

## **Growth without Environment Considerations Could Offset Economic Gains and Future Growth in Asia Pacific**

*Smarter solutions needed to leap-frog to green, low-carbon, resilient prosperity*

**Nairobi/Bangkok, 20 May 2016** – Asia-Pacific’s rapid economic growth, urbanization and lifestyle changes have led to accelerated environmental degradation and natural resource depletion which could undermine the regions’ development gains and prospects for future growth, according to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report.

The *Global Environment Outlook (GEO 6) Regional Assessment for Asia and the Pacific* launched ahead of the second United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-2) emphasizes policy options that will enable the region to leap-frog to resilient, low-carbon, green growth, based on smarter solutions, technological innovation and regional cooperation.

“Scientific analysis shows that the current approach to development in the region comes at a significant cost to health and environment, and it will soon reach a point where such development will start to undermine itself,” Achim Steiner, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UNEP said in his foreword to the report.

The report finds that changing demography and lifestyles, increasingly inefficient use of resources, growing vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters and environment-related health risks could offset the region’s development gains, threaten water and food security, and worsen poverty and inequity.

Asia Pacific now has 15 of 28 megacities and three of the most populous cities in the world – Tokyo at 37.8 million, New Delhi at 25 million and Shanghai at 23 million. This rapid urbanization and related demands and pressures will have an impact on development in the region. Many densely populated cities with critical infrastructure are on coastal areas and deltas that are vulnerable to climate change. Four of the six most vulnerable deltas around the globe are in the region: Godavari delta in India, the Mekong delta in Viet Nam, the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta in Bangladesh and India and the Yangtze Delta in China.

From 1990-2014, climate change and extreme events have displaced millions in coastal areas and small island developing countries and cost over US\$1 trillion in economic losses. Asia Pacific also accounts for 90 per cent of population that are exposed to tropical cyclones.

Air pollution, particularly ambient concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>) that is particularly detrimental to health, is a fast growing health threat, resulting in chronic respiratory ailments, cancer, increased morbidity and premature deaths. The region has 9 out of 10 megacities with the highest concentration PM<sub>2.5</sub> and accounts for nearly 72 per cent of the 3.7 million premature deaths globally attributable to outdoor pollution.

The report also finds that widespread groundwater contamination by humans and livestock is a growing threat to human health, especially for women and children. Water-related diseases and unsafe water are estimated to kill nearly 1.8 million people annually in the region.

While total forest areas have increased since 1990, there has been a drastic decline in natural forests in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, recognized as global biodiversity hotspots, over the past 25 years. In addition, critical coastal and marine resources in the region are under threat with 80 per cent of coral reefs at risk. Between 25 to 33 per cent of Southeast Asia's coastlines are threatened by severe erosion while more than 25 per cent of warm-water corals experienced bleaching, largely from thermal stress but also from the dumping of hazardous materials in the oceans.

Asia-Pacific countries generated 870 million tonnes of municipal solid waste in 2014, a number that is expected to rise to 1.4 billion tonnes by 2030. Uncontrolled dumping is still the main waste disposal method, leading to health and environmental problems. New and complex waste streams like e-waste, construction/demolition waste, disaster waste and marine litter also emerging.

To counter these pressures, the region urgently needs economic transformation that is based on improved energy and transport infrastructure and smart green growth for urban areas, according to the report. These include innovation in cost-efficient renewable energy technologies, development of smart cities, green urban transport and construction, and the use of mobile telecommunications and big data to promote two-way transparency in environmental monitoring.

“With large and increasing investment in infrastructure expected over the next two to three decades, there is great potential in the region for countries to leap-frog to smarter solutions for resilient development and lasting prosperity, including through technological innovations,” said Steiner.

The report also calls for protection of the region's diverse ecosystems and rich biodiversity, building resilience to natural disasters and extreme climate events, responding to environmental health risks, strengthening environmental governance and the science-policy interface, and enhanced international/regional cooperation on environmental issues.

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GEOs bring the best available scientific knowledge to policy makers, bridging the science and policy spheres to enable better informed environmental decision making.

The scientific credibility of GEO is an essential factor in ensuring that the analyses and insights developed in the assessments can be taken into account when developing policies and strategic plans.

### About UNEA

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the world's highest decision-making body on the environment. Hundreds of key decision makers, businesses and representatives of intergovernmental organizations and civil society will gather in Nairobi on 23-27 May 2016 for UNEA-2 at the United Nations Environment Programme headquarters.

The assembly will be one of the first major meetings since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement. The resolutions passed at UNEA-2 will set the stage for early action on implementing the 2030 Agenda, and drive the world towards a better, more just future.