

## Report of the Secretary General

### Actions requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the report of the Secretary General.

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from the 53rd meeting of the Standing Committee (date report: March 2017) through end of January 2018. The papers prepared for the 54th meeting (SC54) address various areas of the Secretariat's work. This report provides both an overview and selected highlights of the work completed during this period.
2. The Secretariat continues its commitment to strengthen its work to effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee, and to support Parties to implement the Strategic Plan of the Convention. Main areas of work are described below.

### Strengthening service to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability

3. Improving the delivery of the Secretariat's core role of servicing Contracting Parties continued to be a priority during the reporting period. This includes the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies, and accountability and responsiveness in the work of the Secretariat to implement decisions and requests from Contracting Parties.
4. A main highlight was the organization of the 53rd meeting of the Standing Committee, including associated meetings of its working groups, which took place from 29 May to 2 June 2017 in Gland, Switzerland. The meeting was attended by 103 participants, with representatives from 50 Contracting Parties, one non-party state and 14 observer organizations. The Secretariat prepared the documents for the meeting, supported the work of the Committee's working groups in advance of and at the meeting, organized logistical aspects, and prepared daily reports and the final report of the meeting. The Secretariat team worked in a coordinated manner with clear roles and responsibilities to support the meeting. Participants expressed satisfaction with the organization and running of the meeting.
5. As follow-up to SC53, the Secretariat has provided support in implementing its decisions. An important activity has been to support several working groups that were given specific tasks by SC53. In particular, the Secretariat has provided considerable assistance to the Facilitation Working Group (FWG), to support the group in its task to review the effectiveness of the Convention's governance. Secretariat support was also provided to the Standing Committee's Working Group on Language Strategy in preparing a proposal for the Committee's consideration, the Independent Advisory Committee established to review the nominations for the Wetland City Accreditation scheme (see Document SC54-28.1 *Wetland City Accreditation*:

*Report of the Secretariat*), and the CEPA Oversight Panel and its work to provide recommendations on the governance of CEPA.

6. The Secretariat organized the 21st meeting of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP21) held in Gland, Switzerland, from 15 to 19 January 2018. 16 STRP members and 20 observers attended, including STRP National Focal Points from Austria, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Oman, Senegal and the United Kingdom. The primary focus of the meeting was on assessing progress with the delivery of the 2016-2018 work plan and outlining an approach for completion of tasks before the end of the triennium (see Document SC54-22 *Report of the Chair of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel* for further details on each of the high priority tasks). Key outcomes included advancing the STRP tasks, finalizing scientific and technical draft resolutions for the 13th meeting of the Conference of Contracting Parties (COP13), and establishing priorities on scientific and technical aspects of the Convention for 2019-2021.
7. An important area of the Secretariat's work in support of the STRP was the facilitation of preparatory work for the high priority tasks, working closely with the Chair, most notably:
  - Global Wetland Outlook: State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People: the Secretariat identified and hired a professional editor and advised on communications aspects and policy relevance of the report; organized a writing workshop involving the main authors and the editor (20-22 September 2017) to review the First Order Draft; and supported the preparation of the Second Order Draft which was then peer-reviewed and discussed during STRP21. The Global Wetland Outlook will be released in late 2018 prior to COP13;
  - Policy Briefs: the Secretariat prepared the Terms of Reference and oversaw the production, editing, translation and dissemination of the Policy Brief *Wetlands for Disaster Risk Reduction, Effective Choices for Resilient Communities* which was drafted by Wetlands International. This Policy Brief was launched with Wetlands International, the Partnership for Environment and Disaster Risk Reduction (PEDRR), and the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) during the International Day for Disaster Reduction (13 October 2017). The Secretariat also supported, published and disseminated the Policy Brief *Integrating multiple wetland values into decision-making*, launched jointly with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) on 19 September 2017;
  - The Secretariat published an online Ramsar Sites Management Toolkit (<https://www.ramsar.org/resources/ramsar-sites-management-toolkit>);
  - It also coordinated consultancies and external reviews for various drafts related to STRP high priority tasks, including an independent review and analysis of the organization of Ramsar Advisory Missions as well as an update of the WET Index by UNEP-WCMC.

Overall, the results of this area of work were positive and the Chair of the STRP commended at the Panel's 21st meeting the support that the Secretariat had provided in its work, noting that the Panel had received more support from the Secretariat during this year than before.

8. The Secretariat has been actively preparing the meetings of the bodies of the Convention scheduled for 2018. Preparatory work has been underway for the organization of the 54th meeting of the Standing Committee to be held on 23-27 April 2018 in Gland, Switzerland. Key

tasks included document preparation, logistical arrangements and development of guidance and process for the submission of draft resolutions (DRs) from Contracting Parties for subsequent presentation at COP13, and logistical arrangements.

9. In preparation for COP13, the Secretariat continued to liaise with the United Arab Emirates, as the host country for the meeting, to be held from 21 to 29 October 2018. A memorandum of understanding was signed in January and the Secretariat is following up with the host on various aspects of the meeting (see Document SC54-18.1 *Preparation of the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Parties: Report of the Secretariat*).
10. The Secretariat is also organizing five regional pre-COP meetings, scheduled for February through March as follows:
  - Africa Region (26 February – 2 March) Dakar / Senegal
  - Asia Region (26 February – 2 March) Colombo / Sri Lanka
  - Americas Region (12 – 16 March) San Jose / Costa Rica
  - Oceania Region (12 – 16 March) Auckland / New Zealand
  - Europe Region (19 – 23 March) Olomouc / Czech Republic
11. Contracting Parties consider these meetings as valuable fora to comment on the DRs that will be discussed by SC54 and COP13, to provide an opportunity for Parties to share experiences in implementation of the Convention at the regional level, to raise issues of mutual interest and to hold preliminary discussions about the election of regional representatives to the Standing Committee.
12. The Secretariat has put considerable efforts to enhance its performance in strengthening services to Contracting Parties' decision-making and accountability. Additional capabilities and experience are being strengthened with the recruitment of the Deputy Secretary General, ongoing recruitment of a Conference Assistant (filling A3 vacancy) and prioritization of this area of work in the Secretariat's Work Plan (see Document SC54-12 *Work plan of the Secretariat for 2018 and proposed format for 2019-2021*). Detailed guidance has been provided to the Secretariat and planning sessions have been held with all staff in advance of the main meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies to strengthen capacities and coordination. However, the effective delivery of this core function is challenged by various factors that the Secretariat has brought to the attention of the FWG and that it considers important to share with the SC54:
  - There is an inconsistency in the deadlines for submission of documents for meetings of the Standing Committee, such that the deadline for submission of draft resolutions is a month after the deadline for publication of documents to be considered by the Committee.
  - A considerable number of meetings are taking place in 2018, namely STRP21, five regional pre-COP meetings scheduled in February and March, SC54 from 23 to 27 April, and COP13 from 21 to 29 October. This is a result of the above timeline, the date of the COP in October and the expectation that DRs be considered in all these meetings, even if the rules of procedure only refer to consideration by the SC.
13. This puts a very heavy workload on the Secretariat in terms of preparation of documents and meeting organization, but also, in terms of fundraising, as it has to fundraise for five regional pre-COPs and the COP in the same year. The Secretariat has raised with the FWG the need to review the sequence of meetings and timelines for submission of papers and DRs to enable the Secretariat to deliver efficiently on the Parties' expectations. Other options suggested, drawn

from the operations of other conventions, include: having SC meetings only in the years in which the COP does not meet; and holding regional meetings immediately before the COP and leaving the option of other regional meetings, for example to share experience in implementation, for interested hosts to organize, including in the context of regional initiatives. The Secretariat welcomes the work of the FWG in this regard and looks forward to SC54's consideration of ways to address these challenges so that the Convention can improve its effectiveness and to enable the Secretariat to deliver on this function in an efficient way.

#### **Increasing relevance of wetlands and the Convention to global sustainable development policy objectives**

14. The Secretariat continued to strengthen its work in supporting international cooperation and enhancing the relevance of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. The Secretariat capacity was strengthened with the recruitment of a Director of Science and Policy. Given that the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are driving national and international planning and funding efforts, attention continues to be given to ensure that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks. The Secretariat has thus continued its engagement in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including with regard to SDG indicator 6.6.1 (on change in extent of water-related ecosystems), as requested in Decision SC53-17. It participated in the 6th meeting of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG-SDGs) in Manama, Bahrain (11-14 November 2017) and continued its engagement in the work of the target team on indicator 6.6.1 led by UN Environment. The Secretariat also participated in the global workshop for integrated monitoring of SDG 6 on water and sanitation, organized by UN-Water Technical Advisory Unit and eight United Nations agencies in The Hague, the Netherlands (21–23 November 2017). The aim has been to ensure that the process for monitoring achievement of the SDGs, especially on water-related ecosystems, takes account of Contracting Parties' commitment to reporting on the extent of wetlands. An important development is that, because of this work, the IAEG-SDG in a WebEx meeting on 28 November 2017 decided that the Ramsar Convention should become a co-custodian for this indicator and requested that the Ramsar Secretariat and UN Environment jointly work on the review of the methodology for the indicator to be presented to its meeting in March 2018.
15. The Secretariat has also been active in supporting the achievement of SDG 14 (*Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*). The Secretariat participated in the first UN Ocean Conference (New York, 5-9 June 2017) in which the Secretary General moderated the Partnership Dialogue on Coastal and Marine Ecosystems, and served as a panellist at two side events, participated in a press conference on the Partnership Dialogue, and delivered a statement to the plenary of the Ocean Conference in the UN General Assembly Hall emphasising the important role of the Convention to help achieve SDG 14. As a follow up, the Secretary General was invited to act as the focal point on the "Community of Ocean Action on Mangroves", which is one of nine communities established by the UN Secretary General Special Envoy for Oceans, Ambassador Thomson. The Community will mobilize and expand the implementation of more than 1,300 commitments made at the Ocean Conference, including through the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.
16. The Secretariat has also been active in supporting SDG 15 (*Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss*). The Ramsar Secretariat continued to strengthen collaboration with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), through the identification of strategic areas of joint work and providing inputs to different

processes, such as the follow-up to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. The Secretariat is also collaborating with UNEP-WCMC to ensure that Ramsar Sites are included in the World Protected Areas Database, which provides the information for SDG indicator 15.1.2.

17. The Secretariat has continued to participate actively in the Biodiversity Liaison Group (BLG), in particular through the Secretary General's attendance at the 12th Ordinary Meeting of the BLG (28 September 2017), in which a major focus was how to increase the visibility and relevance of biodiversity. Heads of biodiversity-related conventions agreed to work together towards the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) meeting to take place on 9-18 July 2018, in which SDG 15 on biodiversity and SDG 6 on water will be reviewed.
18. Given the critical role played by wetlands in climate change mitigation and adaptation, the Secretariat has engaged in the climate change agenda. In particular, the Secretariat participated in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) COP23 in Bonn (6 - 17 November 2017) with a main focus on peatlands, water and coastal and marine ecosystems. As a founding member of the Global Peatlands Initiative, coordinated by UN Environment, the Secretariat was involved in the preparation, launch and follow-up of the rapid response assessment *Smoke on Water – countering global threats from peatland loss and degradation* published at the occasion of UNFCCC COP23, as well as in events on water and other relevant issues.
19. The Secretariat engaged actively at the third session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-3) in Nairobi (4-6 December 2017), emphasizing the role of wetlands in pollution control and water purification, and more broadly, their contribution to achieving SDG 6. The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and its fourth Strategic Plan 2016-2024 are mentioned in the resolutions on "Addressing water pollution to protect and restore water-related ecosystems" and on "Pollution mitigation by mainstreaming biodiversity into key sectors". The Secretary General made interventions at the Leadership Dialogue on practical solutions for a pollution free planet, at a high-level panel discussion on the protection of coral reefs and mangroves, and at an event on gender and environment, notably speaking at the launch of the International Gender Champions. The Secretary General delivered a plenary statement "Wetlands - a sustainable solution for water purification and security" and participated in a meeting with the heads of the Secretariats of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) on an integrated approach to delivery on the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs.
20. During the reporting period, the Secretariat also sought to strengthen its relationship with the Geneva-based missions and UN agencies. On 21 June 2017, the Secretary General presented an Executive Briefing to the Permanent Missions at the United Nations Office in Geneva on "The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands towards the Sustainable Development Goals", hosted by the Director of the UN Office of Geneva (UNOG).
21. Other highlights include:
  - Participation in the 13th session of the Committee on Science and Technology of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Ordos, China, 6 - 9 September 2017, including a presentation at the IBPES Progress Briefing on the Comprehensive Assessment of Land Degradation and Restoration. Discussions with UNCCD Secretariat are ongoing on opportunities for collaboration.

- Participation in the Stockholm Water Week (24 – 31 August 2017) and UN-Water Senior Program Managers meeting held at the margins; and input to the World Water Development Report 2018 focused on “Nature and Water” to be launched in March 2018.
  - Participation in the COP of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) held on 23-28 October 2017, where the Secretariat was represented on the High Level Panel discussion on “Pollution and Wildlife” and in three side events.
  - Strengthened collaboration with IPBES, including participation in the fifth plenary session of IPBES in Bonn, from 7 to 10 March 2017; and coordinated input to the IPBES Global Biodiversity and Regional Assessments.
  - Contribution to other assessments, in particular GEO-6 (Freshwater Chapter) and engagement of the STRP in the call for reviewers of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) first order draft of the 2019 Refinement to the 2006 IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories.
  - Collaboration with the Secretariat of the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement (AEWA) as a member of the Steering Committee of the project “Renforcement d’Expertise au Sud du Sahara sur les Oiseaux et leur Utilisation Rationnelle en faveur des Communautés et de leur Environnement” of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).
  - More detailed information on the Secretariat’s efforts to increase visibility and synergies with MEAs and other institutions can be found in Document SC54-14 on *Enhancing the Convention’s visibility and synergies with other Multilateral Environmental Agreements and other institutions*.
22. In fulfilment of its mandate, the Secretariat has enhanced its engagement with relevant MEAs and United Nations processes. However, a major challenge during the reporting period was that the Secretariat was denied the right to participate, on behalf of the Convention, in the UN HLPF meeting in July 2017, which reviews the implementation of the SDGs and the broader 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as it does not have observer status in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), nor in the UN Economic and Social Council, which is the UN platform for debate on sustainable development. The Secretariat informed the Executive Team and Chairs of the FWG and, with the legal adviser, provided support to the Chair of the Standing Committee for a request to the General Assembly for observer status. The request was deferred until the 73rd UNGA session. The Secretariat looks forward to the SC54 consideration of this matter, as having access to relevant UN events and processes is critical for its work in fulfilling the instructions of the Contracting Parties, in particular to enhance the relevance of wetlands and of the Convention in future meetings of the HLPF and relevant UN meetings, including the session of the HLPF in July 2018 in which SDGs 15 and 6 will be reviewed. A report on this issue is provided in Document SC54-15 *Observer status in the United Nations General Assembly*.

### **Strengthening support and enabling implementation**

23. Since the previous Secretary General report to SC53, the Secretariat has provided support in the designation for 42 Ramsar Sites and the update of information for 122 existing Ramsar Sites, including support in data compilation in the Ramsar Sites Information System (RSIS), publication and translations. The Secretariat supported Contracting Parties with seven Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs): Indonesia (Berkah National Park), Italy (Laguna di Venezia: Valle Averte jointly

with World Heritage Centre), Norway (Nordre Tyrifjord Wetland System), Senegal (Réserve Spéciale de Faune de Ndiaël), United Arab Emirates (Ras Al Khor), the United Republic of Tanzania (Kilombero Valley Floodplain), and Iraq and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Hawizeh Marsh, Central Marsh and Hammar Marsh). SC53 approved funds for RAMs that include Nicaragua (Bluefield Ramsar Site and Corn Island), Côte d'Ivoire (Grand Bassam Ramsar Site), and Uganda (Murchison Falls-Albert Delta Wetland System Ramsar Site, and Lake George Ramsar Site) that will take place in 2018.

24. As mentioned in the report to the SC53, the Secretariat prioritized the completion of data in the RSIS. By end of 2017, the data completion was finalized for 1,095 Ramsar Sites and all data from the old database migrated to the new RSIS platform.
25. The Secretariat continues its efforts to strengthen its “enabling” role (vis-à-vis direct support to individual Contracting Parties), to use its limited capacities and resources in a more efficient and strategic way. Regarding capacity building, the Secretariat introduced internet-based approaches and in particular the use of webinars. Four sessions were organized to provide training on the use of RSIS with 53 attendees from 23 Contracting Parties. In order to support Contracting Parties in the preparation of National Reports and to progress reporting on “wetland extent” as a contribution to SDG 6.6.1, the Secretariat developed a tutorial for the National Reports Online Reporting System and guidelines on information to be provided in Target 8 “National Wetlands Inventory” and in particular on “wetland extent”. This tutorial was delivered via webinars and skype calls. Another area in which capacities were strengthened include the use of earth observation tools for wetland mapping and inventory (GlobWetland Africa Toolbox). Efforts are underway to put in place a more coordinated approach to capacity building across the regions, including by adjusting the job description of the Regional Officer position based in Gland to coordinate capacity building with a primary focus on Africa. The proposed whole-of-Secretariat approach includes the identification of needs and priority areas in which capacities are needed, development and use of common approaches, materials and tools (such as the use of webinars), development of partnerships for capacity building, and monitoring of outcomes.
26. In the context of furthering its enabling role, the Secretariat continues to support Regional Initiatives (see Document SC54-20.1 *Ramsar Regional Initiatives: Update for 2018*) and engage in strategic partnerships. The Secretariat renewed its partnership with Danone for three years. This partnership extension provides resources for World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Awards, as well as for other activities to increase visibility and awareness of wetlands and the Convention. The partnership also provides for collaboration towards sustainable watershed management and climate change with validated tools and methodologies. Given the shift in Danone’s priorities, we expect that starting 2019 the Secretariat will need to raise additional funds for World Wetlands Day and for the Ramsar Awards. The Danone partnership continues to open doors to new opportunities such as potential collaboration with the Livelihoods Fund and the CEO Water Mandate. The Star Alliance partnership with both the Convention and IUCN was terminated in 2017 due to a change in management priorities at Star Alliance. As discussed in SC53, the MAVA project is coming to an end in March 2018 (see Document SC54-11.3 on *The MAVA project*). The Secretariat has reviewed the existing partnerships for which Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) have been signed to take a more strategic approach to our collaboration with key stakeholders (see Document SC54-16 *Review of current and proposed cooperative agreements*).
27. Regarding resource mobilization, a major highlight in the reporting period was the recruitment of the Director of Resource Mobilization and Outreach. A first important step is the

development of a Resource Mobilization Strategy as requested in Decision SC52-23 (see Document SC54-17 *Ramsar Convention Resource Mobilization Work Plan*). This will enable a more strategic approach for this important area of work of the Secretariat.

28. While the above strategy is developed, the Secretariat had continued its fundraising efforts. During 2017 CHF 422,000 in non-core resources have been mobilized to support the priorities established by the COP in Resolution XII.7 Annex 3. At the close of the 2017 fiscal year CHF 81,000 was secured for RAMs and CHF 45,000 for delegate support to participate in pre-COP regional meetings.
29. The Secretariat also provided support to Contracting Parties in their fundraising efforts. In particular, in Africa, it assisted Gabon to develop a GEF-funded project entitled “Project on Sustainable Management of Critical Wetland Ecosystems” for US\$7.521 million and is currently assisting Benin, Guinea and Burkina Faso to develop wetland projects to be submitted to the Green Climate Fund. In the Americas, fundraising has been focused on the priorities identified by Contracting Parties, namely, the Regional Initiatives. The Secretariat and Contracting Parties are looking for donors for La Plata River Basin and Mangroves and Coral Reefs Regional Initiatives. The Regional Initiative for High Andean Wetlands with the support of the Secretariat and FAO is in the process of a submission to the GEF.

### **Enhancing the visibility of wetlands and the Convention**

30. Visibility for wetlands and the Convention are being raised through communications outreach efforts. The Secretariat continues information sharing among the stakeholders of the Convention and increasing public awareness about wetland services and benefits through the Ramsar website, social media, newsletter, a broad range of e-lists and outreach campaigns such as World Wetlands Day. Since last reported on 1 March 2017 (SC53), the website was visited by nearly half million users. 140 news stories were published on the website. On average, all Ramsar social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) have seen a 30% increase in engagement over the past year. The Ramsar Newsletter, disseminated every 3-4 months, is now a well-established means of communications between the Secretariat and Contracting Parties. Three newsletters are planned for distribution prior to COP13. Wetlands relevant publications, training opportunities and educational materials were shared with the CEPA networks. The Secretariat produced seven short videos about wetlands benefits in the three official languages of the Convention. These are the most popular videos on Ramsar social media, having generated 25,000 views.
31. Communications outreach activities were undertaken in support of the Secretariat’s participation in various global fora and events, including the first UN Ocean Conference, the CMS COP12, the UNFCCC COP23 and the third UN Environment Assembly (UNEA3). Thanks to the Secretariat’s presence in these international conferences, including engagement in more than 20 high profile events, key communications messages on the Ramsar Convention and the role of wetlands in climate change adaptation and mitigation (including water security, carbon sequestration, disaster risk reduction) as well as in pollution abatement, reached more than 100,000 people worldwide via social media.
32. These communications efforts have been part of the Secretariat’s implementation of the CEPA Action Plan. The Secretariat assessed the status of implementation of the Plan, and reviewed expected outcomes in line with its capacity and taking a whole-of-Secretariat approach. The Secretariat integrated the Plan’s outcomes into its triennial and annual work plans to align and



streamline its work (see Document SC54-12 *Work plan of the Secretariat for 2018 and proposed format for 2019-2021*).

33. “Wetlands for a Sustainable Urban Future” the theme for COP 13, was approved as the theme to celebrate World Wetlands Day in 2018. In order to support outreach activities from Contracting Parties and partners, the Secretariat developed a series of information and outreach materials, including an animated video available in the three languages of the Convention, made available via the World Wetlands Day website. A social media campaign was executed to promote key world Wetlands Day messages. Staff from the Secretariat joined country celebrations, with the Secretary General visiting the People's Republic of China. An online map of events was made available to register country events and capture the growing global reach of the celebration of the day. More than 1,400 events have been registered on the map at the time of writing of this paper. UN Habitat, WWF, the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT) and ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability are the key partners for the 2018 edition of World Wetlands Day. The Danone Group provided the funding to develop the informational materials.

### **Strengthening the Secretariat’s efficiency and effectiveness**

34. The guiding objective of this past year has been to “organize to deliver” on the Strategic Plan of the Convention and the mandate of the Contracting Parties, and to use in the most efficient way the limited resources of the Convention and the capacities of the Secretariat. Capacity gaps have been filled in the two areas identified in the report to SC53, namely the core function of supporting the governing and subsidiary bodies and the linkage with relevant policy processes through policy-relevant science.
35. Improving financial management continued to be a priority, following up on the Secretariat report of its findings and recommendations presented to SC53. The improvements made in this area were validated by the external auditors. The Secretariat has strengthened compliance with IUCN policies and procedures where applicable, with related processes and procedures having been put in place in 2017 or being put in place in 2018. Capacities have been built in this regard and performance objectives included in management positions. As mandated by SC53, a management review of non-core funds is being conducted. The Secretariat asked the IUCN Head of Oversight Unit to conduct the review, and results will be shared with Contracting Parties. Further information is contained in the documents for SC54 on financial matters and on outstanding contributions (Documents SC54-7.1 *Report on financial matters for 2016-2018* and SC54-7.2 *Status of annual contributions*).
36. A professionally facilitated Planning Workshop for the Secretariat was conducted from 20 to 22 November 2017, building on the results of the first workshop held in January 2017. This workshop focused on: the review of the triennial and annual work plans based on the approved integrated framework (see Document SC54-12 *Work plan of the Secretariat for 2018 and proposed format for 2019-2021*); promoting cohesion and clarity of role, identity and accountabilities of the team; principles to guide how the Secretariat works; and changes needed to better serve Contracting Parties and deliver on the Secretariat’s mandate. The Secretariat also reviewed lessons learned in the implementation of the Work Plan and developed a proposed new framework for the next triennium that could better serve as a planning and monitoring tool.
37. Regarding staff positions, the transition due to retirement of the Executive Assistant has been smoothly handled with the direct appointment of one existing Administrative Assistant in the role and some adjustments in the functions of remaining Administrative Assistants. The vacant

Administrative Assistant position was revised to focus on Conference Services to strengthen the core function of serving the governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention. This position is currently being recruited.

38. Staff development needs of the Secretariat were assessed through an internal survey. Training priorities were identified and a training plan was designed with activities organised starting on the 4th quarter of 2017. The following training activities took place: one day executive communications skills training for Senior Management Team members; one day open communication skills for all other staff members (14 participants attended); a training session on finance for all staff. Other activities were identified for 2018.
39. Considerable progress has been made in strengthening the Secretariat's efficiency and effectiveness, and in filling gaps in its capabilities. The team has worked hard in this regard with encouraging results in key areas of work of the Secretariat as described in this report. However, further work is still needed. Moving towards a whole-of-Secretariat approach has presented challenges as this requires significant changes in ways of working and organizational culture within the Secretariat and in its engagement with Contracting Parties. The Secretariat is developing Standard Operating Procedures which will contribute to making further progress. Other areas for further work include: streamlining work planning process and links to individual performance plans; developing more coherent and coordinated approaches across regions to get efficiencies and better serve Contracting Parties; balancing enhanced accountability for implementation of the decisions taken by the COP and SC with the service provided to Contracting Parties in each region; balance between regional and thematic approaches ; further strengthening accountability to financial standards and operational procedures; and continuing to build capacities and skills in core functional areas of the Secretariat's work.