

## **BACKGROUND PAPER FOR SESSION IV: THE ROLE OF WISELY MANAGED WETLANDS IN ALLEVIATING POVERTY AND PROMOTING HUMAN WELL-BEING**

### **Preamble**

Out of the Johannesburg September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development came a clear recommendation for natural resource management bearing a direct relation to the wise use of wetlands and the functions and services that wetlands render:

“Reverse the current trend in natural resource degradation as soon as possible, it is necessary to implement strategies which should include targets adopted at the national, and where appropriate, regional levels to protect ecosystems and to achieve integrated management of land, water and living resources, while strengthening regional, national and local capacities. (24) “

While the launch of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the year 2000 have since served to bind and commit the international community in vigorously pursuing human development as paramount to sustaining social and economic progress. A few of the Millennium Development Goals relevant to wetlands, water and livelihoods include:

- **MDG-1:** "to halve by the year 2015 the proportion of the world's people who suffer from hunger";
- **MDG-7:** "Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse the loss of environmental resources".

Through their wise use, wetlands can and indeed do make contributions to the above targets and goals through the range of functions, services and products they provide.

This is due to the fact that wetlands perform certain ecological functions such as the maintenance of water tables, flood control and provide habitats for plants and animals. Moreover human activities are often dependent on wetland products which include wood for construction, reeds for thatch, and peat for fuel as well fish, fruit and meat for food.

### **Aims of Session IV: The role of wisely managed wetlands in alleviating poverty and promoting human wellbeing**

**Using the session as a suitable forum, it will be possible to:**

- Highlight and strengthen the understanding of the linkages between wetlands and water management with poverty alleviation.
- Provide information on best practices in the management of wetlands and water resources and the subsequent linkages with conservation, livelihoods and the Millennium Development Goals.
- Identify and make recommendations for relevant programme and policy actions to be undertaken by stakeholders at all levels.

### **Wetlands and Water**

Largely because of water, wetlands are a source of life: much of the world's biodiversity depends on or are linked to them. Wetlands cover a wide variety of habitats and are extremely important ecosystems for biodiversity. Fens, bogs, marshes, rivers and lakes are all included as wetlands types. There are a very large number of important wetland types that need to be included in sustainable development solutions. Hence it is possible to see that wetlands and wetland products are inextricably linked to water, human livelihood and poverty alleviation.

The threats posed directly to wetlands pose an indirect threat to the security of available water supplies, biodiversity and the sustainability of human livelihoods for wetland communities. These threats generally include drainage for agriculture, pollution, rapid human growth as well as from some urbanisation and development pressures. It therefore becomes important to attempt to safeguard and possibly enhance the benefits of development for many communities who subsist on wetlands.

Moreover, it is imperative that the potential of the natural wetland ecosystems for poverty alleviation are recognised when planning and implementing sectoral development projects. Unfortunately, the multi-functionality of wetlands has been and continues to be too often ignored. While developments may bring economic prosperity or improved food security for some stakeholders, often it is the poorer and marginalised people who subsist at the edge of wetlands and who are often excluded from the planning process, that suffer from any negative environmental impacts of such developments. For many of these communities the loss of the wetlands would be tantamount to losing their lifeline.

### **Integrating wetland values and functions into policies and strategies**

It is the case that situations can even be compounded by well-intended development initiatives aimed at relieving poverty but with insufficient knowledge of the functions and values of the wetlands, thus exacerbating the environmental problems and poverty situation. There is a need for poverty reduction strategies to be better informed about the role and importance of wetlands and for their implementation to be guided by best practice management. The development of such strategies are driven by multi-scale processes, structures and mechanisms and so all of these need to be targeted if a solution is to be achieved.

The international conventions, agreements and regional initiatives have a key role in this, as instruments for international exchange of ideas and experiences, adoption and promotion of innovative methods and setting of policy and priorities. This is as they fulfil a significant role in providing guidance for national and regional action, and as such they are an important channel to communicate innovative approaches as well as a means for leveraging funding and action at all levels.

Therefore the relationships between groups of environment, water, poverty reduction and relevant national agencies need to be strengthened to increase the linkage between their respective actions and the pertinent international conventions, agreements and regional initiatives naturally including the Ramsar Convention and the Convention on Biodiversity, and increasingly to others involved in the environment-development issue.

Even though the principle connections between poverty and environment are increasingly acknowledged in some important international policy papers (e.g. The United Nations Millennium Declaration), the need for coherent action in this matter is not yet sufficiently recognised in the strategies and action plans of the main environment oriented conventions. Similarly, there is a strong need to enhance the awareness in the development aid sector of the need to pay due attention to environmental aspects of sustainable development and poverty reduction. Turning the policy statements into practice will rely on effective collaborative action at all levels of planning, policy and decision making.