

The green movement 20 years after the Brundtland Report

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Today, 20 years after the United Nations’ Brundtland Report, time has come to look back and assess what the green movement has achieved and where it failed. In addition, I will formulate some theses on the main challenges facing this movement and its supporters.

1. The rise

Since the 1970s, the environmental movement has grown to a formidable power in northern America and in Western Europe.

- Its greatest achievement was public awareness on green issues and putting environmentalism on the agenda of mainstream politics. This became more than clear when former US Vice President Al Gore released in 2006 his film “An Inconvenient Truth” and the media crowned him as *the* global activist to stop climate change.
- The second greatest achievement was the rise of green parties. In many European countries they came to power on the local level, and they formed coalition governments on the regional/state and national level. The most famous example is Joschka Fischer, an anarchist in the streets of Frankfurt in the 1970s and 1980s who became Germany’s Foreign Minister in 1998.
- Environmental NGOs developed from emotion-driven, local protest groups to professional organisations. Some, like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and WWF, are acting on an international level. They actively took part in formulating and influencing key international treaties like the Basel Convention against exporting toxic waste to developing nations and the Kyoto accord to stop climate change.
- Public campaigning NGOs play a key role in holding governments, public institutions and corporates accountable and in empowering citizens. In western democracies, they play a watchdog role similar to the free media.
- After a period of pure opposition to destructive practices like industrial pollution of whaling, the early 1990s saw NGOs starting to also develop solutions. Many had then realized that just saying “no” to anything damaging the environment and wildlife was not enough. The media and the public loved non-violent demonstrations and actions, but they also wanted answers from NGOs and not only from officials. Being only negative was out once and for all. NGOs developed scientific solutions; in many cases they also implemented them on the ground. Examples: establishing natural reserves, expanding the organic farming and food sectors, developing environmental standards in the forestry sector, developing an energy efficient car engine (The Greenpeace-made car “Smart”), developing and producing the first green refrigerator (The CFC and FC-free “Greenfreeze”, made by Greenpeace), publishing scientific studies on alternatives to toxic chemicals and new mobility systems in urban areas. The list is very long.
- NGOs engaged in economics, maybe inspired by US President Bill Clinton’s famous slogan, “It’s the economics, stupid!” Activists established green and ethical banks and investment funds. NGOs allied themselves with some business sectors to promote green products. In the early 1990s, Greenpeace even went so far as to develop a detailed environmental tax system for Germany, with a prestigious mainstream institute, the Deutsches Wirtschaftsinstitut DWI. This system later inspired a green tax legislation passed by the coalition government of greens and social democrats in Berlin in the late 1990s.

- Corporates have been feeling the heat rising as their image plummeted dramatically. In comparison, the credibility of NGOs rose and rose and rose. Numerous campaigns against corporates led to a change of attitude among managers. Most have understood that the long-term survival of their business depends on their behavior outside office towers. The power of consumers to “vote” with their wallet in shopping malls and supermarkets has often sent a clear message to CEOs: You pollute or contaminate, we do not buy your products. Many NGOs have succeeded in mobilize people to press for change. Remember the successful campaign in Europe by Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace to ban genetically-modified (GM) food in the mid 1990s.
- Foundations and trusts have played a major role in supporting this movement and making all these successes happen. They participated in and enabled strategy debates; and they supported high-profile campaigns that led to visible changes.

2. Stagnation

20 years after the Brundtland report, the green movement is in a phase of stagnation. We need to rethink our strategies and tactics, and we need to go back to some of our political roots.

- The green movement has won in the past 20 years many victories, mainly in western nations – clean air legislation, improved consumer protection, cleaner rivers and sea shores, the end of nuclear testing and even a few national decisions to phase-out nuclear power. Visible pollution in western nations has become difficult to spot.
- Today, we have new non-visible threats like carbon dioxide (CO₂), genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), toxic substances and nanotechnology. And global indicators on *the two* major issues haunting us – climate change and the loss of biodiversity on land and the sea – are dramatic. We have the Kyoto agreement to reduce climate damaging CO₂ emissions and a biodiversity convention to save life on Earth. But CO₂ emissions are still rising, fish stocks are being depleted, more and more species are being lost to urbanization and the exploitation of natural resource while pristine forests in the Amazon and in Siberia are being clear-cut. Extinction is forever, but neither this fact nor international agreements are stopping the global decline.
- We are now living in an era I describe as *the era of mass awareness but without real action*. We are looking at global disasters unfolding as governments and corporates respond by only tackling symptoms. The core issue, our way of life, is not being questioned. And the green movement is not raising this issue anymore.
- The issues at stake are clearly understood by the public and decision-makers in Western governments and corporates. Heads of state, ministers and CEOs today speak like environmental activists. But words are not followed by serious deeds. Governments are afraid to take far-reaching decisions that would impact the *mega consumer way of life* of voters eying at SUVs and more shopping. Voters are aware of the consequences of their behavior, but have problems accepting radical changes. And CEOs cannot and do not want to think long-term because their share-holders want short-term profits. A vicious circle, indeed.
- When green parties came to power in the 1990s, the green movement slowly but surely dropped the issue of how we produce and consume. Too many activists became pragmatic. Remember the past debates about ecological footprint? Tackling this issue is now regarded as somehow outdated and ideological. The global mood after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989 was that capitalism has won all the way. Look at China and India today where two state-controlled economies are now copying the West in all matters accelerating climate change and the loss of biodiversity.
- Corporates have learnt, 20 years after the Brundtland report, how to deal with NGOs and how to deflect public pressure. The mother of all tools they use, especially the biggest polluters, is “Corporate Social Responsibility”. CSR is often communicated via sustainability reports that include activities corporates would implement anyhow to cut costs (like saving energy in oil drilling and industrial operations) or because they have to (paying for the relocation of a community living above a gas field). The fact is that CSR is in most cases a hollow public relations activity.
- In the major western capitals, the balance of power between business representatives and NGOs is extremely tilted. For example, in the EU capital Brussels you have an estimated 15,000 lobbyists, of which around two

thirds represent business interests. And the business lobby has enormous resources at its disposal. Take the European Chemical Industry Council (CEFIC), the lobby group of the European chemical industry. In 2006, its 150 employees and annual budget of 40 million Euros enabled it to significantly weaken the EU chemicals directive REACH. As a comparison, not more than 15 people work in Brussels on REACH at CEFIC's main opponents WWF, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth Europe, the European Environment Bureau and the health and environment organisation HEAL.

- When it comes to communicating content, NGOs are fighting against companies that can afford to air TV commercials and plaster print and web-based media with misleading messages, systematically distracting from the problems they are causing (BP: "Beyond Petroleum"; ExxonMobil: "Driving for efficiency"; Chevron: "Human energy"). It is striking how sectors like oil and chemicals are trying to polish up and green-wash their images.
- Ergo: We all know what should be done to avert the devastating impact of climate change, and we know how to stop biodiversity loss. But politicians are afraid to pass legislation voters would refuse, and people/shareholders are not willing to pay the price for radical change (less and different consumption).

3. Revival

To overcome the current phase of stagnation, the environmental movement needs to reassess its strategies and tactics. Working too closely with governments and corporates has not led and will not lead to the needed deep-rooted changes on a global scale. Solar panels on an office building, more organic food in the supermarket, another natural reserve here and a patchwork of fenced pristine forests there will not stop climate change and the global loss of biodiversity.

- We need a revival of public debates about the way we produce and consume. We need to create environments to discuss ways out of the global trend towards the US and European *mega consumer way of life*. We know that life supporting systems on Earth would collapse if everyone wanted to enjoy the same level of consumption like in the EU or the US. At the same time, developing nations have the right to free their peoples from poverty and raise living standards.

The truth is there are just not enough natural resources on Earth if we all want *the mega consumer way of life*. That is why we need to revive debates on changing the way we live. Should economies be solely driven by blind growth? How about manufacturing only products that last almost for ever and can be 100% recycled? How about consuming less and contemplating more? What about a green GDP and a happiness scale?

In Bhutan, a country in the Himalayas with about 650,000 inhabitants, *Gross National Happiness* (GNH) is more important than GDP. GNH is the overarching concept, the central guide for planning and development in Bhutan. This concept has its roots in the cultural heritage of Bhutan and its spiritual tradition of Buddhism. While conventional development models stress economic growth as the ultimate objective, the concept of GNH is based on the premise that true development of human society takes place when material and spiritual development occur side by side to complement each other. The four pillars of GNH are the promotion of equitable and sustainable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and establishment of good governance.

- We need global campaigns focusing on those responsible for climate change and biodiversity loss. Specific industrial sectors and key governments should be targeted. I strongly believe that change will not take place unless public pressure is exerted on the oil, car and energy industries. They should be publicly named and shamed.
- We also need to raise the pressure on the world's major political forces – the US, the European Union, Russia, China, India and Brazil. EU environmental legislation is a global trend setter. But if we want to influence these major players, then we need strong and politically independent civic society and NGOs in these regions. Global issues need global players influencing decision-makers in international forums and in their capitals.
- The role of the green movement in 21st Century democracies is to raise the pressure on decision-makers and corporates with creative demonstrations and actions, and with policy work. They need to develop solutions linking environmental protection with economics. Global polluters and their friends in power should be publicly

blamed and shamed. PR under the guise of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) must be uncovered. At the same time, activists should be ready to negotiate solutions with CEOs and government officials.

- Too many NGOs are still running campaigns old-style. Their internal structures lack professional management and modern campaign skills. Too many have no membership base and have no experience in mobilising people. The challenge today is for many groups to accept their dire need to develop on an organisational level – and to ask for help.
- The environmental movement needs to combine creative public campaigning with public mobilization, sharp communications, pragmatic lobby work, developing solutions, building strategic alliances – even with specific businesses – and with professional management.
- A lively and independent civic society is missing in autocratic China and in Russia where President Vladimir Putin has introduced a system of “managed democracy”. Global environmental issues cannot be seriously tackled in countries where non-violent activists can land in jail. Today more than ever before, environmental protection and democracy are linked.
- No one should expect civic society to solve alone the major environmental problems facing humanity. It is the governments who will have to make tough decisions, pass the needed laws and oversee their implementation. But NGOs must push them gently but firmly in this direction.

4. The role of foundations

- Foundations and trusts have a major role to play in helping green NGOs and groups to rethink their strategies and tactics. NGOs do not like to be funder-driven. But this should not prevent funders from questioning what and how campaigns are being run, and to ignite debates within NGOs.
- Conserving animals and birds in the UK alone attracts more than 10 times as much money from green foundations and philanthropists as campaigning on the crisis of climate change, according to a report compiled by experts working for the JMG foundation in the UK in May 2007. In the 21st Century, we need fewer funds to save the polar bear but a lot for policy and lobby work to get binding legislation to cut CO2 emissions. Political campaigns are complicated and strenuous – but they save polar bears long-term.
- Fill research gaps, especially in the field of green economics. We need many more “UK Stern reports” to prove that investing massively in climate change protection pays off in the long-run. Foundations could support independent research in that field.
- Support capacity building. Many green groups need to be directed towards professionalism.
- Link democracy with environmental protection. We may lose the battle to save our climate if no free civil society groups are active in Russia, China and the Arab world.

Thank you

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