

The Brundtland Report, p. 1

International Review of Sociology, Monographic On Modernization Theory: Monographic Series, 3, 1991, Rome: Borla, 213-226.

The Gro Brundtland Report (1987)

Or, The Logic of Awesome Decisions

By Joseph Agassi,

Tel-Aviv University and York University, Toronto

World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future (The Brundtland Report). Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987. Pp. xv + 387.

Background

Solutions to global problems must be coordinated or doomed to failure. This is all too obvious, and yet there is almost no such coordination, not even a serious effort towards it; the feeble, almost desperate, efforts in the industrial countries, to solve global problems locally signify only as expressions of concern, not as attempted improvements: growing vegetables without fertilizers, for example, is futile when the use of fertilizers on the global scale is on a sharp increase.

Why are the efforts at coordination so feeble? Unless we face this question, we may never see progress. The answer is not hard to find. Decisions on matters of life and death are awesome; decisions on some awesome questions are guided by accepted laws, rules or customs; other awesome questions are open. Obviously, having to decide on an open, awesome question is a hardship in every possible manner: intellectually and practically, legally and morally, socially and psychologically. People are reluctant to explore predicaments if all available alternative remedies to them implicate decisions on open, awesome questions.

For example, the coordinators of large-scale food distribution is forced to decide on open awesome questions. Recently a complaint was made

that much of the resources earmarked for aid to starving African nations were diverted to the Soviet Union and its erstwhile satellites. Who is to judge where aid is more urgently needed? By what rules? A decision that the limited resource is more urgently needed in one place may deprive a child in the other place of an urgently needed item. So this is a decision on an open awesome question.

These matters are, at least on the face of it, problems of global dimensions, as they concern the distribution of goods and services on a global dimension. But open awesome questions are not necessarily global. Let me air some non-global open awesome questions.

Recently, medicine faced awesome questions of a new kind, concerning the termination of life of a comatose patient or concerning the distribution of the services of hydrolysis machines and of replacement organs. Consequently, the matter hit the media. But despite the impression that the problems are new, there was nothing new in the need of the medical profession to face open, awesome questions: physicians are traditionally forced to make awesome decisions, and even as a matter of course; these may be much more severe than those concerning the termination of life of a comatose patient or concerning the distribution of the services of hydrolysis machines and of replacement organs; but traditionally awesome questions were kept out of the public eye, and so stayed open, until the new respiration and transplant technologies arrived. Until then physicians were forced to make decisions on open, awesome questions alone, and in secrecy, and so the questions remained open. Secrecy was removed after the new respiration and transplant technologies arrived because the medical profession wished to put its new hardware on permanent exhibition; physicians had then no choice but to air publicly the awesome question these involved questions; they then

The Brundtland Report, p. 3

decided to consult experts on ethics. Thus the new profession, or rather philosophical sub-profession, sprang into being, that of the biomedical ethicist or the biomedical ethics consultant. The novelty, then, is in the inability to keep the matter out of the public eye.

Even the involvement of innovations in open, awesome questions is not new, as it is the theme of Shaw's Doctor's Dilemma of the early part of the twentieth century, which is still neglected due to the traditional taboo on airing them in public. Physicians and their aids were traditionally forced to decide on open, awesome questions in the dark despite their frequent recurrence. Thus, field nurses repeatedly and bitterly complain about their having been untrained and unprepared for the situation in the battlefield, where they must make awesome decisions regularly come what may. They are scarcely given occasion to air their grievances in public, and thus the matter remains open.

There is no ethics of decisions on awesome questions that I know of, and so most awesome questions we can think of remain open. The philosophical experts on ethics are trying hard to find guidelines, but they dare not legislate and they dare not fight the taboos surrounding the matter. (See for this N. Laor and J. Agassi, Diagnosis: Philosophical and Medical Perspectives, Kluwer, Dordrecht, 1990.) The traditional, systematic avoidance of exploring awesome questions comprises a very general and very severe limitation on the possible growth of moral knowledge.

The concern with the future of life on earth should override the taboo on public debates on open, awesome questions. Occasions for such debates are abundant, and they often are taboo because they concern public morality, whereas the myth surrounding ethics is that ethics is a matter between individuals. Before plunging into the Brundtland

The Brundtland Report, p. 4

Report let me mention three examples of cases that demanded discussion about awesome questions long ago.

First, already early in the century it was made clear that mass inoculation may cause death, though the number of deaths incurred in a process of mass inoculation is obviously much smaller than the number of lives saved. The question was asked, and aired in the medical literature: who is to judge that the exchange is fair or not? The question was never discussed: there were no tools with which to discuss it and it died out. Also Bernard Shaw opposed inoculation, and his ethics was found unacceptable.

Second, the problem of industrial pollution is easily soluble by the demand that polluters pay for the clean-up. There are many reasons why this, the only available reasonable solution to the problem of industrial pollution is not accepted; some of them have to do with the control that capital has on the media; but the central reason is that we do not have a clear public morality. Public morality applies to undramatic cases no less than dramatic ones. Bertrand Russell observed long ago that industrialists may lay off many workers for a petty motive without facing charges of immorality, while moral scrutiny is directed towards their relations with their neighbors, which have much smaller repercussions even on the neighbors themselves.

Third, the question, how much power do generals have over the lives of their charges is possibly discussed in the secrecy of military planning and in closed sessions of military academies, but the public was never privy to them. Since General Omar Bradley made his opinion known that he thought General Patton was careless about the lives of his soldiers, surely there was room for a debate, but debate never evolved, again for want of proper instrument for debate more than because of military secrecy. Also, despite the popularity of Kurt

The Brundtland Report, p. 5

Wonnegut's Slaughterhouse 5 and other works, only the Gulf War provoked the hitherto suppressed discussions of the morality of bombing civilian populations.

Surrounding The Brundtland Report

A brief note on terminology informs the reader of the (UN) terminology that distinguishes between the advanced or rich parts of the world and the backward or poor ones [thus dividing it into two], with Soviet Russia and its satellites counting as advanced. In 1990, when so much emergency relief aid went to these countries that the relief organizations concerned with Africa expressed concern, this ceased to be adequate: The world should be divided (no longer to poor and rich but), more thoughtfully and less in the fear of censure that imposes rigid established terminology, to diverse categories pertaining to the political, economic categories, social and religious categories--of countries more able or less able to contribute to the purpose at hand.

The Chairman's Report of over 6 pages, by Mrs. Gro Brundtland, begins with the commission's mandate (from the UN General Assembly) to offer a strategy for the conservation of the environment and discusses the enlisting the cooperation of the poor parts of the world and her own outstanding qualifications for the task.

An overview of 23 pages follows. It is a condensed version of the book, and so may merit citing in full. Instead of transcribing or paraphrasing it, let me cite its major points and recommendations, as they provide the flavor of the document, its thrust, its great force and its intolerable deficiencies.

The environmental crisis is global: it respects no national boundaries. Poverty is a major cause of the crisis and it feeds on itself, causing economic imbalance due to excessive export of natural resources, and

The Brundtland Report, p. 6

threatens the whole ecosystem. The arms race intensifies the problems. Yet poverty can be avoided by foreign aid conditioned on democratization. More international coordination between concerned institutions is required, together with increased government aid to them and resolute intervention against violators. Not only restoration but also prevention should be planned.

The Commission demands measures to limit population growth, while respecting traditions. This is impossible, as some significant and very widespread traditions explicitly require optimal population growth and other demand that population growth should not be curbed.

The Commission demands measures to support agriculture in poor countries, not in rich ones, land reforms and the integration of agriculture with other branches of national economies.

The Commission demands to admit as a "first priority to establish the problem of disappearing species and threatened ecosystems on political agendas as a major economic and resource issue. ... Governments should investigate ..." (p. 13).

The Commission demands that economic growth "be less energy intensive than in the past" (p 14), and that the "highest priority should be accorded to research and development on environmentally sound and ecologically sound alternatives" to fossil and nuclear fuels. "It is ... possible." (p. 15).

Suppose it is possible; how should it be planned?

"Transnational corporation have a special responsibility to smooth the path if industrialization"; the Commission demands "tighter controls over the export of hazardous ... chemicals"

"Governments will need to develop explicit settlement strategies to guide the process of urbanization", which should include

The Brundtland Report, p. 7

decentralization, but (p 17).

How?

"A particular responsibility falls to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. ... Urgent action is necessary to alleviate debt burdens ... Commodity-specific arrangements can build on the model of the International Tropical Timber Agreement ... Multinational companies can play an important role ...". (p. 18).

Better arrangements should be made to protect the "global commons", such as "the oceans, outer space and Antarctica" (p. 18).

The "greatest need is to achieve improved relations among those major powers capable of deploying weapons of mass destruction" (p. 19).

To these ends the commission makes "many specific recommendations for institutional and legal change" (p. 20) involving governments, "various regional organizations" , all "major international bodies" , and "the Secretary General of the United Nations" .

I think the reader gets the drift, and I will skip a few paragraphs, condensed as they are, to the final point, the "call for action" : "an active follow-up if this report is imperative" . The UN General Assembly should enact "a U N Program on Sustainable Development."

"We are unanimous in our conviction that the security, well-being, and very survival if the planet depend on such changes, now."

It is obvious that most of the intended readers of the published version of the Brundtland Report are ecologically -minded individuals, and they are converted already so that they will scarcely dissent from any point made in it. Why then take the trouble to publish it at all? The reason for its publication is to offer the information to the public, presumably

The Brundtland Report, p. 8

in order to help interested local bodies, ecological, economic, political, act in some measure of coordination. It is also obvious that the purpose of the submission of the Brundtland Report is that it should help act in some measure of coordination. It is also obvious that the purpose of the submission of the Brundtland Report is not to convert but to offer a plan for action for the UN activists who hope to move that organization for action. Assuming that the situation is as described by most ecologically-minded individuals and by the Report, the question that remains is, why is the situation so hopeless when the cause is so noble, so urgent, and so imperative?

There is no hint of an answer to this question in the "Overview" here cited. At most it says that there are many questions that require more study. This is no answer but a part of the question: when so much money goes to researches of all sorts, why is the urgent study required for the saving of the environment so frustrated? For example, the current Pope has abolished a Vatican commission to study the question, is the population growth problematic? Why? Does the Pope not know that the situation is as serious as it is? Is he certain that the population growth is not problematic? If he is, then his knowledge is not scientific but religious, ex cathedra, as it were. If this is so, then the Commission should have examined this fact and its repercussions. It did not.

Skipping the body of the Brundtland Report for a while we note two annexes, one of 2 pages, a summary of proposed legal principles for environmental protection etc., and one of 15 pages, on the Commission and its work. The first annex recommends that the right to an adequate environment should be added to the list of human rights. The second contains information on the Commission and an interim report that it had published

The body of the Brundtland Report

The body of the Brundtland Report comprises over three hundred pages, and is divided to three more-or-less equal parts, on (1) the common concerns, (2) the common challenge and (3) the common endeavors. I will not report here the expansion of the "Overview" which I have summarized as best I could. Rather, I will report the way it handles moral and social obstacles to the plan--ones to do with values--which require attention if the plan is to be more than a mere expression of a pious wish. Naturally, we bump rapidly into conflict when we read Part I, about Common Concerns. Among the causes for the failures of the past we find the inferior status of women (p. 38): "Hence new approaches must involve programs of social development, particularly to improve the status of women in society ... and to promote local participation in decision making." This is obviously insufficient, as "local participation" is bound to be hostile to women's causes. Women are mentioned a few times in the Report, and the closest I found to a recognition of a conflict here is a passage (p. 106) on population control that requires policies that "should essentially promote women's rights" . It says, "There must be multifaceted campaigns" . There is still no explicit reference to the widespread hostility to family planning.

Under the title of The diffusion of Environmentally Sound Technologies (p. 86) some material could be placed that might inform the reader about the difficulty that every international organization might meet when attempting to diffuse and implement environment-friendly technologies, about the difficulty to transmit any advanced technology to semi-literate countries, about the difficulty to establish viable educational systems in tradition-bound countries. I found none.

An echo of this has reached these three pages; proprietary rights of

multinational corporations, we are told, "are a key element ... But their application in certain areas may hamper the diffusion of environmentally sound technologies and may increase inequities." It just may increase inequities. Just may. Just. Not how, not why, not what to do in order to avoid increasing inequities.

"Developing countries therefore have to work ... to build up their technological capabilities ..." , we are told. "Reforms at an international level are now needed to deal instantaneously ... to stimulate growth of developing countries while giving weight to environmental concerns" (p. 90). Conscientious readers with a modicum of writing ability can write such material as fast as they can read it.

Entering Part II about Common Challenges we find the presentation even sketchier. The opening presentation, on population control, is perhaps the most controversial, as on this the Commission at least says frankly that the action it demands happens to be rather unpopular in many countries. But even this unpopularity is only hinted at. Nor is the demand itself excessive: the Commission demands no more than "Giving people the means to choose the size of their families" (p. 96); it adds to this a patient explanation of the diverse aspects of the need for population control, and it boosts the explanation by some relevant background information which is quite terrifying.

"Larger investments will be needed. ... A concern for population growth must therefore be a part of a broader concern for a more rapid rate of economic and social development ..." (p. 97). The government of Zimbabwe is praised as leading in sub-Saharan Africa in its offering an integrated program of rural health, and in its advancing of women's causes and of contraception (p. 107). If this is true, it invites some

The Brundtland Report, p. 11

analysis: why is Zimbabwe more successful than its neighbors are, and can its successful method be transferred to them? Perhaps here the Report is useful, as this question may arise in the minds of readers who can examine the facts and act environmentally usefully. If this is so, if any progress has been achieved this way, then there is an urgent need to inform the world of it.

For my part I confess I do not find the Report inspiring credence: the paragraph next to the one which praises Zimbabwe praises China, and for its "effort to support village-level industries in the countryside" as "perhaps the most ambitious of this sort of national programs" (p. 108). Notice that the praise is for the ambition only. Nothing is said about the lack of success of this ambition, of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent Red Guards and all.

The problems are, of course, quite formidable, and those who do not know what to do are not to be censured, especially as no one has a clue. It is just staggering that there are new health measures of unbelievably new powers, which are painfully unavailable to most of the inhabitants of the globe, at a time when communication has made all problems global.

What has the World Health Organization done about the situation? I do not know. It has a "Health for All" program; did it succeed? I do not know. The Report says (p. 110), the "Health for All" strategy should be broadened far beyond ...". No praise. Rather, there is mention of "appropriate starting points" even within "the narrower area". This is simply obtuse. Perhaps a UN Commission Report cannot be frank. We need then some other medium of communication: frank communication is desperately needed.

It is too naive to expect the Report to suggest the decriminalization of

abusive drugs, or even to pass silently over the matter. The fact remains that the matter is controversial, and that there are issues much more urgent than this, since poor countries are at best less concerned with abusive drugs than with hunger, so that clearly the document is hampered by internal censorship and consequently cannot offer a reasonable priority list. Yet when problems are very urgent, and they surely are, the question of priorities is itself top priority. The Report's neglect of it is most regrettable.

Good news in the education front (p. 112): "Signs of progress" : "Today almost all the world's boys are getting some form of primary education" though there are gaps between male and female, rich countries and poor. Projections are not good, though: despite increase in investment and enrollment, due to population growth there will be nearly billion illiterates on earth in the turn of the millennium. Again the Report outline what can be done and what should be done.

Nothing that is not by now highly predictable. We are now introduced to a discussion of indigenous or tribal people. Here is a hint of a moral conflict: integrating them into society is good but it also raises their vulnerability (p. 114). In particular, there is a "fine line between keeping them in artificial, perhaps unwanted isolation and wantonly destroying their lifestyles"

What then is to be done? All that is mentioned here is "broader measures of human resources development" , health and nutrition programs, economic development, jobs.

This is an outrage. Canada is these days seriously facing this matter and there is no move simply because there is no idea what to do and the governments, federal and provincial, even local, are too busy with other matters, of course, and they intervene only when matters have reached boiling points and then they make foolish moves in haste. And

The Brundtland Report, p. 13

these are the good guys, or at least the best we have! At least the Report could confess here that more ideas are needed.

Food production presents a well-known crisis. The report offers little analysis and the demand to alter the world food market (p. 128). This is a tall order. of course. The conflict here is between the demand to raise food production and the demand to reduce the use of fertilizers and pesticides. The Report offers no new idea, only compromises--if and when these are available. The worst is that the discussion is meaningless, as the issue is always a matter of cost effectiveness, and there are no guidelines as to how to compute cost effectiveness when lives are at stake. The Report offers some important advice, such as the advice to utilize chemicals efficiently, at the very least to prevent their waste by irrigation (p. 140). But this is the least of it.

Subsistence farmers and nomads are forced to destroy their own environment when squeezed into narrow niches. "Research should give early attention" (p. 142): we do not know what to do about them. And, it may be noted, the spread of the desert is a visible and alarming phenomenon and a major cause of famine. The Report recommends (p. 144) the widening of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and the "enhancement and reorientation" of international assistance, on which more later. I skip the chapter on the extinction of species, despite its colorful discussion: without a sense of priority this is useless, as the preservation of humanity has priority over the preservation of any other species (i.e., the latter can be dealt with only on the assumption that the former is not at serious risk here and now); the Report, we remember, does not deal with priorities.

Energy. An interesting title: "FOSSIL FUELS: THE CONTINUING DILEMMA". The repercussions of the atmospheric pollution and greenhouse effect "are not fully appreciated by society" . It is well-

known that under the pressure of Saudi Arabia and the United States the UN agencies that should discuss these matters are paralyzed. Could the Report be more explicit and free? The dilemma, the Report wisely suggests, is between waiting till the disastrous effects are certain and attempting to divert the disaster (p. 176). The Report recommends improved monitoring, research, and international policies, and preparation for the disaster, especially the rise of sea-level. Here for once the Report stresses that the problem is global and cannot be solved locally. This obviously goes for most of the problems raised here. "Governments should ratify the existing ozone convention and develop protocols ... and systematically monitor ... A lot of policy development is needed." (p. 177).

An interesting history of pollution is presented which I must ignore. The discussion on nuclear energy is admitted to be deadlocked, inasmuch as there is anything openly admitted in the Report (p. 188). The Report manages to ignore even the fact that the standards of nuclear safety are inadequate and scarcely alterable. (I failed to publish a paper on the topic co-authored with authorities on the topic.) The Report recommends renewable energy, namely, hydropower, solar energy, wind power, and geothermal energy as the major source for the future (pp. 192-6). This is no solution, as hydrodams destroy the ecosystem (p. 194) and the other sources are usually small-scale and labor-intensive (p. 194). The Report recommends the abolition of the hidden subsidies for fossil fuel (p. 195). This, of course, requires much research as its repercussions are quite unknown; even the fact is overlooked here that the subsidies for fossil fuel are mainly practiced in the richest countries, and that they are deeply interwoven into the socioeconomic fabric there. Still, concerning energy the Report is optimistic as its recommendations are likely to raise efficiency (pp.

The Brundtland Report, p. 15

196-200).

The same goes for industry (pp. 206ff.), except that here the cost of cleaning is exorbitant and recycling is at best merely a partial relief (pp. 211-13).

Government systems of environmental assessment are run in poor countries by foreign consultant and "could benefit from a second opinion on the environmental documentation they receive" (p. 222). Evidently, these governments admit faulty documents either because the services are rendered to suit the short-term goals of their purchasers or purchasers try to get services on the cheap as they think poorly of the matter in the first place. Either way, the Report's advice will not be followed unless it is more than mere advice.

Industrial hazards. Chemicals. Hazardous waste. "No toxicity data exist" for most chemicals in use. "Third World countries have no way to effectively control trade in chemicals that have been banned ... in exporting countries. Thus these countries badly need the infrastructure to assess the risks associated with chemical use" (p. 224). "Waste management in developing countries suffer from a variety of problems. The amount of waste material crossing national frontiers is increasing and likely to continue to do so ... Some countries have proposed ... Strengthened international cooperation in this area is vitally important, and several international bodies have taken up the matter ..." (p. 227).

The picture that emerges from all this is distorted. Little familiarity with relevant information includes the knowledge of pharmaceutical companies dumping on the markets of poor countries materials banned in rich ones, that chemical companies pay governments of poor countries for permission to dump hazardous waste materials in

deserts and deserted mines and God knows where else. It is unthinkable that the Commission wrote this Report without knowledge of all that.

I will skip the chapter on the urban challenge, as it is too optimistic even by the general standard of the Report: Strengthening Local Authorities (p. 247) and likewise Self-Reliance and Citizen Involvement are too remote from the wretched reality of urban life in the poor countries that are seldom remotely democratic. Perhaps the Report had to say these things, but I cannot read them without bitter reaction and bitterness must be avoided, no matter how hard it is.

This brings us to Part III, Common Endeavours, on managing the commons, on peace and security, and proposals for legal changes. The chapter about peace includes information about the damage war does to the ecosystem which may be news to many, though after the Gulf War this information is more difficult to ignore. Perhaps we know that war is evil even if it does not damage the environment, but there will soon be people who will piously say that there is no evil without some good and conventional war reduces the population pressure; for them these pages may be thought provoking. Moreover, as the Report argues eloquently, armament takes its toll right now. This, too, the Gulf War has made harder to ignore.

The final thirty-something pages, the proposals for institutional and legal change, is based on the following tacit assumption: all is not lost; by sweet reasonableness we can show our fellow humans that in most cases we know what to do and it makes excellent sense to do it; consequently what should be done will be done; moreover, in the cases where we do not know what to do, we need a little research, a little coordination, a little monitoring, and then, again, all will be well. This tacit assumption is palpably false.

Conclusion

This review is obviously unfair: the Report comes to serve one purpose and it is reviewed for a different one. What the Report's purpose is one may easily surmise. It is an official recognition of all the items that can be put on the agenda and even some that should not be put there. The need for an official body to have such a list is a matter of administrative conditions that need not concern the reader not engaged with administration. The general public was informed that the Report is a great breakthrough, and possibly it is; I do not know how this matter can be assessed. But the great need now is for a list of priorities which makes sense and which takes into account the realistic possibilities to implement proposals to save Spaceship Earth. I do not know what these are, but clearly the constraints put on the Brundtland Commission made it impossible for it to handle this matter. Time is short and we should know what the Report is not. We should know that individuals who wish to talk bluntly and undiplomatically should get together and exchange opinions, admit ignorance and helplessness and seek improvements.

Plato's Symposium contrasts two odes to Love, one presenting Love as sophisticated and reasonable and luxuriously fused in beauty the other as a street kid starved for beauty. And Plato opts for the latter as more real.