

GEO

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Foreword

At the start of the 21st century we live in a world in which much of the environment continues to be polluted, degraded and destroyed. The number of poor people is increasing in most parts of the world, including here in Latin America and the Caribbean, as is inequality both within and between countries. At the same time, there is a pattern of excessive consumption by the minority, contrasting sharply with the abject poverty of the majority.

The challenge that lies ahead – to put the region back on the path of sustainable development – should not be underestimated. It will require political determination, financial resources, and the full involvement and participation of all stakeholders, from large business and industrial concerns to community and neighbourhood organizations. It is a challenge that we must take up without hesitation, because to carry on with business as usual is no longer an option if we want to begin this new millennium with some hope for our children and their children.

Fortunately, it is not all bad news. A great deal has been achieved in the last few decades. As the Latin America and the Caribbean Environment Outlook points out, concern for the environment has grown markedly and many environmental institutions and policies have been put in place. The environment is very much on the global and national agendas, albeit only as a side issue accompanying the main agenda items of economy and development. Governments have strengthened environmental policies through institutional changes and legislation. The number of global and regional environmental agreements has increased sharply, bringing greater awareness of environmental issues. There is now more public participation than ever before in environmental management and decision-making, with citizen's groups and NGOs playing a more significant and influential role in development and conservation activities in the region.

Encouraging as these signs are, not enough has been achieved. The changes that have been put in place have not significantly improved the environment or slowed the pace of degradation. While policies for environmental protection and management are moving in the right direction, the pace is slow and their impact isolated. Environmental issues are still far from being integrated into mainstream thinking and policy-making. The time for treating the environment as an add-on is long gone. Better integration of environmental thinking into decision-making about the economy, agriculture, urban management and all other sectors is of the utmost importance.

In reaction to the steps that are still needed for the promotion of more comprehensive decision-making in the region, the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean has called for support to help define a regional environmental vision and to set up the harmonized information systems needed to support decision-making. The Latin America and the Caribbean Environment Outlook report is the first step in responding to this request.

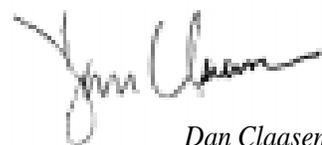
The United Nations Environment Programme will continue to provide leadership in the region for the preparation of integrated environmental assessment reports, regional assessment information systems, and the capacity-building necessary to support these activities within the framework of the GEO process and methodology.

The Latin America and the Caribbean Environment Outlook report shows us that we have come a long way – but also that we still have a long way to go. UNEP will continue to work with governments and other partners in Latin America and the Caribbean to promote sustainable development and the integration of the environment into the mainstream of policy-making and action, thereby facilitating the conservation of the region’s remarkable natural resources.

Latin America and the Caribbean Environment Outlook points the way forward. It is now up to all of us to take up the challenge and ensure that the 21st century is one in which the principle of environmental sustainability and development becomes enshrined as a mainstay of the quality of life in Latin America and the Caribbean.



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Executive summary

CHAPTER 1

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