The world average declined by 15 percent to 0.21 ha per capita in 2018; the decrease was the largest in Africa (-23 percent, to 0.22 ha per capita), followed by the Americas (-15 percent, to 0.38 ha per capita), Asia (-14 percent, to 0.13 ha per capita), Europe (-8 percent, to 0.39 ha per capita) and Oceania (-5 percent, to 0.81 ha per capita).

Against this backdrop, the increase in agricultural production over the same period (described in Chapter 2) indicates higher efficiency in feeding the population with limited land resources. The countries with the highest cropland area per capita are Kazakhstan, Australia and Canada (see Table 4), due to vast areas of land available over sparsely populated areas. Other reasons for high values include the intense use of agricultural inputs over cropland and dependencies on agricultural imports or food aid.

The development of irrigation is one aspect of agriculture intensification that has allowed total production to grow much faster than the cultivated area. The global land area equipped for irrigation reached 339 million ha in 2018 (see Figure 7), an increase of 17 percent from the 288 million ha of 2000 and more than twice the 1960s irrigated area. The vast majority is located in Asia (70 percent), where irrigation was a key component of the green revolution; the Americas account for 16 percent and Europe for 8 percent of the world total. As shown in Table 5, China (74 million ha) and India (70 million ha) have the largest equipped area for irrigation, far ahead of the United States of America (27 million ha). China and India also have the largest net gains in equipped area between 2000 and 2018 (+20 million ha for China and +10 million ha for India).

All the regions except Europe saw increases in the area equipped for irrigation, with Oceania growing the fastest (+23 percent), followed by Africa (+21 percent) and the Americas (+20 percent).

The share of equipped area for irrigation in agricultural land increased to 7.1 percent in 2018, up 1.1 percentage points compared with 2000 (see Figure 8). It increased in all regions, with the larger gains located in Asia as described above. The higher levels in Asia compared to other regions are due to the development of irrigation infrastructure, which has allowed farmers to increase the yield of crops.