

Regional initiatives in the framework of the Ramsar Convention

Action requested: The Standing Committee is invited to take note of this assessment of the success of the regional initiatives, which was requested by Decision SC42-20, and to review the attached Draft Resolution, intended to guide the further work of the regional initiatives, for consideration by the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

Introduction

1. In 1999, the 7th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP7) adopted a framework of guidelines for international cooperation under the Ramsar Convention (Resolution VII.19). It recognized the Mediterranean Wetlands Initiative (MedWet), originally launched in 1991, as a model of regional cooperation, based on endogenous efforts and a wide participation of all sectors (Resolution VII.22), and it encouraged the Government of Panama to implement its plans to establish a regional Ramsar centre for training and research on wetlands in the Western Hemisphere (Resolution VII.26).
2. These Resolutions formally launched the process of regional cooperation under the Convention. The first two models, of a network for regional cooperation and a centre for regional training and capacity building, rapidly inspired the development of other regional initiatives. In response, in 2002 COP8 adopted guidance for the development of regional initiatives in the framework of the Convention (Resolution VIII.30) and included in the Ramsar core budget a funding line for operational start-up support to regional networks or centres (Resolution VIII.27).
3. Resolution IX.7 (2005) and Resolution X.6 (2008) endorsed a number of specific regional initiatives as working within the framework of the Convention and adopted *Operational Guidelines* for them, updating and replacing the earlier guidance from COP8. The Standing Committee was entrusted to monitor the work of the current initiatives, examine and approve new initiatives that meet the Operational Guidelines between meetings of the COP, and allocate the annual amount earmarked in the Ramsar core budget to the approved individual initiatives, based on requests and updated financial and work plans submitted by the initiatives to the Secretariat.
4. Finally, Resolution X.6 (2008) requested the Standing Committee and the Secretariat, particularly for those initiatives funded by the core budget, to review their success and submit a summary report for consideration at COP11. The review of the success of the initiatives operating during the period 2009-2012 is provided below, and the summary of its conclusions and recommendations is included in the operative paragraphs of the Draft Resolution for COP11 that is appended. The review of the success of the initiatives is based on an assessment of their fulfillment of the points listed in the Operational Guidelines that were adopted by Resolution X.6.

Regional initiatives operating in the framework of the Convention 2009-2012

5. Prior to COP11, fifteen regional initiatives have been endorsed as operating in the framework of the Convention, and these are listed below. It is not anticipated that additional regional initiatives will become operational in the short term. The priority for the period leading up to COP12 (2015) is to focus on the further development of the currently operative initiatives and the improvement of their weak points, and possibly to unify separate initiatives in geographically close or overlapping areas.
6. However, in the event of additional initiatives becoming operational, the Standing Committee could be authorized, as was the case in Resolution X.6 for the period 2009-2012, to examine and approve, between meetings of the COP, new initiatives that fully meet the Operational Guidelines after COP11.

Prior to COP11, four centres are operating for regional training and capacity building:

- in East Africa (established in Kampala),
- in the Western Hemisphere (established in Panama City),
- in Central & West Asia (established in Ramsar),
- in East Asia (established in Changwon).

Prior to COP11, nine networks are operating for regional cooperation:

- in the Nile river basin,
- along the West African coast,
- in the Niger river basin,
- in the High Andes,
- in the La Plata river basin,
- in the Caribbean,
- for American mangroves and reefs,
- along the East-Asian Australasian flyway,
- in the Mediterranean,
- in the Carpathians,
- in the Nordic-Baltic region,
- along the Black and Azov Sea coast.

7. During the years following COP10 (2009-2011), the Standing Committee endorsed the above-listed regional initiatives as fully meeting the Operational Guidelines attached to Resolution X.6, based on their submitted work plans and annual reports. This original *ex ante* analysis can now be completed with an *ex post* assessment after three additional years of operation. As required in the Operational Guidelines, all current initiatives work towards providing operational means for effective support for improved implementation of the Convention and its Strategic Plan. They are all moving in the right direction, but to a substantially varying degree of effectiveness. Many of the more recent initiatives still need to constitute their full membership, active participation, and full operation.

The aim of regional initiatives

(Operational Guidelines points 1-4)

8. The currently operative initiatives do not cover all parts (or countries) of the globe, but are reasonably well spread across the major Ramsar regions (Africa, Americas, Asia-Oceania, Europe). They cover a great variety of wetland types, ranging from upstream (High Andes,

Carpathians) to coastal marine ecosystems (Black Sea, West Africa, Caribbean), and from tropical (American mangroves and reefs) to high latitude regions (Nordic-Baltic). The initiatives include different geographical approaches, focusing on regional sea basins (Black Sea, Mediterranean, Caribbean) and major river catchments (Nile, Niger, La Plata), as well as on wider geographical areas (East Asian-Australasian flyway, Western Hemisphere) for a number of good ecological and also socio-economical and political reasons.

9. All of the above initiatives receive support from all or at least a significant number of Contracting Parties in the regions concerned. This is essential to setting up a minimal operational structure to provide lasting structural and operational support to facilitate and improve the implementation of the Convention. Some of the earlier established initiatives provide advice to more recent initiatives, such as the Mediterranean initiative advising the Nordic-Baltic and Black Sea initiatives, and the High Andean initiative advising the Caribbean and American mangroves and reefs initiatives.
10. However, some initiatives (notably the centres for the Western Hemisphere and for Central & West Asia) still have difficulties in bringing together all Parties in their region and in receiving formal letters of support from the missing Parties. Often, this is not helped by the frequent changes of national focal points in the national Ramsar Administrative Authorities.

Coordination between regional initiatives and the Secretariat

(Operational Guidelines points 5-10)

11. The development of effective coordination between the regional initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat is essential. It depends upon regular mutual contacts, physically (meetings of steering groups and similar bodies) or via telephone (conferences) and e-mail, and upon regular reporting to the Secretariat. To this end, reporting by the Centre for Regional Training in the Western Hemisphere and the Niger river basin initiative should become more frequent and more regular.
12. The establishment of regional initiatives is a process over time. In order to fulfill their aims, regional initiatives depend on the services provided by professional staff who can assure a minimal coordination between the participating Parties and with the Ramsar Secretariat. With the exception of two initiatives that have become operative only very recently (for the West African coast and the Niger river basin), the majority of the initiatives are benefitting from such professional support.
13. The different and complementary roles of the regional initiatives and the Secretariat were defined in written agreements, with Secretariat advice or input, for a majority of the initiatives. For the remaining initiatives (e.g., centres for Central & West Asia and for East Asia, networks for the Niger river basin, the Carpathian and the Nordic-Baltic regions), it is proposed that they elaborate such guidance rapidly in the near future. Having clearly articulated written terms of reference and rules of procedure, before potential operative and governance problems arise, is a great advantage. Many of the longer established initiatives have experienced the value of this during their first years of operation.

Governance of the initiatives

(Operational Guidelines points 11-13)

14. Two thirds of the initiatives have elaborated robust and transparent governance and advisory mechanisms, but often as a result of serious operational problems encountered at some stage during their work. Such mechanisms, rules and structures are important to provide guidance and insight to all participating Parties and other appropriate stakeholders, in order to firmly establish the initiative in its geographical region in the long term. The experiences of the longer-established initiatives should be a strong incentive for the more recent ones, and for those that have not yet formally elaborated their written rules and procedures, to do so in an equitable and transparent manner, and to establish active governing bodies, able to address and solve governance problems when they arise. This will be useful in preventing operational difficulties particularly for the centres for Central & West Asia and for East Asia and the network for the Niger river basin, and to a lesser degree for the networks for the Carpathians and the Nordic-Baltic region. The Secretariat puts itself at the disposal of these initiatives to help with drafting such rules and procedures.
15. Having established the coordinating and governing bodies and clarified their responsibilities is one requirement. Assuring the regular participation of representatives of all members of the initiative in the mutual exchange of information and the decision-making meetings is another requirement, and that remains a challenge for several initiatives, notably the centre for the Western Hemisphere and the network for the Black Sea coast.

Substantive elements of the initiatives

(Operational Guidelines points 14-20)

16. Regional initiatives should be based on a bottom-up approach and profit from the participation, not only of the Ramsar Administrative Authorities, but also of other relevant stakeholders such as ministries responsible for water management, agriculture, energy and others, NGOs, academic experts, the private sector, and national or regional offices of Ramsar's International Organization Partners. Establishing and maintaining comprehensive and active membership is an ongoing challenge for most of the initiatives, even for the longest established one in the Mediterranean. Other initiatives are only at the beginning of this path and are so far missing many opportunities for contributions by members who are not yet participating, in particular the networks for the Nordic-Baltic region. Bringing other partners into the network, with their complementary capacities, is beneficial for the operation and the outcomes of the work of the initiatives. Working on active, multi-stakeholder participation remains therefore an important challenge for all Ramsar regional initiatives, albeit to a different degree for each.
17. An additional key objective of regional initiatives is to develop collaboration with other intergovernmental and international partners active in the region. All of the initiatives are - at least in principle aware of the huge potential of such collaboration, and many of them have established plans for concrete cooperative programmes with such intergovernmental organizations. However, these need to be turned into action on the ground, and much still needs to be done, notably in regions where specific regional conventions exist that could provide an ideal policy and finance platform for concrete activities in the framework of the Ramsar Convention. Concrete examples of cooperation between the Ramsar initiative and a regional body include supportive agreements with the Caribbean, Carpathian or Black Sea Conventions, with the Nordic Council and others.

18. The operation of regional initiatives should be focused upon making optimal use of the Ramsar tools published in the Ramsar Handbook and Technical Report series. In addition, strategic and operational targets of the initiatives should be aligned with the Strategic Plan of the Convention. While most initiatives may argue that they operate intuitively in line with these objectives, some of them could refer to these tools in much more concrete terms during their work. This might include focusing on how to apply Ramsar tools and how to implement Ramsar approaches in the region in the context of medium-term planning of activities rather than just an ad hoc annual approach. This concerns mainly the centres for regional training and capacity building in East Asia and Central & West Asia and the networks for the Black Sea coast, the Carpathians, the Nordic-Baltic region, the Caribbean, the Niger and La Plata river basins, and the Mediterranean.
19. Regional initiatives need to raise the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and the general awareness of Ramsar objectives. This is often done among the members and other participants in the initiative, but still very little beyond this audience and in front of the general public. Longer established initiatives are more advanced in fulfilling this objective, others, notably the networks for the Niger river basin, the Carpathians, the Black Sea coast and the East-Asian Australasian flyway as well as the centres for capacity building in Central & West Asia and East Asia, need to focus much more on this objective.

Financial and other support, reporting and evaluation

(Operational Guidelines points 21-29)

20. Regional initiatives require both political support from all concerned Parties and sufficient financial support from concerned Parties and other partners in the region. After an initial start-up phase with possible financial contributions from the Ramsar core budget (in principle not more than during an interval between two meetings of the COP), regional initiatives need to be self-sustaining.
21. A number of the operational initiatives profited from the start from a sufficient support by intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the networks for the Mediterranean and the Nordic-Baltic regions) and have established financial forward planning mechanisms since. Others are entirely – or largely – dependent on Ramsar core budget support. This can only be an exceptional start-up situation during their first years of operation and needs to be changed rapidly. The networks for the West African coast, the Caribbean, American mangroves and reefs, the Black Sea coast, and the Carpathians need now to find substantial financial support from regional resources.
22. Some of the longer established initiatives have received Ramsar core budget contributions for many years, making up a small proportion of their annual budget. This token support to the centres for Central & West Asia and the Western Hemisphere and to the networks for the High Andes and the West African coast should now be replaced by other funding sources in order to ensure their long-term viability and to comply with the Operational Guidelines.
23. Finding sufficient financial support remains a regular challenge for all initiatives. However, using earmarked financial contributions according to annual work plans, during the year in which the planned activities (and expenditures) were supposed to be executed, remains another challenge for several initiatives as well.

24. The experiences since COP8 (2002), when an amount for start-up funding support for regional initiatives was included in the Convention core budget, show that this amount was generally sufficient for the initial start-up needs. Such needs then tend to decrease regularly with the maturation of the initiatives and their capacity for self-sustenance.
25. Regular annual reporting and work planning through the Secretariat to the Standing Committee proved to be essential for effective operations of the initiatives. The Standing Committee has adopted a simple annual reporting and planning format, and the Secretariat's procedures for disbursing annual funding allocations to selected initiatives are working very well as long as those initiatives actually incur the planned annual expenditures and maintain regular contacts with the Secretariat. All of the operative initiatives listed above have established satisfactory minimal reporting procedures. However, care needs to be taken that this will continue in future, in order for the initiatives to remain in a position to be endorsed as operating in the framework of the Convention during the years 2013-2015 leading to COP12.

Concluding remarks

26. The Ramsar approach to work specifically at regional level through the means of active networks of cooperation and centres for training and capacity building has provided the opportunity to engage Parties in novel processes that keep the issues of the Convention alive during the periods between COPs and regional meetings. Establishing lasting regional initiatives is an ambitious endeavour and cannot succeed without sufficient formal, financial and active support from all concerned Parties and other partners in the region. While expectations are high (and remain so), in many cases few concrete activities of cooperation happen at regional level that go beyond annual meetings to exchange experience and transfer know-how and advice.
27. Still too often, the preparation and running of (limited) regional activities depend on only a few active members and substantial involvement by the Ramsar Secretariat, with largely insufficient support at regional and national level provided by other partners beyond the local organizers. Many regional activities depend on opportunities rather than being based on forward plans. Many of the activities planned on an annual basis are delayed or deferred. The members in the regions have still to show their willingness and capacity – politically, practically and financially – to demonstrate the priority for regional cooperation and put it on a lasting footing.
28. The experiences of the longest established network, that for the Mediterranean, have been published and shared widely at workshops and otherwise to inform fellow initiatives how to overcome difficulties and how to solve problems. More such inter-regional exchanges seem to be most useful for the near future. For all initiatives, reaching a cruising speed, and maintaining it to make a substantial difference, remains a challenge, unless all concerned countries and partners in the region are convinced that this form of regional cooperation provides a definite advantage and merits sufficient support in kind and cash. The active partners in regional cooperation believe that this would boost the impact of the Ramsar Convention substantially.

COP11 Draft Resolution 11-xx

Regional initiatives 2013-2015 in the framework of the Ramsar Convention

1. RECALLING that regional initiatives under the Ramsar Convention are intended as operational means to provide effective support for an improved implementation of the objectives of the Convention and its Strategic Plan in specific geographical regions, through international cooperation on wetland-related issues of common concern;
2. ALSO RECALLING that the *Guidelines for international cooperation under the Ramsar Convention* (Resolution VII.19, 1999) provide the appropriate framework for promoting international collaboration amongst Contracting Parties and other partners;
3. ALSO RECALLING that the Contracting Parties recognized the importance of regional initiatives in promoting the objectives of the Convention in Resolution VIII.30 (2002), and that Resolution IX.7 (2005) both endorsed a number of regional initiatives as operating within the framework of the Convention in 2006-2008 and recognized the potential of a number of other initiatives to become operational within the framework of the Convention;
4. FURTHER RECALLING that Resolution X.6 (2008) adopted *Operational Guidelines* for regional initiatives to support the implementation of the Convention, which serves as a reference for assessing the operation of regional initiatives and their success (replacing the *Guidelines for the development of regional initiatives in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands* in Annex I to Resolution VIII.30);
5. NOTING that during the years 2009-2012, the Standing Committee has examined and approved a number of active regional initiatives as fully meeting the Operational Guidelines and noted the substantial progress made by many of the initiatives during these years, based on their annual reports submitted to the Standing Committee; and
6. TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the experience gained through the operational years of these initiatives, the successful application of the Operational Guidelines when selecting and supporting regional initiatives operating in the framework of the Convention, and the conclusions derived from the review of their success with a strategic view for the future development of regional initiatives;

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7. RECOGNIZES the usefulness of cooperation at regional level through networks and centres for training and capacity building in providing effective support for improved implementation of the objectives and approaches of the Convention;
8. APPROVES the continued validity and use of the Operational Guidelines for regional initiatives to support the implementation of the Convention, as adopted for the years 2009-2012 and annexed to Resolution X.6;

9. ENTRUSTS the Standing Committee to continue to assess annually, based on formal reports submitted in time, which of the operative regional initiatives continue to fully comply with the Operational Guidelines and actively contribute to the implementation of the Convention;
10. AUTHORIZES the Standing Committee to examine and approve, between meetings of the Conference of the Contracting Parties, possible new initiatives which fully meet the Operational Guidelines as operating within the framework of the Convention;
11. AGREES to earmark a global amount of financial support in the Convention core budget line "Support to Regional Initiatives", as listed in Resolution XI.xx on financial and budgetary matters, to be allocated to regional initiatives for development activities during the period 2013-2015, provided that they are determined by the Standing Committee to fully meet the Operational Guidelines;
12. DECIDES that the levels of financial support to individual initiatives for the years 2013, 2014, and 2015 through this budget line will be determined by the Standing Committee during its annual meetings at the beginning of those years, based upon updated financial and work plans to be submitted in the required format and in good time prior to the annual meetings, and with the benefit of the specific recommendations made by the Subgroup on Finance;
13. INSTRUCES all initiatives approved by the Convention to submit to the Standing Committee annual reports on their progress and operations, and specifically on their success in fulfilling the Operational Guidelines, as well as to forward annual work and finance plans in the format adopted by the Standing Committee;
14. STRONGLY URGES those regional initiatives that receive initial financial support from the core budget to use this support *inter alia* to seek alternative flows of sustainable funding;
15. DECIDES that regional initiatives will not be eligible to receive Ramsar core budget funding in more than two consecutive periods between two COPs;
16. ENCOURAGES Contracting Parties, intergovernmental agencies, International Organization Partners, national NGOs, private businesses and other potential donors to support regional initiatives seeking financial assistance from the Ramsar Convention with additional voluntary contributions;
17. INSTRUCES regional centres and networks operating in the framework of the Convention to describe themselves as an operational means to provide support for the implementation of the objectives of the Ramsar Convention, but to present themselves with their own individual identities to the public and other partners, in order to avoid any confusion in the public mind between those initiatives and the different roles of the Ramsar Administrative Authorities at national level and the Ramsar Secretariat at international level;
18. URGES coordinating bodies of all initiatives to sign a hosting agreement with their host organizations or countries to clarify the respective responsibilities in accordance with the Operational Guidelines and paragraph 12 of Resolution X.6, which states that "the

coordination body will be responsible to all members that constitute a regional initiative (Contracting Parties and other members), not only to the host country”;

19. FURTHER INSTRUCTS the regional initiatives to maintain active and regular contacts and exchanges with the Secretariat, and to include in their work plans 2013-2015, based on consultations with the Secretariat, the undertaking of an independent evaluation of their operations, outcomes, strengths and weaknesses that makes reference to the Operational Guidelines for regional initiatives in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands (annexed to Resolution X.6), and to share the results of these evaluations without delay with the Secretariat;
20. UNDERLINES the importance for regional initiatives to establish their operational governance structures in a transparent way, based on written terms describing their roles and responsibilities, and to ensure that all members are adequately represented in such structures;
21. URGES Contracting Parties geographically concerned by a regional initiative that have not yet done so, to provide strong and lasting support to the initiative and to signal this through the provision of formal letters of support; and
22. REQUESTS the Secretariat to review the operations and success of the regional initiatives operating during the period 2013-2015 and submit a summary report for consideration by the Standing Committee prior to COP12.