



MEDIA BRIEF

Environmental Cooperation creates Opportunities for Further Progress in Europe

Nairobi, 25 October: Since the publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987, Europe has made great strides in reducing and even preventing many forms of pollution, but rising (average) incomes and related lifestyle changes are leading to higher greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental impacts.

Europe's greater prosperity and growing number of individual households are contributing to unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, higher energy use, poor urban air quality, and transport problems driven by demands for increased mobility.

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*. *GEO-4* 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 action."

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

With good governance and advanced cooperation on environmental matters as one major asset, European countries have ample opportunities to apply "lessons learned" and often well-addressed in the European Union (EU). This is the case for poor urban air quality and poor water quality, which still cause substantial health-related and quality of life problems for many people, for instance in Eastern Europe.

This is the first *GEO* report in which all seven of the world's regions emphasize the potential impacts of climate change, which has raised Europe's average temperature by about 1.40°C over pre-industrial levels.

Growing public awareness, underpinned by rising energy prices, has given a new political momentum to climate change policies in Europe. To limit the impacts of climate change to a manageable level, the European Union has proposed that the global temperature should not exceed an average of 2°C above pre-industrial temperatures. To achieve this target, there would

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need to be worldwide emission reductions of 60–80 per cent in developed countries. If developing countries accept emissions reduction commitments, they will also need to significantly reduce their emissions.

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.

Greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector have been reduced in some countries in Western Europe since 1987, but since the end of the 1990s they have risen across the region as a whole, partly because increasing natural gas prices have re-established coal as a key fuel. Europe has not succeeded in stabilizing its energy consumption levels.

The EU is emerging as a global leader in environmental governance, and the whole region has a unique experience of environmental cooperation. The EU and the region have also made important progress in decoupling resource use from economic growth. But there is still much room for improvement in the way Europeans use energy and resources.

To make consumption and production patterns more sustainable, Europe needs to develop economic instruments that reflect the real environmental and social costs of energy and materials. In some sub-regions, a significant challenge is lack of efficient waste collection and safe disposal, as this causes land and groundwater contamination.

Emissions of air pollutants in Western Europe have fallen by 2 per cent a year since 2000, due to the effective implementation of EU policies. The trend is expected to continue until 2020. In Southeastern Europe, reductions of about 25 per cent are expected by 2020. For both sub-regions the expected reductions will reduce public health impacts significantly by then, but not to safe levels. Since 1999, economic recovery in Eastern Europe has led to a 10 per cent emissions increase, and further rises are expected till 2020, except for sulphur dioxide.

In Western and Central Europe, road freight transport continues to grow faster than the economy, driven by EU expansion and globalization. Road transport enjoys relatively low costs, because it is not liable for infrastructural or external environmental costs.

Europe’s biodiversity is threatened by problems such as urban sprawl, infrastructure development, illegal logging and human-induced fires.

Climate change is expected to become a main driver of biodiversity loss, affecting productivity, the growth cycle of plants and animals, and species distribution.

New EU countries have been slow to implement some of the environmental instruments available for protecting biodiversity, such as support for conserving farmland of high natural value, and the reduction of erosion and nitrate leaching.

The main contributor to water pollution in Western Europe is agriculture, with nitrates coming from fertilizer and manure run-off. There is a high nitrogen surplus in the soils of many countries, which along with agricultural pesticides, threatens groundwater sources.

Agriculture also accounts for about a third of Europe’s use of water, especially in the south. Industrial water use declined in the 1980s and 1990s as industrial production declined, and higher water prices in Western Europe reduced household use.

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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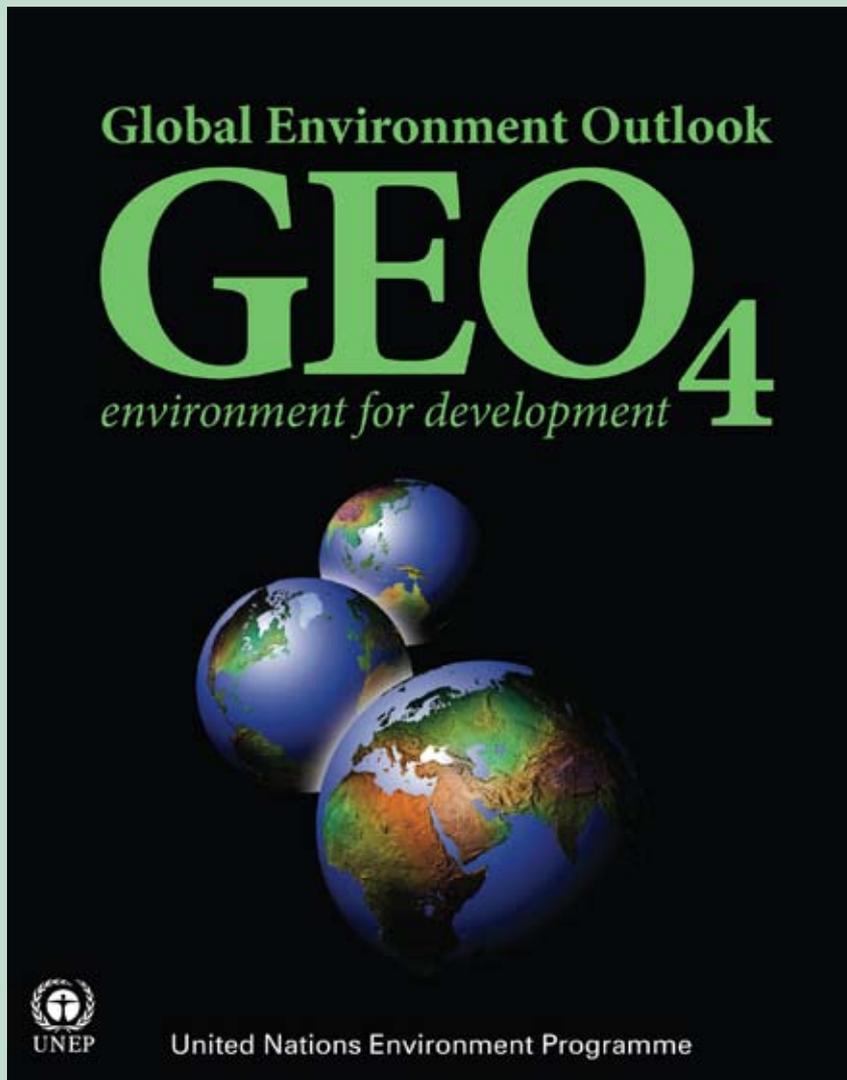
Regional Highlights

In the Arctic regions of Russia the average temperature has risen by about 3°C over the last 90 years. It is projected to increase across Europe by 2.1°C to 4.4°C by 2080. Sea levels are rising and glacier melting accelerating.

For some countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, there is the threat of accumulated hazardous waste from Soviet times. It includes radioactive, military and mining wastes, and also large stockpiles of obsolete pesticides containing persistent organic pollutants (POPs). Funds for proper disposal are scarce.

Over 200 000 square kilometres of arable land have already been abandoned in European Russia, typical of the poor socio-economic conditions in rural areas with small-scale farming, where low incomes, difficult working conditions and a lack of social services all make farming unattractive to young people.





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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