



# Framing Sustainable Development

## The Brundtland Report - 20 Years On

“What is needed now is a new era of economic growth - growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable.” This call in the foreword of the 1987 Brundtland Report, “Our Common Future,” still rings true twenty years later.

Sustainable development - defined by the Brundtland Commission as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* - has been enshrined in documents approved at the highest political level, but “the commitment to sustainable development has not gone much beyond environmental authorities,” says Nitin Desai, a senior adviser to the Brundtland Commission and a key draftsman of the report.

Current consumption and production levels are 25 percent higher than the earth’s sustainable carrying capacity, according to the Ecological Footprint Sustainability Measure, an independent measure based on United Nations statistics. If everyone in the world were to live like an average person in the high-income countries, we would need 2.6 additional planets to support us all.

### **A Groundbreaking Concept**

The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, alerted the world twenty years ago to the urgency of making progress toward economic development that could be sustained without depleting natural resources or harming the environment.

Written by an international group of politicians, civil servants and experts on the environment and development, “the Brundtland Report changed sustainable development from a physical notion based on the concept of sustainable yield in forestry and fisheries to a much broader concept that linked economic and ecological policies in an integrated framework,” says Desai.

“The report came at a time when the oil shocks of the seventies, droughts in Africa, concerns about tropical forests, the depletion of the ozone layer and several other problems were posing great challenges to policy at every level, and it offered a way of looking at these problems in a holistic way,” Desai explains. “The main long-term impact of the report is that we can no longer talk of economic and environmental policy in separate compartments.”

### **International Commitments**

The Brundtland Report laid the groundwork for the convening of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro five years later. Held in June 1992, the Rio Summit was the largest environmental conference ever organized, bringing together over 30,000 participants, including more than one hundred heads of state.

The summit represented a major step forward, with international agreements made on climate change, forests and biodiversity. Among the summit’s outcomes were the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Principles of Forest Management, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and Agenda 21, which required countries to draw up a national strategy of sustainable development. The summit also led to the establishment of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

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Ten years later, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg led to more governmental commitments and helped extend the concept's reach into the areas of business, local government and civil society.

"Sustainable development is a bridge concept connecting economics, ecology and ethics," says Desai, who was the Deputy Secretary-General for the 1992 Rio Summit, the Secretary-General of the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, and an Under Secretary-General at UN Headquarters from 1993 to 2003. "The challenge is to connect and integrate various sectoral policies, such as agriculture, energy, trade or investment," he says. "To get real action, the ownership of the concept of sustainable development must extend to all sectoral agencies and - most importantly - to key private-sector stake holders."

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**More information on CSD-15, including the full press kit, can be found at:**

<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/policy.htm>

**CSD-15 will be webcast live at:**

[www.un.org/webcast](http://www.un.org/webcast)

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