

GEO-4

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says that major threats to the planet such as climate change, the rate of extinction of species, and the challenge of feeding a growing population are among the many that today remain unresolved, and all of which put humanity at risk. The warning comes in its latest Global Environment Outlook: environment for development (GEO-4) report published 20 years after the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) produced its seminal report, *Our Common Future* in 1987.

The work of more than 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1000 others across the world, GEO-4 is a comprehensive assessment of the current state of the global atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity, describes the changes since 1987, and identifies priorities for action. It salutes the world's progress in tackling some relatively straightforward problems, with the environment now much closer to mainstream politics everywhere.

However, there remain the harder-to-manage issues, the “persistent” problems ranging from the rapid rise of oxygen ‘dead zones’ in the oceans to the resurgence of new and old diseases linked in part with environmental degradation: *“There are no major issues raised in Our Common Future for which the foreseeable trends are favourable. --- Failure to address these persistent problems may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and may threaten humanity’s survival. ---Meanwhile, institutions like UNEP, established to counter the root causes, remain under-resourced and weak,”* said Mr. Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director.

But the objective is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario, but an urgent call for action. *“The international community’s response to the Brundtland Commission has in some cases been courageous and inspiring. ---- Over the past 20 years, the international community has cut, by 95 percent, the production of ozone-layer damaging chemicals; created a greenhouse gas emission reduction treaty along with innovative carbon trading and carbon offset markets; supported a rise in terrestrial protected areas to cover roughly 12 percent of the Earth and devised numerous important instruments covering issues from biodiversity and desertification to the trade in hazardous wastes and living modified organisms,”* Mr. Steiner added.

“But, as GEO-4 points out, there continue to be ‘persistent’ and intractable problems unresolved and unaddressed. Climate change is now a “global priority”, demanding political will and leadership. Yet it finds “a remarkable lack of urgency”, and a “woefully inadequate” global response. Several highly-polluting countries have refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the international climate agreement which obligates countries to control anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Negotiations are due to start in December on a treaty to replace the Protocol. Although it exempts all developing countries from emission reduction commitments, there is growing pressure for some rapidly-industrialising countries, now substantial emitters themselves, to agree to emission reductions.

GEO-4 also warns of the effects of rising population growth. 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 hectares per person... “.* And it says the well-being of billions of people in the developing world is because of a failure to remedy the relatively simple problems which have been successfully tackled elsewhere.

GEO-4 recalls the Brundtland Commission’s statement that the world does not face separate crises - the “*environmental crisis*”, “*development crisis*”, and “*energy crisis*” are all one. This crisis includes not just climate change, extinction rates and hunger, but other problems

driven by growing human numbers, the rising consumption of the rich and the desperation of the poor.

Other critical points the report identifies and analyses are water, fish: biodiversity: This is also the first GEO report in which the potential impacts of climate change on all seven of the world's regions are highlighted. In Africa for example, land degradation and desertification are threats; per capita food production has declined by 12 percent since 1981. Unfair agricultural subsidies in developed regions continue to hinder progress towards increasing yields. Priorities for Asia and the Pacific include urban air quality, fresh water stress, degraded ecosystems, agricultural land use and increased waste. Drinking water provision has made remarkable progress in the last decade, but the illegal traffic in electronic and hazardous waste is a new challenge. Latin America and the Caribbean face urban growth, biodiversity threats, coastal damage and marine pollution, and vulnerability to climate change. But protected areas now cover about 12 percent of the land, and annual deforestation rates in the Amazon are falling.

The Future

GEO-4 acknowledges that technology can help to reduce people's vulnerability to environmental stresses, but says there is sometimes a need "to correct the technology-centred development paradigm". The real future will be largely determined by the decisions individuals and society make now: *"There have been enough wake-up calls since Brundtland. I sincerely hope GEO-4 is the final one. The systematic destruction of the Earth's natural and nature-based resources has reached a point where the economic viability of economies is being challenged—challenged—and where the bill we hand on to our children may prove impossible to pay,"* said Mr. Steiner.

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