
[New UNEP report calls for reduced mineral resource consumption](#)

A new report released by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), titled “Decoupling natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth” (1), reveals some alarming figures with regard to global consumption of natural resources. If the industrialized countries of the Northern hemisphere maintain current patterns of consumption, and the so-called “emerging” economies of the South continue the current trend of an accelerated increase in consumption, UNEP predicts that by the year 2050, the global consumption of minerals, ores, fossil fuels and biomass will reach 140 billion tons annually, an amount three times greater than today.

With regard to minerals, including those used in construction and industry, consumption could rise from 25 billion tons today to 75 billion tons in 2050. What’s more, high quality sources of certain essential minerals like copper and gold are already becoming scarce, which means they require ever increasing volumes of fossil fuels and freshwater to process, making current patterns of exploitation and consumption even more unsustainable.

To prevent this from happening, the UNEP report advocates “decoupling” the rate of natural resource consumption from the economic growth rate. While some steps have already been taken in this direction, they have been far from sufficient to be able to speak realistically about “green” or low-carbon economies. Decoupling demands “doing more with less”: freezing the consumption of natural resources in the countries of the North, and ensuring that consumption in the “emerging” countries follows other, more sustainable patterns. Currently, the industrialized countries of the North consume four to five times more natural resources per capita than the poor countries.

Of the various scenarios put forward in the report, the one that would lead to the least impact on the environment, but would be the most difficult to achieve from a political point of view, involves a two-thirds reduction in per capita resource consumption in the industrialized countries of the North, and the maintenance of consumption at current rates in other countries. This would result in global rate of consumption of 50 billion tons of natural resources annually in 2050, the same rate of consumption as in 2000. Nevertheless, the report’s authors point out that even this best case scenario would be insufficient, for example, for the purposes of combating climate change. “These scenarios challenge our current thinking and assumptions about development,” they state.

According to the authors, “If investments in developed and developing countries are made today that lock humanity into a business-as-usual or moderately improved resource intensive growth path, the risks of running into ecological and supply constraints will worsen.” In view of this, UNEP plans to focus future reports on ways to make more efficient use of resources and the search for viable alternatives. As this report makes abundantly clear, this is the path that needs to be followed, because the unlimited exploitation of mineral resources simply cannot be sustained.

(1)<http://www.unep.org/resourcepanel/Publications/Decoupling/tabid/56048/Default.aspx>

