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**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
ON THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMISSION**

**PROGRESS MADE DURING 1996 IN THE IMPLEMENTATION
OF THE PROGRAMME OF WORK FOR THE BIENNIUM 1996-1997**

Report to the Commission on
follow-up action for Agenda 21

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared as part of the programme of work and priorities of the secretariat of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) for 1996-1997. The report consists of a review and assessment of the progress achieved in the implementation of Agenda 21 since its adoption by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

2. The report reviews the activities undertaken by the ESCWA secretariat and ESCWA member States in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the main international conventions on environment. It also evaluates achievements since UNCED and assesses the issues impeding sustainable development in the ESCWA region, with special focus on emerging priorities and unfulfilled expectations, for the consideration of the Commission.

3. The General Assembly, in its resolution 47/190 of 22 December 1992 on the report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, endorsed Agenda 21 and urged "Governments, organs, organizations and programmes of the United Nations system as well as other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to take the necessary action" to implement the provisions of Agenda 21 and other important results of UNCED. Since this endorsement, Agenda 21 has become the global blueprint for development.

4. In its resolution 47/191 of 22 December 1992 on the institutional arrangements to follow up the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the General Assembly endorsed "the recommendations on international institutional arrangements... particularly those on the establishment of a high-level Commission on Sustainable Development." The main tasks of the Commission were: to ensure effective follow-up of UNCED; to enhance international cooperation; to catalyse intergovernmental decision-making capacity; and to examine the progress made in implementing Agenda 21 at national, regional and global levels. In resolution 47/191, the Assembly set out the terms of reference for the Commission and for its composition. An Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development was also created to coordinate the work of organs, organizations and programmes of the United Nations system on the implementation of Agenda 21.

5. The Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development pursued its mandate of strengthening inter-agency coordination within the United Nations system and with other international organizations and financial institutions. To facilitate its work, the Inter-Agency Committee appointed Task Managers to be responsible for the coordination of work along thematic areas of Agenda 21. The ESCWA secretariat's contribution to the global-level discussions of Agenda 21 was to consolidate and advance regional perspectives on the issues discussed by the Commission on Sustainable Development through continuous submission of information on sectoral issues, to be included in the reports prepared by the Task Managers for the annual meetings of the Commission. Although the responsibility for implementing Agenda 21 lies with national Governments, the ESCWA secretariat's initiative taken to catalyse the positions of its members has bolstered their respective stands on the issues reviewed and deliberated by the annual meetings of the Council of Arab Ministers Responsible for Environment (CAMRE).

6. At its fiftieth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 50/113 of 20 December 1995 on the convening of a special session for the purpose of an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of Agenda 21. In that resolution, the Assembly encouraged the Commission on Sustainable Development, at its fourth session in July 1996, to address matters related to the special session and welcomed the decision of the Commission to devote its fifth session, in April 1997, to preparations for the special session of the General Assembly in June 1997. In the same resolution, the Assembly invited "all ... relevant organizations and bodies of the United Nations system... the specialized agencies and other multilateral organizations ... to contribute to the special session" and requested the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development, in close coordination with the Commission on Sustainable Development, "to ensure an effective and coordinated system-wide response to the preparation of the special session."

7. In the ESCWA region, concerted efforts have been made by member States, intergovernmental organizations and United Nations agencies during the past five years to implement Agenda 21 and other results of UNCED at regional, national and local levels. The present report briefly outlines those efforts as part of an overall review and appraisal of the process of implementation of Agenda 21. A more detailed version of the present report was considered by CAMRE at its eighth session in Cairo in November 1996. Further aspects of national-level actions highlighted by the participants in the last session of CAMRE were incorporated appropriately and transmitted to the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development, for submission to the Commission on Sustainable Development. These submissions reflected ESCWA efforts in implementing Agenda 21.

8. The current report follows the guidelines of the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development that were established for the submission of documents, as well as the Secretary-General's report to the special

session of the General Assembly. These guidelines emphasize that, instead of listing the activities implemented, reports should focus on issues of importance and highlight only major activities, including the achievements of the ministerial conferences on environment, the coordination of cooperative efforts for the promotion of sustainable development, and inter-agency collaboration for the implementation of Agenda 21 and other global conventions related to environment. In preparing the present report, the ESCWA secretariat has reviewed and incorporated the findings of various relevant publications, recommendations and decisions taken by key intergovernmental organizations and missions undertaken within the region; it has also consulted with officials from member countries on the various aspects of UNCED and Agenda 21, and has drawn on its contributions to the annual meetings of CAMRE and the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region (JCEDAR) as well as Task Managers' reports for the annual submissions to the Commission on Sustainable Development. The present report, after consideration by the ESCWA Commission at its nineteenth session, will be revised in line with the guidance provided by the participants in the nineteenth ESCWA session; it will then be resubmitted to the Commission on Sustainable Development for presentation to the special session of the General Assembly.

II. IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21 AT THE REGIONAL LEVEL

9. UNCED, which considered the possibility of linking environmental policies with economic issues, provided an additional impetus to the institutionalization of global environmental policies at regional and national levels. In order to finance solutions to regional environmental problems of a global nature, there is a need to rationalize the existing global aid philosophy and to augment existing modalities of financial aid flow programmes; this need was recognized prior to the holding of UNCED. In 1990, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was established and jointly administered by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank to fund activities that address environmental concerns of a global nature. The GEF covers the financing of projects under four thematic areas: climate change, biological diversity, international waters, and depletion of the ozone layer. Desertification and deforestation projects are also eligible for funding provided they are related to the above four areas. In the ESCWA region, the GEF has funded projects in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen covering technical assistance and projects that involve capacity-building and adoption of strategies.

10. The ESCWA member countries are also parties, in different degrees, to various global treaties and conventions dealing with environment-related matters. The Arab Declaration on Environment and Development and Future Prospects, issued by the 1991 Arab Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development, underlined the commitment to the implementation of pertinent global conventions at the regional level and called for regional cooperation in enhancing national capacities, human resources development, and the flow of adequate financing for the implementation, at the national level, of global conventions. It is only through a suitable framework of regional environmental cooperation that the ESCWA region can expect to move towards sustainable development and more rational utilization of the region's natural resources. For effective conservation, national action has to be reinforced by regional cooperation within a framework of global cooperation. There are numerous international conventions and protocols relating to diverse aspects of environmental protection. Their ratification and implementation by Governments are intended to make a significant contribution to the promotion of environmental quality and sustainable development. These conventions and protocols will, therefore, serve as a complement to national environmental policies and will, at the same time, present the ESCWA member countries with numerous challenges. In addressing these challenges, the ESCWA member countries are expected to pay increased attention to the need to integrate environmental policies with technological policies in order to pursue

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sustainable development. CAMRE, at its last session, held in 1996, noted that many ESCWA member countries lacked adequate finances, the necessary technologies and the required human resources to develop and implement effectively environmental protection and management programmes and that there was an urgent need for the transfer of environmentally sound technology on favourable terms. In view of such considerations, the importance of environmentally sound technologies—and the need to make environment and technology policies mutually supportive—cannot be underestimated. The ESCWA secretariat would therefore like to urge ESCWA member countries that have not yet done so to join the international community in signing and ratifying the relevant international conventions dealing with global and regional environmental issues. In particular, reference is made to the following environmental agreements: the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change; the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer; the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer; and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa.

11. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal was adopted on 22 March 1989 and entered into force on 5 May 1992. It has been ratified by 10 countries in the ESCWA region. The Convention stipulates prohibitions against exports and imports of hazardous wastes, unless they are subject to a bilateral, multilateral or regional agreement that stipulates provisions that are no less stringent than those of the Convention. The Convention also spells out the various obligations that industrialized countries have to assist developing countries in technical matters related to the management of hazardous wastes. The industrialization process in some ESCWA member countries, together with the growing affluence in the countries of the region, has resulted in the increased generation of hazardous wastes. Furthermore, the shift from excavative and resource-based industries (oil, gas and minerals) to synthetic chemical and petrochemical industries, has increased the generation of hazardous wastes, though it is still difficult to obtain data from member countries. In addition, the management of such wastes is complicated by the illegal movement of hazardous wastes from industrialized countries to the region (case of Lebanon). While most of the ESCWA member countries have banned the import of hazardous wastes, there is a lack of enforcement of the laws and regulations, and a lack of the means to track movement of wastes in the ESCWA region. Another aspect which ESCWA member countries need to consider is the promotion of clean technologies in order to alleviate waste problems at the source rather than through "end-of-pipe" treatment technologies.

12. The Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted at UNCED in 1992. It was subsequently ratified by eight countries in the ESCWA region. The Convention stipulates that the developing countries should have access to the environmentally sound technologies required for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and that such technologies should be made available under the most fair and favourable terms possible, while recognizing the inherent intellectual property rights associated with the transferred technologies. The Convention reaffirms that conservation technology for sustainable use of biodiversity resources is to be developed jointly by the owners of the resources and by those having the necessary financial, scientific and technical capabilities, and that developing countries should also have a role in biotechnology research.

TABLE 1. STATUS OF ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES RATIFICATION OF ACCESSION TO CONVENTIONS AND PROTOCOLS IN THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENT AS OF JANUARY 1997

<i>Title of the instrument/year of adoption</i>	<i>Total number of countries that ratified/acceded</i>	<i>Date of entry into force of the instrument</i>	<i>ESCWA member countries that ratified/acceded to the instrument during the reporting period</i>	<i>Total number of ESCWA members</i>
Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, 1973	134	July 1975	Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia (1996)	3
Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, 1985	162	September 1988	Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar (1996), Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, Yemen (1996)	10
Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, 1987	160	January 1989	Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar (1996), Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (1996)	10
Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, 1989	105	May 1992	Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar (1996), Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, and United Arab Emirates	10
Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992	163	December 1993	Bahrain (1996), Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar (1996), Syrian Arab Republic (1996), and Yemen (1996)	8
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1992	163	March 1994	Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen	10
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa, 1994	54	December 1996	Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Oman	4
United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982	110	November 1994	Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia	3
International Convention on Nuclear Safety, 1994	26	October 1996	Lebanon	1
Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean Sea against Pollution, 1979	21	March 1986	Egypt, Lebanon (1996) and Syrian Arab Republic	3
Kuwait Action Plan, 1978*	8 (Iran is a non-ESCWA member country)	1978	Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates	7
Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden Action Plan, 1982*	--	--	Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen	5

Source: ESCWA. Based on information provided by Governments and international organizations acting as depositaries to the respective conventions, and on UNEP, Register of International Treaties and Other Agreements in the Field of the Environment (1995/1996).

* UNEP-initiated regional seas programmes.

13. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was signed by 155 countries at UNCED. Of these, 10 ESCWA member countries have ratified the Convention, which entered into force in March 1994. By becoming parties to the Convention, both developed and developing countries accepted a number of commitments and agreed to submit for review information on topics such as: the quantity of greenhouse gas emitted in their respective countries; the implementation of national programmes for mitigating climate change and adapting to its effects; the strengthening of scientific and technical observation of climate patterns and the development of relevant technologies; and the promotion of educational programmes and public awareness about climate change and its probable effects. To comply with the Convention, the countries in the ESCWA region will require technical assistance and financial support in harnessing and developing energy-efficient technologies and in rehabilitating old industries.

14. The countries in the ESCWA region are characterized by great differences of surface area, natural resources endowment, population, income, and level of socio-economic development. The environmental degradation in the region is continuing in many areas. The regional identity, shaped by a similar environment and ecosystem, as well as a common language, heritage and history, compels member countries to find remedies for the underlying causes of environmental degradation. Fortunately, the base for common action is solid. The Arab Declaration on Environment and Development and Future Prospects has advanced the understanding of environmental sustainability and has provided a forum for common approaches and agreements among Arab countries in critical priority areas that have a direct impact on development and relate to the quality of life for future generations of Arab people.

15. In its resolution 47/191, the General Assembly requested United Nations bodies in the region to take measures to facilitate the implementation of Agenda 21. One such measure was the adoption by ESCWA of its resolution 180 (XVI) of 2 September 1992 on regional cooperation and coordination in the field of environment and sustainable development. The purpose of the resolution was to establish an inter-Arab mechanism for promoting environment and sustainable development in the region. Accordingly, ESCWA initiated the establishment of the Joint Committee on Environment and Development in the Arab Region (JCEDAR), in cooperation with the League of Arab States, CAMRE and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/Regional Office for the Near East (FAO/RNEA) in 1993. Furthermore, the Arab Programme for Sustainable Development which was articulated by ESCWA following UNCED, was endorsed by CAMRE in 1993 as a cooperative attempt to set a number of long-term environmental and sustainable development priorities for the Arab countries. The Arab Programme for Sustainable Development is the first attempt to set a number of sustainable development priorities at a pan-Arab level. It is intended to enhance the coordination of national, regional and international efforts to improve environmental conditions and to promote the harmonization of environmental quality and policies throughout the Arab region, as well as to make Agenda 21 more operational in the Arab context, in particular with regard to its provisions relating to the integration of environmental policy with other socio-economic policies. The Arab Programme for Sustainable Development includes sectoral as well as thematic areas covering desertification; industrial pollution; environmental awareness and education; marine and coastal zones; water resources management; human development; capacity-building and institutional development; conservation of biodiversity, development of environmentally sound technologies; environmental information including indicators; and the protection of historical monuments and cultural heritages. These programmes are being implemented with support from various regional organizations, United Nations agencies and donor Governments and agencies.

16. The five-year period following the adoption of the Arab Programme for Sustainable Development formulated to achieve the imperatives set forth in Agenda 21 has witnessed an expanding partnership in the

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field of environmental conservation and sustainable development between CAMRE and various United Nations bodies and agencies in the region, in particular UNEP, FAO, ESCWA and UNDP. The priority areas for cooperation include combating desertification and increasing the green area. Information and data on the nature, scope and extent of desertification and land degradation in the Arab region have improved through the production of technical reports, case-studies and recommendations emanating from technical meetings. In the field of industrial pollution, new and updated information and data on the status of industrial pollution in the Arab region have been developed. Specific guidelines and tools for identifying and diagnosing the environmental impact of different industries in the Arab region have been developed. In addition, these guidelines have been applied to some specific industries (cement, textile, petrochemicals) in selected Arab countries, in order to improve their efficiency and to promote cleaner production. In the field of environmental education, awareness and information, a report on the status of environmental education in primary and secondary schools in the Arab countries was prepared by CAMRE and UNEP in 1997 and was published in Arabic as the first step in the endeavour to enhance environmental education in the Arab region. In the field of biodiversity conservation, a comprehensive report was prepared and published in Arabic in 1996 following an expert group meeting on the subject; the meeting, also held in 1996, included CAMRE, ACSAD (Arab Centre for the Study of Arid Zones and Dry Lands), FAO and ESCWA. The report reviewed appropriate technologies for the protection and conservation of biodiversity, and identified the nature, scope and areas of regional cooperation for promoting national biodiversity conservation strategies for the Arab countries.

17. For the majority of ESCWA member countries, the most critical environmental issues in the coming years will be the scarcity of freshwater resources, particularly in a region characterized by dry, arid lands; depleted fishery resources; the spread of desertification; and the degradation of agricultural lands. The availability of safe biotechnologies, the enhancement of biodiversity in the region and the combating of industrial pollution, in particular in and around cities, resulting from unsustainable industrial development in most ESCWA member countries are also important issues.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF AGENDA 21 AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

18. In every chapter of Agenda 21, countries are called upon to make national plans, strategies or policies for individual areas or sectors. Such plans should at the same time form part of and be consistent with so-called overall comprehensive national plans or strategies for sustainable development. While the goal of national strategies or plans for sustainable development should be to ensure socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for future generations, the main elements in the process of developing a strategy would be: harmonization of the various sectoral, economic, social and environmental policies and plans that are operating in the country; utilization and incorporation of experience gained through existing planning exercises; widest possible public participation; country-driven strategy; and strategy based on a thorough assessment of the current situation and initiatives. These same main elements or features of the planning process are referred to in relation to plan and policy objectives and activities in most sectoral chapters of Agenda 21 and in the two international conventions resulting from UNCED: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The importance of these elements should be reinforced by ESCWA member countries in their formulation of national sustainable development strategies, including those for formulating and implementing the respective Agenda 21 action programmes.

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19. Since UNCED, the concept and principles of sustainable development have been increasingly accepted, and have been reaffirmed by representatives of ESCWA member countries in regional and global conferences, at least in principle. Statements by Governments and by organizations of civil society have repeatedly proclaimed the need to protect the environment; conserve natural resources; preserve social progress, peace and democracy; alleviate poverty and racial and gender discrimination; and promote sustainable patterns of development. Although these statements of principle are often not followed by substantive action on the ground, the repetition of these principles helps to propagate a culture of sustainable development which, it is hoped, will promote actions by Governments, business leaders, and civil societies to move towards sustainable development. Some ESCWA member countries have responded to the call of Agenda 21 to adopt national strategies for sustainable development. Using the development plans as a framework, most ESCWA member countries are in the process of translating the objectives of Agenda 21 into national contexts and plans of action. However, it must be kept in mind that sustainable development is a long-term process leading to improved quality of life, reduction of inequalities and eradication of poverty. These long-term goals are usually contradicted by short-term economic and socio-political situations and other realities of the region. As such, each ESCWA member country, reflecting its specific cultural, ecological, economic and political realities, has entrusted different national institutions with the promotion of national sustainable development.

20. The level and extent of compliance with Agenda 21 recommendations vary among ESCWA member countries, depending on the urgency of the issues involved, the priorities attached to the issues by national authorities, financial requirements and the overall capacity of the country to shoulder implementation of sectoral objectives. The majority of ESCWA member countries have given the main responsibility of Agenda 21 to the institutions that already oversee totally or partially environmental issues. A number of ESCWA member countries have also developed strong coordinating mechanisms, including high-powered ministerial councils or committees chaired by the Prime Minister (Egypt and Kuwait). ESCWA member countries are injecting Agenda 21 principles into their development plans sectorally and in line with national socio-economic objectives. Each country is designing Agenda 21 principles according to its specific situation. For example, Jordan is in the process of adopting a national Agenda 21, and Bahrain has entrusted a ministerial committee to study and recommend how to develop a national Agenda 21. Though some ESCWA member countries have built a long-standing multisectoral national conservation strategy, none of these countries has transformed its official strategy for environmental conservation into an Agenda 21 strategy or a blueprint for sustainable development plans. As can be seen from table 2, almost all ESCWA members today have some sort of coordinating mechanisms to produce such plans. Environmental considerations are also finding their way into macroeconomic strategies. Capacity development programmes in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia are supporting the efforts of their respective planning bodies to incorporate sustainable development principles into their overall planning procedures. At the national level, there is an encouraging trend to deal more comprehensively with the overlapping issues of air, health, water and waste, and to seek assistance in developing a more integrated approach to all aspects of natural resources use and management.

21. The encouraging trends mentioned above are inevitably only part of the broader picture of capacity development since UNCED. It remains true that, for the most part, the solutions to the technical problems involved in achieving sustainable development are well known. What is lacking is the development of the social and institutional structures needed to keep pace with the policy, regulatory and service demands arising from population growth, and increasingly complex and changing technology. The issue of good governance is also crucial, given its impact on the development of capacities and performance standards for sustainable

TABLE 2. INSTITUTIONS ENTRUSTED WITH AGENDA 21 IN THE ESCWA REGION

Country	Policy institutions	Executing agency
Bahrain	Environmental Protection Commission	Ministry of Housing, Municipalities and Environment
Egypt	Office of the Prime Minister	Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency
Iraq	National Council for the Protection and Improvement of Environment	Ministry of Health
Jordan	Council of Ministers: - Ministry of Municipalities; Rural Affairs and Environment	General Corporation for Environmental Protection
Kuwait	The Public Authority for Environment*	Various ministries
Lebanon	Ministry of Environment	Various ministries
Oman	Council of Ministers: Permanent Commission for Environmental Protection	Ministry of Provisional Municipalities and Environment
Qatar	Council of Ministers: Permanent	Ministry of Municipalities and Agriculture
Saudi Arabia	Ministerial Committee on Environment	Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration
Syrian Arab Republic	Minister of State for Environmental Affairs	General Authority for Environmental Affairs
United Arab Emirates	Council of the Federation	Federal Environmental Agency
West Bank and Gaza Strip	Council of Ministers	Ministry of Agriculture
Yemen	Council of Ministers	Environmental Protection Council

Source: ESCWA secretariat, based on national sources.

* Chaired by the First Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kuwait.

development which, as noted above, are long-term objectives of Agenda 21. As noted, much of the progress to date has been in the areas of strategy formulation, greater participation and information exchange, but many constraints on implementation of strategies still remain. What is lacking in many ESCWA member countries are the structures and capacities to carry out many of the technical functions associated with sustainable development such as environmental management; natural resources monitoring; environment impact assessment; pollution regulation; and other more technical activities. These, in turn, require, the strengthening of ministries and agencies for agriculture and water, and the reshaping of training curricula, the creation of new institutes, civil service pay reform, and the modification of laws and regulatory

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frameworks. Though some progress has been made in these areas, there are major gaps in capacity in the areas of technical, scientific and institutional structures in most ESCWA member countries, and many member countries have long-term goals to improve these structures. In assessing progress in the national implementation of Agenda 21, the participants in the last meeting of CAMRE reported that they continued to focus on the formulation of guidelines, frameworks, and other national approaches to the implementation of Agenda 21. However, a review of the varying degrees of national implementation of Agenda 21 in the countries of the ESCWA region leads to the conclusion that the drawbacks encountered include the predominantly sectoral orientation of overall planning, weakness in coordinating intersectoral plans, and limitations due to insufficient financing and human resources.

22. As JCEDAR and the associated organizations move towards joint programming, the process is being observed, not only by CAMRE but increasingly by those responsible for assessment and management of sustainable development at national and regional levels. However, though the goal of coordination is to combine the expert skills and financial resources of individual organizations so that policies, information resources, and operational programmes better integrate specific sustainable development concerns of ESCWA member countries, the current status of inter-agency coordination for the promotion of Agenda 21 in the ESCWA region is confined to consultations and networking among specialists in various fields of Agenda 21. Another difficulty facing the coordination efforts is the financial situation affecting most United Nations bodies and agencies, including ESCWA, in the region. Furthermore, not all regional organizations, including those in the United Nations system, have the same views or understanding of the concept of sustainable development, which for some organizations is equated with environment or limited to the sectoral management of natural resources. Hence, the ESCWA secretariat would like to stress again the importance of better policy coordination, at the regional level, between all organizations and United Nations agencies, to ensure more effective joint programming for Agenda 21 issues, and more rational allocation of resources, including avoidance of duplication resulting from overlapping tasks often mandated to different regional organizations by their governing bodies within the same Governments. The same can be said with regard to the member countries, where lack of genuine coordination at national levels among different government departments is hindering the establishment of a common policy approach to the adoption of national sustainable development strategies.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BY THE ESCWA SECRETARIAT

23. Within the framework of its preparations for UNCED, ESCWA, in its resolution 165 (XV) of 18 May 1989 on environment and development in the ESCWA region, implicitly recognized the principle of sustainable development and called upon member States "to devote more attention to environmental considerations in both their overall and sectoral policies, plans and programmes with a view to contributing to environmentally sound and sustainable development" and requested the Executive Secretary "to take all environmental considerations into account in the implementation of the Commission's work programme, especially in the areas of agriculture, industry, transport, natural resources, energy, social development and human settlements." Accordingly, the cross-sectoral structure of ESCWA has been reorganized to respond positively to the challenges of sustainable development in the region, with particular reference to the priorities of the region where the issues of water shortages, desertification, poverty, occupation, war and conflicts are contributing to the continuation of regional unsustainable development. Furthermore, and in recognition of the need to further regional cooperation in the areas of statistics, social issues, energy and water management, the ESCWA Commission subsequently established four committees on these issues, in an attempt to offer

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member Governments an effective mechanism to respond to the challenges of sustainable development issues and to adopt universal precepts to the specific circumstances prevailing in the ESCWA region.

24. The ESCWA region is facing problems because of past development strategies, which led to unsustainable use of natural resources encouraged by low or no-cost water prices and lack of incentives for conservation and lack of allocation of water for higher-value use. At the same time, the region faced population growth and increased urbanization. Energy policies lacked accountability and the supply of fuel oil had a high sulphur content; leaded gasoline continued to be supplied. Energy consumption was high in relation to economic output. However, in the light of the recent changes in the region, and in particular the move towards economic reforms, privatization and trade integration, ESCWA is playing an increasingly important role in providing technical assistance, with particular emphasis on building and strengthening countries' capacities for sustainable development. ESCWA is also reviewing the member countries' performance in meeting their environmental policy objectives, and strengthening their natural resources management and planning capabilities. The advisory services provided by the team of regional advisers in the areas of energy, environment, trade, statistics, industry and water management are part of the expanding ESCWA efforts to facilitate sustainable development in the region. As can be seen, the promotion of sustainable development by ESCWA is taking on a wide range of forms and touches upon many sectors. However, most of the chapters of Agenda 21 are covered by the regular programmes, operational projects and sectoral advisory services of ESCWA. In the areas of energy and natural resources, the ESCWA Commission established in 1995 a committee on energy and a committee on water resources. The establishment of the two committees was in recognition of the fact that the prevailing conditions in the region provided the opportunity for a cooperative approach to the conservation of environment, the protection of natural resources and the promotion of sustainable development in the ESCWA region. These committees underline the urgent need for further integration of environmental considerations into all sectoral programmes of the secretariat, in line with the national and regional priorities of sustainable development. Several research studies and reports were prepared, and the results disseminated through seminars, workshops and intergovernmental meetings related to various aspects of Agenda 21, in particular, water management, cooperation and capacity-building in the areas of energy, water, agriculture, rural development, and the phase-out of ozone-depleting substances.

25. However, although a wide range of activities was implemented by ESCWA, there are still areas for regional cooperation that need to be explored, including: techno-environmental policy formulation; standards setting; the establishment and implementation of environmental management systems by public and private firms; environmental auditing and environmental impact assessment (EIA); environmental indicators; and the development and diffusion of an environmentally sound technology assessment. Such issues need to be investigated at the regional level. To this end, the initiatives taken by regional bodies and agencies such as UNEP, UNDP, FAO, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), as well as ESCWA, should be coordinated further in order to better promote the regional objectives of sustainable development. ESCWA, through its participation in the meetings of regional organizations, has provided policy guidance on the promotion of the follow-up of Agenda 21 on a regional level and has undertaken some specific activities for the Arab Programme for Sustainable Development. For example, with regard to the diverse areas of desertification, clean technology, the preparations for the special session of the General Assembly, biodiversity and sustainable development indicators, ESCWA has contributed several technical studies and participated in meetings leading to the regional articulation of sectoral chapters of Agenda 21.

26. In the regional context, the structural changes of the energy sector due to issues of privatization, regional cooperation and the promotion of clean energy including new and renewable energy, are given priority by the ESCWA secretariat. The secretariat is pursuing all avenues leading towards increased regional collaboration in energy networks, especially energy conservation and efficiency, new and renewable sources of energy, and electric power system interconnections. In addressing the emerging issues of the region, in line with the programme objectives for sustainable development elaborated in Agenda 21, activities in the area of water resources management covered priorities in areas of integrated water resources development and management, water resources assessment, and regional cooperation for the protection of water resources. Further activities undertaken by ESCWA include the promotion of regional cooperation in the water sector. These include implementation of a field project to investigate the shared basalt aquifer system in the Syrian Arab Republic and Jordan, and mathematical modelling of the Wadi Ham aquifer in the Fujairah coastal plain of the United Arab Emirates. This technical field assessment for groundwater management can, in principle, be applied to other ESCWA region coastal areas. To disseminate information related to water resources in the region and to strengthen the national capacities of member States, the ESCWA secretariat organized training courses on the use of remote sensing data and Geographic Information System (GIS) techniques in hydrology and hydrogeology and water legislation in the ESCWA region.

27. With regard to combating poverty, the region is witnessing two interacting processes: the expansion of methods of development along with consumer styles and behaviour that are clearly unsustainable; and the generation of poverty. It is increasingly clear that the unsustainable growth of the past few decades has generated a pocket of poverty in every society, resulting in an overall deterioration of the quality of life, increasing unemployment, decreasing labour productivity, and rural migration to towns and cities. The urban areas of middle-income countries of the region, facing increasing pressure, cannot always support population increases and rural migration; this is leading to deterioration of the quality of life and the continuation of poverty, deprivation cycles and negative social and political consequences. To address this problem, the ESCWA secretariat has initiated a series of studies to investigate the roots of poverty in the region in its larger economic and social contexts. In sum, these studies conclude that environmental deterioration, population, health conditions and development are inextricably entwined. Unsustainable development will ultimately affect the quality of life. The human cost—expressed in poverty, suffering unavoidable illness and mortality—is the real cause behind poverty in the ESCWA region. In the related areas of demographic dynamics and sustainability, the ESCWA secretariat has initiated activities in the form of technical studies, dissemination of information and capacity-building in the areas of demographic and related socio-economic indicators. In cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the ESCWA secretariat organized an Expert Group Meeting on Population Policies and Sustainable Development in the Arab Region (October 1996). In addition, the secretariat forwarded numerous concise reports to the Task Managers entrusted by the Commission on Sustainable Development to prepare sectoral reports on Agenda 21 for submission to the special session of the General Assembly. These reports covered: integrating environmental considerations in development and decision-making; managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought; conservation of biological diversity; sustainable agricultural and rural development; capacity-building issues; financial issues; and information for decision makers.

V. CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND REGIONAL PRIORITIES

28. The qualitative assessment of regional progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 indicates achievements in some areas. In particular, the Arab Declaration on Environment and Development and the

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Arab Programme on Sustainable Development have provided additional incentives for regional cooperation in the implementation of Agenda 21. The subsequent meetings of CAMRE encouraged the Arab countries to ratify environmental conventions. Along these lines, an annual expert-level meeting is convened to prioritize activities, set targets, and identify time-frames for the implementation of regional projects in the areas of desertification, industrial pollution, environmental awareness and information and issues related to biodiversity. Such regional cooperation is promoted through a network of national institutions involving the concerned ad hoc committees and through participation of member countries and specialized regional organizations including United Nations organizations. Another encouraging trend in the region is the positive capacity-building of institutions and staff concerned with sustainable development, reflected in the allocation of financial resources, the streamlining and reorganization of institutions entrusted with the management of natural resources and environment, and the significant contribution by UNDP through the Capacity 21 project in the ESCWA region. Another initiative includes cooperation of ESCWA with CAMRE in building national capacity for monitoring the sustainability of development in the region through the institution of environmental indicators. Finally, the participation of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the business community and other major groups has increased, especially in the areas of information dissemination, research, project design for community services and public awareness, and is creating a culture for sustainability in the region.

29. However, negative sustainable development continues, reflecting the continuous abuse of the limited arable land; the increase in desertification; the decrease in the per capita amounts and quality of freshwater; the continuation of industrial air and water pollution; the inefficient use of water and energy resources due to low-cost or no provisions or a lack of incentives to conserve; and an increase in urbanization and population. Among the contributing factors to this situation is the prevailing structure for decision-making in many ESCWA member countries, where issues of economic, social, environmental and technological management planning at policy levels are dealt with separately. Such sectoral handling of issues influences the actions of all groups involved and leads to inefficiency and unsustainability. Hence, significant changes in the institutional structures of departments concerned with development or management of natural resources will be needed to promote decisions concerning sustainable development at national levels. It is for this reason that a number of ESCWA member countries have set up inter-ministerial commissions or working groups empowered with ensuring coordination and cooperation among all government departments concerned. However, along this line of institutional reform, there should be serious applications of tools to improve the decision-making process, such as developing environmental indicators, cost-benefit analysis, environmental impact assessment (EIA) and environmental audit and more transparency on the part of Governments in releasing information pertaining to their environmental records and in strengthening legislation and environmental standardization to protect the natural resources of their countries and peoples from harmful pollution.

30. A significant challenge for the post-UNCED institutional arrangements in the region will be to further refine the linkages between CAMRE, UNEP, ESCWA, FAO, UNIDO and UNDP for more focused, thematic arrangements to develop and utilize initiatives to strengthen capacities and implement projects at national and regional levels. In order to realize the full potential from joint programming among all United Nations agencies in the region, the ESCWA secretariat believes that more coordination is needed to work collectively and in line with the regional priorities of ESCWA member countries. The same argument can apply to coordination of the United Nations system and involvement of donor agencies at the national level to implement a comprehensive integrated strategy for sustainable development.

31. Another factor hindering sustainable development in the ESCWA region, noted by the annual meetings of CAMRE, is the lack of transfer of environmentally sound technology on a concessional basis to the ESCWA region. The ESCWA member countries have expressed disappointment with the international community for not meeting the financial commitment made at UNCED towards the implementation of Agenda 21, in particular with regard to the Official Development Assistance (ODA) target of 0.7 per cent of gross national product (GNP). The overall decline in ODA to the middle-income Arab countries and the least developed Arab countries as of the mid-1980s has caused considerable concern in those countries. On the supply side, a major contributing factor has been the budget constraints in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. The situation has been exacerbated by a sharp fall in assistance from oil-exporting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries owing to the falling oil prices and the financial constraints faced by those countries as a result of the Gulf war, arms procurement and increased military expenditure. On the demand side, there has been increased competition for aid from other countries in Eastern Europe. As a result, total flows of ODA to the Arab region, including bilateral assistance from GCC countries, have fallen sharply. Added to all this is the current socio-economic polarization in the region, which is a reflection of occupation, sanctions, and the missing link between peace and growth for sustainable human development to replenish the region's environmental heritage.

32. The special session of the General Assembly in 1997 will consider national, regional and global achievements since UNCED, based on inputs submitted through the Commission on Sustainable Development, including inputs of the regional commissions. The present report, prepared according to the guidelines established, highlights the regional achievements, priorities and issues of Agenda 21. The Commission may wish to review this report and provide guidance to the secretariat, in particular with regard to incorporation of achievements at the national level. The General Assembly will identify constraints on and obstacles to implementation, and determine priorities for the future. The Commission is therefore requested to review the regional and emerging priorities summarized in the present report and to advise the secretariat on the regional aspects of implementing Agenda 21. A summary of the present report reflecting the input of the Commission will then be submitted to the forthcoming session of the Commission on Sustainable Development and the special session of the General Assembly.

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