



Chapter 7: Conclusion

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Beyond merely recognising each other's relative strengths and weaknesses, UNEP and civil society have to bear in mind that there are very real problems that urgently need to be addressed. UNEP's GEO-4 report provides cause for concern, showing that collectively humans are over-utilizing the Earth's ecosystem services at a rate that is outstripping nature's ability to renew and replenish them.

The report concluded that the per capita availability of fresh water is declining globally; that the vast majority of well-studied species are declining in distribution, abundance, or both; and that the Earth's surface is warming, threatening to further exacerbate the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of land, soils, forests, fresh water, and the oceans.

GEO-4 also found that environmental changes affect human development and that poor people are the most vulnerable to them. Climate change, for example, is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of heat waves, storms, floods, and droughts. More than 90 percent of the people exposed to such disasters live in the developing world.

There can be no real change in these environmental trends without a corresponding improvement in the living standards and situation of many millions of people around the world. This is especially relevant with respect to developing countries, where most of the world's poor are currently living. More than 1 billion people—nearly one in every six on Earth—currently live in extreme poverty. The international system has committed itself to reduce poverty and to address other critical global challenges through the Millennium Development Goals. (See Box 6.)

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Despite the pressing problems and sobering realities mentioned above, there is also reason for hope. The GEO-4 report found that over the past two decades, the international community has reduced the production of ozone-layer damaging chemicals by 95 percent, created innovative carbon trading and carbon offset markets, increased terrestrial protected areas to the point that they now cover 12 percent of the Earth's surface, and successfully negotiated numerous important international environmental treaties and agreements on diverse issues, including biological diversity, climate change, land degradation, and trade in hazardous wastes.

All of these victories have resulted from joint efforts between the UN system and Major Groups. To build upon these successes, civil society and UNEP must continue to deepen their relationship and work together to protect our planet and all those who inhabit it.

Box 6. The Millennium Development Goals

Humanity faces the great challenge of alleviating widespread poverty and developing the planet in a sustainable manner. There is now widespread agreement on crucial, minimal steps that must be taken to improve the living conditions of millions of people across the world. Central to this pursuit are the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs consist of a series of pledges by the governments of the world, most of which are to be achieved by 2015.

Of particular importance for UNEP is Goal 7, "Ensuring environmental sustainability," which includes three main targets:

Integrate the principle of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse the loss of environmental resources.

By 2015, halve the proportion of peoples without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

By 2020, have achieved a significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

For further information, see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>