PRESS RELEASE

United Nations Development Programme

Climate Change Will Intensify Development Challenges in the Arab Countries

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Water Scarcity and Desertification among Main Concerns

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UNDP Convenes Experts in Damascus to Work Toward Solutions

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Arab Climate Resilience Initiative to be launched by end-of-year

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Four Seasons Hotel, 15-16 September 2010

Damascus, 15 September, 2010— The impacts of climate change threaten to intensify development challenges in the Arab countries, unless action is taken to enhance climate resilience in this region already grappling with high levels of water scarcity and desertification.

Projections published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) show that temperatures in the region are projected to increase by as much as 2° C in the next 15-20 years, and over 4° C by the end of the century. The impact of such temperature increases go far beyond inconvenience, striking at the heart of a range of development challenges that have long vexed populations and policymakers across the Arab countries. Rainfall is projected to decrease by as much as 30% in parts of the region. The flow of rivers and streams such as the Tigris, Euphrates and Nile are expected to reduce. The recharging of aquifers is expected to slow, and overall stocks of freshwater to be reduced, accompanied by an increase in desertification.

In a region in which 16 of the 22 countries already fall below the water scarcity level of 1,000 cm ^{3}, and where 90% of the land mass is classified as arid or semi-arid, further entrenchment of these challenges poses a major threat to livelihoods across the region.

The main climate change risk in the Arab countries according to the IPCC will largely be linked to long-term desiccation and drought associated with climatic variability. The Middle East contains the world's hottest deserts, inhospitable to most forms of life. Climate change may put even greater stress on these areas. And areas of the Arab countries that have traditionally been more fertile such as the Mediterranean basin are expected to face increasing pressure as higher temperatures, reduced rainfall and more extreme weather threaten their fragile ecosystems. These changes will pass through to a series of effects, particularly on agriculture and food

security. Agricultural yields are expected to fluctuate more over time, and to stabilize at lower averages over the long-term, especially in rain-fed areas. And in countries such as Yemen that depend largely on subsistence agriculture, reductions in agricultural productivity can quickly translate into major impacts on both food security and unemployment.

Climate change is also expected to increase the frequency and intensity of extreme climatic conditions and related disasters, leading to more severe events such as droughts, floods, hurricanes and dust storms. The Arab region has recently experienced an increasing number of extreme events of these types. Morocco, for example, in recent decades has seen an average of five or six droughts per decade, up from only one drought per decade in the beginning of the 20th century. Although the damage associated with this type of event has rarely been quantified, primary estimates indicate huge economic, social and environmental costs and losses that could constrain development in many countries.

Increasing urbanization and abandonment of rural areas are among the observed impacts of climate change in some Arab countries, and are projected to grow in scale. Shifting rainfall patterns, expanding desertification and falling agricultural productivity are likely to undermine rural livelihoods, worsen job prospects in rural areas and accelerate migration to urban areas. The capacity of local governments in urban areas to provide adequate infrastructure and public services will be tested, especially given the backlog of under-serviced populations in many cities around the region.

Population growth magnifies the challenges of climate change by increasing demand for food and water while also putting increased pressure on land use. The population of the Arab countries nearly tripled between 1970 and 2010, climbing from 128 million to 359 million. Figures of the United Nations Population Division forecast that the Arab region will have 598 million inhabitants by 2050, straining the carrying capacity of the natural environment.

The Arab countries have joined other regions in showing an active interest in responding to the climate challenge both in local approaches and in within the global policy dialogue. The media in Arab countries have given increasing salience to climate issues in recent years, and a range of civil society groups, think-tanks, academics and opinion leaders have engaged in active dialogues on climate change. The 2009 *Arab Human Development Report*, an independent report on development challenges written by Arab scholars and sponsored by UNDP-RBAS, also identified climate change as one of the key policy challenges facing the Arab countries, sparking a broad discussion in the regional media and among opinion leaders on options for the way forward.

Policy leaders have shown interest and action as well, with initiatives ranging from new investments in renewable energies, to launching national development plans with strong environmental safeguards, to active participation in international policy dialogues. At the regional level, an important landmark in the Arab dialogue on climate change was achieved when, in 2007, the environment ministers of Arab countries agreed an Arab Ministerial Declaration on Climate Change, which endorsed the international consensus on climate change, highlighted the potential impacts on development in the Arab countries, and called for policy action ranging from "inclusion of policies to deal with climate change issues in all sectors," to "adoption of national and regional action plans dealing with climate change issues," to "Establish[ing] studies and research centers for climate change in the regions of developing countries, including the Arab region," noting that "these centers should be concerned with examining impacts and challenges facing the citizens and peoples of the developing countries as a result of climatic change."

As a dedicated partner of the Arab countries, the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP-RBAS) is currently launching a series of consultations with national and regional experts and policymakers in order to identify priorities and opportunities for catalyzing efforts to address the climate change challenge as called for by leaders and a range of sectors in the Arab region.

UNDP-RBAS has agreed with the Ministry of Environment of the Syrian Arab Republic as well as the UNDP Syria Country Office to host the first consultation of the process in Damascus today and tomorrow (15 and 16 September). The consultation will bring together over 90 participants including dozens of speakers to take stock of challenges and opportunities in the area of climate change, with a particular focus on water scarcity, desertification, and population mobility. Speakers and participants include experts and policymakers representing 17 Arab countries, regional institutions including the League of Arab States, and international organizations including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Organization for Migration, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Environment Programme, and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas. Arab universities and research centers represented include the American University of Beirut, King Abdulaziz University (Saudi Arabia), the University of Alexandria, the National Water Research Center (Egypt), the University of Jordan, the Arabian Gulf University (Bahrain), Birzeit University (Occupied Palestinian Territory), the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, the *Institut des Regions Arides* (Tunisia), and the *Institute National de la Recherche Agronomique* (Morocco). Travelling from the United States to participate in the meeting are Arab experts from the University of North Carolina and the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory of the California Institute of Technology.

The expected outcomes of the meetings include recommendations for activities and policies that respond to climate priorities, an expansion of the local and regional knowledge base related to climate priorities, and the mobilization of key actors to establish momentum for raising the climate challenge to the highest levels of national and regional research and policy.

Following on the consultation in Damascus, UNDP-RBAS will also organize, in partnership with respective Ministries and Country Offices, a consultation on Sea Level Rise to be held in Cairo on 20-21 September, and a consultation on Energy Efficiency to be held in Manama on 6-7 October. These consultations will continue to build knowledge and generate partnerships for responding to the climate challenge, and will feed into a high-level regional meeting in Morocco on 3-5 November, on which occasion the knowledge and ideas generated throughout the consultative process will be validated and a regional initiative on responding to climate change will be launched by UNDP-RBAS and partnering Arab governments.

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UNDP is the UN's global development network. The organization advocates for change and connects countries to knowledge, experience and resources that help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners.

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