



# EARTH SUMMIT+5

Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise  
the Implementation of Agenda 21

## **Earth "trends" report sees danger ahead**

Unless the "business as usual" development patterns of the last 25 years change, warns a United Nations report, "Critical Trends: Global Change and Sustainable Development", the next quarter-century is likely to be characterized by declining standards of living, rising levels of conflict and environmental stress. Poverty will deepen, especially in the large cities of some developing regions, triggering conflict over dwindling natural resources and a shortage of agriculturally productive land. Fresh water, a crucial component of economic activity as well as of human health, will be scarce in many areas and increasingly polluted in most.

On the positive side, the report on long-term trends cites a continued rise in world food production, an overall increase in life spans, a falloff in the rate of world population growth (from just over 2 per cent per annum in the 1960s to less than 1.5 per cent in the first half of the 1990s) and some regional improvements in environmental quality.

The report is one in a series of United Nations assessments of progress in implementing the agreements made at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro--known formally as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED).

The UNCED agreements consist of *Agenda 21*, a far-reaching blueprint for sustainable development; the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; two framework conventions, one aimed at curbing climate change, the other on stemming the loss of the world's genetically diverse plant, animal, and microbial species; and a statement of principles on the sustainable use of forests. There have also been two major follow-up agreements since Rio, one regulating high-seas fishing (1995) and the other a framework convention on mitigating the destruction of drylands through desertification (1994).



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A companion report, issued by the United Nations Environment Programme, found that the depletion and degradation of natural resources were continuing at potentially disastrous rates. The "*Global Environmental Outlook*" (GEO-1) cites excessive emissions of greenhouse gases, the accelerating disappearance of biologically diverse forms of life, growing levels of pollution and chronic shortages of clean fresh water.

The Rio review process formally began at the fifth session of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, 7-25 April 1997. It concludes two months later with a week long Special Session of the General Assembly.

Reviewing data from the past 25 years and using model-based projections and scenarios to look ahead 25 to 50 years, the trends report reviews key issues of sustainable development and suggests the most promising policy approaches, with emphasis on the steps that governments can take.

## **But "doom scenarios" don't help**

One major lesson, the report says, is that "the doom scenarios" of the 1970's--such as the Club of Rome's 1972 report, "The Limits of Growth"--have not only proved unreliable, but politically counter-productive. Some threats identified as potentially catastrophic--nuclear war and fossil fuel exhaustion, for example--have receded, while others--such as population pressure and industrial pollution--have shown themselves susceptible to determined policy intervention.

"Less happily", the report states, "new and unexpected threats have emerged--life-threatening damage to the stratospheric ozone layer, the resurgence of infectious diseases, the rise of AIDS, anticipated changes in the global climate. In sum, while millions of people enjoy lives of safety and comfort unimaginable a few generations ago, hundreds of millions more live in conditions as bad as any endured in the past. "Global



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catastrophe does not appear to be imminent", but it is clear that "pursuit of business as usual is most unlikely to result in sustainable development in the near future".

The report highlights the close links between economic growth, human development and good management of the natural resource base, and identifies where socio-economic development appears most threatened by environmental degradation.

The availability of food, for example, could be adversely affected by a scarcity of water needed for agriculture. "When you look at the projected demand for food based on population growth over the next 25 years, the volume of irrigation needed to grow that food and the projections for water availability, they often don't add up", says Emily Matthews, who drafted the report for the United Nations Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development.

"What this report says is that in a few areas-- and water quality and supply is one--we are in a potentially critical situation", says Ms. Matthews. "We use the word 'potentially' because the crisis can be averted--it's a question of using government policies, private sector mechanisms and all the technology at our disposal".

Three strategies appear to offer the most promise, Ms. Matthews suggests. They are increased investment in people, especially in basic education and health care, along with empowerment that allows them to creatively address imminent challenges; encouragement of clean and efficient technologies through regulation and economic incentives; and pricing reform which begins to internalize the social and environmental costs of key economic activities.

"Positive developments are evident in each of these areas," the report says, "but the pace of change is slow". Investment in



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human resources is on the upswing, but is not accorded the priority given to economic production per se. In terms of pollution reduction and production, many efficiency gains this century have been more than offset by the volume of economic growth. Reversing the degradation of natural resources will take decades, so any delay in making necessary changes will greatly increase futures monetary and human costs.

Recognition of the dangers that lie ahead, the report says, should serve as a "wake-up call" for humanity.

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