

Facing critical challenges to all of humanity, our only option is to move towards greater awareness and understanding of why and how we must act to safeguard our common future and to protect planet earth.

20 years ago, the international commission which the United Nations had asked me to establish and chair laid before the world its findings based on years of hard work, of learning and of sharing experience.

The unpretentious-looking book carried the name Our Common Future, since it dealt with nothing less than our survival together, rich countries as well as poor countries.

It came at a point in our history when awareness was growing that we share this one world, and that we risked overstepping limits unless we adapted our use of natural resources to the longterm carrying capacity of the planet.

But it was also clear that the vast majority of the world's population only had a small share in this overuse of our finite resources. Unequal opportunity and unequal distribution were at the heart of the problem.

We based our report on a comprehensive approach as we addressed the role of the international economy, as we addressed population and education, food security, species and ecosystems, energy, industry and the urban challenge, the oceans, space and Antarctica, and we addressed how we need to organise the international community based on the Charter of the United Nations, the universal human rights and the fundamental freedoms.

The commission came to the conclusion that endemic poverty, prevalent and abject poverty, had to be radically reduced before we could speak of progress, and eliminated before we could claim success.

While the commission worked, we experienced industrial and nuclear catastrophes, the growing

threat to the ozone-layer, famines, drought and increase in pandemic diseases.

To the surprise of many the report did not paint a picture of doom or defeat but presented a strong message of hope. While humankind doubtless had the capacity to destroy the global equilibrium between itself and the biosphere, humankind had never had greater capacities and possibilities to save that fragile relationship. Today it is urgent that we help create a broader basis for action. We all need to mobilise public opinion to support the changes we all are dependent upon.

Poverty is still our gravest challenge. We are more than six billion people co-existing on our fragile planet, many of whom are dangerously short of the food, water and the security they need.

Fortunately many countries experience brisk economic growth. In contrast, many countries in Africa find themselves in a vicious cycle with negative growth, suffering on the fringes of the world economy.

But hundreds of millions are leaving the valleys of despair to climb the heights of justice and prosperity, not least in Asia.

This is the single most important expansion of welfare and prosperity in our lifetime, and probably in all of history.

Girls and women are still discriminated against and treated inhumanely – and degradingly in many countries and cultures. But trends point in the right direction, not least for girl's education.

And which countries are experiencing the highest growth rates? Those which practise equal opportunities gain a competitive advantage.

Access to safe drinking water in developing countries is increasing and the Millennium

Development Goal of halving the share of people without access to safe water may be reached globally but with greater success in Asia than in Africa.

Still, water scarcity, water pollution and overuse of ground water resources is a survival issue in many countries and regions, and many hold this problem to be even more critical than the threat of climate change.

That competition aside, we have no choice but to tackle both, and they are to a great extent interlinked.

We are all victimised together. Nobody can hide from climate change. Nobody can buy protection.

The choice of water as a rallying point for this first-year prize is an excellent one. There cannot be a trade-off between fighting climate change and promoting development. Those who are most vulnerable are also the most at risk. Climate change exacerbates loss of biodiversity and land, soil, forest and water degradation.

While the world's poor walk the earth with a light carbon footprint they are bearing the brunt of unsustainable practices and patterns of development.

Cities like London may face flooding risks as sea levels rise, but their citizens are protected by flood defence systems.

In contrast, when global warming changes weather patterns in the Horn of Africa, crops fail and people go hungry. Women and girls spend more and more hours collecting water for the household.

Today, the real vulnerabilities linked to storms and floods are found in rural settlements in the great river deltas of the Ganges, the Mekong and the Nile, and in urban slums across the

developing world. The challenges are great. So are the opportunities for change.

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