
GRO HARLEM BRUNDTLAND

First Female Prime Minister of Norway & Mother of Sustainability

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Considered the “mother” of sustainable development, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland attributes her passions for public health, the environment, and political activism to her father, a doctor and cabinet minister. At the tender age of seven, Dr. Brundtland joined the children’s organisation of Norway’s Labour Party, and has been a member ever since. The early seeds of internationalism inspired by her family took deeper roots during her experience at Harvard, working with distinguished medical experts from around the world.

As an environment minister, Prime Minister, and party leader, Gro Harlem Brundtland gained international recognition as a leader on key global challenges, the environment, human rights, sustainable development, and global security issues. Dr. Brundtland completed her medical studies at Oslo University. As a young mother and newly qualified doctor, she won a scholarship to the Harvard School of Public Health where her vision of extending health beyond the confines of the medical world into environmental issues and human development began to take shape.

Later employed with the Ministry of Health in Oslo, Dr. Brundtland focused on children’s health issues. In 1974 she was asked to serve as Norway’s Minister of the Environment focusing on the links between public health and the environment.

During the 1970s, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland lobbied for women’s rights and progressive family policies, and gained a political reputation at home, as well as international recognition in environmental circles. At age 41, Dr. Brundtland became the first woman Prime Minister of Norway—and the youngest person ever appointed. Her cabinet of eight women and nine men represented the highest level of gender equality in history as Dr. Brundtland continued to lead her country for more than a decade.

Dr. Brundtland chaired the World Commission on Environment and Development, the Brundtland Commission, which popularized the concept of sustainable development in its landmark report, “Our Common Future.” Their recommendations provided the momentum for the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

She returned to her roots in medicine serving as Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO)—a position utilizing her considerable skills as a physician, environmentalist, politician, and activist. Under her forward-thinking leadership, WHO confronted the global threat of the SARS virus and her rapid response and information networking are largely credited with helping prevent the widespread growth of the disease. Dr. Brundtland also intensified the debate on global health as key to economic development, and began programs to curb malaria, tobacco use, tuberculosis, and AIDS, as well as a new focus on chronic diseases, diet, and nutrition.

Dr. Brundtland left WHO in 2003 after succeeding in getting support for the first ever negotiated agreement on a major public health issue: The Tobacco Convention. That same year she was recognized as Scientific American's Policy Leader of the Year for initiating and coordinating a rapid worldwide response to SARS. "There is a very close connection between being a doctor and a politician," she has said. "The doctor tries to prevent illness, then tries to treat it if it comes. It's exactly the same as what you try to do as a politician, but with regard to society."

Dr. Brundtland served as a member of the United Nations "High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change." The panel's 2004 report, "A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility," includes sustainable development as an integral part of a new vision of collective security, and the proposal for "Responsibility to Protect," the principle applied in 2011 in the cases of Libya and Cote d'Ivoire. In May 2007, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, named Dr. Brundtland, as well as Ricardo Lagos, the former President of Chile, and Han Seung-Soo, the former foreign minister of South Korea, to serve as UN Special Envoys for Climate Change.

Also in 2007, she became a founding member of the "Elders," a group of 11 leaders called together by Nelson Mandela and chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who contribute their wisdom, independent leadership, and integrity to tackling the world's toughest problems with the goal of conflict resolution and making the world a better place. She is a member of the Board of the "United Nations Foundation," initiated by Ted Turner and his generous gift of \$1 billion to the UN and its causes. She also served as a member of "The Independent Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament." In 2010 the UN Secretary General appointed her a member of his "High Level Global Sustainability Panel."

Dr. Brundtland travels and lectures extensively as a leading voice on climate change, for a healthier and better educated world, and a champion of sustainable development, which she defines as "meeting the demands of the present generations while preserving the rights of future generations to meet their own needs." Her numerous awards include the 1988 Third World Prize for leadership on sustainable development, the Indira Gandhi Prize 1989, and der Internationaler Karlspreis zu Achen 1994. She also received the International Environment Prize from the City of Göteborg in Sweden, and in 2004 the Blue Planet Prize from the Asahi Glass Foundation, Japan.

She holds numerous honorary degrees from major universities, including Oxford, Harvard, and Yale, as well as Cape Town and the All India Institute.