

Norway: A Developing Country with Good Prospects?

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This paper was originally published in *From One Earth – One World*, p 47–49, and was presented to the organizers: The Joint Committee of the Norwegian Research Councils and The Ministry of Cultural and Scientific Affairs. The Report was from a research policy conference on environment and development held in Fornebu, Oslo, Norway, March 22–23, 1988.

How was a philosopher to react to the birth of a strong, international environmental movement in the 1960s? To me, the issue was perfectly clear: people would be forced to seriously contemplate their philosophy of life. I know of no philosophy of life that assumes that high quality of life can be achieved by damaging interference in the natural environment. Philosophers have always reacted when people build up a gigantic external apparatus in order to achieve *basic goals in life*, whether these are regarded as pleasure, happiness, or some kind of perfection. They have always reacted when a whole ocean of external measures are demanded to satisfy people's vital needs, an ocean in which people are now slowly but surely drowning. But Diogenes of Sinope clearly exaggerated in his teachings that virtue requires avoidance of physical pleasure. We must compromise between him and ourselves.

It is now recognized that the mad economic, and more general, growth in the richest countries ever known in the history of the world cannot continue. Therefore, as a philosopher, I believe that the path is open for change in the way people conduct their lives. This change must consist of placing a higher value on the *quality of life than on material standards of living*. [This is deep ecology movement platform principle 7. Ed.] But this demands profound differences in all kinds of politics and policies. We must "give priority" to resolving the problems.

The problems will be felt in the interim period. Old habits die hard. The path toward wise policies and a wise way of life is bound to be long.

In the future, when we interfere in nature, we shall ask: are these interventions necessary for the quality of our lives as humans? Perhaps we can simplify life in our society in a way that would be beneficial? This concerns our personal freedom, our freedom of movement, our freedom from economic worries.

The Earth's fabulous resources are bountiful enough for a sustainable human population, of perhaps at least 1000 million (1 billion), to live in paradise as far as external conditions are concerned, without destroying either the conditions of life for other living creatures, or the diversity of the landscapes. (I believe that it is an inescapable goal to maintain the richness and diversity of life on Earth, at least for people who have had an opportunity to thoroughly contemplate the development of life on Earth.)

Until 1945, the rallying slogan of the dominant political long-term perspective in rich countries was *progress*. When, in the period 1945 – 1965, the emphasis was placed on a global perspective, and it included the materially poor countries, the central maxim became development! The poor countries were called *developing* countries and the rich countries *developed* countries. And the dreadful thing was that the rich were used as a model for the poor. However, in the 1960s, something radically new occurred. The international ecology movement received a flying start with Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, and the fight began against the marriage between agriculture and the chemical industry. It became clear that pollution of the natural environment was almost proportional to economic growth. "Gross National Product," GNP, was rechristened "Gross National Pollution." This was not mentioned in the [Brundtland] Commission's Report. In circles concerned about the degradation of the environment the maxim "development" was replaced by "sustainable development." Persons concerned with the global perspective have tacitly understood that the term "conditions of life" refers to the richness and diversity of life on Earth and more generally to the ecosphere, not just the biosphere. It is a significant advance when the Commission's Report, approved by politicians, uses the term "sustainable development" as its slogan. An initial conclusion from the above is that the rich nations must now admit clearly and explicitly that, at best, they are developing countries, that is to say, countries that are seriously planning a process of development *in the direction of* what is sustainable in the long term. The rich countries' economic growth, as growth is understood today, is clearly not sustainable. Compared with certain poor countries,

Norway's share, per inhabitant, of serious pollution and other activities threatening to life is overwhelming.

Philosophically speaking, it is obvious that the wise thing is to attain high quality of life by the *simplest possible means*. Today, simplicity is of primary importance. This implies that we must learn to *place the highest possible value on things of which there are enough for all*. The more lasting and intense pleasure we get out of these things, the less time and energy we spend on striving to obtain things of which there is *not* enough, and which therefore have a market price. And the quality of life in a country as a whole must be measured in terms of those who are most poorly situated, and not in terms of the average.

This shows the limitations of the current market economy which encourages consumption of material and energy. There is little connection between lifestyle and the satisfaction of fundamental needs and goals, such as self-realization, including freedom from economic worries. Sales people want us *to buy*.

Today, it is a blessing that the goal of sustainable development in the long term naturally leads to political clarification of the relation between the fundamental goals of life and the means used to achieve them. Rationalization implies proper use of means to achieve fundamental goals. We sorely need such rationalization on a global scale.

In political terms this implies a strong, but gradual reduction of public and private consumption, a decrease in real wages, reduced imports. It is worth noting that I have used three words with emotionally negative overtones in the preceding sentence – *reduction, decrease, reduced*. Therefore, tactically speaking, our present terminology is very unfortunate. This is because outdated goals force us to answer basically unimportant questions: “Can we really no longer expect increased gross or net national product?” (But that’s *dreadful!*). “Must we really tighten our belts any more, i.e., reduce consumption?” (But that’s *awful!*), etc. Life quality is important and can be high with low material consumption.

As yet, no terminology has been developed for rational goals, those which refer directly to the quality of life and sustainable development in the long term. The difference must be incorporated into private and public communication. If we examine this more closely, the change, provided we show a certain minimum of wisdom and common sense, will consist of higher quality of life. The transition from a scale of

measurement based on material living standards to one based on the quality of life will take time, but it is also well under way [in 2005].

Finally, I will sum up the most important points briefly:

1. Considering that it is politicians and not ecologists who coach for the World Commission's Report, it represents a marked advance in the view of the future of the human race and conditions of life on Earth.
2. By choosing the term "sustainable development" as a central slogan, the Commission has given the green light for a very radical interpretation of what lies ahead, both in poor and in rich countries. The term "economic growth" is still used, but the rich countries' models of growth are sufficiently criticized to make these countries qualify as developing countries, ones which must now try to achieve a course of development that is sustainable in the long term. Then, GNP will lose its importance. [See the websites focusing on General Progress Indicator, or GPI, as a broader, deeper way of defining and measuring progress.]
3. As a consequence of this, a large share of the research considered meaningful in terms of the Commission's Report must consist of planning and implementing the transition to a sustainable process of development in rich countries.
4. Use of simple means to satisfy fundamental needs is one prescription for change. The goal in the long run is to implement such change without reducing the quality of life in spite of lower material standards of living as defined in the richest societies. The research tasks will stem largely from such goals.
5. If the basic goal is achieved, another goal will also be achieved that has hitherto been considered unachievable: *To have a standard of living in the rich countries that the citizens of these countries can honestly want all others to share.*