

Report of the Secretary General

Action requested:

The Standing Committee is invited to note the present report of the Secretary General.

Introduction

1. This report covers the work of the Secretariat from 1 October 2022, when Dr Musonda Mumba assumed the position of Secretary General of the Convention on Wetlands, through to 30 May 2023. It provides both an overview and selected highlights of the work completed by the Secretariat during this period.
2. The new Secretary General has expressed her commitment to strengthen the Secretariat's work to effectively deliver on its mandate specified in Article 8 of the Convention, and to implement the instructions given to it by the Conference of the Contracting Parties and the Standing Committee. The Secretary General has organized reporting on the work of the Secretariat in the main areas below to support Parties in the implementation of the Strategic Plan of the Convention:
 - Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties;
 - Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes;
 - Collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism; and
 - Mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention.

Ensuring operational excellence in support of Contracting Parties

3. The delivery of the Secretariat's core role in supporting Contracting Parties remains a priority and includes the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies and implementation of the decisions and instructions of Contracting Parties. This area of work has been prioritized in the new triennial work plan and 2023 annual work plan, which is presented to the 62nd meeting of the Standing Committee (SC62) for its consideration as document SC62 Doc.13.
4. A critical function of the Secretariat is the organization of meetings of governing and subsidiary bodies of the Convention, including the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP), the Standing Committee and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP). During this period, the Secretariat has made logistical arrangements, prepared meeting documents, and organized the convening of COP14, STRP25, and SC60, SC61 and SC62.

5. A major highlight during the reporting period was the organization of COP14, held between 5 and 13 November 2022 in hybrid format in Wuhan, China and Geneva, Switzerland, under the theme “Wetland Actions for People and Nature.”
 - One hundred and forty-six Contracting Parties were present, represented by 533 delegates. 55 Observer organizations participated with a total of 160 participants registered for the meeting.
 - Notable moments and outcomes of COP14 included the high-level ministerial segment, granting of the 2022 Ramsar Conservation Awards, designation of new accredited wetland cities and the adoption of 21 Resolutions.
 - Following COP14, a satisfaction survey was sent to all participants. In the results, Contracting Parties expressed overall satisfaction with the Secretariat’s preparation and management of the meeting. Areas of potential future improvement were identified and will be taken into consideration for COP15.
 - Based on the experience of COP14, the Secretariat has reviewed and updated its standard host country agreement to better reflect the requirements and needs of Parties at a meeting of the COP. This was done taking into account the equivalent agreements used by secretariats of other Conventions and internal feedback.
 - During COP14, Zimbabwe expressed its desire to host COP15 in 2025. Zimbabwe’s proposed dates and venue will be presented to SC62 for acceptance.
6. The Secretariat organized STRP25 from 2 to 5 May 2023. A total of 49 participants attended the meeting, including all 18 panel members as well as representatives of six Contracting Parties and 12 STRP observer organizations. The Secretariat enabled virtual participation in plenary sessions of the meeting, with 12 participants making use of this.
7. The Secretariat has undertaken preparations for SC62, which is scheduled from 4 to 8 September 2023, including logistical arrangements and preparation of meeting documents.
8. The Secretariat has supported the establishment and work of Working Groups and Subgroups of the Standing Committee, including the Management Working Group, the Subgroup on Finance, the CEPA Oversight Panel and the Youth Working Group (YWG). Additionally, it has supported the group of Parties interested in institutional strengthening of the Secretariat as called for in Resolution XIV.6. In response to Decisions SC61-08 and SC61-011 the Secretariat will support Parties in establishing the Subgroup on COP15 and the Independent Advisory Committee of the Wetland City Accreditation during SC62.
9. On 21 March 2023, the YWG hosted two online workshops on “Youth shaping wetland conservation”. The workshops brought together more than 100 participants from around the world, working on youth engagement in wetlands conservation and restoration to discuss the implementation of Resolution XIV.12 on *Strengthening Ramsar connections through youth*. The Secretary General gave her opening remarks during the workshop and reminded participants that the Resolution offers young people around the globe the legitimacy to be engaged as problem-solvers and to leverage this opportunity to build on the momentum of youth engagement in climate action around the world. The Secretariat thanks the Canadian government for making the workshops possible.

10. During the reporting period the Secretariat supported the Standing Committee in taking intersessional decisions as instructed by the Contracting Parties at COP14 and the Standing Committee at SC61. A link to these decisions can be found on the Convention website from the SC62 event page at <https://www.ramsar.org/event/62nd-meeting-of-the-standing-committee>.
11. The Secretariat carried out two Ramsar Advisory Missions (RAMs) during this period. The first was to Lago Poopó y Uru Uru to assist the Government of Bolivia to identify possible measures to preserve the ecological character of this Wetland of International Importance (“Ramsar Site”). The second was to Basse Vallée du Couffo, Lagune Côtière Chenal Aho, Lac Ahémé, to assist the Government of Benin in identifying possible solutions to threats from the development projects and other human activities that cause massive annual fish mortality in this Site. The reports of these RAMs are being reviewed by these Parties. The Secretariat is preparing to undertake RAMs to Sierra Leone and to Nicaragua in the remainder of 2023.
12. The Secretariat facilitated an efficient process for the appointment of members of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and the Panel’s work planning for the 2023-2025 triennium. Information on the nomination process was shared with Parties prior to COP14 as well as during regional meetings during COP14. Contracting Parties, International Organizational Partners (IOPs) and STRP observer organizations were invited to submit nominations with a deadline of 16 December 2022. The deadline was subsequently extended until 15 January to encourage balanced geographic distribution among nominees. The Panel’s membership was confirmed in a notification to all Parties on 23 February 2023.
13. Working closely with the STRP Chair and Vice-Chair, the Secretariat organized an informal virtual meeting to brief Panel members on preparations for STRP25, including the format of the draft STRP work plan to be prepared for 2023-2025. A self-paced online induction training course for Panel members, IOP and observer representatives and STRP National Focal Points was developed and made available through the InforMEA platform.
14. The Secretariat held a professionally facilitated planning workshop in March 2023, which focused on assessing progress in the implementation of the 2022 work plan and reviewing new instructions to the Secretariat from COP14 Resolutions. Based on this review, a new triennial work plan and 2023 annual work plan were developed, organized around the seven key functions approved by the Standing Committee at SC54. This new work plan will better enable the Secretariat to focus on the activities, deliverables and outcomes that have been identified by the Parties as being most critical to the effective implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat’s work plan also serves as the basis for the development of individual work plans for staff and evaluation of staff performance.
15. Technologies and business practices continue to be developed to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of the Secretariat. The CRM (constituent relationship management) database was updated and further developed as the main tool for efficient management of mailings, meeting registration, reporting and contacts. The Convention’s website is being redeveloped with a focus on ease of use for Parties as well as the Secretariat, Internal guidelines have been developed and disseminated on how to use tools for more streamlined and efficient ways of collaborating, including on documents and organization of conference calls.
16. The financial stability of the Secretariat continued to remain solid in 2022 as in the previous year. Sound financial management of the Secretariat budgets – both core and non-core – have been validated by the external auditor. At the end of 2022 the core fund balance had increased,

to CHF 3,930,000, due mostly to the accumulated unspent funds carried forward within the 2019-2021 triennium and 2022 due to lower implementation of the budgeted activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported in document SC62 Doc.8.1.

17. As of 31 May 2023, the Secretariat consists of 22 staff. Of these 12 are male and 10 are female, giving a male-female ratio of 55% to 46%. Two positions are vacant: the Special Assistant to the Secretary General and the Senior Advisor for Europe. The recruitment process for the latter post has been successfully completed, and the selected candidate will commence their role on 15 June 2023. It is important to highlight that the Secretariat has successfully achieved a relative gender balance in terms of its human resources. However, upon closer examination of senior-level positions (P2 and above), there is currently an imbalance in the male-female ratio, with males comprising 67% and females 33% of these positions. The recruitment of a woman as the Senior Advisor for Europe represents a positive stride toward attaining greater balance in senior and management roles, the new ratio being 38% female and 62% male. This appointment contributes to promoting gender equity within the Secretariat.
18. The Secretary General has prioritized working closely with Ramsar Regional Initiatives (RRIs), including through enhanced communication between the Secretariat and RRIs as well as between RRIs. The Secretary General held a meeting with coordinators of RRIs on the sidelines of COP14. The Secretariat also organized a virtual annual planning meeting of RRIs on 24 January 2023. This was the first opportunity for RRIs to share their annual plans with other RRIs and identify possible areas of cooperation. The Secretariat plans to continue to work with RRI coordinators to identify areas of further cooperation and promote learning among RRIs.

Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes

19. Increasing visibility and awareness of the centrality of wetlands in global processes is foundational to addressing the triple planetary crises linked to climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. The issue of protecting, conserving, and restoring wetlands must be elevated to instil urgency of the actions needed.
20. During the reporting period, about 290,000 users visited the Convention website, the principal online source of documents and news related to the Convention. The Secretariat published more frequent news stories and updates on the website. An updated website will be launched in summer 2023 which will improve performance and provide a fresh presentation of the Convention.
21. The Convention is active and engaged on several social media sites. These platforms have all seen a steady increase in engagement over the reporting period. Currently the Convention's Twitter account has about 32,000 followers, Instagram about 10,000 followers and the Facebook page has about 150,000 likes, while the official LinkedIn account has about 5,800 followers and the YouTube channel has about 4,000 subscribers. The Secretary General is extremely active on Twitter (with about 10,500 followers) and LinkedIn with updates on the meetings she is attending and her views on wetlands in the global agenda.
22. World Wetlands Day on 2 February remains the most significant communication and awareness-raising event for the Convention. The 2023 theme, "It's time for wetland restoration", highlighted the urgent need to prioritize restoration. The Secretariat – with funding from Danone – produced a variety of communication and branding materials for the global awareness campaign and made them available to download on the dedicated website¹.

¹ See <https://www.worldwetlandsday.org/>.

23. Over 1,700 national events were organized for World Wetlands Day, in over 70 countries, and a diverse audience that included children, local communities, youth and policy actors participated. The Secretary General joined celebrations in Costa Rica, Belize and Mexico and moderated two virtual panel discussions entitled “Time to fast-track restoration of wetlands” organized by the Secretariat on 1 February. Speakers on the virtual panels discussed wetland restoration trends, challenges and opportunities, while IUCN on behalf of the six IOPs highlighted seven priority actions for wetland restoration.
24. The Secretariat has been leveraging the opportunities presented by international days to bring attention to the importance of wetlands for the planet and people. On international days such as World Water Day (22 March), International Day for Biological Diversity (22 May), World Ocean Day (8 June), International Youth Day (12 August) and International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction (13 October), the Secretariat has distributed video and print statements from the Secretary General, developed event specific social media content and participated in events.
25. The Secretary General has been extremely active in international fora, for example the Senior Officials Meeting of the United Nations Environment Management Group (EMG) in November 2022, the Global Workshop on Source-to-sea Management in December, the United Nations Water Summit in New York in March 2023 and the meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions in May.
26. The Secretary General is proactive in seeking engagement with the international media for opportunities to communicate about wetlands.
27. The Secretariat has utilized the Ramsar Conservation Awards as an opportunity to share the rich stories of the award winners and their notable accomplishments to a public audience through distribution of video vignettes of the Award winners and their ability to influence others in the wetland’s movement.
28. The accreditation of Wetland Cities at COP14 provided an opportunity to showcase the importance of urban wetlands and how cities around the world are protecting and wisely using these urban resources. There was strong media coverage at the local featuring the newly accredited cities and how urban wetlands are contributing to more liveable cities.
29. The Secretariat actively participates in online meetings of the “Communications Flotilla”, organized by the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Montreal, which was established a way of coordinating communications and achieving synergies among a number of biodiversity-related Conventions and organizations.
30. A key element of the Communications Strategy is to create rich, current and relevant content which will enable our partners and stakeholders to spread our content and our messages. We will create compelling content, using storytelling where possible such as showing the “wetland champions”, to share stories that will foster understanding and inspire action for wetlands. We will continue to search for and source local and regional content to illustrate our messages.

Collaboration to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global targets, and to enhance multilateralism

31. Contracting Parties have expressed their desire for the Secretariat, on behalf of the Convention, to be active in the wider global policy agenda. To this aim, the Secretariat continues to prioritize

its work in supporting international cooperation and raising the profile of wetlands and the Convention in the global policy agenda. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Global Biodiversity Framework are driving national and international planning and funding efforts. The increased attention ensures that wetlands and the work of Contracting Parties under the Convention contribute to these policy frameworks.

32. The Secretariat has prepared a joint storyline with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) for the UN Secretary General's Report to the High-Level Political Forum in July 2023. The Secretariat also continues to engage with UN Water on the work programme for SDG 6 ("Ensure access to water and sanitation for all").
33. The Secretariat continues to strengthen its relationship with the Geneva-based Permanent Missions to the UN and its agencies, through briefings in collaboration with the United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG) before COP14 in 2022 and a briefing scheduled for 25 June 2023. The Secretary General and Regional Advisors also hold regular bilateral meetings with the Permanent Missions.
34. The Convention is one of the global partners in the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The Secretariat's activities broadly cover climate, water and biodiversity. The Secretariat continues to collaborate actively with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), concentrating its efforts on cooperation and synergies with the biodiversity-related Conventions, in accordance with paragraph 32 of Resolution XII.3 (Rev. COP13) on *Enhancing the visibility and stature of the Convention, and increasing synergies with other multilateral environmental agreements and other international institutions*. More specific areas of cooperation continue to be implemented with these MEAs within the existing memoranda, in particular with the CBD, the Convention on Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the World Heritage Convention (WHC) as well as with the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).
35. The Secretariat also contributes to the UN Decade's Task Force on Best Practices and Task Force on Monitoring.
36. In terms of climate, the Convention's main partners are the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and UNCCD. In terms of biodiversity, the Secretariat works closely with the Biodiversity Liaison Group of the biodiversity-related Conventions and participated actively in COP15 of the Convention on Biological Diversity.
37. The Secretary General addressed the Plenary of the UN Water Conference in New York and set out a clear link between water and wetlands, in particular the connection between global water security and the health of the world's wetlands. More detail can be found in document SC62 Doc.14 on *Enhancing the Convention's visibility and synergies in partnership with multilateral environmental agreements and other institutions*.

Mobilizing resources to support implementation of the Convention

38. Availability of sufficient and predictable funding is essential for effective implementation of the Convention. The Secretariat has taken actions to encourage timely payment of contributions by Contracting Parties to the core budget and to raise funds for the non-core fundraising priorities identified in Annex 4 of Resolution XIV.1 on *Financial and budgetary matters*.

39. In 2022 total voluntary contributions received were CHF 1,960,000, an increase compared to 2021, when such contributions amounted to CHF 462,000. This increase was related to the holding of COP14 in November 2022.
40. The Secretariat has prepared an updated Resource Mobilization Work Plan as instructed by Parties in Resolution XIV.1 for consideration by SC62 (see document SC62 Doc.18). This work plan will guide the Secretariat's resource mobilization efforts during the current triennium. A subscription mailing list² for resource mobilization enables the Secretariat to send subscribers notifications informing them of calls for proposals, grants, and news to support national fundraising efforts for wetlands.
41. It is public and private sector organizations that fund wetland projects and are a resource to support the fundraising efforts of Contracting Parties. There is a funding database which is constantly updated and currently counts 125 entries. Within this reporting period, the Secretariat would like to acknowledge the voluntary contributions received towards the non-core fundraising priorities from the Flemish Ministry for Environment and Spatial Development to support the development of inventories, from the Governments of Australia and Canada for youth and wetlands activities, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to support the work plan of the STRP, and Danone for World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Conservation awards.
42. To ensure full participation and representation of Contracting Parties at COP14, approximately CHF 425,566, nearly 75% of the total funds needed, was raised for the participation of delegates from Small Island Developing States and countries that were recipients of Official Development Assistance. A total of 94 Contracting Party delegates that requested funding were sponsored to attend COP14 in Geneva. The Secretariat recognizes the Governments of Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Finland, Germany, Norway and Switzerland for their voluntary contributions to this fundraising effort.
43. January 2023 marked 25 years since the original partnership agreement between Danone and the Convention was signed in 1998. The Secretary General met Danone officials at their headquarters in Paris on 20 April 2023 to review current activities and reflect on the future strategic priorities to strengthen the partnership. During this reporting period the grant funded the production of communication materials for World Wetlands Day and the eighth edition of the Ramsar Wetland Conservation Awards, including the Evian Special Prize of USD 10,000 to each of the recipients in the categories of Wise Use, Innovation and Young Wetland Champion. Additionally, for the second year running, Pitch for the Grant, an invitation for individuals, community organizations and social enterprises to submit project proposals to conserve wetlands, was launched on World Wetlands Day. The Secretariat received over 200 project ideas from all over the world. The selection of the winning project idea, and recipient of EUR 10,000, will be concluded in June 2023.
44. The Secretariat signed a new memorandum of understanding with the Nagao Natural Environment Foundation of Japan that will enable the Secretariat to provide implementation support to Contracting Parties in Asia and Oceania until 2025 through the Nagao Wetland Fund (NWF). Through the NWF, the Secretariat has been able to assist various small-scale projects in the developing regions of Asia and Oceania for sustainable management and conservation of Wetlands of International Importance since 2016. The Fund has been particularly integral in implementing the objectives of the Convention in the remote areas of the Pacific Islands, the Himalayas and the deserts of Central Asia.

² See <https://contacts.ramsar.org/subscribe?reset=1>.

45. Since 1997, the Secretariat, the United States Department of State, and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service have operated an initiative, the Wetlands for the Future (WFF) fund, to benefit Latin American and the Caribbean institutions and individuals through capacity building and training in the conservation and wise use of wetlands. This initiative promotes the implementation of the concept of wise use of wetlands and the Convention's Strategic Plan, through strengthening the capacity of countries to manage their wetland resources and promote wetland training activities currently underway or planned within the region or complement existing training and education initiatives with wetland-related instruction.
46. In conclusion, the Secretariat will continue to build on the momentum of the first part of the triennium. It will also continue in its efforts to support Contracting Parties in their implementation of the Convention through increasing the visibility and relevance of wetlands, collaborating with others and mobilizing financial and technical resources.