

Wetlands International

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Better understanding our wetlands

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Better Understanding Our Wetlands

National Wetlands Policies and their Development in West Africa

‘... defining a national policy on wetlands is surely the best means of making them a national development priority ...’

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Preamble

It is known today that wetlands, just like agricultural lands and forests, are amongst the main systems that maintain life on our planet. This awareness has played a decisive role in the emergence of global support and

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political commitment with respect to the sustainable development and conservation of the environment in general and of wetlands in particular.

The interest in wetlands is growing every day and a tendency towards the conservation of these ecosystems is perceptible in various countries, whose adopted policies are preventing any loss or degradation of these environments, ensuring their wise use and encouraging research in view of assessing their values.

The aim of this series of publications is to help NGOs, decision-makers and environmental planners, administrative authorities, national aid organisations, donors, the national education sector etc., become aware of issues on wetlands and influence decisions that respect the environment in developmental matters, and that pay greater attention to the preservation of these ecosystems and to the sustainable use of their resources.

Importance of Wetlands at the National Level

Wetlands are very important for the ecological and hydrological functions and rich biological diversity which they maintain. Wetlands are, for human beings, of great economical, cultural, scientific and recreational value.

Wetlands are amongst the most productive ecosystems on earth with their systems directly satisfying the needs of millions of people and providing goods and services to regions that are not situated around wetlands (*cf. Bulletin n° 2 & 3 of this series*).

The importance of wetlands can be estimated by the number of waterbirds found in them, since a numerous studies have been carried out on waterbirds, which are good indicators of the biological diversity existing in a given wetland. In arid regions in particular, wetlands are a real source of life and a development pole for riverine communities. They contribute to the subsistence of livestock rearers, farmers, fishermen etc and play a very

important role in nature conservation.

However, not all wetlands fulfil hydrological functions in the same way. In some cases, they could even have functions that are against man's interest. Certain riverine wetlands could cause rivers to overflow their banks thereby increasing the risk of floods. In underlining the importance of wetlands, it is therefore crucial to quantify, if possible, their varied and different functions.

Impacts of Development on Wetlands at the National Level

Wetlands conservation and water issues are topical matters for all social strata, especially for those taking decisions on the funding of development projects and for certain local interest groups that are faced, on a daily basis, with the consequences brought about by the disappearance and the degradation of wetlands.

The rapid and unsustainable development of these ecosystems and the hydrological basins in which they are found remains a disturbing factor in the natural hydrological cycles, very often bringing a higher frequency of and aggravation of floods, droughts and pollution.

It is therefore essential, for the survival of wetlands and the continued provision of goods and important services, for all communities to take wise measures in the protection of wetlands and the distribution of water.

In West Africa, direct or indirect human activities have greatly altered the regularity of cyclical changes of wetlands. One of the resulting consequences of the disappearance of wetlands are the water and food crises already beleaguering some of our regions, with their effects tied to regional and national securities.

With regard to water utilisation and river basin management, the frequency in management conflicts is justified by the fact that in present day debates, wetlands are yet to receive the priority attention they deserve with respect to the important functions they fulfil through contributing to the maintenance of productive river basins in good condition.

A unique National Wetlands Policy

To develop and implement wetlands policies, efforts by African countries in general should necessarily start with a better understanding of the present state of the changing tendencies of their resources; this supposes conducting national inventories of wetlands and especially making good use of the results of these inventories to instigate and encourage decision-taking at the political level.

This reflection, by African Francophone political decision-makers during the Evian Meeting in May 1999 to support the implementation efforts of the Convention on Wetlands, testifies to the interest for the African region to reach a decisive stage in the recognition of the problems of wetlands and in the achievement of targeted solutions.

Reasons for a independent National Policy

Wetlands are rarely covered explicitly at the national level by other management policies on natural resources.

In most West African countries, policies and strategies relating to aquatic ecosystems are very often components of national policies on sustainable development, biological diversity and other sectoral environmental policies. Thus, information on this type of environment is unclear and hidden in more general objectives.

A unique wetlands policy offers an opportunity for recognising them as ecosystems that require different management and conservation methods that are not hidden by other management objectives. A unique policy permits, on the one hand, drawing the attention of, notably, legislators and the general public to the problems concerning wetlands and, on the other hand, allows a clear expression of goals and objectives to be attained for these ecosystems. Finally, the policy should indicate precisely responsibilities and commitments that governments should undertake and fulfil.

A national policy is a reflection of a standpoint and it :

- ❑ expresses desired principles ;
- ❑ signals intentions (goals and objectives) ;
- ❑ reveals choices made with regard to strategic orientations ;
- ❑ signifies a commitment ;
- ❑ proposes a consensus ;
- ❑ expresses concern ;
- ❑ offers advice and establishes, clearly, roles and responsibilities.

What could be the objectives of a national policy ?

The objectives of a policy express its importance and should be enumerated through a defined number of key concepts, which will all be of equal importance in the formulation of the policy. However, the implementation of the policy could be such that one or two of these objectives arouse public attention.

During the formulation of a national wetlands policy, the following objectives could be taken into consideration :

- ❑ Ensure that the wetlands policy, as well as any programme formulated to this end, is linked to other policies relating to water, wild species conservation and economic development amongst others, in order to guarantee the wise use of resources and fulfil international commitments with regard to the conservation of these ecosystems.
- ❑ Promote measures aimed at eliminating wetland destruction and encouraging their restoration whilst preserving their integrity and genetical diversity, and ensuring that the consumption and economic utilisation of their resources remain durable.

The means of promoting these objectives and their application at different national levels could be defined through the application, by consensus of implementation strategies.

Priority Measures in the Establishment of a Policy

The application of the principles of wise use of wetlands through the establishment of a national policy is a major expectation of the Convention on Wetlands. To ensure the application of these principles, measures to be considered and linked to this policy are amongst others :

- ❑ establishing institutional mechanisms that permit the definition of how wetlands conservation could be successfully carried out and how priorities on wetlands could be integrated into the development plan of the territory ;
- ❑ establishing mechanisms and procedures that will permit the introduction of an integrated and multidisciplinary approach into the planning and execution of projects on wetlands ;
- ❑ examination of the legislation and policies in force which affect wetlands conservation ;
- ❑ application, where necessary, of the legislation in force and of important policies on wetlands conservation ;
- ❑ sharing, between countries, of acquired experience and information on the policy on wetlands, their conservation and wise use ;
- ❑ improving the understanding by decision-makers and the public of all the advantages and values offered and provided by these ecosystems ;

- ❑ the study of traditional techniques employed in order to use wetlands wisely and the elaboration of pilot projects on the sustainable use of representative wetlands ;
- ❑ defining conservation and management priorities for each wetland according to the needs and conditions of each country ;
- ❑ registration on the Ramsar list of identified Wetlands of International Importance.

Principles to be established in the Development of Policies

To help stakeholders conserve and use wetlands in a sustainable manner, two essential policies have proved to be particularly useful to development agencies. There are :

- ❑ the formulation and implementation of national wetlands strategies and policies ;
- ❑ the effective incorporation of wetlands conservation and wise use into projects, sectoral programmes and policies.

To promote the development and implementation of national policies, a well-conceived and well-planned action is often necessary in improving knowledge and awareness of wetlands so that conservation measures could be adapted precisely to the specific conditions of a particular country. Policy formulation must not be a simple one-off action, but should on the contrary be fully incorporated into the environmental economical development planning.

As for wetlands conservation, it should be taken into consideration in the national management strategies concerning natural and environmental resources. In practise, wetlands bear the influence of all the other sectoral policies. Consequently, all policies concerning wetlands must be incorporated into the national strategic frameworks of the environment.

Principles to be established in the formulation of programmes and policies on wetlands are multiple, and express, at best, present concerns on the management and wise use of their resources.

The wise use principle

(Ramsar Convention)

'the sustainable use of wetlands for the benefit of mankind in a manner that is compatible with the preservation of the natural properties of the ecosystem'

□

The interdependence principle

'the management of wetlands should be envisaged on a larger scale, taking on, if necessary, a political and social dimension and covering different sectors'

□

The multiple use principle

'the management of wetlands in a sustainable manner involves accepting and optimising wetlands' different uses'

□

The precautionary principle

'the avoidance of activities that are deemed to have a negative consequence on the environment even in the absence of scientific proof of their harmfulness'



The "no total loss" principle

'wetlands must not be subjected to any total drainage in the absence of any environmental management imperative'



The restoration principle

'parts of wetlands must be restored, each time that it is possible, if it can be shown through past documented studies, that no given situation is at its best state and that it is possible to revert to the original state'

Principles for National Wetlands Policies

(Adapted schema according to Guidelines on Aid and Environment. OECD, n°9, 1996)

Implementation strategies of the policy

It is not rare to find several strategies having direct or indirect bearing on the management of wetlands. In many institutions and organisations, wetlands conservation and management is a shared responsibility. The development and implementation of a national policy on wetlands should, therefore, necessarily take into account

the successes, failures, and relevance of these sectoral policies to avoid duplication.

The national wetlands policy should include specific implementation strategies that favour key areas that are representative of government's priorities while encouraging a certain degree of co-operation and sufficient participation of other interest groups.

Several items, such as the following, can be included in a national policy :

- ❑ The creation of common objectives for wetlands conservation in such a way that they will be an integral part of a global national development plan ;
- ❑ The improvement of co-ordination activities and communication between government bodies and NGOs ;
- ❑ The recognition and encouragement of local communities and non-governmental organisations' role and efforts with regard to wetlands conservation ;
- ❑ The co-ordination and proper planning of government programmes in order to reduce unfavourable effects on wetlands to a minimum and encourage their conservation ;
- ❑ The guarantee of adequate management and maintenance of protected wetlands after their designation, acquisition and/or preservation ;
- ❑ The correction of shortcomings in wetlands classification, inventory, study and evaluation, and the guarantee of synthesising, stocking and searching for data necessary for improved knowledge and access.

Finally, the implementation of the policy presents the ideal framework for reinforcing the links between its strategies and other national policies' initiatives, particularly in the areas of water and natural resources management,

biological diversity and in the fight against desertification etc.

Wetlands International and the Development of National Policies

The national wetlands policy is a key element in the application of the wise use concept of the Convention on Wetlands. To this effect, great efforts have been made since 1996 towards making Recommendation 6.9, adopted during the 6th Conference of Contracting Parties, a reality on the ground. This Recommendation demands "the establishment of a framework for the formulation and application of national wetlands policies and an analysis of the status of these policies at the international level".

Wetlands International, through its West Africa Programme, launched a training module on the processes of developing and implementing national wetlands policies in May 2000 ; this module is destined for certain target groups, including political decision-makers, town councillors and managers of wetlands and national parks.

This and other training modules basically incorporate the guidelines on the development and application of national wetlands policies for two reasons :

- firstly, in order to complete the different national policies or present them in a more global context, and
- secondly, because these modules could be useful to countries involved in amending their policies or national strategies on wetlands, or to those who plan to do so.

In line with the guidelines on international co-operation within the framework of this Convention, Ghana, which hosted a regional course organised by Wetlands International in Africa and which has just developed her national strategy, after Uganda in 1995, shared her knowledge and experience with fourteen (14) other countries in West and Central Africa that are now starting the process.

