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WATER SCARCITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

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Preface

This study was prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) through its Social Development Division in collaboration with the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) and the Cairo Office of the Ford Foundation.

It represents a component of the commitment by ESCWA to its members to follow up on the outcomes of the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) (Cairo, 5-13 September 1994) and within the general framework of the twenty-first special session of the United Nations General Assembly (New York, 30 June – 2 July 1999) and the plan of action for the Millennium Development Goals.

This report is the first of a series of reports on population and development to be published every biennium with the principal aim of highlighting the strong links between population and development and their economic, social and political impacts at national and regional levels.

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Introduction

At its fifty-fifth session, the General Assembly declared 2003 the International Year of Freshwater to highlight the key role played by freshwater on public health, food production and socio-economic development. Water is such a critical and essential resource for human life that it could ultimately define the limits of sustainable development at both national and global levels. Within the context of sustainable development, freshwater is a particularly pressing issue in the Arab region, which contains a modest 1.1 per cent of global renewable freshwater for a total of 4.6 per cent of the world's population.

Access to safe water is a global concern. While certain innovations can maximize the use of available water, technological advances cannot change the rate at which water is renewed in the global water circulation system. This rate has remained static from the first civilizations that arose in river basins when population growth and distribution were intimately linked to the availability of freshwater. Given the subsequent population explosion since those earliest days of civilization, water has become an increasingly crucial concern, particularly in the Arab region where severe water scarcity has been compounded by one of the fastest-growing populations in the world.¹ Water scarcity is a key dimension of poverty in Arab countries. Moreover, as population pressures in the region increase, the demand for water resources rise, thereby further hampering efforts aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development in the region.

In the Arab region, it is particularly crucial to address the issue of water in the context of ICPD. The Programme of Action that emanated from that Conference presents a policy dialogue and a framework for achieving sustainable development that is socially equitable. Additionally, the Programme promotes a harmonious and dynamic balance between population, natural resources, the environment and development, thereby providing a blueprint for slowing down population growth and improving the quality of life. The links between population growth, widespread poverty, unsustainable use of natural resources and environmental degradation "call for patterns of development that reflect the new understanding of these and other inter-sectoral linkages".²

This report examines the severity of freshwater shortages in the Arab region; the impact of such shortages on the population; and the challenges that Arab countries face in meeting a growing demand for safe water. Within that context, this study explores options and strategies available to Governments in controlling scarce freshwater supplies and in managing demand through conservation and the use of efficient technologies. Additionally, this report investigates demographic trends in the Arab region with the aim of reducing long-term pressure on water by slowing down population growth and by improving the reproductive healthcare of women, which can contribute to equitable sustainable development.

¹ In this study, the Arab region refers to the member countries of the League of Arab States (LAS).

² See the Programme of Action of ICPD, chapter 3, paragraph 3.1