Wetlands, land use patterns, and drought -- Ramsar and CSD-16

14 May 2008

The Secretary General, Mr Anada Tiéga, has been attending CSD-16 in New York, USA, from 7 to 14 May 2008, in a follow-up to his participation in the intersessional meeting held in Beijing, China, January 2008. CSD-16’s thematic issues are Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, Drought, Desertification, and Africa. It is being held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York from 5 to 16 May 2008.

Significance of CSD-16 for Ramsar

The Secretary General was one of the panelists in the Thematic Discussion about Drought, and his presentation was focused on “Wetland management as a significant land use issue”. Sound wetland management is a key solution that can substantially contribute to drought mitigation and adaptation. Unsustainable land uses that destroy wetlands will exacerbate drought and desertification consequences.

The panel and the delegates from all regions of the world discussed the following issues in an integrated and balanced manner, taking into account linkages with other thematic issues and with cross-cutting issues, including means of implementation:

- Climate change, water scarcity and drought
- Drought and Impacts on hunger and poverty
- Building resilience
- Drought preparedness and response measures to drought
- Monitoring and early warning

Mr Tiéga first explained the Ramsar definition of wetlands, with a focus on rivers, lakes, floodplains, estuaries, deltas, peatlands and costal areas, and he highlighted the role of wetlands with regard to the above issues and the contributions of the Ramsar Convention. Droughts can affect all ecosystems, including the rain forest areas such as the Amazon that suffered from severe drought in 2005. All major tropical forests need a healthy network of wetlands to sustain their values for biodiversity conservation and other ecosystem services, including the Amazon rain forest and the Congo basin forests that are dependent respectively on the Amazon River and its tributaries and the Congo River and tributaries. Most of the impacts of drought are felt through water availability from rivers, lakes, deltas, estuaries.

The Secretary General also drew attention to the role of wetlands with regard to four basic approaches to measuring drought. According to research by Donald A. Wilhite, director of the National Drought Mitigation Center, and Michael H. Glantz, US National Center for Atmospheric Research, there are more than 150 recognized definitions of drought, reflecting differences in regions, needs, and disciplinary approaches. For the purpose of his presentation Mr Tiéga drew upon Wilhite and Glantz’s categorized definitions in terms of four basic approaches to measuring drought:

- meteorological drought
- agricultural drought
- hydrological drought
- socio-economic drought
The Secretary General then developed these themes further, with a special focus on hydrological drought and land use patterns, in terms of the Ramsar Convention’s objectives and priorities.

He concluded in the end that, unfortunately, many governments, including Ramsar Contracting Parties, are seeking to solve their water problems by turning away from sound wetland management and simply using the available groundwater. This is a rather short term solution that will deplete the groundwater to create a much more difficult problem in the long run.

Looking for solutions

The Secretary General used the occasion to argue that it is time to look at the big picture and to seek solutions through land use planning at the hydrological basin scale. This approach includes national planning but it also requires cooperation between countries sharing transboundary water courses and water storages such as rivers, lakes and floodplains. A balanced approach will include both surface and groundwater. This planning involves technical, socio-economic and political solutions. The Ramsar Convention is providing a series of scientific and technical guidelines on the these matters, and important decisions have also been taken by the Conference of the Contracting Parties to reinforce the Parties’ commitments in this regard. For instance, Resolution VII.18 on river basin management, adopted in San José, Costa Rica, in 1999, provides guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management.

Resolution IX.1 (2005) and its Annex C i on River basin management: additional guidance and a framework for the analysis of case studies provide additional guidance, including the description of critical path activities for integrating wetlands into river basin management. That Resolution recognizes the important role that the Ramsar Convention can play as one of the international actors potentially involved in disaster avoidance, post-disaster restoration, and mitigation of impacts associated with natural phenomena, including those induced or exacerbated by human activities. This Resolution recalled that at COP8 (2002) the Contracting Parties adopted Resolution VIII.35 on The impact of natural disasters, particularly drought, on wetland ecosystems, and it underlines the devastating impacts of natural disasters on the delivery of ecosystem benefits and services, and thus on the maintenance of the ecological character of Wetlands of International Importance and other wetlands in affected countries.

Resolution IX.1 also urges the Parties to maintain or restore Ramsar sites, other wetlands, and associated ecosystems in order to reduce their vulnerability to natural disasters in accordance with their natural hydrological regimes, and to ensure that they can continue to deliver their full range of ecosystem services for people and for biological diversity. The Resolution also supports the expansion of measures being undertaken in different regions of the world to protect and rehabilitate peatlands to reduce the risk of fires and to provide water supply in times of drought.

Mr Tiéga observed that the Ramsar Convention encourages Contracting Parties and river basin authorities to ensure that wetland ecosystems are managed and restored, as part of contingency planning, in order to mitigate the impacts of natural phenomena such as floods, provide resilience against drought in arid and semi-arid areas, and contribute to wider strategies aimed at mitigating climate change and desertification and thus reduce the incidence or magnitude of natural phenomena induced or enhanced by such change.

It is encouraging to note that an increasing number of Ramsar Parties have adopted a National Wetland Policy or Strategy or similar strategic tool to integrate wetland conservation and wise use into their national planning processes. For instance, the No Net Loss of Wetlands in the United States of America and the Clean Water Act are tools for maintaining and restoring the integrity of wetlands and water.

In closing, he argued that it is time to assess how existing policies, social practices and social changes are affecting people’s vulnerability to droughts. Decision makers will have to address the following questions:

- which systems and which water and wetland user groups will have priority rights to surface water during droughts?
- which systems and which user group will not have priority rights?
- what kinds of contractual arrangements, laws and other institutional arrangements are needed to promote a sustainable use of water and other wetland ecosystem services?

Water allocation is one of the key approaches to consider in response to the above questions, and the Ramsar Scientific and Technical Review Panel is continuing its important development of guidance for the Parties on this vital area of work.