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## Promoting GCC Regional Integration: An Environmental Perspective

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## Promoting GCC Regional Integration: An Environmental Perspective

Mohamed Abdelraouf

Promoting environmental integration among the GCC countries may seem to be a peripheral priority in political exchanges, but it is an incentive as well as a tool for nurturing better relations among these countries. It can also pool the efforts and resources of all stakeholders to accelerate the search for solutions to common environmental problems and achieve a better quality of life for the GCC people.

“Regional integration is a process in which states enter into a regional agreement in order to enhance regional cooperation through regional institutions and rules. The objectives of the agreement could range from economic to political and environmental, although it has typically taken the form of a political economy initiative where commercial interests have been the focus for achieving broader socio-political and security objectives, as defined by national governments.”<sup>1</sup>

“Regional integration initiatives, according to Van Langenhove, should fulfill at least eight important functions:

- the strengthening of trade integration in the region
- the creation of an appropriate enabling environment for private sector development

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1. Regional Integration, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional\\_integration](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regional_integration) (accessed April 30, 2014).

- the development of infrastructure programs in support of economic growth and regional integration
- the development of strong public sector institutions and good governance
- the reduction of social exclusion and the development of an inclusive civil society
- contribution to peace and security in the region
- the building of environment programs at the regional level
- the strengthening of the region's interactions with other regions of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

“Geographical proximity is seen as a key factor for regional diffusion. The more proximal the state the higher the probability of adoption; the probability of a state to adopt a policy is positively related to the number of bordering states that have already adopted that policy.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Role and Importance of Environmental Integration

The author proposes the following definition for environmental integration: “an environmental arrangement between two or more countries marked by coordination and/or unifying of environmental policies and positions and achieving joint mega environmental projects/activities as well as elimination of environmental barriers for the benefits of the people of these countries.”

The aim of environmental integration is to pursue a sustainable development policy and thus achieve a better quality of life for the people in different countries.

Effective environmental integration requires a coherent framework of principles to improve environmental protection in these countries. These principles concern:

- The political dialogue with third countries through multilateral environmental treaties
- Cross-cutting issues, trade policy, and environmental governance

On the local level (nationwide), environmental integration means making sure that environmental concerns are fully considered in the decisions and activities of other sectors within a specific economy.

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2. Ibid.

3. Danyel Reichea, “Energy Policies of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries—Possibilities and Limitations of Ecological Modernization in Rentier States,” *Energy Policy* 38, no. 5 (May 2010).

On the regional level, such as in the case of the GCC countries, it concerns common environmental policies, positions, and standards that are adopted by each member state in order to ease and facilitate economic and political integration. In fact, environmental integration in this regard aims at promoting sustainable development since the environmental pillar of sustainability is the basis of sustainable development. Thus, one can say that environmental integration is the first step to achieving sustainable development integration. Sustainable development provides a long-term vision that involves combining a dynamic economy with social cohesion and high environmental standards.

If the countries of the GCC wish to develop an integrated regional space in terms of politics, economy, society, culture, environment, energy and infrastructure that may lead to GCC unity, integration in the environmental field is a prerequisite for very simple reasons:

- All of the previously mentioned areas, from energy to economy and even security and political issues, are influenced by environmental issues and the environment is an integral part of them.
- Environmental issues are a part of sectoral plans, strategies and policies, i.e., energy policy, agriculture policy and so on. This is true within the country and in regional plans and policies.
- The environment is the basis of sustainable development and the shift towards a green economy.

### Benefits of Integration

As a point of departure, there are many benefits of better environmental integration:

- Environmental integration is an opportunity for the countries to deal with common and similar environmental threats and problems.
- Global and regional environmental problems do not recognize borders. The very negative economic and political impacts can only be countered by joint efforts of countries especially geographically neighboring countries.
- Environmental integration is a pre-requisite for economic and political integration and achieving, ultimately, unity.
- By working towards similar legislation, policies, and the same quality of life, states can ease and unify investment processes.

- By achieving the same standards and same quality of services, states can attract investors, citizens, and tourists instead of losing them to other states which offer better quality of services.
- Environmental integration helps to increase efficiency, spread clean technology, and raise the prospects of peace and prosperity.
- Overall economic and social costs will fall while the quality rises.

As a result, the author would like to put forward the following rule: “The greater the environmental integration among countries, the easier and faster is economic and political unity.”

Implementing effective environmental integration means categorizing the process into one of the four following stages depending upon how countries proceed with environmental integration:

- Basic coordination (for common environmental problems, projects, and multilateral negotiations)
- Guidance rules on environmental standards and institutional coordination
- Common environmental policies and regulation, multilateral negotiations (EU)
- Full environmental integration (one position, one policy, central institutional set up, regulation etc.).

The best experience in regional environmental integration perhaps is that pursued and implemented by the European Union. Since the early 1970s, Europe has been firmly committed to the environment. This includes protection of air and water quality, conservation of resources and protection of biodiversity, as well as waste management and control of activities which have an adverse environmental impact. These are just some of the areas in which the EU is active at both the member state level, regionally, and internationally. The European environment policy, based on Article 174 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, aims to ensure the sustainable development of European society.

Areas of cooperation and integration are many and cover several environmental issues such as:

- The Kyoto Protocol of climate change, reduction of greenhouse emissions in energy and transport
- Sustainable development strategies based on the integration of environmental policies

- Waste management including the prevention and recycling of waste such as specific, dangerous, and radioactive waste
- Air pollution issues such as air quality, atmospheric pollutants caused by transport and industry
- Water protection and management involving water usage, marine pollution, inland waters and the discharge of substances
- Protection of nature biodiversity: Biodiversity, flora and fauna, forests, genetically modified organisms
- Soil protection including the management of specific soil types, the discharge of substances, and activities leading to specific risks
- Civil protection measures, their mechanism and financing when involving environmental accidents
- Noise pollution: Noise management and their sources
- Environmental cooperation with third world countries through enlargement processes and international conventions
- Chemical management

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the EU has put in place a program of action that will guide European environment policy until 2020 in order to also give more long-term direction to a vision that sets out where the EU sees itself by 2050. The environment action program to 2020 sets the priorities as shown in the following graph, which addresses broad issues of sustainable living beyond traditional environmental issues of air, water, and soil protection.



Source: EU Environment Action Programme to 2020, <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/newprg/index.htm> (accessed May 5, 2014).

## Common Environmental Issues in GCC Countries

The countries of the Arabian Gulf are characterized by extreme arid climates, sparse natural vegetation, and fragile soil conditions. The GCC countries are mainly desert lands with the exception of the coastal strips and mountain ranges. They face many similar environmental challenges that can be classified into two broad categories – traditional and emerging environmental challenges.

Traditional environmental challenges include the following:

**Land Degradation and Desertification** which continue to be among the most significant environmental problems in the GCC countries. Some countries in the region suffer from almost 100 percent desertification. Major forces driving land degradation are urbanization and industrialization, overgrazing, agriculture, and forest degradation. Land degradation and desertification are linked to a number of challenges including food production, biodiversity loss, deterioration of water resources, and climate change. To combat these effects, it is better to address them through regional policies and programs.

**Biodiversity:** The GCC region has a rich assemblage of fauna and flora inhabiting a wide range of terrestrial habitats. The major factors that impact terrestrial biodiversity include habitat destruction and fragmentation, overgrazing, hunting and trade of wild animals, expansion of agriculture, invasive alien species, and tourism.

**Coastal and Marine Environment:** The diversity of the coastal habitats in the form of benthic deep, shallow sub-tidal and inter-tidal habitats, rocky, sandy and muddy shores have helped to enrich coastal and marine biodiversity. The major causes of coastal pollution in the GCC countries can be summarized as: ship-based pollution, offshore oil leaks and spills as a result of offshore operations, fishermen dumps, municipal wastewater discharge, and industrial discharge (including desalination and cooling water discharge). The marine environment in the GCC countries is very important as a source of food security, energy (fossil fuel), water desalination, as well as for supporting many industries such as pearl trade, travel and tourism, transport, and fishing. In order to protect the marine and coastal environment from environmental threats such as oil spills, land-based sources of pollution as well as challenges from global climate change, a regional Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) policy and program is of utmost importance.

In addition, many fishery species are in severe decline and continued biodiversity conservation can only be achieved through the application of an integrated fishery management approach.

**Water Resources:** The limited availability of freshwater in the Arabian Gulf region has, for decades, presented a significant challenge to the people and the governments of the region. Scarce rainfall together with a high rate of evaporation and consumption leads to deficits in the water budgets of the countries of the Arabian Gulf region. The major causes of increasing water demand include population growth and rapid urbanization, besides wasteful consumption patterns both in the domestic and agricultural sectors. In the GCC countries, physical water scarcity occurs because of the small amounts of annual rainfall. As a result, the region is largely dependent upon unsustainable groundwater abstractions.

The challenges of water scarcity, quality (pollution), depletion of groundwater, access to safe drinking water, sanitation, transboundary water, water and climate change, water distribution and water efficiency all require a regional integrated water resources management (IWRM) system that would allow for solutions to be proposed and implemented.

**Air Pollution:** The GCC countries have witnessed a radical transformation in the last two decades with large-scale urbanization and industrialization. These have increased

the pressures on air quality, adding to naturally high levels of dust. Further, owing to the dominance of the oil and gas sector, the countries are also large contributors to the global emissions of carbon dioxide. The main pressures on urban air quality come from power plants, different industries, and the transport sector.

Emerging and new environmental challenges can be classified as follows:

**Waste Management:** Growing population and high levels of urbanization have increased the demand for urban services in the region, including solid waste management. In addition, owing to acceleration in the pace of industrialization, the generation of hazardous and non-hazardous industrial wastes as well as medical wastes has increased.

In addition, Construction and Demolition debris (C&D) represents a major component of municipal solid waste. The quantity of C&D waste is affected by the rising trend in construction, renovation, demolition of old structures, and reconstruction or expansion of the road transportation network. There is also a need for more recycling which is limited. The only comprehensive form of recycling in the GCC countries has been in the case of paper and cartons, metals, and cans.

**Environmental Threat from the Iranian Nuclear Program:** Iranian nuclear activities have caused much concern in the GCC countries, both from the political and environmental perspectives. The environmental consequences include the potential contamination of water bodies due to natural radioactive pollution and/or radiation leakage caused by shipping accidents.

**Climate Change:** Climate change is one of the main problems facing humanity worldwide with catastrophic negative impacts on all aspects of life and on various living species. Due to their climatic conditions, the GCC countries have a high vulnerability to the projected impacts of climate change. In this regard, joint activities/positions among the GCC countries are very important.

**Energy:** Today, the evolution of different forms of renewable energy technologies (RETs) offers solutions to society's energy needs. Despite rich renewable resources in the GCC countries, the energy sector is characterized by heavy reliance on fossil fuels with adverse impact on air and land resources, besides inconsistent implementation of different policies enforcing energy efficient systems and energy conservation measures and addressing regulatory and financing frameworks that promote clean technologies and influence energy pricing/subsidies.

It is in this context that renewable energy is emerging as one of the viable options for energy diversification in the GCC. With its solar resource endowments

and large desert areas, the GCC can not only meet its domestic energy demand from renewables, but can also become an exporter of renewable energy. There is a clear opportunity for the region to play an important role in the RE sector. Deployment of RE can help establish a local RE industry while creating jobs in local economies that have been struggling with high youth unemployment rates. The GCC countries can join forces in various areas related to RE such as research, investment and technology transfer, and development of RE technologies. Once again, joint policy and projects are very essential in this regard.

### The Way Forward

Overall, while environmental issues have been part of the GCC countries' cooperation agenda, one must admit that political and economic issues continue to receive the most attention.

On the environmental front, the GCC states have taken a number of initiatives. The most important one is the adoption by the Supreme Council, during its sixth session held in Muscat in 1985, of "policies and general principles for the protection of the environment." This is considered the strategic framework for joint environmental action among the GCC countries and the basis for future environmental work. Following the adoption, the GCC issued guidance rules for the environmental field including:

- The decision of the ministers responsible for environmental affairs in the GCC countries in their fourth meeting in April 1994 to agree on a common system for environment impacts assessment for the GCC countries
- The common system for environmental protection, Muscat 1995
- The common system for Environmental Impacts Assessment (EIA) for projects in the GCC countries, Muscat 1995
- In Kuwait, in 1997, the GCC adopted common systems for the protection and development of wildlife, for dealing with radioactive materials, for waste management as well as the adoption of the procedures for coordination among the GCC countries with regard to the transfer of hazardous waste across borders among themselves for the purpose of processing and recycling or disposal.
- A common system for the management of healthcare waste was decided at the Muscat summit meeting in 2001

- The adoption of standards for the environmental specifications of quality of air, water and noise control and their bylaws in Manama 2004
- The issuance of a unified system for the control of substances that deplete the ozone layer in Abu Dhabi in 2005

Other efforts include the establishment of a GCC environmental media and awareness committee as well as numerous GCC environmental conferences and the holding of region-wide environmental weeks. One of the most important recent projects is the GCC Electricity Linkage project.

Since the GCC economies have grown and diversified in the last decade, they face similar environment threats. As economies grow, environmental challenges and issues grow as well. Thus full environmental integration (i.e., on positions, policies, institutions, regulations, and projects) should be viewed as a mandatory step in the right direction. Otherwise, the GCC risks losing what has been achieved and even drawing back on development and quality of life. That is simply because the basis for development is the environment and the region's natural resources are already scarce and under pressure. The best way to sustain what has been achieved and further improve the quality of life is better environmental integration as only through such integration can the GCC shift towards the green economy, the economy of the future.

## Policy Recommendations

Failing to introduce sectoral policy integration, policy mixes, and regional integration will only intensify the current non-sustainable consumption and production patterns, especially for energy, water, food, and marine resources.

Proximate states tend to have similar economic aspects and common social problems that lead to similar policy action effects. In sum, one can make the following recommendations:

- Collaboration between the GCC countries needs to move beyond economics and politics into another realm: environment and renewables.
- Cooperation in the environment and renewables sectors is a win-win situation for the GCC countries and will eventually strengthen economic and political relations.
- It is a must that GCC countries cooperate in environmental issues not only to help the planet become a better place to live in but also to create business opportunities and to help fight problems such as climate change, food crisis, energy crisis, and desertification.

- Specifically, the GCC should promote :
  - o A unified position in multilateral environmental treaty negotiations such as climate change
  - o Joint mega-environmental projects, such as desalination plants, and renewable or awareness campaigns including their corresponding research and development aspects
  - o Unified integrated regional policies for coastal management, fisheries, land degradation, etc.

Despite these many initiatives, the current environmental cooperation and integration is far from what is needed. Many of the required rules and common systems continue to remain at the theoretical level and have not been applied as there is no clear enforcement mechanism in the member countries.

Thus, there is a need for improvements in the organizational structure or institutional setup as well as a need for a regional green economy strategy. An example that could be used as a point of departure is the effort toward the development of a National Green Growth Strategy in the UAE.

Environmental conditions, in addition to corresponding challenges and risks, are almost identical in all of the GCC countries. This, in turn, should lead to common environmental policies or programs. Yet for the moment, most environmental initiatives are characterized by a certain celebratory nature and by the lack of unified institutional work or a coordinated approach to follow up on agreed activities. As a result, joint environmental initiatives rarely go beyond the simple formulation of policies, principles, and meetings where they can be classified as providing a degree of guidance but without any obligation of implementation or being compulsory. If the GCC states are serious about their own sustainability, this level of action is insufficient.

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