

# Preface



The *Global Environment Outlook: environment for development (GEO-4)* report is published in what may prove to be a remarkable year – a year when humanity faced up to the scale and pace of environmental degradation with a new sense of realism and honesty matched by firm, decisive and above all, imaginative action.

It highlights the unprecedented environmental changes we face today and which we have to address together. These changes include climate change, land degradation, collapse of fisheries, biodiversity loss, and emergence of diseases and pests, among others. As society, we have the responsibility to tackle these and the development challenges we face. The trigger propelling countries and communities towards a rediscovery of collective responsibility is the most overarching challenge of this generation: climate change.

Humanity's capacity to order its affairs in a stable and sustainable way is likely to prove impossible if greenhouse gases are allowed to rise unchecked.

Attempts to meet the Millennium Development Goals relating to poverty, water and other fundamental issues may also fail without swift and sustained action towards de-carbonizing economies.

The difference between this GEO and the third report, which was released in 2002, is that claims and counter claims over climate change are in many ways over. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has put a full stop behind the science of whether human actions are impacting the atmosphere and clarified the likely impacts – impacts not in a far away future but within the lifetime of our generation.

The challenge now is not whether climate change is happening or whether it should be addressed. The challenge now is to bring over 190 nations together in common cause. The prize is not just a reduction in emissions of greenhouse gases, it is a comprehensive re-engagement with core objectives and principles of sustainable development.

For climate change, by its very nature cannot be compartmentalized into one ministerial portfolio, a single-line entry in corporate business plans or a sole area of NGO activism. Climate change, while firmly an environmental issue is also an environmental threat that impacts on every facet of government and public life – from finance and planning to agriculture, health, employment and transport.

If both sides of the climate coin can be addressed – emission reductions and adaptation – then perhaps many of the other sustainability challenges can also be addressed comprehensively, cohesively and with a long-term lens rather than in the segmented, piecemeal and short-sighted ways of the past.

*GEO-4* underlines the choices available to policy-makers across the range of environmental, social and economic challenges – both known and emerging. It underlines not only the enormous, trillion-dollar value of the Earth's ecosystems and the goods-and-services they provide, but also

underscores the central role the environment has for development and human well-being.

The year 2007 is also momentous because it is the 20th anniversary of the report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. It augurs well that the report's principal architect and a person credited with popularizing the term sustainable development as the chair of the Commission – former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland – is one of three special climate envoys appointed this year by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

The *GEO-4* report is a living example of international cooperation at its best. About 400 individual scientists and policy-makers, and more than 50 GEO Collaborating Centres and other partner institutions around the world participated in the assessment with many of them volunteering their time and expertise. I would like to thank them for their immense contribution.

I would also like to thank the governments of Belgium, Norway, The Netherlands, and Sweden for their financial support to the *GEO-4* assessment that was invaluable in, for example, funding global and regional meetings and the comprehensive peer review process of 1 000 invited experts. My thanks are also extended to the *GEO-4* High-level Consultative Group whose members offered their invaluable policy and scientific expertise.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Achim Steiner". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Achim Steiner  
United Nations Under-Secretary General and Executive  
Director, United Nations Environment Programme