

**Remarks by Arab Hoballah,
Chief, Sustainable Consumption and Production,
Division of Technology, Industry and Economics, UN
Environment Programme (UNEP)**

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Your Excellences, Mr. Director General/UNESCO, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to be present here and represent the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), a UN family institution, which plays the leading role in the assessment of environmental problems and challenges our only home, planet Earth, faces, as well as mainstreaming environment stakes in the public and private policies.

Governments, civil society, business sector, people are all eager to know what is going on our planet, why it happens and what could be expected in the future. I must, therefore, refer to the core UNEP's mandate that, since UNEP's establishment in 1972, has been to keep under review the world environmental situation in order to ensure that emerging environmental problems of wide international significance receive appropriate and adequate consideration by governments.

The world faces unprecedented environmental changes, which presents both challenges and opportunities. Mounting scientific evidence shows that ecosystems are under huge and increasing pressure, and prospects for sustainable development are consequently under serious threat. While these challenges might seem insurmountable they also create opportunities for local communities, business and international co-operations to innovate.

In order to secure the environmental conditions for prosperity, stability and equity, responses that are timely and proportionate with the scale of the environmental challenges will be required. In creating such responses, Government, the International Community, private sector, civil society and the general public all have an important role to play. As the environmental programme of the United Nations, UNEP will strive to fulfil its role in articulating, facilitating and supporting appropriate responses to these environmental challenges and the opportunities.

To implement this mandate a global participatory integrated environmental assessment process was launched by UNEP and its partners in the 1990s to produce the Global Environment Outlook report (GEO). This is an authoritative, scientifically robust and peer reviewed report on the state of the world's environment and its natural or nature-based resources.

Today I would like to bring to your attention the fourth issue in the Global Environment Outlook series—GEO-4, which was officially launched on the 25th of October last year in more than 30 main cities of the world.

The GEO-4 report is an illuminating read outlining how over the past 20 years—since the publication of the landmark Brundtland Commission report *Our Common Future*—the financial wealth of the planet has soared by around a third.

But at the same time it is sobering: much of the 'natural' capital upon which so much of human well being and economic activity depends—water, land, biodiversity and marine resources—continue their seemingly inexorable decline.

Many challenges outlined in *Our Common Future* remain, largely unresolved, persistent and even more acute than they were 20 years ago. For example,

- Concentrations of the greenhouse gas CO₂ in the atmosphere are roughly a third higher now than they were 20 years ago.
- In 1987, around 15 per cent of global fish stocks were classed as collapsed. GEO-4 says this has roughly doubled to 30 per cent.
- Globally more than two million people may be dying prematurely as a result of out door and in door air pollution each year.
- Three million people die from water-borne diseases each year in developing countries, the majority of whom are children under the age of five.
- Available freshwater resources are declining: by 2025, close to two billion people are likely to live with 'absolute' water scarcity.
- Populations of freshwater vertebrates have declined on average by nearly 50 per cent since 1987 as compared with an around 30 per cent decline for terrestrial and marine species.

There are more and more facts like these—facts that in the final analysis are about human well-being.

Ladies and gentlemen,

If you read the chapters and conclusions of GEO-4, you are reading the most authoritative compilation and peer reviewed publication of the best data available.

You may also wonder, given the severity of the sustainability challenge, what we have been collectively doing since the Brundtland Commission report.

You would recognize that the multilateral environment governance infrastructure has been rolled out—we have global treaties covering the stratospheric ozone layer, biodiversity, climate, desertification and other issues.

GEO-4 is also salt and peppered with shining examples of creative and intelligent management from “no-take” zones in Fiji’s fishing industry to the restoration of river systems in Cameroon.

But the fact remains that faced with the magnitude and scale of the challenge, the response has, to put it mildly, often been confined to national action in limited or specific areas—air pollution in Europe for example.

The reality is that the intentions and good work have failed to match the speed, pace and magnitude of the challenge particularly in the translation of global agreements into legislation and action at the national and regional level.

Without an accelerated effort to reform the way we collectively do business on planet Earth, we will shortly be in trouble if indeed we are not already.

To further contribute to this global challenge of taking care of Planet Earth in a responsible manner, UNEP, guided by the scientific evidence and priorities emerging from global and regional fora, is re-focusing its efforts in the medium term on six cross-cutting thematic priorities, namely climate change, disasters and conflicts, ecosystems management, environmental governance, harmful substances and hazardous waste, and resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production.

Consistent with its mandate and its comparative advantage, UNEP will exercise its distinctive role in environmental leadership within these cross-cutting thematic priority areas by catalyzing and promoting international cooperation and action; providing early warning and policy advice based on sound science; facilitating the development, implementation and evolution of norms and standards and developing coherent inter-linkages among international environmental conventions; and delivering technology support and capacity building in line with country priorities.

On one issue we may be finally turning the corner. That issue is climate change.

It has taken 20 years to build the scientific consensus. But in 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has done that and in doing so deservedly jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize.

GEO-4 takes this logic across the whole spectrum of environmental issues. Like climate change, the GEO-4 findings request us all—governments, business, local authorities, NGOs and individuals—to put a full stop behind the science and move for an accelerated effort on this wider environmental landscape. It is time to find the same sense of urgency on all environmental issues: from biodiversity and land degradation to fisheries and freshwaters.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As with climate change, the cost of inaction and the price humanity will eventually pay is likely to dwarf the cost of swift and decisive action now. It is obvious that we increasingly need to focus more on resource efficiency and reverse the trend of the unsustainable consumption and production patterns.

To that end, UNEP has been recently launching a series of international initiatives, such as the “International Panel for the Sustainable Management of Resources”, or jointly with the private sector such as the “Sustainable Building and Construction Initiative”, or jointly with other UN Institutions such as “Sustainable UN” as we are also expected to demonstrate by example how to act towards sustainability and more efficient use and management of the limited resources of our Planet Earth. Moreover, and as requested by the WSSD, UNEP jointly with UNDESA is working on the elaboration of a 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, to be to the UNCSD in 2011 and then to the next World Summit.

Finally, if we are to seize the opportunities for more intelligent management of the Earth’s natural assets upon which we all ultimately depend, then we need all sectors of society to respond and to be able to respond. Let us use these assets more wisely so that it is not just bank notes that we hand onto the next generation, but an economically productive, equitable and sustainably managed planet. Within the “ONE UN” and in close cooperation with UNESCO, UNEP is determined to play an active role in the sustainable management of our Planet Earth and therefore fulfills its mandate.

Thank you