

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

51st Meeting of the Standing Committee

Gland, Switzerland, 23-27 November 2015

SC51-22

Status of and recommendations for the Small Grants Fund

Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to provide direction on reforms to the Small Grants Fund to link it to a direct and consistent funding mechanism.

Introduction

1. For 25 years, the implementation of the Ramsar Convention has been enhanced through grants, supported by Contracting Parties to the Convention and facilitated by the Ramsar Secretariat. The Small Grants Fund (SGF) is one of three established Ramsar grant funds, together with the Swiss Grants for Africa (SGA) and the Wetlands for the Future Fund (WFF) supported by the USA. The Small Grants Fund is the only multi-donor grant fund.
2. In 2012, Resolution XI.2 on *Financial and budgetary matters* encouraged voluntary contributions to the SGF and reaffirmed the Contracting Parties's conviction that it was of great value. However, the SGF is currently inactive because of a lack of voluntary contributions. In Decision SC47-16, the Standing Committee requested an information paper on the future of the SGF. This report responds to that request.
3. Resolution XII.1, also on *Financial and budgetary matters*, states that the Conference of Parties:

REAFFIRMS its conviction that the Convention's Small Grants Fund is of great value in terms of the implementation of the Convention, and URGES Parties and others to find CHF 1,000,000 over the next triennium (Annex 3) to secure the efficient operation of this programme.

REQUESTS that the Standing Committee review the operation of the programme during the triennium and definitively conclude whether the Parties should continue or cease the Small Grants Fund for the consideration of the 13th meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties.

4. This paper outlines the status, options and recommendations for the SGF.

Background and status of Ramsar's grant funds

5. Since 1991, the SGF, formerly the "Wetland Conservation Fund", has supported a wide range of activities related to the Convention. It has provided a total of over CHF 8,000,000 to 240 projects in 110 countries. It is based on voluntary contributions from any Contracting Party. It is administered by the Secretariat, including an advisory service, project oversight and project

ranking process. Its Operational Guidelines and project selection were approved by the Standing Committee. The Operational Guidelines ([linked here](#)) have three areas of focus:

- Projects with a clear link to the Ramsar Strategic Plan;
 - Emergency assistance related to maintaining the ecological character of designated Ramsar Sites; and
 - Preparatory assistance to allow non-contracting Parties to progress toward accession to the Convention.
6. Started in 1989, the Swiss Grants for Africa (SGA) has provided financial support to 90 projects focused on wetland conservation and wise use in over 40 countries in Africa. It is funded by a voluntary contribution from Switzerland over and above the annual dues provided to the Convention’s core budget. In 2014, for instance, a grant to the SGA of CHF 90,000 was entirely used to sponsor African delegates’ participation in the pre-COP meeting in Tunisia. In 2015, a grant to the SGA of CHF 115,000 was entirely used to sponsor African delegates’ participation in COP12 in Uruguay. This fund is administered by the Secretariat, with project approval by Switzerland.
 7. Since 1997, the Wetlands for the Future Fund (WFF) has been supported by a voluntary contribution by the USA, underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding. It has now provided financial support to 290 projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, 83 of which have supported activities within designated Ramsar Sites. The fund is largely focused on capacity building and training, with approximately CHF 107,000 being donated in 2015.
 8. Chart 1. below shows that voluntary contributions to the SGF have varied dramatically over time, and the SGF last met its target of receiving CHF 1 million in 1997. Table 1 shows the number of projects funded and donor countries since 2002. No calls for new SGF proposals have been made since the 2010-2011 project cycle because of the lack of funds and a surplus of ranked priority projects waiting to be funded. There are currently no funds available in the SGF for new projects.

Chart 1. Combined annual voluntary contributions to small grants fund

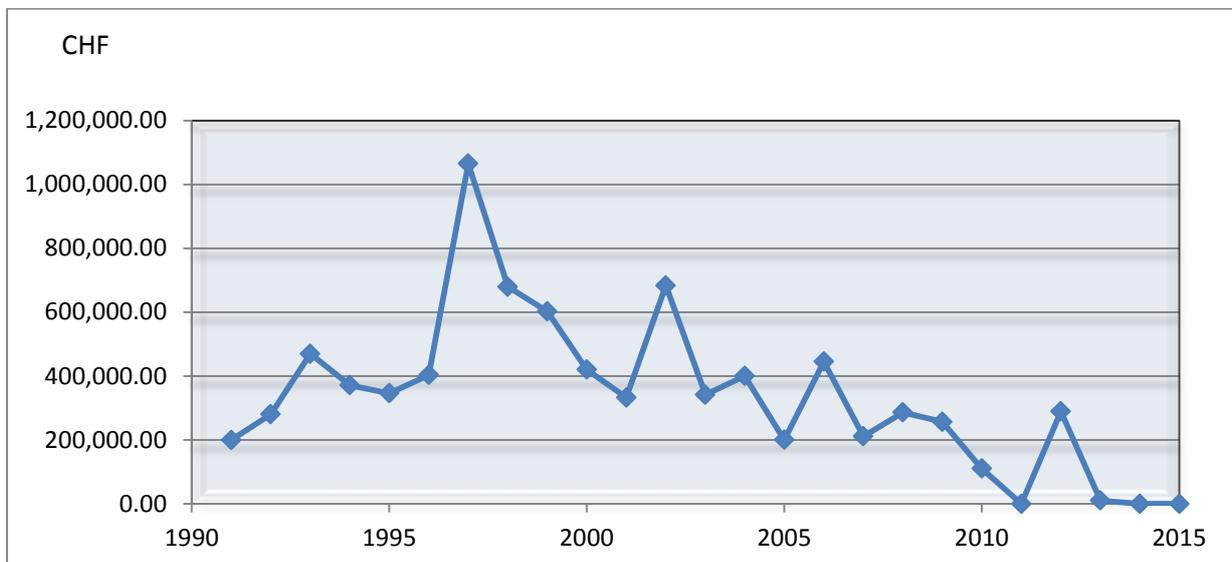


Table 1. Provision of funding per annum to the small Grants Fund, and number of projects supported

| SGF year cycle | Net funds received for projects (CHF) | Donor countries & organizations | No. of projects funded | Location of Projects Funded |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| 2002 | 574,854 | Austria, Japan, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, USA | 17 | Congo, Gambia and Senegal, Kenya, Mauritius, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, Mexico, Uruguay, Fiji, Palau |
| 2003 | 341,885 | Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Iran, Italy, Japan, Sweden, United Kingdom, WWF Living Waters Prog. | 9 | Nigeria, Kenya, Lao PDR, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Moldova, Bahamas, Guatemala, Marshall Islands, Tonga |
| 2004 | 281,040 | Austria, Japan, Sweden, UK | 11 | Lesotho, Liberia, India, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Slovenia, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Samoa, Southeast Asia areas project. |
| 2005 | 196,602 | Japan, Sweden, UK | 6 | Ghana, Tajikistan, Jordan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Suriname, Brazil |
| 2006 | 361,740 | Czech Republic, Japan, Norway, Sweden – SIDA, UK | 15 | Benin and Togo, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Madagascar, Republic of Congo, Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Viet Nam, Armenia, Republic of Moldova, Antigua and Barbuda, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama, Kiribati |
| 2007 | 163,598 | Czech Republic, Japan, Sweden - SIDA | 5 | Malawi, China, Moldova, Colombia, Fiji |
| 2008 | 184,783 | Austria, Hungary, Italy, Japan, R.O.Korea | 8 | Cabo Verde, Nepal, Turkey, Chile, Bangladesh, Albania, Cameroon, Marshall Islands |
| 2009 | 235,962 | Germany, Japan, Korea, Mauritius, Sweden; Danone | 7 | Morocco, Mali, Republic of Congo, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam |
| 2010 | 110,232 | Bangladesh, Japan, Norway | 3 | Guinea Bissau, Cambodia, Nepal |
| 2011 | 0 | - | - | - |
| 2012 | 289,510 | Norway, Japan, Canada | 7 | Belize, Ghana, Belarus, Moldova, Uganda, Lao PDR, Georgia |
| 2013 | - | - | 1 | Ecuador |
| 2014 | - | - | 0 | |
| 2015 | - | - | 0 | - |
| TOTAL | 2,740,206 | 12+1 | 89 | - |

9. The SGF usually receives many more applications and quality proposals than available funding can support. Correspondingly, the demand for the Secretariat to provide advisory services, evaluate and rank projects has been disproportionately high compared to the funding available.
10. Since 2010, Secretariat reports to the Standing Committee have noted the challenge of funding the SGF and significant actions have been taken to revitalize it, including repackaging the SGF portfolio to showcase specific projects and highlighting high quality “star projects” to potential funders.

11. In decision SC48-12 the Standing Committee asked the Secretariat not to launch a call for SGF proposals in 2015, due to the lack of resources.
12. A current review of the Secretariat's reports indicates that the challenges associated with the SGF may be the following:
 - a. As a multi-donor fund, the SGF lacks a champion. In contrast, the WFF has consistently been funded by the USA and the SGA has consistently been funded by Switzerland.
 - b. Private sector and foundation support has not been significant so far, perhaps because the incentives for donors to finance a basket of projects through Ramsar have not been fully explained. The SGF lacks a process that encourages continued giving. While presenting a hand-picked portfolio of projects and soliciting voluntary contributions for individual projects has attracted some once-off funding, it did not create a sufficient incentive to continue contributions to the SGF.
 - c. Some donors seek far larger projects to consolidate resources and increase impacts.

Reform of the Small Grants Fund

13. Information available from reports provided to successive Standing Committees on the implementation of the Small Grants Fund suggests that it is seen by countries as providing significant value. Impact has been achieved on the ground through projects that have been supported.
14. A brief review of other Small Grants Funds that exist (e.g. GEF, IFAD, KfW, other Ramsar Convention Small Grants Funds, etc.) suggests that when donors have additional incentive for providing funds, such as the opportunity to engage in and influence spending decisions, then they may be more likely to provide funding.
15. Factors affecting the success of other small grants funds, such as those of KfW, GEF, etc., could be summarized in a short paper that also recommends the most suitable possible niche for the Ramsar Convention's SGF.
16. One possibility would be for the Working Group on Resource Mobilization to guide the Secretariat on how to increase the attractiveness and up-to-date relevance of the SGF, and present recommendations to SC52. The proposal could consider:
 - a. Linking the SGF to the priorities of the 4th Strategic Plan. This would refresh the strategic relevance of the fund by alignment with the most recent priorities of Contracting Parties. Some illustrative targets that might be considered worth focusing the SGF fundraising and/or allocations towards might include:
 - Target 4: Invasive alien species and pathways are identified and prioritized, priority species are controlled or eradicated, and management responses are prepared and implemented to prevent their introduction and establishment.
 - Target 7: Sites that are at risk of loss of ecological character have threats addressed.

- Target 12: Restoration is in progress or completed in degraded wetlands, with priority to wetlands that are relevant for disaster risk reduction, livelihoods and/or climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- b. Advertising the SGF on the basis of shared priorities between Ramsar and a prospective funder, in an area that generates significant value for society. For example, the SGF could be positioned as:
- an opportunity for the beverage industry to protect headwater wetlands that are important for drinking water supply; or
 - an opportunity to increase coastal resilience that benefits both communities and private sector infrastructure and engineering assets.
- c. Identifying specific opportunities for the SGF to fulfil the intention spelled out in the original guidelines, that funding should be directed towards helping grantees make necessary preparations for seeking funding from other sources for larger scale activities. This would entail a shift of focus in the SGF from supporting small on-the-ground projects, to supporting proposal preparation for large funds such as the GEF or the multi-lateral development banks (African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank etc.).
17. The Secretariat would like to suggest that the issue of the Small Grants Fund be a standing item on Standing Committee meeting agendas for the triennium, so that sustained and focused attention can lead to informed decision making about its future at COP13.