

Abu Dhabi Declaration – Perspective of Arab Environmental Action* –

The Arab Ministers Responsible for the Environment meeting in Abu Dhabi, in a Special Session of their Council (CAMRE) on 9 Dhu'l-qa'ada 1421H) (3 February 2001) and on the occasion of the International Conference and Exhibition – Environment 2001 in Abu Dhabi;

Having: reviewed the report on Perspectives of Environmental Action in the Arab World which was prepared upon an initiative of and support from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and with generous support from the United Arab Emirates;

Emphasizing: the growing concern for the environment, both at the Arab and Global levels, clearly reflected in the declarations on environment and development issued by their first meeting in Tunis, 1986 and their meeting in Cairo, 1991 and at the Earth Summit (Rio 1992), as well as the decisions and commitments included in the Rio Declaration of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth summit – Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the recommendations and declarations relating to environmental issues adopted by the various international conferences that followed the Earth Summit up to the Conferences held in Malmö and Abuja in the year 2000.

Recognizing: that the Arab Region stands at the threshold of a new century

and a new millennium, during which the world will witness developments of profound impact on various aspects of life, as we know it today. The Region enters this era having realized significant and far reaching achievements in the development of Arab society during the past century reflected in improvement in human health, education, socio-economic standards and the environment. They recognize, in particular, achievements in institutional building, legislation, environmental education and training, the use of environmentally friendly technologies as well as Arab active involvement and contribution to regional and global environmental agreements and programmes.

This process of accelerated development has had its impact on the environment. This has raised of late, the issue of achieving the optimum linkage between development imperatives, eradicating poverty and protecting the environment. This has revealed several negative aspects have been identified, and in particular the fact that development and raising living standards without concern for the environment resulted in intensive exploitation of natural resources and pollution levels beyond the capacity of nature to promote a healthy and safe environment conducive to achieving sustainable development fulfilling the aspirations of the Arab people. This calls for the adoption of more effective approaches in development based on

the rational use of natural resources, renewable and non-renewable, as well as their protection from pollution.

Realizing: that achieving sustainable development, faces two main challenges. First, the continuing increase in population which represents a real threat in the long-run if maintained at current rates together with the imbalance in population density between urban, rural and "badia" areas at the national and regional levels. Second, the limitation of many natural resources in Arab countries and the deterioration of their quality.

Noting: that while we have today reasonable expertise regarding current environmental problems, whether in understanding or dealing with them, yet the number of environmental experts is still smaller in numbers and shorter in experience than needed and our environmental institutions are still young with limited experience, currently facing difficult and complex challenges.

Recognizing: that most of the current urgent environmental issues are the same as those of the last century, while increased in intensity and varied in priority from one place to another. The last few decades have witnessed negative impacts on the environment resulting from accelerated industrial development and expansion of urbanization that have led to deterioration of infrastructures in most Arab countries, increases in air pollution levels, land degra-

* See page 163.

dation, pollution of marine and coastal areas, deterioration of fisheries and loss of biodiversity. Today, all these negative impacts are much more pronounced and more acute than half a century ago.

Recalling: that the last few years have witnessed greater interest among Arab citizens in environmental problems and a realization that, if allowed to continue, they will represent a real threat to the future of development efforts. This has prompted decision makers to consolidate these encouraging orientations and to nurture this emerging concern for the environment among the Arab citizens and encourage their participation in addressing them.

Recognizing: that there is an urgent need to develop a strategy and a clear vision for the future of Arab environmental action to face current and future challenges in the first two decades of the new century.

Convinced: that this calls for greater understanding of the current state of the environment, the magnitude and direction of changes resulting from pressures of development activities, their driving forces and their impacts on human health, natural resources and national economies. Based on this, priorities and areas for action can be identified and the perspectives of Arab environmental action can be established.

Stressing: the fact that globalization, trade liberalization, advances in information technology, the growing role of civil society and public participation in decision making and the shift towards decentralization represent the major development at the global scene, in addition to global environmental issues, that have direct impact on the Arab Region.

Declare

First: There is an urgent need for alleviation of poverty and improvement of living standards and economic conditions of the Arab citizen through programmes of sustainable development one of whose corner stones is environmental protection and the rational use of natural resources.

Second: The priority environmental problems facing the Arab world at the beginning of the twenty first century are:

- Severe shortage of water resources and deterioration of their quality;
- Limitation of available lands and deterioration of their quality;
- Irrational consumption of natural resources;
- Increasing urbanization and its consequent problems;
- Deterioration of marine and coastal areas and wetlands.

Third: Achieving our objectives calls for a new strategy based, first, on identification of areas of strength and weakness as revealed by past experience, and second on deeper understanding of global developments in the various fields of environmental action.

The Arab Ministers emphasize that such a strategy must be built on the following principles:

1. Working simultaneously on two time frames: Since environmental problems vary in causes and their present and future consequences, it is neither possible nor useful to address them all at once. This calls for the formulation of environmental rehabilitation and protection plans on two time

frames. First, the short term would deal with the most urgent problems, and which have a real chance of success. This would reinforce the credibility of environmental institutions and generate more resources to deal effectively with the harder problems, at greater depth and on a more sustainable basis. The second, the long term, requires more resources to allow for in-depth studies aiming at the identification of solutions and the provision of conditions that are conducive to the effective implementation of such solutions.

2. Starting with the elimination of the causes of environmental degradation before attempting to their impacts, Dealing with the impacts without eliminating the causes is a waste of effort, time and resources. However, when the impacts become acute, it is necessary to address both simultaneously. It is clear that such situations constitute a heavy burden on society, thus confirming the danger of rolling over environmental problems, or either from place to place, or from time to time. Experience of other countries has shown that such policies can only lead to greater costs that could be avoided by dealing with environmental problems at an early stage.

3. Applying modern environmental accounting methods, which provide decision makers, with clear comparisons between the cost of investing in the environment and the magnitude of the losses resulting from failure to include the environmental dimension in the feasibility studies of development projects.

4. Adopting the "Cleaner Production" strategy in its comprehensive sense, starting from the rational use of natural resources, eliminating hazardous substances, maximizing the efficiency of design and production processes and minimizing emissions, effluents and wastes in production and use to levels that are within the carrying capacity of the environment. Cleaner Production also includes the effective environmental management of wastes as well as consideration of changing the consumption patterns that have created the social demand of a particular product or service.

5. Taking adequate measures that ensure that Arab countries become active partners in the efforts to develop advanced technologies related to improving the environment. There are today many initiatives seeking to achieve important and promising results in dealing with chronic environmental problems related to providing the natural resources needed for development projects, and in particular renewable resources, the reduction of levels of pollutions, whether in production or use, improving the effectively of recycling wastes or disposing of them in safer ways. The Arab Region is called upon to keep up these efforts and to participate actively in them, concentrating on the urgent problems mentioned above.

6. Capacity building and institutional development through:

- a) Development of human resources at all levels and in all fields of the environment of expertise at an unprecedented intensity.
- b) Review of curricula at all levels of education with a view to making the environment an integral component in our education system, in an effort to bring up a generation that is aware of its responsibility towards the environment, whose environ-

mental awareness is based on sound understanding of environmental issues, which respects the limits of nature and which spares no effort in protecting the environment in whatever career they choose in life.

c) Encouraging Arab media to show greater concern, in depth analysis and clarity in their coverage of environmental issues addressed to Arab citizens with a view of sensitizing them to environmental problems and encouraging them to support efforts of protecting the environment and to be guardians of these efforts.

d) Enabling civil society to participate more effectively in environmental decision making to ensure effective support to such decisions, with greater emphasis on the role of women and the family.

e) Further develop the environmental institutions, benefiting from the experience of other nations and guided by our social values and cultural heritage.

f) Strengthening the modes of operation of the Council to ensure fulfillment of its objectives within the current and future global and regional development.

7. Achieving a qualitative jump in the efforts of scientific research and technology development institutions so as to provide the scientific underpinning and technological experience to effectively address environmental problems that have accumulated over the years.

8. Indignization of water desalination techniques and production of reverse osmosis membranes, applying at the same time techniques of water resource management that ensure the balance between supply and demand.

Fourth: To be guided in the implementation of environmental programmes and projects for the coming two decades by options identified in the "Perspectives of Arab Environmental Action" report considered as a working manual for achieving the objectives of this Declaration.

Fifth: Stress the need for undertaking effective measures to support the environmental administrations in Arab countries and their supporting activities and to seek the necessary funding for carrying out their duties. In this context the Ministers:

a) Welcome the interest shown by the Arab leaders in environmental issues and look forward to the inclusion of preparations for the Rio+10 Summit in the agenda of the next summit to be held in Amman, Jordan. They also look forward to the environment becoming a fixed item on the agenda of future summits.

b) Welcome further the endorsement by the 7th Islamic Summit (16 Shaban 1421 H, 12-16 November 2000 in Doha) of the Jeddah Declaration issued by the International Forum on the Environment from an Islamic Perspective (25-28 Rajab 1421 H, 22-25 October 2000) and the call for adopting the recommendations of the Forum as a basis for complementing the regional and global environmental programmes so as to reflect an Islamic perspective of the environment.

c) Stress the necessity of securing permanent sources of funding for addressing current and future environmental problems. This requires the establishment of an Arab mechanism to fund environment investments at the national and regional levels in addition to cooperation and partnership with industrialized countries and regional and international financing institutions, realizing that returns on investments in the

environment far exceed the return on other investments.

d) Emphasize the importance of sound preparation for the Rio+10 Summit. Such preparation should include the drafting of a comprehensive report that reflects the expectations of the region, reviews what has been achieved in the past 10 years in the area of the environment, outlines the main objectives and assesses the human and financial resources required. In this context it is essential to convene a joint ministerial meeting for the Arab ministers of environment, economy, finance and planning to decide on the issues to be raised at Rio+10. It is also essential to exchange views on these issues with their African and Muslim counterparts with a

view to formulating coordinated positions and if possible unified stands which will have an impact on the debate at the Summit.

e) Call for closer cooperation in this field with developing countries (Group of 77 and China) and regional and International organizations concerned with issues of the environment.

Sixth: Emphasize the importance of enhancing cooperation with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as the UN body responsible for the environment, calling upon UNEP to provide further support to CAMRE in accordance with the Jeddah Regional MOU (May 1999) so as to strengthen Arab Environmental Action and increase CAMRE's involvement

in the global environmental programmes. In this context, they call upon UN Secretary- General and the international community to contribute generously to the Environment Fund to enable UNEP to sustain its regional and global programmes.

Seventh: Welcome the hosting of the Kingdom of Morocco of the Seventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and call for support to Morocco for achieving a successful conference.

Eighth: The Arab Ministers will monitor the implementation of this Declaration through the regular sessions of CAMRE.

