

# WEST ASIA

## G L O B A L E N V I R O N M E N T O U T L O O K

The fourth *Global Environment Outlook – environment for development (GEO-4)* assessment report is published in 2007, exactly two decades since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published its seminal report – *Our Common Future* – which placed sustainable development on the agenda of governments and other stakeholders. *GEO-4* is the most comprehensive UN report on the environment prepared by about 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1 000 others across the world.

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West Asia has paid significant attention to the environment including the enactment of environmental regulations, developing environmental and sustainable development strategies and action plans, and joining many multilateral environmental agreements. However, the continued rapid population growth, military conflicts, and unprecedented levels of development, has resulted in a significant increase in environmental challenges.

### Socio-economic trends

Despite notable progress made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals in health, education and empowerment of women over the last 20 years, 32 per cent of the total population over the age of 18 (some 36 million people) is still illiterate. Poverty has been rising since the 1980s, with rates ranging from almost zero in Kuwait to 42 per cent in Yemen. Urban population in the region is at 63 per cent, and unemployment rates above 20 per cent.

Agriculture contributes an average 30 per cent to GDP and is the main economic activity in the Mashriq and Yemen, employing more than 40 per cent of the work force. Oil is the major source of income in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

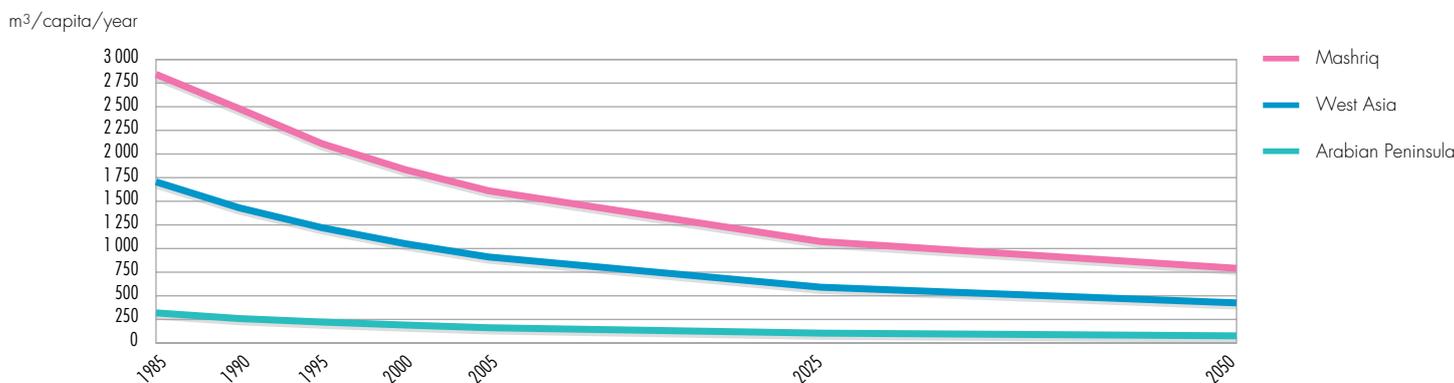
countries, representing 40 per cent of GDP, and 70 per cent of government revenues.

Economic reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the temporary recovery of oil markets lead to some economic stabilization during the 1990s. Real economic growth picked up since 2002, with a sharp increase in oil prices, particularly in the GCC countries. The main challenge is that governments have yet to integrate the environment in social and economic development.

### Freshwater

West Asia is one of the world's most water-stressed regions. Between 1985 and 2005, per capita freshwater availability fell from 1 700 to 907 cubic metres/year; and will decline to 420 m<sup>3</sup>/year by 2050. The Mashriq relies mainly on surface water and, to a lesser extent, on groundwater, while the Arabian Peninsula relies mainly on groundwater and desalinated water; both sub-regions are increasingly using treated wastewater. More than sixty per cent of surface water originates from outside the region and the issue of shared water resources is a major determinant of regional stability.

Trends and projections in per capita freshwater availability



Source: UNESCWA and UNDP

The agricultural sector accounts for more than 80 per cent of total water used. In the Mashriq, the health impacts of poor water quality are a major concern.

Recently, most countries have shifted towards integrated water management and protection approaches. Water policy reforms focus on decentralization, privatization, demand management, conservation and economic efficiency, improved legal and institutional provisions, and public participation.

### **Land degradation and desertification**

About 64 per cent of West Asia's 4 million square kilometre land is drylands and prone to degradation. Just over 8 per cent of the land is cultivated. Historically, land has provided the population with ample food. Over the last 20 years, however, a 75 per cent increase in population has spurred the demand for commodities and land. Increased pressures resulted in land degradation in most of the countries, with 79 per cent of the land degraded at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with 98 per cent of it caused by humans.

Forests occupy 1.34 per cent (5.1 million ha) of the region's total area, less than 0.1 per cent of the world's total forested area. Many countries have developed National Action Plans to combat desertification, and joined international treaties to combating desertification and protecting biodiversity and forests.

### **Coastal and marine environments**

Coastal and marine areas in West Asia are threatened by rapid coastal development of residential towns, resorts and recreational projects, land reclamation, industry, oil pollution, chemical contamination, water desalination, discharge of micro-organisms and over-fishing.

Recently, countries have introduced tools such as environmental impact assessments and adopted integrated coastal zone management plans. West Asia has more than 30 marine reserves and is signatory to 18 regional and international agreements related to coastal and marine environments.

### **Urban environment**

Over the past two decades, West Asia has witnessed intense urbanization, resulting in higher demand for water and energy, waste management challenges, deterioration of air quality, and expansion of slum areas, especially in Mashriq countries. Per capita solid waste in the GCC ranges between 0.73 and 1.40 kg/person/day, compared to 0.61 and 0.86 kg/person/day in the Mashriq.

### **Energy**

The energy sector is a primary driver of both economic development and environmental degradation. The region produces about 23 per cent of global oil and about 8.7 per cent of global gas production. Per capita energy consumption in the region varies greatly between oil producing countries and non-oil producers. Average per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions increased from 6 to 7.2 tonnes between 1990 and 2003.

Some countries have developed energy efficiency codes and standards in the areas of buildings, home appliances, waste, and energy, and have introduced legislation and monitoring of air pollution.

### **Peace, security and the environment**

Armed conflict in West Asia is affecting human well-being, and resulting in the degradation of natural resources and ecological habitats. In Iraq, deterioration in health services and environmental health conditions has resulted in increased non-violent death rates. There is also concern over depleted uranium used in the 1991 and 2003 wars. The Lebanon-Israeli war in 2006 resulted in a major oil spill along the Lebanese-Syrian coast, and raised concern over human health from air and water pollution. The successive wars in the region have increased the number of refugees and internally-displaced people to about 4 million.

Sources and credits for the information presented here are available and fully referenced in the **Fourth Global Environment Outlook - environment for development** report.



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