

Revised Operational Guidelines for Ramsar Regional Initiatives

Introductory note

The 12th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP12) instructed the Standing Committee (through Resolution XII.8, paragraph 9) *“to undertake a review of the Operational Guidelines for Regional Initiatives to support the implementation of the Convention, as adopted for 2013-2015 through Standing Committee Decision SC46-28 and published on the Ramsar website, taking into account issues, among others, of governance, capacity, fundraising, and programmatic approach in alignment with the Ramsar Strategic Plan, and adopt the necessary amendments no later than the 52nd meeting of the Standing Committee (SC52);”*

A proposal for revised Operational Guidelines follows below. The aim of the revision is to keep the substance of the Operational Guidelines 2013-2015 and to add missing elements.

For the sake of clarity, and to accommodate cultural differences between initiatives in different parts of the world, the Guidelines focus on fundamental issues of global concern and do not cover local concerns that require locally adapted solutions.

The revised Guidelines:

- group key elements in a coherent way,
- list those fundamental rules that need to be adhered by each initiative, and
- give concise instructions, applicable to all actors involved.

The Operational Guidelines will be used as a practical reference tool to assess the success and progress of work by the Ramsar Regional Initiatives. In order to evaluate the situation of any given initiative, its compliance with each of the numbered guiding principles can be evaluated with a unequivocal “yes” or “no” response.

The leaders of the Ramsar Regional Initiatives are invited to study the proposed Operational Guidelines below and to propose possible improvements prior to the workshop of the leaders of the Regional Initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat on 22 November 2015. This day will provide an opportunity to discuss the proposed revised Operational Guidelines, and to clarify details where needed. With the aim to agree by the end of the day on a consolidated version that will subsequently be submitted to the 52nd meeting of Standing Committee (in 2016) for formal adoption.

Operational Guidelines 2016-2024 for Regional Initiatives in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands

Objectives of Ramsar Regional Initiatives

1. Regional Initiatives formally recognized by the Ramsar Convention are operational means to provide support for the effective implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan 2016-2024. Ramsar Regional Initiatives raise the visibility of the Convention through international cooperation on issues of common, often transboundary, concern.
2. Ramsar Regional Initiatives provide lasting structural and operational support to facilitate and advance the implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan. This requires the active involvement by all Contracting Parties in the regions concerned. For each Strategic Plan period, national support to the common work programme of a Ramsar Regional Initiative is confirmed through formal letters addressed by the Ramsar Administrative Authorities to the Ramsar Secretariat, confirming their active participation.

Work programme of Regional Initiatives

3. The work programme of each Ramsar Regional Initiative federates all relevant national and regional stakeholders to achieve together significant results for the implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan. Active participation in Regional Initiatives is not restricted to Ramsar Administrative Authorities or national focal points, but needs to include as active members *inter alia* representatives of other Ministries, Ramsar International Organisation Partners (IOPs), other non-governmental and civil society organisations (NGOs/CSOs), academia, local communities, and economic actors from the private sector.
4. Ramsar Regional Initiatives collaborate with intergovernmental or international partners that operate in their region, notably regional conventions, commissions or ministerial councils, to elaborate complementary and non-duplicative activities and work programmes, and to establish common funding schemes.
5. The work programme of each Ramsar Regional Initiative is aligned to the Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024 and focuses on the achievement of those targets that are most relevant for the region concerned.
6. Ramsar Regional Initiatives make optimal use of existing Ramsar tools (notably Resolutions and their technical annexes, handbooks, guidelines, methods, etc.). The Regional Initiatives establish regular contacts with the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP), its national focal points and other experts in the region, in order to obtain best available scientific and technical advice, and to feed regional experience back to the global work of STRP.
7. The work programme of Ramsar Regional Initiatives raises the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and the general awareness on the objectives of its Strategic Plan. The work programme includes specific activities in the fields of awareness raising, communication, education and participatory processes with relevant stakeholders (CEPA). Regional Initiatives seek advice from and report the outcomes of their activities to the Ramsar CEPA Oversight Panel.

Governance of Regional Initiatives

8. Ramsar Regional Initiatives establish their own governance and advisory mechanisms in order to provide coordination, guidance and insight in a transparent way and assure public accountability to all stakeholders. This implies the establishment of a governance body for each initiative with equitable representation of the participating Contracting Parties and other relevant stakeholder groups. The governance body oversees guides and controls the operations of the initiative in an independent way and reports publicly to all members of the initiative.
9. A senior member of the Ramsar Secretariat participates in the work of the governance body of each Regional Initiative to maintain regular links, to provide advice, and to monitor the alignment of the initiative's work programme with the targets of Ramsar's Strategic Plan.
10. The governance and coordination structures of Ramsar Regional Initiatives are laid down in a set of operational procedures, based on commonly agreed, written terms of reference, rules of procedure, or operational guidance. These procedural rules are made public and shared with the Ramsar Secretariat.

Funding of Regional Initiatives

11. Ramsar Regional Initiatives receive institutional support from all participating Contracting Parties. They receive financial support for their operations from Contracting Parties and other donors, including through specific project or programme financing.
12. New Ramsar Regional Initiatives are only launched once funding for a fixed start-up phase and its programme of work has been secured.
13. Ramsar Regional Initiatives generate their own resources and become financially self-sufficient after an initial start-up phase. In the longer term, they obtain equitably spread financial support by all Parties concerned and other donors, in order to provide a stable financial base.
14. The COP established a Ramsar core budget line to provide start-up funding for Ramsar Regional Initiatives that require so during a limited period of time. The Standing Committee is tasked to make annual allocations of these funds to initiatives who request such funding, who fulfil the Operational Guidelines, and are considered most in need of such short-term financial support.
15. The Ramsar Secretariat assists Regional Initiatives to the best of its availability with the mobilization of additional financial resources where needed.

The legal status of Regional Initiatives

16. Ramsar Regional Initiatives consist either of physically established centres that operate a regional programme for training and capacity-building, or of international networks for regional cooperation without a physical centre, or a combination of both.
17. Regional Initiatives are not part of the Ramsar Secretariat. They do not fulfil any of the specific roles of the Secretariat, or of any national authority or organisation which may provide support or hosting facilities to them. In order to fully comply with the Operational

Guidelines, Ramsar Regional Initiatives establish their own legal entity which clarifies their independence, status and role.

18. To operate in accordance with the Guidelines, a legal status according to suitable provisions in the national law of a hosting country is satisfactory. However, in the longer term, Ramsar Regional Initiatives endeavour to obtain an international legal status. The Ramsar Secretariat provides support to the best of its abilities.
19. When a Ramsar Regional Initiative is hosted by a national or international institution, a hosting agreement recognizes the specific legal status of the initiative and its operational independence from the hosting institution.

Developing the capacity of Regional Initiatives

20. Ramsar Regional Initiatives describe themselves as an operational structure that acts for a more effective implementation of the Convention and for the achievement of relevant targets of the Strategic Plan in the region concerned. Ramsar Regional Initiatives have their own visual identity, to avoid confusion with the roles of the Ramsar Secretariat, national Ramsar Administrative Authorities, or possible hosting institutions. They adopt a specific logo and use it in combination with the Ramsar logo. They maintain a regularly updated website as a public source of relevant information.
21. Each Ramsar Regional Initiative has its own financial accounting and reporting system, supervised by its governance body, in order to be able to operate, receive funds, and conduct specific projects.
22. Each Ramsar Regional Initiative has specifically dedicated staff to coordinate its programme and to provide support to specific activities or to its governing and advisory bodies. Professional staff is either hired through the legal entity of the initiative, or may be seconded by other institutions. Both situations are governed by written contracts.
23. Ramsar Regional Initiatives seek sustainable long-term funding from reliable resources. Initiatives that receive financial support from the Ramsar core budget, use part of this support to find long-term funding from other sources, particularly if they receive Ramsar core budget support for more than one period between two COPs.
24. A newly established Ramsar Regional Initiative may request start-up funding from the Ramsar core budget for a limited time to cover part of its operational costs. The Standing Committee determines on an annual basis the levels of such funding to specific initiatives for the operational costs during the year under consideration.

Annual reporting by Regional Initiatives and endorsement by the Standing Committee

25. The Ramsar Secretariat maintains regular contacts with Regional Initiatives and receives relevant documents on their structure and operations, in order to allow an assessment of their compliance with the Operational Guidelines.
26. Ramsar Regional Initiatives report annually, through the Ramsar Secretariat, to the Standing Committee, on their progress and operations and submit annual work plans according to the timetable and format adopted by the Standing Committee.

27. Regional Initiatives that meet the Operational Guidelines are endorsed by Standing Committee as operating in the framework of the Ramsar Convention, for the period between two meetings of the COP. After each meeting of the COP, a new endorsement is needed.
28. The COP or Standing Committee tasks the Secretariat periodically to undertake specific reviews on the operations and effectiveness of Ramsar Regional Initiatives. The initiatives respond to such enquiries in a transparent way and provide all requested information in time for the needed reporting back.

Cooperation between the Ramsar Secretariat and Regional Initiatives

29. The Ramsar Secretariat cooperates to the best of its ability with each of the Regional Initiatives. This is based on the principle of complementary work, i.e. that Regional Initiatives provide additional capacities to cover gaps which the Secretariat is not able to cover.
30. The Secretariat invites contributions and comments from all Ramsar Regional Initiatives when proposing new programmes and activities, as part of a common endeavour. This concerns also the circulation of key policy, programmatic and technical or scientific documents, including those produced by the STRP, and those in preparation for meetings of the Standing Committee and the COP.
31. The Secretariat communications team engages the Ramsar Regional Initiatives in its programme of work and specific campaigns, including for World Wetlands Day, from the inception phase. This assures that the Ramsar message is spread consistently throughout the world.
32. The Ramsar Secretariat reports annually to Standing Committee on the work of the Regional Initiatives and on its cooperation with each of them, including information submitted by each initiative according to the annual reporting format adopted by Standing Committee.
33. When preparing meetings of the COP, the Ramsar Secretariat consults with the Regional Initiatives about their intentions and needs to hold events linked to the COP, in order that such logistical needs can be included in the Memorandum of Understanding to be signed with the COP host country.