



MEDIA BRIEF

Asia and the Pacific Pays High Price for Progress

Nairobi, 25 October: Asia and the Pacific, home to 60 per cent of the world's people, are making "remarkable" progress in reducing poverty, a UN report says. The region is also improving its ability to protect the environment, energy efficiency is increasing in many places, and drinking water provision has advanced considerably in the last decade.

But progress has come at a price. Increases in consumption and associated waste have contributed to the exponential growth in existing environmental problems. Serious challenges remain, including urban air quality, fresh water stress, agricultural land use (a threat to food security) and increased waste. The illegal traffic in electronic and hazardous waste is a new challenge affecting human health and the environment.

Environmental and economic policies have not been fully integrated, a major obstacle to establishing an effective system of environmental management.

The 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 these persistent problems, UNEP says, may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and may threaten humanity's survival. The report adds - "There are no major issues raised in *Our Common Future* for which the foreseeable trends are favourable." But it insists: "The objective is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario, but an urgent call for more stringent action."

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.

It 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 [its environmental demand] is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 ha/person...".

GEO-4 says ecosystems and human health in Asia and the Pacific continue to deteriorate, while population growth and rapid economic development have driven significant environmental degradation and loss of natural resources.

However, the report also recognizes the region's achievements in protecting its environment, key to tackling poverty. Several countries have already achieved many of the MDG targets and have set themselves new and more demanding goals, called MDG Plus.

This is the first *GEO* report in which all seven of the world's regions emphasize the potential impacts of climate change, which *GEO-4* says is likely to mean more severe droughts and floods in the region, as well as soil degradation, coastal inundation and salt water intrusion caused by sea level rise. Agricultural productivity is likely to decline substantially, because of warmer temperatures and shifting rainfall.

www.unep.org/geo/geo4/



South Pacific island states are extremely vulnerable to climate change and associated sea-level rise, and some may have to consider migration and resettlement. Health problems are likely to worsen, with higher rates of cholera, dengue fever and heat-related illnesses.

The climate change threat is now urgent. Some experts have identified a 2°C increase in the global mean temperature above pre-industrial temperatures as a threshold beyond which climate impacts become significantly more severe, and the threat of major, irreversible damage more plausible. This implies emission reductions of 60–80 per cent by 2050 in developed countries.

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.

GEO-4 says climate change is a “global priority”, demanding political will and leadership. Yet it finds “a remarkable lack of urgency”, and a “woefully inadequate” global response.

On air quality, the region’s growing energy needs and the “exploding” growth in motor vehicles are causing serious damage, with haze pollution from forest fires in South East Asia making matters worse.

Excessive use of surface and underground water, industrial pollution, and inefficient use of fresh water all contribute to water stress. There are also indications of unprecedented glacier retreats in the Himalayan-Hindukush region.

South East Asia has set aside 14.8 per cent of its land for protection, above the world average for 2003 of 12 per cent. But elsewhere in Asia and the Pacific less than 10 per cent of land is protected.

Arable land is being degraded in all sub-regions; some countries appear to have taken counter-measures sufficient to overcome the impact on agricultural production such as substituting new arable land for degraded land.

Since 1987, Asia and the Pacific has become the world’s fastest developing region, imposing enormous pressures on its ecosystems, such as mangrove forests and coral reefs.

This development, the region’s greater affluence and new lifestyles, have led to changes in consumption patterns and the generation of large quantities of waste. Unsanitary landfills contaminating land and groundwater are of particular concern.

More than 90 per cent of the 20–50 million tonnes of electronic waste produced globally every year ends up in Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar and Pakistan. But Asian workers are reported to be “using obsolete technologies to process 21st century wastes”.

Effective waste management strategies and systems are either completely lacking or else inadequate in many Asia and the Pacific countries, posing a serious threat to human and environmental health.

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 persistent 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 harder-to-manage 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

China's sustained growth and the acceleration of India's economy have contributed to the reduction (between 1990 and 2001) by nearly 250 million, of the number of people living on less than US\$1 a day. Efforts at reducing malnutrition, however, have been less successful.

Across the region, 17.6 per cent of the people (655 million) still lack access to safe water. South Pacific states have made no progress, and Central Asian countries have fallen back.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than a billion people in Asia are exposed to outdoor air pollutant levels above WHO guidelines, causing the premature death of about 500 000 people a year.

There is evidence of significant adverse effects from tropospheric (ground-level) ozone on staple crops in some developing countries, including China, India, Pakistan.

Fertilizer application in the East China Sea's catchment area has risen by up to 250 per cent and the number of harmful algal blooms in coastal waters, often caused by fertilizer pollution, has also risen dramatically.

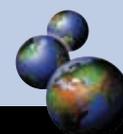
Properly conserved ecosystems support human well-being: the large mangrove forests in Phang Nga, the most tsunami-affected region in Thailand, gave significant protection in the 2004 disaster.

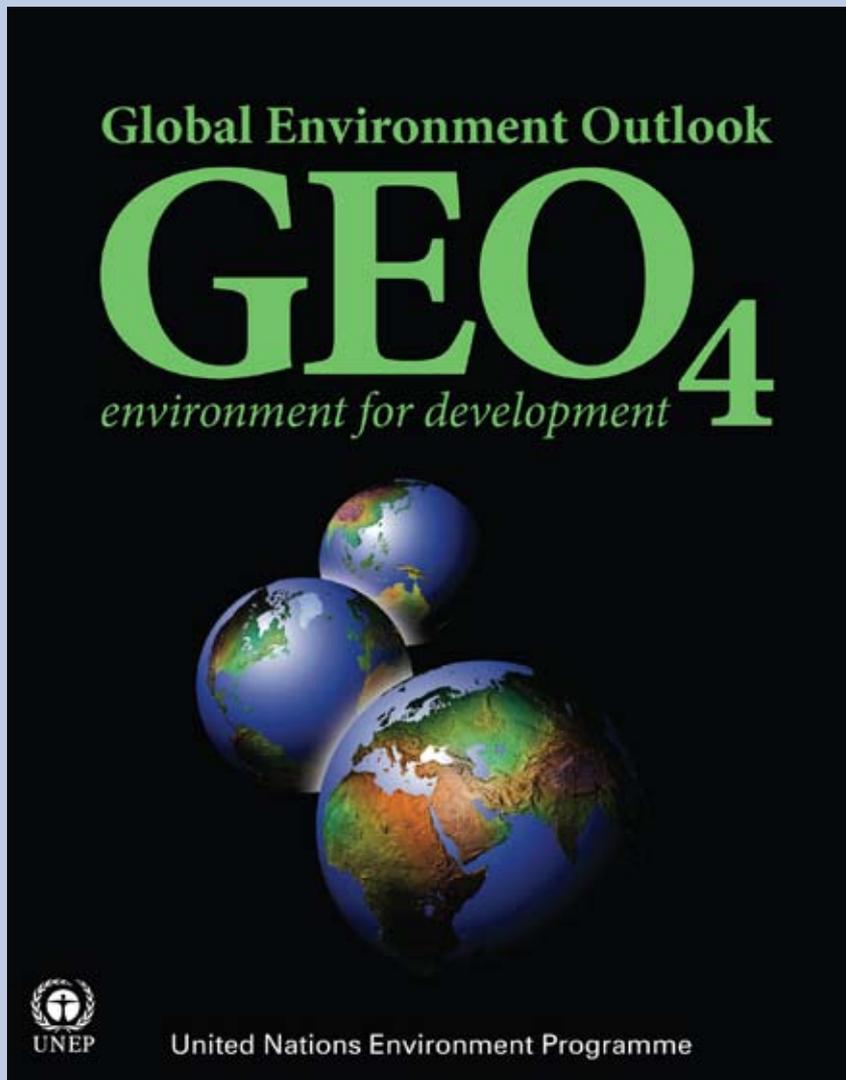
Nearly 120 square kilometres of mangroves planted in Viet Nam at a cost of about US \$1.1 million have saved \$7.3 million a year in dyke maintenance.

Between 1987 and 2004 energy use in Asia and the Pacific increased by 88 per cent, compared with a global average rise of 36 per cent.

During the 1990s the number of cars and two-wheeled motorcycles in China and India rose by more than 10 per cent annually.

Orange roughy stocks off New Zealand were fished to 17 per cent of their original spawning biomass within eight years.





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
UNEP's official distributor's website: <http://www.earthprint.com/go.htm?to=DEW0962NA>
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