

ASIA AND THE PACIFIC AND DRIVERS OF CHANGE



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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Asia and the Pacific region comprise 43 countries and a number of territories with a rich diversity of nature, ethnicities and cultures. The region is home to almost 4 billion people or 60 per cent of the world's population. Labelled as the world's fastest developing region, it has since 2001, surpassed the 5 per cent growth rate suggested by the 1987 Brundtland Commission.

Urban air quality

The air pollution and degradation of air quality in many Asian cities are a result of fast urbanization, and rapidly growing number of motor vehicles. The problem is further compounded by the region's relatively poor energy intensity and fuel efficiency; a lack of mass transit services in many mega cities as well as more frequent forest fires in South East Asia. More than 1 billion people in Asia are exposed to outdoor air pollutant levels exceeding WHO standards, which causes the premature death of 500,000 people annually.

Many countries in Asia and the Pacific have addressed the air quality issue through legislative and other measures. Some limited

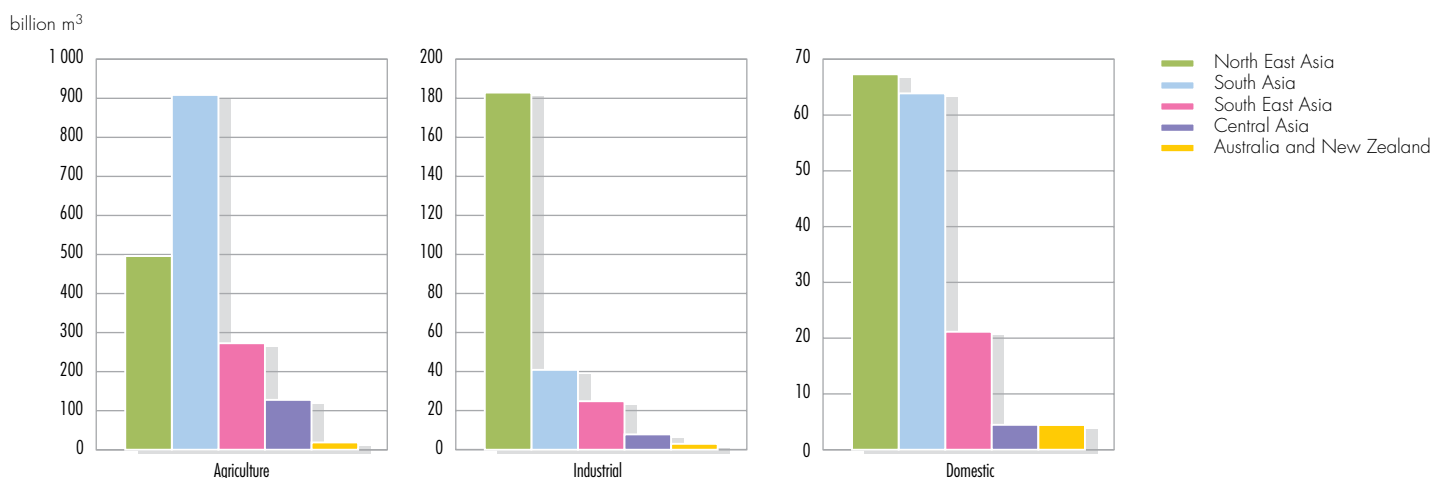
progress has also been achieved through the use of cleaner and renewable energy but additional efforts are needed.

Freshwater stress

Adequate water supply is a major challenge to all nations in Asia and the Pacific. Some 655 million people lack access to safe water. Excessive withdrawal from surface waters and underground aquifers, pollution by agrochemical plants and industries, domestic wastewater, and inefficient use are major causes of water stress. Climate variability and change have led to considerable spatial and temporal variations in rainwater availability. The influx of saline water is also a severe threat in South and South East Asia, and in the atoll islands of the Pacific.

Countries are taking numerous steps to address the rising demand for safe water. Effective and innovative approaches to water efficiency and water pollution control are still needed in most countries.

Average freshwater use by sector in the period 1998-2002



Source: GEO Data Portal compiled from FAO AQUASTAT 2007



Vital ecosystems

As the region has two thirds of the world's coastlines and more than half of its inhabitants live on the coastal zones, enormous pressures are put on its coastal and marine ecosystems to support social-economic development and ever-growing demand for energy. Half of the world's mangrove areas are located in the region and are under severe threats by industrial and infrastructure development, sedimentation and pollutants from inland. It is estimated that East Asia and South Asia discharge 89 per cent and 85 per cent respectively of their untreated wastewater directly into the sea.

Approximately 72.5 per cent of the world's coral reefs are in Asia and the Pacific. About 60 per cent of the region's coral reefs are at risk from mining and destructive fishing practices and higher sea surface temperature which leads to severe bleaching.

Due to large-scale exploitation of natural resources, most of the inland water ecosystems in Central Asia have also been severely depleted.

The common policy response to ecosystem destruction is the establishment of protected areas. South East Asia has set aside 14.8 per cent of its land for protection, representing a higher proportion than the 2003-world-average of 12 per cent. In other sub-regions, less than 10 per cent of their land is protected. In the South Pacific, as well as in Indonesia and the Philippines, local communities or land-owning groups, together with local governments and/or other partners, collaboratively manage 244 designated coastal areas including 276 smaller protected areas under a locally-managed marine areas strategy (LMMA) initiative.

Agricultural land use

In Central Asia, land degradation from salinization due to poor irrigation practices continues. As food security is a high priority for the region, countries have taken appropriate measures to overcome the decline in land fertility and increase food crop production. Good governance provides appropriate legal and policy mechanisms for administering land ownership. It also fosters the active participation of civil society in land reform efforts, and ensures the equitable distribution of agrarian development benefits. The rights of women farmers in South and South East Asia are recognised and equally protected.

Waste management

The industrial model of development together with new lifestyles in the region has led to rapid changes in consumption patterns, generation of large waste quantities, and changes in waste composition.

The current trend in municipal waste generation of 0.5-1.4 kg per person per day shows no sign of abating. The use of unsanitary landfills contaminates land and groundwater. The illegal traffic in electronic and hazardous waste also poses growing challenges as the region lacks appropriate technology and human capacity to handle these.

More effective waste management strategies and systems are urgently required at the national and city levels.

Recently, several governments in the region have initiated a variety of policy responses to address the growing waste problem, including market-based tools, and *reduce, reuse and recycle* approaches with a goal to become a *Sound Material-Cycle Society*.

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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