

CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)

25th Meeting of the Standing Committee

Gland, Switzerland: 23- 27 October 2000

DOC. SC25-25

Agenda item 22.4 (ii)

**Feasibility of turning over the administration of the SGF
to one of the International Organization Partners
(Decision SC24-21)**

Action requested: The Standing Committee is requested to note the Bureau views on this matter and to take a decision on it in order to report to COP8.

1. Paragraph 16 of Resolution COP VII.5 reads as follows:

The COP “AUTHORIZES the Standing Committee to continue to evaluate the functioning of the Fund as prescribed in Resolution VI.6, including the mechanisms for deciding on grant allocations and for project monitoring and evaluation, and to implement any changes in functioning which it considers necessary; **and REQUESTS the Standing Committee to report on the results of this evaluation to Ramsar COP8. This evaluation should take into account the possibility that the management of the SGF could be entrusted to one of the Convention’s International Organization Partners.**” (Emphasis added)

In turn, Decision 24-21 of the Standing Committee reads: “it instructed the Bureau to prepare an agenda paper on the idea of the administration of the Ramsar Small Grants Fund being turned over to one of the International Organization Partners for consideration at the next SC meeting.”

2. The SGF was established in 1990 as a concrete mechanism of the Convention to provide assistance to developing countries in their effort to apply the Convention on the ground. In 1996 eligibility to receive SGF funding was extended to countries with economies in transition.
3. The Conferences of the Parties in 1993, 1996 and 1999 recognized the value of the SGF and on all occasions the Resolutions adopted recommended without hesitation the continuation of the Fund. The COP last year received a detailed evaluation of the Fund which reconfirmed its usefulness in the following terms:

The COP “EXPRESSES its conviction that the critical review submitted to Ramsar COP7 of the first nine years of operation of the Ramsar Small Grants Fund for Wetlands Conservation and Wise Use (Ramsar SGF)

demonstrates that this mechanism continues to be extremely valuable for facilitating the implementation of the Convention in developing countries and countries in transition.”

4. All three COPs and the Standing Committee on several occasions recognized that the main and only problem with the SGF is its very uncertain funding. In the SGF Resolution, the last COP:

“10. REITERATES its conviction expressed in Resolutions 5.8 and VI.6 that the level of resources available to the Ramsar SGF should be increased to at least US\$ 1 million annually;

“11. URGES that a mechanism be developed for receiving commitments of contributions to the SGF, if possible for a three-year period at a time, and REQUESTS the Contracting Parties that will chair the Standing Committee and the Subgroup on Finance of the Standing Committee in the next triennium to seek to initiate this mechanism, with the assistance of the Ramsar Bureau and the Standing Committee as a whole.”

5. In this report for this meeting of the Standing Committee, the Secretary General has said:

Funding for the Small Grants Fund constitutes a serious concern. At present, the Fund has a very well established mechanism to evaluate projects and disburse funds, but so far there is no “mechanism” as such to resource the Fund. The Bureau sends out every year a call for contributions to the Ramsar Administrative Authorities in donor countries. The experience so far shows that, since the Administrative Authorities are not “funding agencies”, in most cases only a reduced number of them are in a position to make small contributions, generally out of funds that were left over in their annual budgets. This does not constitute a “funding mechanism”, and so far, the Ramsar Administrative Authorities have not been able to engage the development agencies, or other sources of funds, in their respective countries to contribute to the SGF.

The Regional Coordinators at the Ramsar Bureau are finding that, in spite of the recognized usefulness of the Fund, the SGF is also becoming a source of disappointment and disillusionment in the recipient countries, since year after year the majority of the projects do not get support because of lack of resources. It should be taken into account that the SGF is often perceived by recipient countries, rightly or wrongly, as the only concrete support that they can receive from the Convention. If the SGF does not work, more and more Contracting Parties could start considering that Ramsar is not able to really support them with wetland wise use and conservation, and lose interest on it.

Thus, one of the top priorities of the Senior Advisor for Environment and Development Cooperation should be to investigate the possibilities of establishing a concrete and reliable mechanism for resourcing the SGF. If this proves not to be possible, COP8 should seriously consider whether the SGF should continue to be operated by the Convention or not.

6. As far as the Bureau's capacity to administer the SGF is concerned, the Secretary General considers that:
 - a) clear rules and procedures have been established for project evaluation and administration, which makes the tasks of the Regional Coordinators and the Projects Administrator much easier than in the past;
 - b) in addition, Contracting Parties have significantly increased their capacity to submit good project proposals, though there is still room for improvement;
 - c) if the SGF funding were to achieve the COP-recommended target of one million US dollars per year, this would allow funding of some 40 projects. Evaluating and administering 40 projects per year would still be within the current Bureau capacity, not least since evaluation of this many or more projects is currently undertaken each year by the Bureau staff. In addition, the 10% administration fee over one million dollars would allow the Bureau to hire another part-time staff to assist in the SGF administration;
 - d) at present, the Bureau staff is not so much concerned with the work involved in relation to the SGF but rather with the frustration, year after year, of having to work on projects' reception and evaluation (including going back to the countries with requests for improvements in the project proposals) knowing perfectly well that the majority of them will not be funded. The Regional Coordinators feel that they are losing face vis-à-vis the recipient countries (which are the large majority of Contracting Parties) because of this, and thus also losing their motivation for this aspect of their work. This is the more true because the Regional Coordinators regard the SGF as an invaluable tool for their work of assisting Contracting Parties in developing capacity to implement the Convention.
7. Consequently, the conclusion of the Bureau is that the real problem with the Ramsar SGF is its resource base, not its administration. If this problem could be solved, the Convention would gain, in image and effectiveness, by continuing to have the SGF associated with it.
8. Passing the administration of the SGF to one of the International Organization Partners would be mostly a political decision, since sooner or later, even if the fund were to keep its name of "Ramsar" SGF, it would become associated with the institution administering it more than with the Convention itself. Thus, the Convention would have abandoned one important aspect of what has heretofore made it attractive to recipient countries.
9. The Bureau has not canvassed the interest that may exist among the International Organization Partners to take over the SGF administration because it was not mandated to do so. Since the Partners will be present during the discussion of this matter, it will be interesting to hear their views and opinions. It goes without saying that the Bureau will be very interested in finding ways and means to establish a closer partnership with some or all of the Partners in relation to the SGF.