

Environment action urgent, stop being complacent

[Najib Saab](#) | The Daily Star 13-3-2019

Stop being complacent, show some urgency, and get real about implementing the goals you set in 2015 for achieving sustainable development. This unvarnished message is what Jock Martin of the European Environment Agency thought should be conveyed to world leaders, based on the findings of the sixth edition of Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6). The 750-page comprehensive report, to be released Wednesday, is the flagship evidence-based product of the United Nations Environment Program. Jock served with us for the past five years at the High Level Group entrusted with overlooking the GEO process and preparing an action-oriented summary for policymakers. Urgent action is needed if the world governments are serious about securing a healthy planet for healthy people. Although the report might not say it as boldly as Jock, this is ultimately the essence of the report, which shows that the overall environmental situation is worsening globally and the window for action is closing. Moreover, healthy environment is not only a necessity for human health and well-being, but also a prerequisite for economic prosperity.

Unsustainable production and consumption patterns are putting the world off-track, thus demanding swift action and strengthened international cooperation to reverse the negative trends. Greenhouse gas emissions have already triggered extreme climate change. Air pollution, currently the main cause of illness, is projected to cause about 7 million premature deaths annually by midcentury.

Biodiversity loss, mainly from land-use change, overexploitation, illegal wildlife trade and climate change is causing a mass extinction of species, which threatens the Earth's integrity and capacity to meet human needs. Plastic litter invades all levels of the marine ecosystem, with potential health impacts through the consumption of fish and marine products. Land degradation is another increasing threat, affecting 29 percent of global land, where 3.2 billion people live, resulting in adverse impact on people and nature.

Freshwater is poorly managed and polluted, leading to the death of nearly 1.5 million people annually from preventable diseases, such as diarrhea and intestinal parasites, which are associated with polluted drinking water and inadequate sanitation. In addition, pesticides, and heavy metals are appearing in alarming levels in our food supply, causing multigenerational impact.

After describing the situation, the UNEP report warns that the social and economic costs of inaction often exceed the costs of action and have bigger impact on the poorest and most vulnerable in society, particularly in developing countries.

The report argues that achieving internationally agreed environmental goals on pollution control, cleanup and efficiency improvement is crucial, yet insufficient. Environmental policies in the context of sustainable development need to incorporate integrated objectives, science-based targets, economic instruments, regulations and robust international cooperation. Robust transformative action prescribed by the report includes tripling of today's rate of lowering carbon emissions, and increasing food availability by 50 percent, through more efficient production, cutting food waste, and changing eating patterns by the adoption of healthy and sustainable diets across all regions.

The report found that the health co-benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollutants outweigh the costs of mitigation. At the same time, this helps to achieve climate and air quality targets and increase agricultural production. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation can also provide environmental and health co-benefits. Sustainable outcomes can best be achieved by combining objectives for resource use efficiency, with ecosystem-based management and better human health.

UNEP gave food, energy and transport systems, together with urban planning and chemical industry, as examples of systems of production and consumption needing innovative policies. Deployment of technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase resource efficiency can strengthen the economic performance of countries, municipalities, enterprises

and other stakeholders. However, as innovations are part of the solution, the report cautions they can also create new risks and have negative environmental impacts.

In a clear warning against dumping environmental priorities under other goals, the report asserts that sustainable development will be better achieved through modes of governance and adaptive management that give greater priority to the environmental dimension.

The report endorses placing a price tag on natural resources, to bolster efficiency. Depletion of natural resources is starkly demonstrated in the case of Arab countries, where demand for nature's products and services amounts to more than twice what these countries can supply, according to a study on Ecological Footprint produced by Arab Forum for Environment and Development. This imbalance places a limit on future growth and well-being. In view of boosting sound resource management, the AFED report proposed accounting for the use and damage of natural assets in national budgets, instead of treating them as free endowment.

The report urges governments to design and implement policies that integrate regulations, technologies and economics to meet the complex challenges the world is facing. Investments to mitigate climate change and air pollution should be prioritized, alongside robust resource management systems, which reduce risks to future generations.

Adequate investment is needed in knowledge systems such as data, indicators, assessments and policy evaluation, allowing action on early signals to avoid unnecessary harm and costs. Precautionary approaches can reduce threats of serious or irreversible damage where relevant scientific evidence is insufficient to inform decision-making. For those who take the lack of decisive evidence in certain areas as an excuse for inaction, the hundreds of scientists who produced the UNEP report had a clear message: while more data will always be needed, in an ever changing environment and global scene, evidence which already exists is enough to compel urgent action on all environmental fronts. Delay is not an option.

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