

**High Level Political Forum**  
**"Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world".**

**Inputs from the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands**

**(a) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global level**

The mission of the Ramsar Convention is “Conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national actions and international cooperation, as a contribution towards achieving sustainable development throughout the world”.

The wise use of wetlands, defined as “the maintenance of ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development”, contributes to poverty eradication, as has been expressed in Resolutions of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention and reflected in the Wise Use Handbook.

Wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems. They provide essential services and supply all of our fresh water. Beyond water availability and quality, they are invaluable in supporting climate change mitigation and adaptation, disaster risk reduction, supporting health as well as livelihoods, local development and poverty eradication. Investment in maintenance of the services provided by wetlands should be integral to poverty-reduction strategies and related policies and plans. It is thus central to implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development agenda and the SDGs.

Wetlands play a role in improving human well-being, including through poverty reduction. While poverty alleviation is a key target for some parts of the world, the principle that conservation and wise use of wetlands will help reduce poverty and promote human well-being is well recognized as wetlands provide a wide range of environmental services vital for local communities and can form a key element of their livelihood strategies.

Ramsar Contracting Parties have provided an overarching framework to address issues of poverty eradication in relation to wetland conservation and wise use in various COP Resolutions, such as Resolution IX.14 on *Wetlands and poverty reduction*, Resolution X.3 *The Changwon Declaration on human well-being and wetlands*, Resolution X.28 on *Wetlands and poverty eradication* and Resolution XI.13 *An Integrated Framework for Linking Wetland Conservation and Wise Use with Poverty Eradication*. The framework is focused on the vital link between wetlands, livelihoods and the well-being of people around the world, as well as the importance of providing the guidance and mechanisms for underpinning this vital link and the valuable contribution that wetland ecosystem services can make to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 1.

The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024 also contributes to the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 1 (Poverty eradication), Goal 2 (End hunger and promote sustainable agriculture), Goal 6 (Ensure water and sanitation for all), in particular target 6.6.1, Goal 13 (Combat climate change), Goal 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources), Goal 15 (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems) and Goal 17 (Strengthen means of implementation). The following link provides a reference to how the Ramsar Strategic Plan contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals: [http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/ramsarsp4\\_sdglinks\\_poster\\_e.pdf](http://www.ramsar.org/sites/default/files/documents/library/ramsarsp4_sdglinks_poster_e.pdf).

## **(b) The identification of gaps, areas requiring urgent attention, risks and challenges**

**Wetlands are the most threatened ecosystems, with higher rates of loss and greater numbers of threatened species than any other type of ecosystem.** The degradation and loss of wetlands is more rapid than that of any other ecosystem (with a loss of 64% to 71% of wetlands since 1900), and this trend is accelerating, because of major changes in land use, water diversions, and infrastructure development. Similarly, the status of both freshwater and coastal wetland species is deteriorating faster than that of species inhabiting other ecosystems. Populations of freshwater species **have** declined by 37% in 38 years, between 1970 and 2008, a larger decline than for any other biome.

Access to freshwater is declining for 1-2 billion people worldwide; some 1.1 billion people worldwide lack access to water; and a total of 2.7 billion find water scarce for at least one month of the year. By 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, and two-thirds of the world's population could be living under water stressed conditions. This in turn negatively affects food production, human health, and economic development, and can increase societal conflict.

**There is an urgent need to improve water governance.** Water governance that is demand-driven promotes over-allocation of water, as a result of increasing demand and over-use of water. Instead, water governance should treat wetlands as our "*natural water infrastructure*", integral to water resource management at the scale of river basins. Actions to support water allocation to ecosystems, such as environmental flows, placing upper limits on water allocations (water 'caps'), and new water management legislation, must be strengthened.

**Without wetlands, the water cycle, carbon cycle and nutrient cycle would be significantly altered, mostly detrimentally.** Yet policies and decisions do not sufficiently take into account these interconnections and interdependencies.

**Action is needed to maintain the benefits provided by wetlands for economic development and the livelihoods of people, especially the poor.** Wetlands provide natural infrastructure that can help meet a range of policy objectives. Even with current attempts to maintain water flows for ecosystems, the capacity of wetlands to continue to deliver benefits to people and biodiversity, including clean and reliable water supplies, is declining.

**Wise use, management and restoration of wetlands should help to build opportunities for improving people's livelihoods.** Wetland degradation affects livelihoods and exacerbates poverty, particularly in marginalised and vulnerable sections of society. Setting of well-stated goals for restoration of wetlands offers an efficient and cost-effective means of increasing ground and surface water storage, improving water quality, sustaining agriculture and fisheries, and protecting biodiversity.

**Protect our wetlands.** Commitments and measures taken by Ramsar's 169 Contracting Parties to identify Sites of International Importance and to conserve all their wetlands are an important contribution to the implementation of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement.

**Improving the ecosystem services of water and wetlands can have a positive effect on poverty alleviation by contributing to food, water and energy security.** By addressing several policy objectives and understanding the values and benefits that water and wetlands provide to society, such improvement creates a more sustainable foundation for management action to protect and enhance water and wetland ecosystem services.

**Stop our wetlands from becoming degraded or lost.** Wetland loss can lead to significant reductions in human well-being, and can have negative economic impacts on communities, for example through exacerbating water security problems. It is important to recognize that we all depend on healthy wetlands for our water security.

**(c) Valuable lessons learned on eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity**

Resolution XI.13 (2012) *An Integrated Framework for Linking Wetland Conservation and Wise Use with Poverty Eradication* of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands encourages Contracting Parties to utilise the framework provided in conducting assessments of interlinkages between wise use and poverty in wetlands and within the development of site level management plans, as well as using it as a means to develop collaboration and cooperation with development agencies to address poverty issues within wetlands.

In accordance with this Resolution, and the work plan of the Scientific and Technical Review Panel of the Convention, a review was conducted of nine case studies and best practices on the application of the framework for assessing poverty in wetlands in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Some of the key lessons learned from these case studies are:

**Lobbying can be effective in influencing policy.** To influence key decision-makers, it is essential to use well-informed arguments, and a knowledge of the economic value of a wetland can provide valuable support;

**Traditional knowledge should be utilised.** A key element of the participatory approach is placing value on traditional knowledge. This can be used to understand issues from the local stakeholder's perspective;

**Poor communities should be engaged in alternative livelihood strategies.** The feasibility of alternative livelihood strategies must be understood before being implemented, otherwise the desired outcomes may not be achieved. To ensure the participation of the poor in these activities there is merit in demonstrating the advantages of full participation and providing space for local communities to become involved;

**A long timeframe maybe needed.** It is clear from the case studies that a long time frame is often required for projects to effectively balance poverty eradication with wise use of wetlands.

On the other hand, from the review of National Wetland Policies or similar instruments adopted by Contracting Parties, by 2012 a total of 68 countries had developed poverty-reduction strategy papers, and these were amongst the poorest countries in the world. Wetland Policies have shown a good integration of Ramsar wise-use principles, which incorporate the sustainable use of wetland resources to benefit local communities.

By COP12, in 2015, 39% of Contracting Parties had incorporated wetland issues in poverty-eradication strategies and 16% had implemented wetland programmes or projects that contributed to poverty alleviation objectives or food and water security plans. This progress clearly contributes to SDG Goal 1 and Target 1.1, as well to Ramsar Strategic Plan Target 1 and Aichi Biodiversity Target 2.

## **(d) Emerging issues likely to affect the realization of poverty eradication and achieving prosperity**

### **Wetland loss and degradation**

Wetland ecosystem services (the benefits people derive from wetlands) form an integral part of the livelihood strategy of wetland-dependent communities. Failure to follow wise-use principles can prevent a recovery from poverty or can push people into poverty or deeper into poverty than they were.

### **Policies that trigger deterioration**

It is clear that policy changes can improve the well-being of communities and maintain good ecological character of wetlands. Conversely, a policy change that triggers deterioration in ecological character beyond the limit of natural tolerance can push communities into poverty.

### **Ecosystem functions and the ecosystem services they provide to people and nature**

The services, benefits, values, functions, goods and products that wetlands provide have not yet been integrated in national development plans. The lack of recognition of the role of wetlands in facilitating the human right to water and poverty reduction, and the modesty of the efforts invested in restoring wetlands, both contribute to a continued failure to realise the potential benefits of wetlands. The integral values and benefits, both material and non-material for people and nature, in a non-consumptive approach, include spiritual, existential and future-oriented values.

### **Climate change**

The adverse effects of climate change, such as sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and changes in hydrology and in the temperature of water bodies, will lead to a reduction in the services provided by wetlands. Removing the existing pressures on wetlands and improving their resiliency is the most effective method of coping with the adverse effects of climate change. Conserving, maintaining, or rehabilitating wetland ecosystems can be a viable element in an overall climate change mitigation strategy.

## **(e) Areas where political guidance by the high-level political forum is required**

### **Water security**

Wetlands play an important role in ensuring water security and are fundamental to human health and well-being. The role played by wetlands within the hydrological cycle provides an important opportunity for linking local public health concerns to wetland conservation.

### **Food security**

Food security is one of the most significant contributions of wetlands to human health. Wetlands contribute to all three elements of food security, i.e. availability, access, and nutrient sufficiency. They also directly support the health and livelihoods of millions of people worldwide through the provision of important food items such as rice and fish. Almost a billion households in Asia, Africa and the Americas depend on rice growing and processing for their main livelihoods. More than 660 million people rely on fishing and aquaculture for a living; most commercial fish breed or spawn in coastal wetlands, and 40 % of all fish consumed are raised in aquaculture.

Future food security is also dependent on the genetic materials contained in plants, including those in wetlands. Wetlands also provide products that form the basis of subsistence incomes for local communities.

### **Cross-sectoral approaches**

A conceptual shift among policy-makers and decision-makers is required to ensure that cross-sectoral approaches are adopted and implemented, incorporating the principles of consultation and transparency, and ensuring the long-term future of the services provided and supported by wetlands. As these approaches place greater emphasis on the sustainable use of wetlands and their resources, they will better support sustainable development and improved human well-being.

### **(f) Policy recommendations on ways to accelerate progress for those at risk of being left behind**

#### **Addressing indirect and direct drivers of change**

Many of the responses designed with a primary focus on wetlands and water resources will not be sustainable or sufficient unless other indirect and direct drivers of change are addressed. For example, the sustainability of protected areas for wetlands will be severely threatened by human-caused climate change. Similarly, the management of ecosystem services cannot be sustainable globally if the growth in consumption of services continues unabated. Responses also need to address the conditions that determine the effectiveness and degree of implementation of the wetland-focused actions.

#### **Consideration of the trade-offs among different wetland ecosystem services and the need for cooperation across sectors**

It is not uncommon for strategies aiming to increase food production and reduce poverty to propose the conversion of marshes to agriculture, conversion of mangroves to aquaculture, and significant increases in the use of fertilizers to increase crop production. Such actions, however, reduce wetland habitat area (and hence the magnitude of the services they provide), increase the input of water pollutants, remove the natural water-filtering service provided by wetlands, and remove ecosystem services provided by mangroves, such as timber and charcoal supply and fish habitat, on which the poor in particular rely. This will make the development goal of improved water and sanitation more difficult to achieve and may increase poverty for some groups. In contrast, a development strategy that aims to safeguard the full range of benefits provided by wetlands might better achieve the set of development goals while minimizing future harm to the wetlands.

#### **Wetland restoration**

A primary goal of wetland recovery projects is to restore and enhance wetland benefits by re-establishing natural ecological processes. Some wetland functions can be mimicked with engineered structures, but engineered methods typically do not provide the maximum ecological benefit. The key to success is the setting of well-stated goals that form part of a broader comprehensive and rigorous process for planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the restoration projects and adopting an adaptive management approach.

#### **Systems of protected areas in international, regional, sub-regional, and national frameworks**

A regional or landscape approach is necessary especially for aquatic systems that are not easily “fenced” from surrounding areas. Protected area networks at all levels, including the designation and management of Ramsar sites (currently 2,741) play an important role, especially as individual sites are often functionally interconnected by reason of shared hydrology, migratory species, and so on.

#### **Climate change**

Removing the existing pressures on wetlands and improving their resilience is the most effective method of coping with the adverse effects of climate change. Sea-level rise, coral bleaching, and changes in hydrology and the temperature of water bodies will lead to a reduction in the goods and services provided by wetlands. Further, efforts to respond to climate change may have equally negative and compounding effects on freshwater and coastal zone ecosystems. Information about

the consequences of climate change on specific wetland types and river basins is sorely needed to allow managers of water resources and wetlands to integrate changes in climate into their planning and management efforts. Conserving, maintaining, or rehabilitating wetland ecosystems can be a viable element of an overall climate-change mitigation strategy.