



Operational Guidelines 2013-2015 for Regional Initiatives in the framework of the Convention on Wetlands

Approved by the 46th meeting of the Standing Committee (Decision SC46-28), April 2013

The aim of Regional Initiatives

1. 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, as well as to raise the visibility of the Convention in specific geographical regions, through international cooperation on wetland-related issues of common concern, involving all relevant national and regional stakeholders.
2. Geographical regions to be covered by specific Initiatives are defined according to the wetland-related needs of the relevant actors in the region. In practical terms, a Regional Initiative may correspond to one of the six regional groups established by the Convention (specified in Resolution XI.19), but it may also be more restricted in geographical focus or span several regional groups defined in Resolution XI.19, if the Contracting Parties concerned consider that to be more appropriate.
3. Regional Initiatives are intended to provide lasting structural and operational support to facilitating and improving the implementation of the Ramsar Convention. They need support from all, or at least a significant number, of the Contracting Parties in the region. To be eligible for funding from the Convention, such support must be confirmed through a formal letter by the national Ramsar Administrative Authorities, ideally renewed for each period between two meetings of the Ramsar Conference of the Parties (COPs). Sufficient national support by the countries concerned is essential to setting up a minimal operational structure for effective work in the region.
4. Regional Initiatives that are fully consistent with the aims listed above are different from regional projects. Regional projects are joint activities or programmes proposed by several Contracting Parties for a given geographical region, focusing on specific aspects, often limited in time. Regional projects can be the operational means for delivering specific aspects of Regional Initiatives, but should not be confused with the latter.

Coordination between Regional Initiatives and the Secretariat

5. The development of effective coordination between Regional Initiatives, acting regionally, and the Ramsar Secretariat, acting globally and being responsible to the Standing Committee and the COP, is essential.
6. The complementary roles of the coordinating mechanisms of Regional Initiatives and the Ramsar Secretariat, including their respective responsibilities, may be defined in written arrangements, if agreed by all participating Contracting Parties. A Regional Initiative is not and cannot act as a regional office of the Convention.

7. A Regional Initiative must describe itself as an operational means to provide support for the implementation of the objectives of the Ramsar Convention, and present itself with its own identity, in order to avoid any confusion between the roles of Regional Initiatives, the Ramsar Administrative Authorities at national level, and the Ramsar Secretariat at international level. Practical means to this end are the adoption of a specific logo, to be used in combination with the Ramsar logo, and the establishment and regular updating of a specific website.
8. It is the responsibility of the involved stakeholders to develop, coordinate and run Regional Initiatives. Depending on available human and financial resources, the Ramsar Secretariat will endeavour to the best of its ability to assist Regional Initiatives, including through mobilization of additional resources.
9. The Secretariat maintains regular links with the Regional Initiatives and provides advice so that global Ramsar guidelines are applied throughout the different regions, and so that the strategic and operational targets of Regional Initiatives are aligned with the Convention's Strategic Plan.
10. The Secretariat must receive regular reports from the Regional Initiatives to be able to report to Standing Committee and the COP on their progress as required.
11. The establishment of Regional Initiatives is a process over time. In order to fulfil their aims, Regional Initiatives should establish mechanisms that assure a minimal coordination between the Contracting Parties and other members participating in the Initiative. Coordination functions could be assigned to Contracting Parties or participating institutions on a rotating basis, and such a modality can be reflected in a regionally signed agreement.
12. The Regional Initiatives should aim to develop the capacity to take on the additional role of coordinating and supervising regional projects that are developed under the framework of such Initiatives. Projects and programmes to support the Initiative through actions with a geographically or thematically more restricted focus, often limited in time, are likely to develop increasingly over time. They should be supervised by the coordinating bodies or mechanisms of Regional Initiatives.
13. Professional staff involved in Regional Initiatives, who supervise regional projects, add substantial implementation capacity for the Convention in the region.

Governance of Initiatives

14. Regional Initiatives need to become firmly established in their geographical region. They must establish their own governance and advisory mechanisms approved by the administration involved from the Contracting Parties as well as other stakeholders, in order to provide coordination, guidance and insight.
15. In order to establish a coordination body or mechanism, key support from a host country, an International Organization Partner (IOP) of the Convention, or a host intergovernmental organization is essential. However, when established, the coordination body needs to be able to operate independently and be responsible through its work and

reporting to all members that constitute a Regional Initiative (Contracting Parties and other members), not only to the host country or body.

16. Elaborating equitable and transparent governance and coordination structures is essential. These structures need to be laid down in a set of operational procedures, based on written, commonly agreed terms of reference, rules of procedure, or operational guidance.
17. Regional Initiatives shall inform the Ramsar Secretariat of the establishment of their governance body and submit a list of its composition. Terms of reference, rules of procedure, or other written regulations for the governance and coordination of the Initiative shall be shared with the Secretariat, as well as the minutes and decisions taken by all meetings of the governance body.
18. The Conference of the Parties and the Standing Committee shall receive, through the Secretariat, reports on the activities of Regional Initiatives and shall oversee their general policies relating to the implementation of the Convention.

Substantive elements of Initiatives

19. Regional Initiatives should be based on a bottom-up approach. As a matter of priority, the support from all Contracting Parties of the specific region covered by the Initiative should be sought from the start.
20. Each Initiative should entail the participation, from the start, not only of the Administrative Authorities responsible for the application of the Convention in the Contracting Parties involved, but also of all other relevant stakeholders with an interest in and directly or indirectly responsible for wetland issues, including the ministries responsible for environment and water issues, intergovernmental bodies, Ramsar International Organization Partners (IOPs), other NGOs, academia, local communities, and economic actors.
21. A Regional Initiative should base its operation on the development of networks of collaboration established upon a clearly defined framework, thus creating an enabling environment for the involvement of all stakeholders at all levels.
22. At an early stage, a Regional Initiative should seek collaboration with other intergovernmental or international partners and Ramsar IOPs operating in its region, by establishing complementary and non-duplicative activities. The establishment of such collaborations should be reported to the Secretariat.
23. The operation of a Regional Initiative should be focused upon making optimal use of the Ramsar tools (frameworks, guidelines, guidance, methodologies, etc.) published in the Ramsar Handbooks, Technical Reports, and Briefing Notes series, and it should be based upon strong scientific and technical backing provided by relevant institutions which should be recognized as partners in the Initiative. The use of specific Ramsar guidance should be reported to the Secretariat.
24. The strategic and operational targets of a Regional Initiative should be fully aligned with the Strategic Plan of the Convention by means of policy and site technical work and activities.

25. Regional Initiatives need to raise the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and the general awareness of Ramsar objectives. Specific activities in the fields of communication, education and participatory processes with relevant stakeholders should be included in their work plans. The outcomes of such activities should be communicated to the Secretariat for use by the Ramsar CEPA Oversight Panel.
26. Regional Initiatives need to support the further development of the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) through cooperation with STRP national focal points in the region, STRP members and experts, and through synergies to be established at all possible levels of the activities undertaken by Regional Initiatives .

Financial and other support

27. A Regional Initiative requires both political support from all participating Contracting Parties and financial support from at least one or more Contracting Parties and other relevant partners in the region. Equitably spread financial support by all parties concerned is likely to provide a more stable financial base.
28. Substantial support from a host country is especially important if a coordinating office is to be established. This would need a hosting agreement to be signed, in order to provide sufficient independence of operation to the Regional Initiative in terms of staffing, accounting and fundraising.
29. The launching of a Regional Initiative needs to rely upon secured funding for planned work, activities and projects.
30. Financial support for a Regional Initiative from the Convention's core budget, should the COP and Standing Committee so decide, will only be provided as start-up funding, in principle only for a period corresponding to the interval between two meetings of the COP. After that period, the Initiative should be self-sustaining, and the Ramsar core support for it will be allocated to other Initiatives instead. Financial support to regional centres that meet the Operational Guidelines can be obtained for a period of up to six years in total.
31. At each of its triennial meetings, the Conference of the Parties allocates a specific amount of funding to the core budget line for Regional Initiatives for the time until its next meeting. Based on this global amount, the Standing Committee allocates specific funds to individual Initiatives on an annual basis. This annual allocation will be based on individual reports to be submitted in good time in a standard format to the Secretariat. These reports will provide information on the operational readiness and the urgency of Ramsar core funding needs by the Initiative during the coming year.
32. Regional Initiatives need to generate their own resources and become financially self-sufficient after an initial start-up phase and in the long term. When deciding financial support from the Convention's core budget, geographically equitable distribution will be taken into account over the long term. This is not always possible during a single interval between two meetings of the COP, for which proposals must be weighed on their merits and readiness to operate.

Reporting and evaluation

33. Regional Initiatives that are recognized by the COP as operating within the framework of the Convention must submit progress reports to the Secretariat, according to a standard format, in time to allow adequate reporting to the next meeting of the COP.
34. Annual reports of progress and financial status are required from Regional Initiatives requesting funding from the Ramsar core budget. Such reports must reach the Secretariat in time for the preparation of the annual meeting of Standing Committee.
35. Disbursement of Ramsar funds will be undertaken at six-monthly intervals, based on a short progress report of activities and financial status to be submitted by the beneficiaries to the Secretariat.
36. Periodic assessment and review processes for the Initiatives are needed and will be coordinated by the Ramsar Secretariat according to specific rules to be approved by the Standing Committee. These review procedures are meant to assure that the Regional Initiatives are operating within the framework of agreed work plans and following the approaches approved by the Ramsar Convention through COP decisions.