UNEP News Release

Africa's Natural Wealth Key to Economic Prospects
http://www.unep.org/dewa/africa/aeo2%5Flaunch/
Successes and Challenges Highlighted in Africa Environment Outlook-2

Nairobi, 27 June - Poverty in Africa can be made history if the region's wealth of natural resources is effectively, fairly and sustainably harnessed a new report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says.

Outstanding issues like rapid rates of deforestation, high levels of land degradation, wasteful water use in agriculture and climate change remain and need to be urgently addressed.

Other challenges are emerging. These range from genetically modified organisms and the costs of alien invasive species up to a switch of chemical manufacturing from the developed to the developing world, says the Africa Environment Outlook-2.

However many African countries are now parties to a wide range of international environment treaties and new cooperative agreements are being born covering shared river and ecosystems like the Limpopo up to the management of the Congo basin's globally important forests.

Meanwhile initiatives like the African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) promise to propel the region and its people onto a more prosperous path that balances economic, social and environmental concerns.

Several African countries, like the Gambia and Zambia, are mainstreaming the environment in their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and other countries are starting to use tax and other market mechanisms to conserve ecosystems like forests.

Only last week Tanzania announced, in its budget, VAT exemptions for liquefied petroleum gas in order to reduce energy production from charcoal and wood. Kenya has announced that solar panels and related equipment will be zero rated.

Achim Steiner, UNEP's Executive Director, said today: "The report challenges the myth that Africa is poor. Indeed, it points out that its vast natural wealth can, if sensitively, sustainably and creatively managed, be the basis for an African renaissance—a renaissance that meets and goes beyond the internationally agreed Millennium Development Goals. But this is not inevitable and, as the AE0-2 points out, African nations face stark choices".

"If policies remain unchanged, political will found wanting and sufficient funding proves to be elusive, then Africa may take a far more unsustainable track that will see an erosion of its nature-based wealth and a slide into ever deeper poverty," he added.

“Such a track will have disturbing consequences not just for many of the 800 million people here but for the rest of the world. Nevertheless, I am convinced that we are fast reaching a watershed in Africa’s response and that the pieces of a sustainable jigsaw puzzle are being steadily put into place” said Mr Steiner.

“Governments are signaling an increased willingness to cooperate and to engage over a wide range of pressing regional and global issues. The economic importance of the environment is increasingly recognized by Africa’s leaders as an instrument for development, for livelihoods, for peace and for stability. I sincerely believe we have a real opportunity to take this impetus a long way,” he concluded.

Henry Djombo, Ministre de l’Economie Forestiere et de l’Environnement of the Republic of Congo and the new President of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), said: “The production of the AEO-2 is a key response to one of the priorities expressed by our Heads of State in the context of the revitalized African Union and its New Partnership for Africa’s Development”.

“AMCEN is proud to have worked closely with UNEP and other specialized institutions of the African Union, Regional organizations, major stakeholders and the UN family to capture the key priorities of the region while emphasizing policy options and actions for enhanced investment, economic growth, poverty reduction and reduction of human vulnerability which are critical for the sustainable management of our resources,” he added.

The AEO-2, compiled on behalf of AMCEN with funding from UNEP and the governments of Belgium, Luxembourg and Norway, is the work of researchers and scientists from across the region.

Untapped Potential

From freshwaters to forests and from minerals to the marine environment, the region is only realizing a fraction of its nature-based economic potential says the AEO-2, which is sub-titled Our Environment, Our Wealth.

The report says, for example, that the potential for tourism based around nature and cultural sites is huge but relatively untapped.

“Africa has numerous tourist attractions, yet it contributes only four per cent annually to the multi billion dollar global tourism industry,” it notes.

Similar arguments are made in terms of food in a region with “sufficient land resources to produce enough to feed its people and yet one in three is presently undernourished”.

The report also overturns the popular view that Africa is short of water, rather it underlines how little of it is utilized for irrigation, drinking water and power generation.

Africa's renewable freshwater resource is, at close to 4,000 cubic km per year, about 10 per cent of the global freshwater resource and closely matches Africa's share of the world population.

Yet in 2005 only about five per cent of the development potential is being used for 'industry, tourism and hydropower," notes the report.

It points out that Africa "is a mining giant" producing nearly 80 per cent of the world's platinum, more than 40 per cent of the globe's diamonds and more than a fifth of its gold and cobalt. Yet its industrial base is insignificant".

The report argues that, in the case of minerals as well as areas like forest products, there is a pressing need to 'add value to natural resources".

"There is a need for Africa to move from being a major exporter of primary resources to being one" with a vibrant industrial and manufacturing base.

The AEO-2 assesses the state of the environment and draws plausible scenarios as to the likely impacts of different policies over the coming decades.

The kinds of tough choices facing African leaders, business and civil society are most clear cut in the scenarios on Freshwater and Land.

Land

If food production in Africa is driven purely by Market Forces, the level of land degradation is likely to rise to between 25,000 and 35,000 hectares a year under a worst case scenario.

This rapid intensification of farming will hit forests in particular with forest cover declining 'drastically' during the 2005 to 2025 period.

Under a more promising scenario, dubbed The Great Transition, agricultural land expands by 10 per cent between 2005 and 2025.

Under this scenario much of this comes not from greater exploitation of existing agricultural land but as a result of putting government-held lands into production.

Revised tax systems also promote good land use with a switch towards agriculture tailored to local climatic, geographical, demographic and cultural factors.

Land degradation declines to 0.1 million hectares a year by 2015 with restoration programmes leading, from about the same year, to an increase in forest cover.

Freshwater

Under a worse case scenario, competition for water will rise as industrial expansion grows with the losers likely to be the general public.

Industrial growth in the region is likely to be as a result of developed world companies shifting factories, such as chemical plants, into developing parts of the world such as Africa and in particular North and South Africa.

The new industries will generate employment but will take up to 16 per cent of supplies putting increasing pressure on underground water supplies, says the report.

Water prices for domestic consumers could soar in many African cities forcing people to buy cheaper but more polluted sources.

Under this scenario over a third of Africans in future will not have adequate access to water.

Under the more optimistic scenario, industries are required to meet proper pollution control standards and, although industrial use of water climbs to just under a fifth of total water use, discharges do not pollute lakes or rivers.

Increases in industrial demand are balanced by water efficiency gains in agriculture through, for example, the adoption of drip as opposed to spray systems.

Currently agriculture in Africa accounts for up to 90 per cent of water use. Under the Great Transitions scenario it declines to under 60 per cent as a result of governments introducing and encouraging tariffs and modern water saving irrigation systems.

However, the availability of greater quantities of clean and safe drinking water allied to rising living standards and incomes generated by industrial growth will probably result in higher public use if not ‘over use’ in growing urban areas.

Thus the proportion of Africa’s citizens without access to adequate water supplies under this scenario will be 26 per cent by 2050 from a total population then of 1.5 billion.

It indicates that to meet and maintain the internationally agreed development goals will require even greater efforts in areas of consumer awareness and water efficiency in homes and cities.

Emerging Issues

Alien invasive species from toads to trees are among the emerging issues facing Africa says AE0-2.

Experts have pinpointed large numbers of life forms, deliberately or accidentally introduced into Africa, which are poisoning cattle, damaging water supplies, carrying infections and affecting tourism.

The highest numbers of alien species are estimated to be found in South Africa followed by Mauritius, Swaziland, Algeria, Madagascar and Kenya.

Their impacts may equate to hundreds of millions of dollars in damage annually and may also be contributing to the undermining of economic progress and the delivery of the MDGs.

Black wattle, a tree introduced into South Africa about 150 years ago to provide bark products, is undermining river banks and harming wildlife in the Cape Floral Kingdom, one of the world's great biodiversity hot spots.

Since 1995, the South African government has removed and destroyed some five billion black wattle trees. The annual bill for manual and chemical control of all alien species in the Cape Floral Kingdom is around $40 million.

Meanwhile stockpiles of obsolete and hazardous chemicals, a switch of chemical production from developed to developing countries and gaps in the safe handling of toxic substances are becoming another new area of concern.

The issue is underscored in a study of wetlands in Senegal where agricultural and industrial chemical pollution has more than halved fish catches in some places.

The AEO-2 call for a raft of measures to be put in place to ensure Africa maximizes the benefits of any chemical industrialization.

These include improved risk assessments, monitoring, effective waste management, labeling of products to enable sound consumer choice and emergency response systems.

The recommendations echo those proposed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 and that were agreed by environment ministers under the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management at UNEP's Special Session of its Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Dubai earlier in the year.

The third emerging issue focuses on how the region is responding to the promises and potential pitfalls of gene modified plants.

The report notes that nearly 20 African countries are now growing or field testing GMOs from Morocco and Egypt to Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa across to Benin, Cameroon and Mali in West Africa.

The report accepts that such high tech crops could help in the war against famine and hunger and thus play a part in meeting internationally agreed development goals.

But there are worries that such crops may be seen as 'silver bullets' deflecting attention from more fundamental issues of hunger like poor food distribution systems, the inability of the poor to get access to crop lands and environmental mismanagement.

There is also concern that too few African countries have the scientific, legal, risk assessment and administrative structures in place to deal with this new generation of crops.

A multi million dollar capacity building project, being undertaken by UNEP and funded by the Global Environment Facility, aims to bridge theses gaps so that 100 developing countries, including over 30 African ones, have the necessary skills and laws needed to accept or reject GMOs.

Notes to Editors

The Africa Environment Outlook-2: Our Environment, Our Wealth is available at www.unep.org

Copies of Africa Environment Outlook 2 can be ordered through UNEP's online bookstore at: www.earthprint.com The price per copy is US$60. Purchases from developing countries attract a 50% discount and those from the least developed countries, 75%.

Fact Sheets covering the emerging issues of Invasive Alien Species, chemicals and Genetically Modified Organisms are available at www.unep.org with the press release

The secretariat of the African Ministerial Conference for the Environment is hosted by UNEP at http://www.unep.org/roa/Amcen/default.asp

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