



MEDIA BRIEF

Economic Progress Improves Africa's Chances for Development but Land Degradation Remains among Key Concerns

Nairobi, 25 October: Africa's social and economic performance has improved recently, thus raising its chances of meeting key Millennium Development Goal targets, a UN report says. There are however many challenges yet to overcome.

In Africa, land is an important environmental, social and economic good, critical to the realization of opportunities for the people of Africa. However, land degradation is the biggest threat to the region realizing its full potential. Land degradation affects about five million square kilometres of Africa - one sixth of the continent.

Land is under pressure because of increased demand for resources from its growing population, natural disasters like drought and floods, and the inappropriate use of technology and chemicals.

These findings and warnings come in Global Environment Outlook 4, *GEO-4*, the latest in the series of flagship reports from the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme. *GEO-4* is published 20 years after the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) produced its seminal report, *Our Common Future*. It describes the changes since 1987, assesses the current state of global atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity, and identifies priorities for action.

GEO-4 salutes the world's progress in tackling some relatively straightforward problems, with the environment now much closer to mainstream politics everywhere. But despite these advances, there remain the more persistent issues for which existing measures and institutional arrangements have systematically demonstrated inadequacies and where solutions are still emerging. Failure to address persistent problems, UNEP says, may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and may threaten humanity's survival. But it adds: "The objective is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario, but an urgent call for action."

Land degradation not only threatens livelihoods but also puts at risk forests, fresh water, coastal and marine resources, and helps deserts spread. The degradation of land often causes and intensifies poverty. It worsens hunger and makes conflict more likely. Degradation takes several forms: soil erosion, which is widespread in Africa; coastal erosion with Togo and Benin losing as much as 30 metres annually to the sea; and salinisation, affecting about 2.7 per cent of the total land area.

The degradation means that more Africans are badly nourished: the continent's food production per head is now 12 per cent less than in 1981. Agricultural production per head fell by 0.4 per cent between 2000 and 2004, and Africa is the only region in the world where the need for food aid is increasing.

Another factor worsening land degradation is the maintenance of unfair agricultural subsidies in developed regions, *GEO-4* says. The impacts of these on developing countries is significant - making it often cheaper for them to import food than to produce it, and thus forcing them to focus on export crops like coffee, which in turn reduces agricultural opportunities for smallholder subsistence farmers and leads to food insecurity and migration to the cities.

Damage is also linked to conflict, the UN says, and the Darfur region of Sudan is an example. Rainfall there has declined steadily over the last 30 years, harming farmers and pastoralists. The resulting land degradation has forced many people southwards, leading to conflict with farmers where they settle.

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Recognizing that land use and degradation have cross-cutting impacts, measures to address the challenge of land degradation have included integrated crop and land management programmes which offer farmers benefits such as higher yields and reduced risks.

Other localized steps include water harvesting, agro-forestry, and new grazing strategies, which can not only increase yields but also build healthy soils, maintain crop diversity and avoid the need for expensive and polluting chemical inputs.

More attention is now being paid to the inclusion of customary tenure in national land administration laws to protect people's customary land rights, avoiding the "Western" administration system of land title which has often failed to benefit the poor.

A significant political reform was the transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union. The Action Plan of the Environment Initiative, developed in 2003 under the New Partnership for Africa's Development, is Africa's most recent regional environmental policy.

GEO-4 says the well-being of billions of people in the developing world is at risk, because of a failure to remedy the relatively simple problems which have been successfully tackled elsewhere.

The report says the world as a whole is living far beyond its means. The human population is now so large that "the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available... humanity's footprint is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 ha/person...".

Progress towards a sustainable world which the Brundtland Commission called for still has far to go. The average sub-Saharan African country spends three times more on repaying its debts than it does on providing basic services to its people. Africa has 5 per cent of the developing world's income, but carries about two-thirds of the global debt.

The proportion of Africans living below the poverty line rose from 47.6 per cent in 1985, two years before Brundtland reported, to 59 per cent in 2000. The proportion of undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa fell on average from 35 per cent in 1990 to 32 per cent in 2003. But the absolute number rose, from about 120 million people in 1980 to 206 million in 2003.

GEO-4 says the threat of climate change is urgent. According to some new studies, Africa is one of the regions most vulnerable to climate variability and change because of multiple stresses and low adaptive capacity. Food security is likely to be further aggravated by climate variability and change.

Negotiations are due to start in December on a treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol, the international climate agreement which obligates countries to control anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Although it exempts all developing countries from emission reduction commitments, there is growing pressure for some rapidly-industrializing countries, now substantial emitters themselves, to agree to emission reductions.

The future will be largely determined by the decisions individuals and society make now, *GEO-4* says: "Our common future depends on our actions today, not tomorrow or some time in the future."

For some of the world's problems, the damage may already be irreversible. *GEO-4* warns that tackling the underlying causes of environmental pressures often affects the vested interests of powerful groups able to influence policy decisions. The only way to address these problems requires moving the environment from the periphery to the core of decision-making: environment for development, not development to the detriment of environment.

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Notes to Editors

GEO-4 is produced and published by the Division of Early Warning and Assessment of the United Nations Environment Programme. It is available from www.unep.org/geo/geo4/

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Regional Highlights

Between 1995 and 2004, African economies have grown. In 2004, the economic growth rate in terms of purchasing power was 5.8 per cent, up from 4 per cent in 2003.

Local communities and IUCN-The World Conservation Union have worked together since 1991 in Mauritania and Senegal to restore the Diawling delta. Fish catches rose from under 1 000 kg in 1992 to 113 000 kg in 1998, bird counts from 2 000 to over 35 000. The work has added about US\$1 million annually to the region's economy.

Restoration of Cameroon's Waza Lagone floodplain has produced an annual benefit of about US\$3.1 million in fish catches and productivity, fresh water availability, flood farming and wildlife and plants resources. But restoration costs more than prevention.

Numbers of Mauritania's octopus fishers dropped from nearly 5 000 in 1996 to about 1 800 in 2001, because of foreign vessels' operations.

Exploitation of West Africa's fish by Russian, Asian and European Union fleets increased sixfold from the 1960s to the 1990s, but African countries only receive 7.5 per cent of the value of their fish in licence fees once it has been processed. Such agreements adversely affect fish stocks and food security, forcing artisanal fishers from coastal West Africa to migrate to some of the regions that are exploiting their resources.

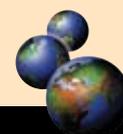
The bushmeat trade and wildlife markets in parts of Africa are examples of activities that have impacts on the environment, and also carry a risk of disease emergence. Between 2000 and 2003, 13 of 16 Ebola outbreaks in Gabon and the Republic of Congo resulted from the handling of gorilla or chimpanzee carcasses.

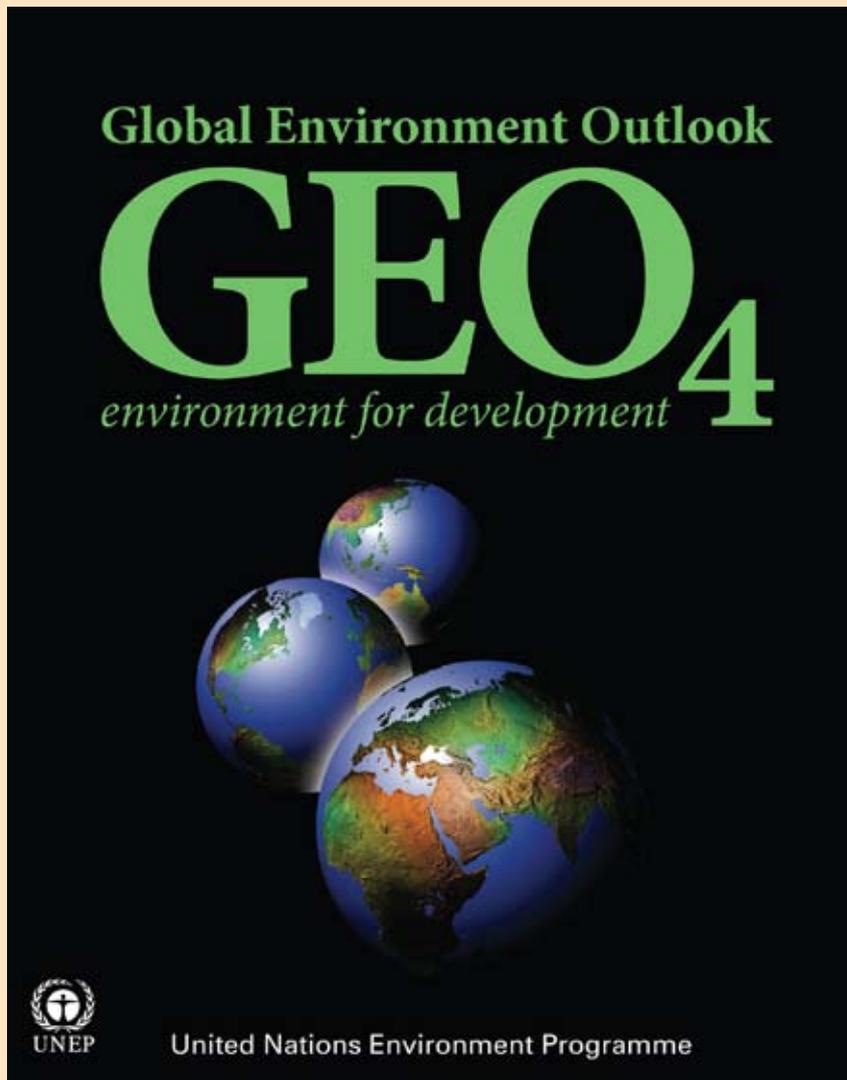
95 million hectares of Africa are threatened with irreversible degradation if nutrient depletion continues.

In Niger sorghum yields from crops grown without fertilisers were about 600 kilogrammes per hectare. These were doubled by the application of 40 kg/ha of nitrogen fertiliser.

Horticulture, which accounts for 20 per cent of global agricultural trade, and is the fastest-growing agricultural sector, has significant potential. Horticultural exports in sub-Saharan Africa exceed US\$2 billion/year.

The people of African rely on fisheries to provide some of their food needs. Nearly 10 million people depend on fishing, fish farming, and fish processing and trade. Africa produces 7.3 million tonnes of fish/year, 90 per cent of which is caught by small-scale fishers. In 2005, the region's fish exports were worth US\$2.7 billion.





The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is UNEP's flagship assessment process and report series. The fourth report in the series, GEO-4 provides an overview of the global and regional environmental, social and economic state-and-trends over the past two decades. It highlights the interlinkages, challenges and opportunities which the environment provides for development and human well-being. The report also presents an outlook, using four scenarios to explore plausible futures to the year 2050, as well as policy options to address present and emerging environmental issues.

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Copies of the GEO-4 report are available for download on www.unep.org/geo/geo4/ and on
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