

HUMAN WELL-BEING AND THE ENVIRONMENT



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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The evolution of ideas on development has made the concept of human well-being central to policy debate. **Human well-being is the outcome of development and is strongly linked to the state of the environment.** Establishing how environmental changes impact on human well-being, and showing the importance of environment for human well-being, are among the core objectives of this report.

Many alternative views exist about what human well-being means. In this report well-being is defined as *the extent to which individuals have the ability and the opportunity to live the kind of lives they have reason to value.* The environment is appreciated beyond its role as income generator, and its impacts on human well-being are seen as multi-dimensional.

Human well-being encompasses personal and environmental security, access to materials for a good life, good health and good social relations, all of which are closely related to each other, and underlie the freedom to make choices and take action. Other important factors in the analysis of well-being include poverty, inequality, and gender.

Poverty and inequality

Poverty implies a low level of well-being with outcomes such as poor health, premature mortality and morbidity, and illiteracy. It is often driven by inadequate control over resources, discrimination and lack of access to material assets, health care and education.

Inequality refers to skewed distribution of an object of value, such as income, medical care or clean water, among people or groups.

A dynamic perspective of poverty analysis includes the concepts of mobility and vulnerability. The former relates to the ability of people to move from one social group, class or level to another. A degrading environment may lock individuals

within low-mobility paths. The latter concept involves exposure and sensitivity to risk, and the inability to cope or adapt to environmental changes.

Gender inequality

An analysis of distributive impacts of the environment on human well-being cannot ignore features such as gender. Gender inequality is one of the most persistent inequalities in both developed and developing countries, with the majority of people living in poverty being women. The latter carry a disproportionate burden from environmental degradation compared to men.

Health

The health of many people around the world is affected by human-induced changes to the environment. Almost one-quarter of all diseases are caused by environmental exposure. Urban air pollution is one of the most widespread environmental problems, affecting health in almost all regions of the world. The WHO estimates that more than 1 billion people in Asian countries are exposed to air pollutants. More than 800 000 people die prematurely due to particulate matters. Other sources of health concerns due to environmental degradation which negatively affect human well-being include water pollution as well as diseases such as SARS, avian influenza, malaria, dengue fever etc.

Material needs

People depend on natural resources for their basic needs, such as income, food, energy, water and housing. In many communities, particularly in developing countries, environmental resources, including fish, timber, non-timber forest products and wildlife, directly contribute to income and other material assets. For instance, more than 1.3 billion people depend on fisheries, forest and agriculture for employment. In Africa more than 7 in 10 people live in rural areas, with most engaged in resource-



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The environment provides opportunities for recreation and also has spiritual and cultural underpinnings for society.

dependent activities such as small-scale agriculture, which accounts for more than 90 per cent of Africa's agricultural production.

Security

Security incorporates economic, political, cultural, social and environmental aspects. It includes freedom from threats of bodily harm, violence, crime and war. It means having stable and reliable access to resources and the ability to mitigate and respond to shocks and stresses. Environmental resources are a critical part of the livelihoods of millions of people, and when threatened, through environmental changes, people's security is also threatened. Extreme weather events such as hurricane Katrina, which took place in 2005 in the United States, shows

the link between the destruction of coastal wetlands and the increased vulnerability of coastal communities resulting from such environmental changes.

Social relations

The environment also affects social relations by providing cultural services, such as the opportunity to express aesthetic, cultural or spiritual values associated with ecosystems. Nature provides opportunities for observation and education, recreation and enjoyment. In certain communities, the environment underpins the very structure of social relations. For instance, traditional foods play a very important role in the social, cultural, nutritional, and economic aspects of indigenous peoples living in the Arctic.

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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