

Sustainable Development: Have We Made Progress Since the Publication of the 1987 Brundtland Report?

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Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Law and Justice](#), [United Nations](#)

*In 1987, the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development published “Our Common Future” (1). Written under the chairmanship of **Gro Harlem Brundtland** who was then Prime Minister of Norway, this report presents the results of a broad global consultation aimed at proposing a comprehensive program of change for sustainable development. Thirty years later, what is retained of the Brundtland report and what progress do we observe on our way to sustainability?*

Accurate statements and lucid recommendations

The Brundtland Commission’s report clearly identifies the most serious environmental problems of the 1980s: uncontrolled population growth, excessive deforestation and grazing, destruction of tropical forests, extinction of living species, increased greenhouse effect causing climate change, acid rain, erosion of the stratospheric ozone layer, etc. It also emphasizes the social-economic aspects and in particular the perverse effects of unbridled economic growth and over-consumption of resources by the better-off.

The Commission proposes a definition of sustainable development that is now widely recognized:

“Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. “

With a view to sustainable development, the Commission identifies a series of strategic objectives that include changing the quality of economic growth, controlling demographics, meeting basic human needs, preserving and enhancing the resource base, taking into account the environment in developing new technologies and integrating ecological and economic concerns into decision-making.

It then proposes solutions that apply on a global scale. For example, reduce energy consumption in industrialized countries and promote the development of renewable energies, encourage massive reforestation in countries affected by desertification, implement tax and land reforms to reduce pressures on ecosystems, adopt an international convention for the protection of species. Although these measures are aimed primarily at protecting the environment, the Brundtland Report stresses the importance of combating poverty and injustice, which are both causes and effects of environmental problems.

To realize and finance this ecological shift, the Brundtland Commission proposes a reform of international institutions, notably the World Bank and the IMF, which should better take into account social and environmental objectives and alleviate the debt of the poorest countries. The Commission also recommends a reorientation of military spending for the fight against poverty and inequality and challenges large companies to engage in more responsible production and consumption.

The Brundtland Report actually demonstrates that the global economy and ecology are now deeply intertwined. Beyond the economic interdependence of nations, we must now deal with their ecological interdependence. Since the development crisis is global, the solutions must be as well (2).

Impressive international spin-offs

The recommendations of the Brundtland Report have catalyzed the UN's sustainable development approach and encouraged the engagement of governments, businesses and civil society around the world. In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, participants set the basic principles and established the Agenda 21, which became the basis for so many sustainable development initiatives. Following the recommendations of the Brundtland report, the Summit also saw the adoption of a declaration on sustainable forest management and three important conventions on biodiversity, the fight against climate change, and the fight against desertification (3).

The Millennium Summit, held in September 2000 at United Nations Headquarters in New York, concluded with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, which set out the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (4); these objectives inspired by the Brundtland report expiring in 2015.

To succeed them, the UN has worked with governments, civil society and partners to harness the momentum of the MDGs and develop an ambitious post-2015 agenda: "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda". It is organized around 17 Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (5).

The MDGs and SDGs, like Agenda 21, are development strategies to which Member States must be subject to the risk of being ostracized on the international stage. The adoption of the SDGs has led to a myriad of initiatives to encourage States to implement them: principles and frameworks, monitoring indicators, assessment of the situation, etc.

Although the concept of sustainable development presents itself as a promising solution, the imposition of the master plan for sustainable development comes up against different visions of development (6) and can be seen as an interference in state governance and more especially emerging countries which must henceforth follow this master plan, to have access to international financing.

The Brundtland Report and major UN summits have also guided action by governments, civil society and business. Over the years, we have seen the development of organic farming, environmental certification, corporate social responsibility, renewable energy production, responsible investment, green economy, life cycle analysis, the greening of production processes and green marketing, all too often misguided in greenwashing (7), offering unscrupulous businesses the opportunity to unduly polish their image as a good corporate citizen.

Its impact in Quebec

Like other states such as the Netherlands, Norway or Canada (8), Quebec has been heavily influenced by the Brundtland Report (9). After having participated in the financing of its French version published in 1988 (10), the Québec government has resolutely embarked on the path of sustainable development and has carried out various initiatives. In 1988, the Quebec Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (11) was created, which in 1989 organized the first Québec Forum on Sustainable Development, and the Interdepartmental Committee on Sustainable Development (CIDD) was established in 1991. Subsequently, Quebec was particularly noted for its very active participation in the 1992 Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro, as part of the Canadian delegation, notably by strongly supporting the adoption of the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Montreal has also been hosting the Convention on Biological Diversity since 1995.

In spite of a few ministerial initiatives, it will be necessary to wait until the Johannesburg Summit, in 2002, to note a real progress of the file at the governmental level. Let's mention for the record that in 2000, the issue of sustainable development, which became almost inactive within the Ministry of the Environment, was revived in extremis during a program review. A new team under my leadership took the initiative of preparing Québec's participation in the Johannesburg Summit and developing a government framework for sustainable development. In 2001, an opinion from the Conseil de la science et de la technologie (Quebec Science and Technology Council) recommended that the Québec government make sustainable development a priority and demonstrated the value of such an approach (12). Following a change of government in 2003, the Ministry of the Environment conducted a public consultation in 2005, which led the following year to the adoption of the Quebec Sustainable Development Act, a law that is still exemplary today (13).

Under this legislation, the government created the position of Sustainable Development Commissioner responsible for measuring government performance in this area. It has also committed to consider 16 principles of sustainable development in its activities, as well as to adopt and implement a strategy that needs to be the subject of periodic implementation reports and which needs to be reviewed every five years (14). The Act also requires government departments and agencies to prepare and implement sectoral action plans.

The Brundtland Report has also inspired a number of non-governmental initiatives, such as the ÉcoSommet (15) of 1996, born of the desire of environmental groups to continue the turnaround initiated at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The same year, Québec hosted the World Conservation Union's First World Conservation Congress, under the theme "Caring for the Earth", and the Union for Sustainable Development organized the International Forum "Major Works and Sustainable Development" (16). In 1997, the Nikan congress on territorial applications of sustainable development is held in Jonquière. Nearly 550 participants from 42 countries attended this meeting. The Nikan Congress recognized the critical role of indigenous peoples in defining and applying the principles of sustainable development, and the need for partnership among all peoples to ensure the well-being of present and future generations and the preservation of the environment (17). In recent years, the dynamism of civil society and the academic community in terms of sustainable development has been reflected in Québec (as everywhere in the world) by a myriad of activities and initiatives.

Inspired by the Brundtland Report and its spin-offs, many non-governmental organizations have sprung up in Quebec or have simply integrated the concept of sustainable

development into their activities. For example, the UQCN (who became Nature Québec), the Regional Councils for the Environment and Sustainable Development, the Conseil patronal de l'environnement du Québec (Quebec Employers' Council for the Environment), Équiterre, Earth Day Québec, and the Monique-Fitzback Foundation, instigator of the Quebec Brundtland Green Schools Network. This is also the case for the university community, which has expanded teaching programs, chairs and research centers on sustainable development.

What “progress” since Brundtland?

The sustainable development desired by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 called for a paradigm shift. If a paradigm shift has occurred in the world, it is certainly not the one described in “Our Common Future” (18).

Much progress has been made since the publication of the Brundtland Report. We have significantly reduced the number of people living in extreme poverty, more people have access to safe drinking water, fewer children die in early childhood and fewer mothers die during childbirth (19). Despite the fact that some countries are experiencing unprecedented levels of prosperity, this prosperity is only apparent. The plundering of natural resources and the degradation of the environment continue unabated, climate change threatens more than ever the most vulnerable people and ecosystems, and the planet's carrying capacity is about to be exceeded (20, 21). The gap between rich and poor is steadily widening (22), food insecurity (23) and indebtedness (24) are advancing, democracy is on the wane and unique thinking is invading the media (25). And, worrying statistics illustrating the degradation of living conditions, in 40 years the number of sperm produced by men has fallen by nearly 60% in rich countries (26), the number of obese children and adolescents has been multiplied by 10 (27), and wild vertebrate populations decreased by 58% (28).

The progress dictated by economic growth is in fact based on the impoverishment of the middle classes (29), the indebtedness of nations and individuals, the hegemony and economic control of banks, overconsumption and the waste of natural resources (30, 31) and the growth of inequalities between humans (32). Not to mention the relocation of industrial jobs (33) and the social exploitation of workers in the South (34). In 2017, the public and private indebtedness of the 44 richest countries reached 235% of GDP compared with 190% in 2007 (35).

Concerning governance, the corruption of elected representatives and proxyholders continues to grow (36). Most mainstream media are controlled by large industrial groups and banks (37, 38). Military budgets are constantly increasing (a rise of 43.6% since 2000 in the US to reach \$ 611 billion in 2016 (39)). The demonization of patriotism (40) leads to a loss of autonomy for nations whose development is under the control of multinational corporations, banks (41) and lobbies (42).

Despite a strong commitment by governments to sustainable development, significant action on this path is slow to take hold. The engineer and author Philippe Bihouix rightly points out that “our leaders are pretending to press the brakes with a lenient speech on sustainable development, while they fully push on the accelerator!” (43). I would add that political leaders seem to be more inclined to respond to the demands of oligarchic lobbies than to the legitimate expectations of their constituents.

For example, despite their commitment to reduce GHG emissions, G20 governments spend nearly 4 times more on fossil fuels than developing renewable energy (44) . Between 2013

and 2015, Canada provided \$ 3 billion a year in public funding for oil, gas and coal, compared to only \$ 171 million a year for clean energy (45).

The challenges of sustainable development

Thanks to the Brundtland Report, the world has gained a deeper understanding of the interconnected challenges we face and that sustainable development offers the best opportunity for people to choose their future (46).

The success of the concept of sustainable development is due to the fact that the Brundtland Report was essentially right in uncovering fundamental truths that were subsequently confirmed (46, 47). The need to respect biophysical limits and to remedy physical deficiencies is now better understood. Similarly, the interdependence of environmental protection and the reduction of poverty is more widely recognized (46).

Despite this awareness and the good faith efforts of a growing number of individuals, the situation continues to deteriorate to the point of undermining our optimism. What can be done to improve the situation?

Like **Pierre Rabhi**, promoter of happy sobriety (48), and **Serge Mongeau**, a leader of voluntary simplicity (49), the ecologist **Pierre Dansereau** advocated joyful austerity (50), aimed at reducing consumption of assets and resources while providing room for more responsible investment. But how could we convince the rich to take such a turn? How could we be convinced to consume less? I will also refer to the four-point ecological strategy proposed in 1984 by **Michel Jurdant** in his book “Le défi écologiste” (51): raising awareness, demystifying quantitative progress, proposing alternative lifestyles, and encouraging a democratic public debate. I would add that we must constantly educate young and old about the principles of sustainable development (52), further regulate and reduce the power of banks and the financial community (53), focus on subsidiarity (54), encourage accountability of elected officials and leaders (55), promote independent information (56), and especially learn to recognize the influence of interest groups (57).

A work program that concerns us all on the path of a development centered on collaboration, sustainability, well-being, prosperity and peace. Let us remember, to guide our efforts, the wise words attributed to the indigenous leader Geronimo: “When the last tree is cut, the last fish is caught, and the last river is polluted; when to breathe the air is sickening, you will realize, too late, that wealth is not in bank accounts and that you can’t eat money.”(58, 59)

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Notes

1. World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York. 400 p.

2. For many, this finding reinforced the idea of establishing global governance of environmental issues to the detriment of the sovereignty and accountability of nations. It would have encouraged Mondialism,

this doctrine which aims to realize the political unity of the world considered as a unique human community.

3. <http://www.un.org/french/events/rio92/rioround.htm>

4. <http://www.un.org/fr/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>

5. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/fr/development-agenda/>

6. See for example : Parizeau, M.-H. et S. Kash (eds), 2017. *À chacun son développement durable? De la diversité culturelle aux nanotechnologies*. Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 384 p.

7. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2016/aug/20/greenwashing-environmentalism-lies-companies>

8. https://researcharchive.lincoln.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10182/1352/crm_ip_25.pdf;jsessionid=0E84AB35F0C18F7146FF9E4138CB9665?sequence=1

9. See for example : <http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/evol-concept.htm>

10. Commission mondiale sur l'environnement et le développement, 1988. *Notre avenir à tous*. Éditions du Fleuve / Les publications du Québec, Montréal, Québec, Canada, 434 p.

11. However, this consultation structure was abolished in 1997.

12. <http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/etat/innovation.pdf>

13. <http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/loi.htm>

14. http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/strategie_gouvernementale/

15. http://crebsl.com/documents/pdf/autres/12_EcoSommet_rapport_final_modifie.pdf

16. Event organized and held under the presidency of the undersigned.

17. <http://constellation.uqac.ca/1888/>

18. http://ecoconseil.uqac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Guide_utilisation_GADD_2016_SM.pdf

19. See also : <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378014000727>

20. http://www.un.org/fr/millenniumgoals/reports/2015/pdf/rapport_2015.pdf

21. <https://www.technocracy.news/index.php/2015/09/30/gro-harlem-brundtland-stumps-for-sustainable-development/>

22. <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/760276/davos-suisse-oxfam-richesses-pauvrete-paradis-fiscaux-inegalites>

23. <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1056120/faim-monde-progression-statistique>

24. For example in Canada : <https://www.desjardins.com/ressources/pdf/pv170828f.pdf>

25. See for example this objective analysis of Obama's

- years : <https://www.dreuz.info/2017/01/11/oubliez-la-pensee-unique-des-journalistes-voici-le-vrai-bilan-des-annees-obama/>
26. <http://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/sante/201707/27/01-5119700-fertilite-declin-alarmant-du-nombre-de-spermatozoides.php>
27. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2017/increase-childhood-obesity/fr/>
28. <https://www.wwf.fr/rapport-planete-vivante-2016>
29. For example in Europe : <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/monde/2016/07/01/31002-20160701ARTFIG00141-comment-l-europe-a-organise-la-pauperisation-de-ses-classes-moyennes.php>
30. In particular, caused by the planned obsolescence of products : http://www.lemonde.fr/pollution/article/2017/07/04/le-parlement-europeen-demande-a-la-commission-de-legiferer-contre-l-obsolence-programmee_5155600_1652666.html
31. And food waste : <http://www.un.org/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=40182#.WfTlz2jWzIU>
32. <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/2015/02/16/20002-20150216ARTFIG00203-pourquoi-les-inegalites-se-creusent-dans-le-monde.php>
33. http://www.question-mondialisation.org/media/Articles-publies/GDD29_K-Adnane.pdf
34. <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/socsoc/2015-v47-n1-socsoc02302/1034416ar/>
35. <http://blogs.lexpress.fr/attali/2017/07/24/la-prochaine-crise-financiere/>
36. https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016
37. In France : agoravox.fr/actualites/medias/article/qui-possede-les-medias-72443
38. In Canada : <http://www.cem.ulaval.ca/pdf/Groupescanadiens.pdf>
39. <http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/782687/evolution-depenses-militaires-monde-carte>
40. <https://fr.novopress.info/205251/pourquoi-le-patriotisme-est-diabolise-par-yvan-blot/>
41. See, for example, the subjection of Greece to the ECB: <https://www.mondialisation.ca/les-profits-odieux-de-la-bce-sur-le-dos-du-peuple-grec/5614753>
42. <https://www.mondialisation.ca/linfluence-des-lobbies-sur-la-politique-internationale/13161>
43. <https://reporterre.net/La-croissance-verte-est-une-mystification-absolue>
44. http://www.liberation.fr/planete/2015/09/21/subventions-aux-energies-fossiles-la-trop-grande-generosite-des-pays-developpes_1387445
45. http://priceofoil.org/content/uploads/2017/07/talk_is_cheap_G20_report_July2017.pdf
46. Gibson, Robert B. (ed). 2017. *Sustainability assessment applications and opportunities*. Earthscan, Routledge: (30 y after

Brundtland) <https://books.google.ca/books?id=mFXUDAAAQBAJ&pg=PT23&lpg=PT23&dq=30+years+after+brundtland&source=bl&ots=4ii5Q1N0QH&sig=ggGOBSfvKZNSgzjdAZFScST765M&hl=fr&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjvqcSFsKTUAhWj54MKHddCCyc4ChDoAQgzMAA#v=onepage&q=30%20years%20after%20brundtland&f=false>

47. <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/brundtland-commission-sustainable-development-rio-2012>

48. <https://www.petit-fichier.fr/2013/07/12/pierre-rabhi-vers-la-sobriete-heureuse-texte-original/>

49. <http://simplicitevolontaire.org/la-simplicite-volontaire/livres/la-simplicite-volontaire-plus-que-jamais-serge-mongeau/>

50. <http://archives.radio-canada.ca/sports/ecologie/clips/3510/>

51. Jurdant, M. 1984. *Le défi écologiste*. Éditions du Boréal Express, Montréal, 432 p.

52. <http://www.mddelcc.gouv.qc.ca/developpement/principe.htm>

53. <https://sites.google.com/site/hecpouvoiretpouvoirs/4-le-pouvoir-et-les-pouvoirs-du-canada-contemporain/4-relations-de-pouvoir/2-relations-de-pouvoir-entre-les-milieus-financiers-et-l-etat>

54. adels.org/rdv/decentralisation/16_subsidarite_democratie_liberative.rtf

55. <http://www.ciesin.org/decentralization/French/Issues/Transparence.html>

56. <http://conseildepresse.qc.ca/actualites/nouvelles/un-conseil-de-redaction-pour-assurer-lindependance-des-journalistes/>

57. <http://www.millenaire3.com/content/download/1385/19395/version/1/file/lobbying.pdf>

58. <http://dicocitations.lemonde.fr/citations/citation-40007.php>

59. Some attribute this quote to the indigenous author, Alanis Obomsawin : <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/10/20/last-tree-cut/>

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