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World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED)

Valentina Brogna

Sustainable development is known as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. We owe such a definition to the report Our Common Future, published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. The WCED, also called 'Brundtland Commission' from the name of its chair Gro Harlem Brundtland (at the time Norwegian Prime Minister) (Brundtland 2005), was a catalyst for sustainable development to be subsequently transposed into policy commitments, agendas and objectives (Borowy 2014).

This special commission was established in December 1983 by the United Nations General Assembly, owing to disappointing results of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Indeed, UNEP had assessed the impact of its environmental policy activities and found that, particularly, state implementation had lagged (Nohl 2024). Therefore, the purpose of the WCED would be 'to propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond' (United Nations General Assembly 1983) as foundation for UNEP environmental perspective for 2000 (Reiser 2023).

The creation of the WCED saw opposing interests. The United States and the United Kingdom feared that the WCED would propose too strict recommendations against economic growth and the Soviet Union tried to stop its creation (Manulak 2022). UNEP also tried to control the process. At the same time, North-South politics played out in disagreements over the geographical composition, the role of the secretariat and the respective responsibilities of its chair and vice-chair (Manulak 2022). In the end, 23 independent commissioners composed the WCED – 12 from the Global South, 7 from the Global North and 4 from Communist states (Borowy 2021) – with a strong secretariat. Brundtland got political control, with support from financing countries (Manulak 2022).

The WCED aimed at a substantial agenda for change: an environmental agenda alternative to the standard one that focuses on pollution and resource management. Such an agenda would switch the focus from environment to development, allowing for a nexus between the two. The outcome report contained many social issues in a tripartite understanding of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental dimensions) (Borowy 2021). It balanced three main views about environment and development: systemic (natural resources are limited), liberal (economic growth can combat poverty and pollution) and structural (developing countries' economic growth can support environmental protection).

In so doing, it showed a pro-growth bias (Borowy 2021). The WCED supported an increase of aid to developing countries, but it led to fears of 'green conditionalities' and adjustment of trade preferences in their favour (Manulak 2022, 146–150). It also foresaw sustainable development mainstreaming into the overall United Nations system.

From 1984 to 1987, the WCED held 9 meetings and 8 site visits in different countries, commissioned 75 studies and received hundreds of reports (Manulak 2022; Nohl 2024). Its working process was long – comprising discussion of studies and controversial topics during meetings, with experts and public hearings, text revision, further discussions – but it led to a dense report, 'Our Common Future'. The diversity of commissioners' worldviews (Borowy

2021) meant strong contrasts in negotiations around several considerations: balancing environment and economy; North and South interests; intergenerational justice; scientific evidence and political feasibility (Borowy 2014). Yet it also gave an example of global deliberation on potentially irreducible sustainability issues. The legacy of the Brundtland Report is perceivable today in global governance through the concept of sustainable development.

Despite significant challenges since its inception, which materialized a North-South divide around environmental protection and developmental concerns, the WCED had a foundational role in bridging the two concepts. It problematized their link and defined sustainable development, which today has its full place in global governance with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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