

VULNERABLE IN A WORLD OF PLENTY

G L O B A L E N V I R O N M E N T O U T L O O K

The fourth *Global Environment Outlook – environment for development (GEO-4)* assessment report is published in 2007, exactly two decades since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published its seminal report – *Our Common Future* – which placed sustainable development on the agenda of governments and other stakeholders. *GEO-4* is the most comprehensive UN report on the environment prepared by about 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1 000 others across the world.

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Human vulnerability to environmental change and the opportunities that the environment provides for development and human well-being are some of the topical issues analysed in the *GEO-4* report. Human vulnerability and well-being are of particular interest to governments and the international community now about half-way to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 – the first target year in the implementation of the MDGs.

Despite significant improvements in human well-being over the last 20 years, with gains in income, nutrition, health, governance and peace, there are many ongoing challenges. Millions of people across all regions are poor, and lacking essential services that are common among the wealthy.

Vulnerability

An intrinsic feature of vulnerability is people and/or ecosystems at risk. Such risk could be drought, floods, climate variability and change, conflict, and extreme price changes. Vulnerability takes into account exposure and sensitivity of people to the impacts of such events, and their ability to cope or adapt. Complementary to coping and adaptation is resilience – the ability to bounce back to the reference situation.

Vulnerability analysis is widely used to identify people and ecosystems that may suffer most from environmental and/or human-induced variability and change. It also identifies the underlying causes, and is used to develop policy relevant recommendations for decision-makers on how to reduce vulnerability and adapt to change. It has become a central aspect of studies of food insecurity, poverty and livelihoods and climate change.

The *GEO-4* report identifies broad representative patterns of environmental and socio-economic vulnerability. The patterns of vulnerability highlighted as case studies in the report show that vulnerability cuts across the full range of geographic and

economic contexts. The poor, indigenous people, women and children are the most vulnerable.

Poverty is a key factor in human vulnerability and for people to cope and adapt, and to be resilient. Poverty reduces the ability of people to respond and adapt to environmental change. The poor suffer more than the rich when water, land and the air are degraded and polluted. Climate change and environmental degradation increase the frequency and impact of natural hazards, such as droughts, floods, landslides and forest fires, which often lead to the loss of land, food insecurity and migration.

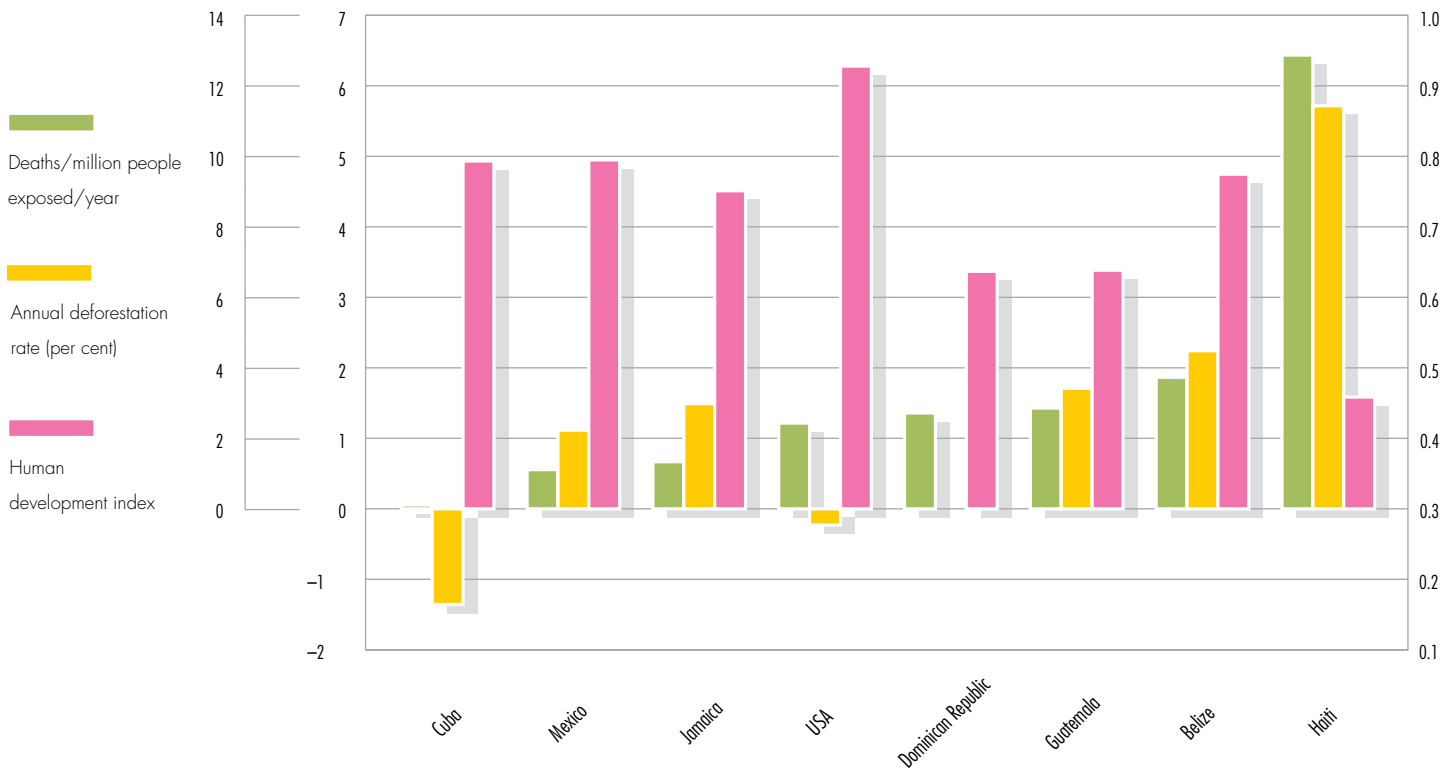
While regions have made progress in meeting the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG 1) on reducing extreme poverty and hunger, many will not achieve the 2015 targets. In developing countries, extreme poverty – those living on less than US\$1/day – fell from 28 per cent in 1990 to 19 per cent in 2002. Actual numbers decreased from 1.2 billion to just over 1 billion in 2002.

Even though under-five mortality rates have improved considerably, more than 10 million children under five still die every year – 98 per cent of them in developing countries. Some 3 million die due to unhealthy environments.

Conflicts, violence and fear of persecution regularly displace large civilian populations, forcing millions of people into marginal ecological and economic areas within countries and across international boundaries. More than 8 million people have died directly or indirectly as a result of war in Africa since 1960.

Over the past 20 years, natural disasters have claimed more than 1.5 million lives, and affected more than 200 million people annually. One of the main drivers of increased vulnerability to hazards is global environmental change. Between 1992 and 2001, floods were the most frequent natural disaster, killing

Caribbean casualties due to hurricanes



Source: FAO, UNDP, UNEP, CRED

nearly 100 000 and affecting more than 1.2 billion people worldwide. More than 90 per cent of the people exposed to disasters live in the developing world, and more than half of disaster deaths occur in countries with a low human development index.

The “export of vulnerability” – decreasing the vulnerability of some by, for example, the outsourcing of energy, food and industrial production – can increase efficiency in one region at the expense of others by displacing the impacts. In Europe, for example, the relocation of highly-polluting industries to Eastern European countries is contributing to higher energy use per unit of industrial output there, while improving energy efficiency and decreasing polluting emissions in Western Europe.

Continued environmental degradation in all regions is unfairly shifting burdens onto future generations, and contradicts the principle of intergenerational equity.

Opportunities

The environment provides opportunities to meet the MDGs, and to enhance well-being through the various goods-and-services it provides. Improving human well-being is at the heart of development. This is not just a moral imperative, but also a critical aspect of fundamental human rights, and is essential for reducing vulnerability and achieving sustainable use of the environment.

Empowering women not only contributes to the widely-shared objective of equity and justice, but also makes good economic, environmental and social sense and reduces vulnerability. To reduce vulnerability, governance must be integrated from the local to the global levels, across a range of sectors, and over a longer time frame for policy making.

Poverty must be addressed in all countries if vulnerability to both environmental and socio-economic changes is to be reduced.

Sources and credits for the information presented here are available and fully referenced in the **Fourth Global Environment Outlook - environment for development** report.



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