

## PRESS RELEASE

### GEF Small Grants Programme Syria

#### Signature Ceremony Brings Five New Environmental Projects to Life

**Damascus- 4 April 2006-** Land, water and energy are the fundamental resources that underpin all Syrians' lives. Transforming practices that have exhausted these vital inputs can make a contribution to the national and international environmental goals Syria aspires to, and this is what the Syrian Small Grants Programme's latest projects work towards. Today these five initiatives, receiving a total of \$226,594 funded by the GEF Small Grants Programme (SGP), have been officially inaugurated with the joint signatures of Syria's United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative, Ali Al-Za'atari, and representatives of the community-based organizations receiving the funds.

The projects reflect the broad range of environmental action that the SGP supports and funds in over one-hundred countries throughout the world. These latest projects in Syria will help in many ways. They will transform the lives of farmers whose land is threatened with catastrophic degradation, educate the Syrian people about environmental challenges, promote alternative sustainable crops and develop non-polluting energy use; all the while supporting the capacity-building of grass-roots organizations that benefit by having ownership of these projects and developing the critical skills necessary to manage funds.

An eloquent example of how the environment and society are intertwined and how solutions to environmental problems are also challenges to shape society comes in the exciting project signed today by Zahret Al Mada'en. Receiving \$28,126, it will establish "place-based education" in Hajar Al-Aswad, Damascus, aiming to involve the local community in the increase, management and protection of green areas and the sustainable maintenance of scarce environmental resources. Zahret Al Mada'en, with the close support of the international NGO Movimondo, will seek to raise environmental awareness through educational and practical

activities based around a new botanic garden that provides a location for learning as well as for sustainable income-generation.

In Khaltan village in the Afrin region of northern Syria, farmers have been facing economic ruin from the threat of land degradation in their sloping olive orchards. Instead of the fate of nearby villages becoming 'ghost-towns', the SGP is providing \$49,418 to assist the community to implement and leverage new technologies. This will be facilitated by cooperation with the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas who has for decades been conducting research about such environmental challenges; such a partnership highlights how SGP support can make available cutting-edge technology and research for the benefit of ordinary farmers and serves as an example across all of Syria. Land degradation is also a challenge for the farmers of Abed village near Deir Ezzor. Polluting diesel pumps for irrigation have been causing air and water pollution that threatens farmers' harvests. Now, with \$49,650 of SGP funding, Abed farmers are pioneering the use of solar power to replace expensive and inefficient diesel, improving incomes and cutting pollution in one stroke.

Agez village is another example of how today's signature ceremony heralds the start of a new dawn for people whose livelihood was threatened by deteriorating natural resources. Agez village will be using its \$49,400 of SGP funding to rehabilitate land that has been overworked, causing a catastrophic decrease in the water table. Participatory resource management and alternative crops, such as medicinal herbs, will be used to address this problem that had seemed to have no solution and is typical of the situation that many of Syria's agriculturalists have been facing. The abiding importance of such projects is the example they provide. A project receiving \$50,000 from the SGP in the protected area of Wadi Deir Mar Musa to develop such knowledge is the final initiative to be signed and officially inaugurated today. Through eco-touristic activities, visitors and the local community will have their beliefs and perceptions of the local and global environment challenged by this eco-centre set in the Qalamoon mountains by the historic Mar Musa Al Habashi (St. Moses the Abyssinian) monastery.

The breadth of projects that the Small Grants Program of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) seeks to address reflects the all-encompassing nature of the environmental challenge facing the world. The Programme was established in Syria in May 2005; it is present globally in almost one hundred countries already. The Programme, implemented in Syria by the United Nations Development Programme, seeks to provide funding at a community or non-governmental level to address the five key focal areas of the GEF: Bio-Diversity Conservation, Renewal Energy and Climate Change, International Waters Protection, Persistent Organic Pollutants reduction and Land Degradation. Through working in a manner that encourages participation and ownership of the projects SGP funds by grass-roots groups, these challenges can be addressed by improving the capacities and sustainability of livelihoods. Today's five new projects are a bold and significant in the right direction for Syria to realize this goal.

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The Small Grants Program (SGP) is a program of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) implemented in Syria by the United Nations Development Programme. The goal of the SGP is to deliver global environmental benefits in the GEF Focal Areas of biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, protection of international waters, prevention of land degradation (primarily desertification and deforestation), and elimination of persistent organic pollutants through community-based approaches. The SGP, working hand in hand with community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations, is a pioneer in Syria due to its grass-roots approach and community-led commitment to development.