Sustainable Development in action
United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
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New UN Report Finds Progress on Atmospheric Pollution, But Urgent Action Needed on Energy Access, Industrial Development and Climate Change

NEW YORK, 11 April—Evidence indicates that concerted international efforts can be highly effective in addressing global and regional pollution problems, from leaded gasoline to ozone-depleting substances, but that redoubled international efforts are needed to provide clean, affordable energy for poverty reduction and industrial development and to tackle climate change, according to a new report issued by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

The report, "Trends in Sustainable Development," a colorful compilation of maps and graphs, is being issued in advance of the Commission on Sustainable Development's 14th session (1-12 May 2006), which is devoted to discussion of the interrelated challenges of energy for sustainable development, industrial development, atmosphere and air pollution, and climate change.

Energy use continues to rise globally, the report found, but – due to greater efficiency and a shift to less energy intensive activities – energy consumption has grown at a slower rate than the world economy. And because of cleaner fuels, even fossil fuels, the rise in carbon dioxide emissions is less than the growth in energy consumption. Sulfur dioxide emissions have declined over the past 20 years because of cleaner technologies and greater use of low-sulfur fuels. And fewer people are suffering from lead contamination as leaded gasoline has been phased out almost everywhere.

"In terms of human health, economic health and the health of the planet, there has been significant progress in reducing air pollution, lead poisoning and ozone depletion since countries agreed on concerted action," says JoAnne DiSano, Director of the UN Division for Sustainable Development. "This progress has occurred because governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations have taken these challenges seriously. We still have problems where we need to do more – there are 1.6 billion people who don't have access to electricity and 2.4 billion who still use firewood or dung to cook and heat. We need reliable and clean energy for industrial and economic development, and if we are to address climate change, we need to implement solutions now."

The Trends Report found that:

- In developing countries, per capita energy consumption is between one-third and one-fifteenth what it is in developed countries.
- Major economies are increasingly relying on oil, gas and even electricity imports: China's oil imports have jumped significantly in recent years and, for the United States, oil imports have risen from 40% of needs in 1990 to almost 60% in 2004.
- Globally, natural gas imports have risen as a share of consumption from 13% in 1980 to 29% in 2003.
- While per capita energy consumption is correlated with per capita income, Europe and Japan are considerably less energy intensive for their income levels than is the USA.

- Among developing countries, even though South Asia has a slightly higher per capita income than sub-Saharan Africa, its per capita energy consumption is lower due in part to less reliance on inefficient biomass fuels.
- Biomass remains the main source of energy in sub-Saharan Africa. In developing countries, indoor air pollution from solid cooking fuels takes a much heavier toll in respiratory illness and early death than does urban air pollution.
- While developed countries still dominate world manufacturing output, the share of developing countries in world manufactured exports has risen rapidly, reaching just under one-third in 2000.
- While East and South Asia has experienced dynamic manufacturing sector growth, other developing regions have lagged behind, while manufacturing activity declined steeply in many countries with economies in transition.
- Global SO_2 emissions have decreased, but concentrations remain above the WHO threshold in many cities in developing countries. Cities such as London and Los Angeles, once heavily polluted, now show concentrations well below the WHO threshold.
- By 2003, developed countries had reduced consumption of CFCs by over 99% and developing countries by more than 50%. Still, some of the replacement CFC chemicals also contribute to ozone depletion.
- All high-income countries have now phased out leaded gasoline, as have most countries in Latin America. However, in Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, a number of countries still sell leaded gasoline as well as unleaded. Sub-Saharan African governments have agreed to eliminate lead from gasoline as of 1 January 2006.
- In the USA, EU, and Japan, the transport sector has seen the fastest growth in greenhouse gas emissions, and emissions from international aviation have grown more than twice as fast as overall transport emissions.
- Economic growth in the large emerging economies of Asia has been significantly faster than growth in CO_2 emissions — China has seen its GDP grow by about 200% since 1990 and its emissions increase by approximately 60%; for India, the figures are around 100% and 75%, respectively.

The Commission on Sustainable Development is a unique UN forum that brings together government officials and representatives from a broad spectrum of civil society to discuss and recommend solutions that promote sustainable development.

The full report can be found at http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/trends2006/index.htm. More information on CSD14 can be found at http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/csd.htm.

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