



# EARTH SUMMIT+5

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

## **Global Water Supplies in Peril, UN Report Finds Overall Sustainable Development Lags, a Companion Study Says**

The world's supply of clean fresh water, already threatened by growing levels of pollution, is growing so scarce in some areas that if current trends continue, two-thirds of humanity will suffer "moderate to severe water stress" within 30 years, according to a forthcoming United Nations report.

The report warns that the situation not only imperils human health and development on a vast scale, but also the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems on which much of the Earth's life depends.

"There is clear and convincing evidence", the report says, "that the world faces a worsening series of local and regional water quantity and quality problems, largely as a result of poor water allocation, wasteful use of the resource, and lack of adequate management resources".

The report, titled "Comprehensive Assessment of the Freshwater Resources of the World", is part of a series of United Nations studies prepared for the Commission on Sustainable Development for its five-year review of progress achieved in sustainable development since the 1992 Earth Summit (the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development). The reports are aimed at providing policy-makers with the most up-to-date data and recommendations on how to respond.

The water report's findings are echoed by a companion United Nations study, "Global Change and Sustainable Development: Critical Trends", which reviews key issues over the quarter-century since the ground-breaking 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, and suggests the most promising policy approaches. The report



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highlights the close linkages 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 trends report says that despite a slowing of world population growth, increases in food production and overall improvements in living standards, the outlook for achieving sustainable development is not encouraging. The gains are being offset by certain negative trends, such as the growing scarcity of fresh water, loss of forests and productive agricultural land and a rise in the absolute numbers of desperately impoverished people.

"Global catastrophe does not appear to be imminent", the report notes, but it is clear that "pursuit of business as usual is most unlikely to result in sustainable development in the near future". The trends report recommends that governments design policies based on three key elements: increased investment in people; promotion of clean and efficient technologies through regulatory and economic incentives; and use of price reforms to encourage a shift away from wasteful and destructive consumption patterns.

A third of the world's population already suffers from what the water report calls "moderate to high" stress as a result of over-demand and pollution of water supplies. The report says that by 2025, if all humanity is to have access to safe drinking water and sanitation, the needs of an additional 5 billion people will have to be met.

It is crucial, the water report says, that there be an international consensus on the potential severity of the crisis. The evidence so far, it said, indicates that Governments must give water resources a high priority in their national planning.



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The growing scarcity of water is also hampering the expansion of agricultural production at a time when demand for food is rising with steady population growth, the report says. It urges that efforts to deal with the water crisis be made in tandem with an international drive to move toward global food security. In some countries there will be a need to move from food self-sufficiency to greater reliance on food purchases from world markets.

Current levels of water shortages and pollution are causing "widespread public health problems, limiting economic and agricultural development and harming a wide range of ecosystems", the water report found. "They may put global food supplies in jeopardy and lead to economic stagnation in many areas of the world", triggering "a series of local and regional water crises with global implications".

The water report acknowledges some bright spots. Some countries, particularly in the developed world, have achieved not only significant improvements in water quality, but "impressive reductions" in use of water for irrigation and for industry and municipalities. But on balance, the report says, "these gains have not reversed either the general trend toward water shortages, nor the widespread decline in water quality".

The water report was prepared by the United Nations through a steering committee representing all the United Nations organizations involved with water issues and a Government-supported organization, the Stockholm Environment Institute. The steering committee consisted of representatives from the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, the United Nations Department for Development Support and Management Services, the Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the



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World Bank, the World Health Organization and the World Meteorological Organization. Financial support was provided by the Governments of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Canada.

Both the water and critical-trends studies were prepared for the fifth session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (7-25 April 1997) and a subsequent Special Session of the General Assembly (23-27 June 1997) that will assess progress achieved since the Earth Summit. The Commission was created to follow up on Agenda 21 and other agreements approved at the 1992 meeting held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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