

Public Health and the Environment in a Sustainable Society

Gro Harlem Brundtland,

Tang Prize,

Taipei 2018

Mr. President, Led + G. men

I am happy to be back here, remembering the wonderful events more than three years ago when my colleagues, recipients of the first Tang Prizes, and I celebrated here in Taipei.

Today I have been asked to focus on Public Health and the Environment in a Sustainable Society.

This is what has dominated my life and work over the many decades of a long life.

Let me share with you parts of that story.

My early years as a daughter of a doctor and also politician father clearly inspired my own choice of education, to study medicine and then to focus on the role of health to promote a just and fair society.

Directly following my medical degree from the University of Oslo, my husband and I, with two young children, traveled to the US, to Boston, to continue our studies at Harvard University.

I was only 25, the youngest in my class at Harvard School of Public Health.

I wanted to focus on Public Health, affecting the lives of so many, not limit my attention to clinical medicine, one patient at a time.

In my mind was the fascinating history of Public Health, and the enormous benefits it had created, through great Pioneers, such as the german doctor, Semmelweis and the british doctor John Snow, who had lived and worked more than a hundred years before.

By their determined efforts to seek the truth and background for serious and deadly illness, they became heroes of Public Health, as they opened new doors of knowledge and evidence to prevent key ills of our societies.

Dr. Semmelweis systematically looked into the details of difference between to obstetrical wards in his hospital. Why did a shocking 10-

15 % of women giving birth in one ward die from skeptical postpartum fever, and less than 2 % in the second ward?

Paradoxically, the dangerous ward was the one where rich mothers delivered, doctors were attending, and not the ward where only midwives assisted the poorer women.

The doctors went every morning to examine the dead, and brought with them the sources of infection.

Dr Semmelweis had to fight for years to have the medical community accept that cleaning of hands is of the essence!

He understood there was this link, although at that time, unfortunately, bacteria were still not part of the knowledge base.

Dr John Snow had seen the tragedies of cholera epidemics, and started searching for any common source or event that linked affected patients and their destinies.

He realized that water from the same pump was behind the epidemic, in Soho, making Broad Street, and its water post recognizable for all later students of medicine, across the world.

Progress in Public Health is a fantastic story of the last 150 years, changing the face of our societies in so dramatic ways.

Water and Sanitation, vaccination of children, eradication of smallpox, the importance of nutrition for pregnant women and their young offspring's, these are only some examples of how the safety of our societies have grown, and the average life expectancy increased by several decades. This is the result of the application of new knowledge and evidence.

The links between health and the human environment were obvious.

The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat are all crucial components to define our destinies in life.

The observation that there was more illness and shorter lives among the poor was not new.

But public action to promote Public Health often led to improvements in the lives of all groups in society.

We interact; we are interdependent, in so many ways.

It took a hundred years of impressive progress before a new dimension entered into the picture: Environmental damage and destruction, combined with climate change.

Humanity and its combined activities, industrialization, transport and the use of coal and oil had led to destruction of nature, the critical basis for our own existence.

The new dimension required a new era of awareness, knowledge and evidence to safeguard our future, one of interdependence the health of Planet Earth and our own health and survival.

This new awareness, illustrated by Rachel Carsons book “Silent Spring” in the 1960ies, again took time to enter into mainstream understanding among decision makers.

As a young environment minister, in the 1970ies, my main focus was still on environment and health while global warming and the serious long-term consequences were still not really on our horizon.

In the 1980ies it became increasingly clear that only a global perspective, including the whole dimension of the right to development for all, could be the solution to our mounting challenges.

As I became charged with leading The World Commission on Environment and Development, in 1983, we made clear that overcoming poverty, realizing the human rights of all to a decent life must be part of a sustainable solution and a development pattern that could be sustainable.

We are in this together, and we need cooperation and a sense of shared responsibility to safeguard our common future.

This was the analysis and message of the Report I was honored to Chair, more than 30 years ago.

The Report was groundbreaking, calling for a new pattern of development, and coined the new concept: Sustainable Development.

It proved to be an historic breakthrough.

The reality that we are all in this together has finally taken hold.

We are all responsible to do our part, not only all governments, and all private business or other actors, but each and every one of us.

Crucially, I believe the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals ended up being applicable to all countries, not just the developing ones, managed to bridge serious differences between groups of countries. This also made it possible to bridge difficult gaps as to the Climate agreement.

Finally the agreement applies to all of us, in all our countries.

I have personally followed and been part of this whole process for decades. I have now and then had reason to celebrate progress and breakthroughs in the direction of my own beliefs, values and principles, those that I hold dear, and that our report 30 years ago also illustrated.

Let me mention just some such examples.

There has been a long fight to have gender and rights for girls and women fully addressed.

The same is the case with regard to equality as a common goal, both between and within countries.

It may seem surprising, but it was also a hard struggle to address and place the Climate issue as an essential Goal within the SDG, where it clearly belongs!

Believe it or not, for years and years, Energy was being defined as a no go!

Many countries, insisting that Energy was a so-called national issue, held this major factor hostage.

We have dramatically reduced the proportion of people living in extreme poverty. Life expectancy has increased. More people have access to safe drinking water. Fewer children are dying in infancy, and fewer mothers die while giving birth to new generations. And we have significantly reduced pollution from industries.

But one must only look at the headlines to know that problems abound and inequity persists.

In an era of astounding wealth, approximately 1 in 10 people still live on less than \$1.90 a day.

A report released in January by Oxfam found that “eight men own the same wealth as the 3.6 billion people who make up the poorest half of humanity.”

Technology has moved us forward by leaps and bounds, yet a mosquito bite can still kill a child.

Let me end by illustrating some major challenges we are facing, as more and more citizens become city dwellers across the world.

WHO data show that 80 % of our cities exceed the air quality limits, and half of all cities have levels more than 3,5 times those limits.

The history of Public Health and the lessons learnt should still inspire us as we help move ahead to a future that is healthy, just and secure.