

**CONVENTION ON WETLANDS (Ramsar, Iran, 1971)**

**26<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Standing Committee  
Gland, Switzerland, 3-7 December 2001**

**DOC. SC26-6 (b)**

Agenda item 10 (b)

**Ramsar's participation in the preparatory process of the World Summit on Sustainable Development**

**Action requested.** The Standing Committee is requested to note the initiatives taken by the Bureau on this matter and to consider possible actions to engage the support of Contracting Parties for Ramsar-related issues in the preparatory process of the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), in particular to support some of the “core corrections” contained in Annex I to this document.

1. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) will be held in Johannesburg , South Africa, on 2-11 September 2002, two months before Ramsar COP8 in Valencia.
2. The WSSD is intended to take stock of implementation of Agenda 21, the key document that emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 (thus, the WSSD is also referred to as the “Rio+10” process/Summit).
3. On 25 October 2001, Nitin Desai, UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, said that a growing consensus is building around the idea that the WSSD must agree on definitive actions that can comprehensively address the economic, social and environmental issues confronting the global community. Yet it seems so far that no such concrete agreement has been reached on how to do this. There is a general consensus that the WSSD preparations are suffering from a significant lack of leadership. Nevertheless, for the time being the preparatory process is going ahead and Ramsar must try its best to ensure that the issues of interest to the Convention will be reflected in the WSSD results.
4. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (the main institutional arrangement established in the UN to follow up the implementation of Agenda 21) is acting as the Preparatory Committee for the WSSD. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in New York serves as the secretariat of the Commission and thus for the WSSD preparations as well.
5. The preparatory process includes four meetings of the Preparatory Committee. The first one, mostly of an organizational nature, took place in New York in April 2001. The other three meetings will be held on 28 January-8 February 2002 in New York, on 25 March-5 April 2002 also in New York, and on 27 May-7 June 2002 in Bali, Indonesia.
6. The Preparatory Meeting in January 2002 will constitute the first substantial meeting, and it may be the crucial meeting for the WSSD. The main working document will be the report of the UN Secretary General summarizing the results and proposals coming out of a series of regional preparatory meetings that are taking place mostly in September and October

2001, jointly organized by the UN Regional Economic Commissions and UNEP, and meetings of the so-called Major Groups that were recognized in Agenda 21: women, children, indigenous people, NGOs, local authorities, trade unions, industry, science and technology, and farmers.

7. Many Member States have asked to convene their own National Preparatory Committees to review their successes and the challenges they face in achieving sustainable development, and to contribute their views to the assessment of progress.
8. Following Decision SC24-15 of the Standing Committee, which “supported efforts to ensure a high Ramsar visibility in the Rio+10 process”, the Bureau commissioned the 100-page report entitled *Agenda 21 and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands - Submission to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) for the review and assessment of the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21*.
9. The report was translated into the other two official languages and distributed to Contracting Parties under cover of a diplomatic note dated 6 March 2001, stating that “The Bureau very much hopes that this document will be put at the disposal of the lead agency and/or task force responsible for each country’s preparation for the World Summit, so that the role of the Convention on Wetlands is taken into account both in the reports of accomplishments and in the recommendations towards the outputs of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.”
10. As indicated in the Foreword of the report:
  - “2. The Bureau (secretariat) of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands has prepared this ‘report card’ on the activities of this treaty that now has sustainable development as the centerpiece of its mandate, for the information of those who will participate in the preparation of the World Summit at national and international levels. The intention is to ensure that, unlike in Rio in 1992, the Ramsar Convention gains full recognition of the important role it is playing, and the roles it plans to and could play, in pursuing sustainable development.
  3. The report has been structured broadly around the advice provided by the Commission on Sustainable Development and the proposed ‘thematic reviews’ which will be prepared to highlight accomplishments and identify gaps and deficiencies in the approaches being taken to implement Agenda 21.
  4. To assist those crafting such reviews, wherever possible quantitative measures have been included to give some sense of progress in addressing priority actions.
  5. The report draws upon Ramsar’s 30 years of experience in advancing its Wise Use principle and demonstrates that the Convention on Wetlands has come of age as an international instrument, and has much to contribute across almost all chapters of Agenda 21.
  6. The report also recommends some priority ‘course corrections’ of particular interest to the Ramsar Convention for the consideration of the World Summit. These are based on an

assessment of the policy and programmatic gaps and weaknesses which are apparent in the implementation of the Ramsar Convention.”

11. In addition, the Bureau was admitted as an intergovernmental organization at the first preparatory meeting for the WSSD and plans to attend the forthcoming meetings.
12. Finally, the Bureau is fully engaged in a related process dealing with International Environmental Governance, reported upon in DOC. SC26-6 (a).
13. While the Bureau is actively involved in these processes, endeavoring to forward the recognition of the Convention as an important tool for sustainable development and obtain the necessary recognition by the international community, at the end of the day this will only be possible if the national delegations participating in these processes will support this effort. Otherwise, the Bureau, in its observer capacity, will encounter real limitations in making this happen.
14. The Bureau understands that most Ramsar Administrative Authorities are not directly involved in these issues, normally taken care of by the ministries of foreign affairs and the cabinet of the ministries where they are located. Nevertheless, the Bureau wishes to urge the Standing Committee to consider this matter and to ensure that at least one country in each region will accept responsibility for actively supporting the Bureau's efforts, by, for example, identifying the key person in the government who would be prepared to take up these issues.
15. The Bureau also invites the Standing Committee to analyse the “core corrections” that were proposed in the report on *Agenda 21 and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands*, which are reproduced in the Annex to this document. The Bureau calls the attention of the Committee in particular to the following paragraphs in the Annex:
  - 14.7 The Ramsar Convention's List of Wetlands of International Importance as a tool of sustainable development and biodiversity conservation
  - 14.8 Urgent action needed to protect global fisheries
  - 14.9 Ecosystem restoration a priority in order to regain services and benefits
  - 14.10 Actions needed to see the UNCED-related and other conventions working as a closely coordinated 'team' promoting sustainable development (Note: this issue is also explored in DOC.26.6(a) and DOC.26.6(c)), with more up to date information.)
  - 14.11 The funding mechanisms in place for the implementation of the UNCED-related and other conventions need review
16. Concerning the introduction to COP8 of the results of the WSSD that would be of relevance to the Convention, the Bureau suggests that an invitation be issued to the Minister of the Environment of South Africa to address the plenary in the afternoon of Day 1, under *Key issues in the work of the Convention: intervention by an invited speaker*. In addition, the Bureau should prepare an analysis of the results of the Summit that are relevant to the Convention and distribute it as an official document of the COP together with the document containing the draft resolutions (which should be distributed 30 days before the opening of the COP, that is, by 18 October 2002).

## Annex I

### Extract from the Ramsar Bureau report *Agenda 21 and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands*

#### Recommended 'course corrections'

14. The following are some recommendations for 'course corrections'. They are limited to the perspectives of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and do not pretend to embrace the full spectrum of 'course corrections' that the World Summit should consider.

#### 14.1 **A continuing need for policy and legal reforms**

While some progress is evident, there remains a need for national policy and legal instruments to be aligned with the expectations of Agenda 21 in many countries. There now exist an increasing number of exemplars, or models, in this regard and the World Summit should be urged to find ways to be more effective in making these available to other States.

#### 14.2 **Fundamental reforms to governance structures needed**

The evidence suggests that in order to advance toward sustainable development Parties, if they have not already done so, need to consider some fundamental changes to their governance structures, such as:

- i) the establishment within government of a primary driver of sustainable development, one that can accelerate the integration of social, economic and environmental factors. Such a driver could be a task force, high level council, or Ministry established by and reporting to the President or Prime Minister;
- ii) the decentralization or delegation of decision-making to the most appropriate management level. The 'ecosystem approach' developed under the Convention on Biological Diversity advocates this through its Principle 2 and suggests that decentralized systems may lead to greater efficiency, effectiveness and equity. The World Summit should be urged to support this goal and seek the resources to accelerate the introduction of participatory management regimes in the most 'stressed' river basins initially, and subsequently in all others; and
- iii) the application of the ecosystem approach for the decentralization of big global funds and setting up of more sustainable financial mechanisms at the field level, i.e. site-specific trust funds, theme-specific funds, etc.

#### 14.3 **Reforms needed in the way the Major Groups are consulted**

The point has not yet been reached at which all stakeholder interests are routinely represented around the table when matters of sustainable development and the use of natural resource are being discussed. Countries should be urged to review their consultative processes to ensure they are permitting those representing the Major Groups to have their say in national and local policy setting and planning for natural resource management.

**14.4 The poor quality of natural resource information is impeding Agenda 21**

Unless countries have at their disposal high quality data upon which to base integrated planning, much of the product has to be based on guesswork and speculation. While current initiatives such as the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment and the Global International Waters Assessment may help in this regard, the challenge will remain of getting this information into the hands of the people who need it, and ensuring that they have the capacity to interpret and apply such information.

**14.5 Education remains a priority - and a weakness**

There remains an urgent need for the World Summit to encourage a range of actions in the education areas. Little progress has been made in introducing the principles of sustainable development into formal and informal education streams and this warrants very high priority. As indicated in point 14.1 above, part of the solution lies in improved transfer of experiences and information. A failure to engage the education sector in Agenda 21 would seem to be limiting progress in this area, and steps need to be taken both nationally and internationally to address this problem.

**14.6 New approach to training and capacity building needed**

The delivery of training in many cases does not appear to be based on a sound understanding of needs or existing competencies. The World Summit should be urged to develop a major Agenda 21 training initiative - a 'one-stop-shop' for training in sustainable development - which will bring together the necessary expertise and resources to see these shortcomings addressed.

**14.7 The Ramsar Convention's List of Wetlands of International Importance as a tool of sustainable development and biodiversity conservation**

The World Summit should be urged to recognize the importance of States protecting and utilizing their freshwater and coastal wetland resources wisely, using the vehicle of the List of Wetlands of International Importance. Countries are encouraged to use their sovereign right of designating key wetland sites as Wetlands of International Importance as a 'tool' to assist sustainable development and biodiversity conservation aspirations. As advocated by the Ramsar Convention, these wetlands can become part of a global network of 'demonstration' sites for sustainable development, while at the same time providing a focus for national actions to implement Agenda 21 in very tangible and demonstrable ways. To date 123 Parties to the Ramsar Convention have designated 1050 Wetlands of International Importance. These can be found spread across inland water, marine and coastal, dryland, mountain and other ecosystems. In so doing, these Parties have made a major contribution to their national obligations under CBD as part of their quest for sustainable development.

**14.8 Urgent action needed to protect global fisheries**

Allied to 14.7 above, States should be urged to use the mechanism of designating sites to the List of Wetlands of International Importance to establish national networks for protecting vital fish habitats. Fish resources are becoming more and more stressed. By taking the proactive step now of protecting vital fish nursery areas as Ramsar sites, countries can ensure a level of food security and of viable commercial fisheries.

#### 14.9 **Ecosystem restoration a priority in order to regain services and benefits**

While it remains more cost-effective to conserve the natural ecosystems, the technology presently exists to restore many areas now degraded or converted to other less productive uses. The Ramsar Convention advocates the restoration and rehabilitation of wetlands, especially in the cases where countries have specific water management objectives (improved water quality, water storage, flood mitigation, etc.) in mind. The World Summit should be urged to take the proactive step of agreeing to increase efforts in ecosystem restoration.

#### 14.10 **Actions needed to see the UNCED-related and other conventions working as a closely coordinated 'team' promoting sustainable development**

Major weaknesses continue to be identified in the manner by which the suite of conventions operating with an Agenda 21 mandate (either directly or indirectly) are coordinating their work. Without a strong effort to achieve a more collaborative and integrated implementation of the UNCED-related and other relevant conventions, it is difficult to see national administrations, and even more so local stakeholders, being encouraged to think more holistically about the management of natural resources. The following actions are recommended to address these concerns.

- i) As a mechanism to engage the Major Groups more effectively, document and demonstrate the fundamental science behind the global ecosystem, how it is being broken down, and why. Within this context, articulate the specific role, or roles, of each convention, how they link – in an ecosystem sense – and how they link operationally. (The following point (ii) considers some of the operational links in more detail.) As part of the same initiative, the World Summit should be urged to support the concept of 'demonstration' sites to show how the various international conventions can be implemented in an integrated way – to deliver sustainable development. There remains a healthy skepticism among local communities that these high-level instruments can be manifested in tangible outcomes for them. 'Demonstration' sites that show how this can be done would provide an enormous boost for the aspirations of Agenda 21.
- ii) Despite more recent efforts, the general lack of coordination between the multilateral conventions in terms of policy development, science and technology, information management and administration is a major concern. Ramsar's Joint Work Plan with CBD is considered the model for advancing inter-convention collaboration.

The process of creating a more integrated working 'team' of conventions requires acceleration, and the World Summit could, and should, be the catalyst for this. The following could be significant first steps to achieving these more efficient and effective working arrangements among conventions:

- a) taking the idea contained in Chapter 38 of Agenda 21 regarding a high-level inter-agency coordination mechanism (paragraphs 38.16-18), establish an international coordinating and information-sharing mechanism between the UNCED-related and other conventions, which can assist in developing common programmes of work, harmonizing and cross-linking agendas, improving the scheduling of conferences of the Parties and meetings of subsidiary scientific meetings, etc.;

- b) establish a ‘chairs of subsidiary scientific bodies working group’ for the UNCED-related and other conventions in order to encourage cross-fertilization of ideas and the sharing of information and expertise;
  - c) continue to move toward seamless and harmonized information management systems for the UNCED-related and other conventions, as advocated by the 1999 World Conservation Monitoring Centre’s feasibility report for the biodiversity-related conventions (see below);
  - d) promote the further development of bilateral, trilateral or multilateral Memoranda of Cooperation, with associated Joint Work Plans, between conventions, and (as recommended above) include as part of these the ‘demonstration’ projects showing integrated delivery of UNCED-related and other conventions.
- iii) The burden imposed by the independent reporting requirements under each convention is also a major issue, especially for developing countries, and warrants attention by the World Summit. The WCMC Report on harmonizing information management among the biodiversity-related conventions referred to above proposes measures to streamline national reporting, and these require urgent attention.
  - iv) The problem of ensuring that all Parties can participate fully in the workings and deliberations of the international conventions is not a new issue. Regrettably no solution has yet been found to this problem, which continues to see developing countries disadvantaged. Some of the actions recommended above, such as better coordination of meeting schedules, more integrated work programmes, simplified and streamlined national reporting, etc., would serve to reduce the burden on developing countries and for this reason deserve high priority. Experience has also shown that participation by developing countries in Conferences of the Parties and subsidiary scientific bodies is generally constrained by lack of resources. If equity is to be ensured in these important international discussions, then this matter needs to be addressed.

#### 14.11 **The funding mechanisms in place for the implementation of the UNCED-related and other conventions need review**

While the Global Environment Facility and some national funds such as the Fond Français pour l’Environnement Mondiale (FFEM) are proving to be useful instruments for the implementation of two of the UNCED-related Conventions, the World Summit should be urged:

- i) to review these mechanisms to make them even more effective, more easily accessible to countries in need, and more integrated with other funding mechanisms for sustainable development; and
- ii) to identify tangible sources of additional funding to allow a more effective implementation of all conventions by developing countries and countries in transition.