



Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative

Policy Brief: National Wetland Policies

Regional Dialogue on Wetland Policies in the Lower Mekong Region

The Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI) and the Ramsar Regional Centre-East Asia, convened a regional dialogue on wetlands policies to review the state of national wetland policies across the region. It was attended by the five IBRRI country governments, non-governmental organisations and academics.

This policy brief provides IBRRI partners with specific recommendations on the development and implementation of national wetland policies discussed during the dialogue.



The Ramsar Convention and Wetland Policy

- A National Wetland Policy is a key feature of the implementation of the wise use concept of the Ramsar Convention.
- The Fourth Ramsar Strategic Plan 2016-2024 proposes that Contracting Parties to the Convention should implement the Strategic Plan at national and regional levels by developing national wetlands policies. Such policies should recognise the benefits wetlands provide and be cross-sectoral to ensure greatest impact on the wise use of wetlands.
- The Ramsar Convention adopted Resolution VII.6 on “Guidelines for developing and implementing National Wetland Policies” in 1999. The annex to Resolution VII.6 sets out comprehensive guidance for the development, integration and implementation of wetland policies. This guidance has been expanded in Ramsar Handbook 2 (4th Edition) on *National Wetland Policies*.

Wetland Policy or Wetland Policies?

Two distinct, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, approaches can be pursued. Both approaches come with an element of risk. However, the challenges may be more significant in attempting to embed wetland issues within multiple cross-sectoral policies, as the potential for policy gaps to occur is greater, especially where the appetite for uptake and integration within some sectors is weak.

National Wetland Policy

A unique, 'wetland-centric' stand-alone policy at a national level can provide a strong opportunity to recognize the importance of wetlands and to establish clear management responsibilities and objectives. A national wetland policy can:

- Help raise the profile of wetlands, with legislators and the public;
- Articulate the key roles and responsibilities of government thus enhancing accountability.

Integrated Wetland Policies

The integration of wetland issues within multiple cross-sectoral policies and strategies can also be beneficial to raising awareness of wetlands. Integrated wetland policies can:

- Assist with embedding the wise use of wetlands in multiple ministries;
- Raise awareness of wetland ecosystem services across different levels of government from the national to the local levels.

Sectoral Policy Interests

Wetland policies can be integrated within the policies and strategies of multiple sectors. For instance:

Water sector: Water resource planning can highlight the key role that wetlands may play in improve water quality and quantity, regulating water flow in rivers, or recharging groundwater resources.

Energy sector: Wetlands can be highlighted in strategic planning for hydropower and the need to ensure their wise use along with the need to generate renewable energy.

Agriculture sector: The conversion of wetlands to agriculture can often result in the loss of key benefits to local communities. Sustainable agricultural policies can emphasise the wise use of wetlands for both food production and their novel use in treating agricultural runoff.

Tourism sector: Well-designed and managed wetland tourism can make a significant contribution to sustainable development objectives whilst maintaining the ecological character of wetlands.

Regional Wetlands-Related Policy Strengths and Weaknesses

Sectors with strong policy linkages to wetlands:

- Biodiversity planning and management
- Natural resource management
- Environmental protection
- Water management
- Protected areas
- Fisheries
- Forestry






Sectors with weak policy linkages to wetlands:

- Economic growth strategies
- Sustainable development
- Industrial development
- Tourism
- Agriculture
- Health
- Education
- Climate change
- Poverty alleviation
- Disaster risk reduction

Overview of Wetlands Related Policies in IBRRI Countries

- Not all five IBRRI countries have stand-alone national wetland policies
- The countries that do have national wetland policies (Myanmar and Viet Nam) are at different stages of implementation. Both countries have acknowledged that there is a need for further support on implementation.
- Several countries include wetlands in national guidance, strategies and under the aegis of other laws, agreements and regulations. For instance, wetlands are addressed as one of the land use types in the National Land Use Master Plan 2030 in Lao PDR and in Viet Nam, wetland policy objectives have been integrated into the National Strategy on Climate Change.

				
Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Thailand	Viet Nam
<p>No national wetland policy</p> <p>Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management</p> <p>Law on Water Resources Management</p> <p>Protected Area Law</p> <p>Fisheries Law</p> <p>Guidance for the Wise Use of Freshwater Wetlands</p> <p>'Mangroves' mentioned once in NDCs</p>	<p>No national wetland policy</p> <p>National Land Use Master Plan 2030</p> <p>Water and Water Resources Law</p> <p>'Wetlands' mentioned five times in NDCs</p>	<p>Developed National Wetland Policy in 2019 with six wetland policies and 17 objectives</p> <p>National Wetland Committee established in 2016</p> <p>'Mangroves' mentioned three times in NDCs</p>	<p>No national wetland policy</p> <p>List of wetlands of national and international importance</p> <p>Wetlands featured in the Master Plan for Integrated Biodiversity Management 2015-2021</p> <p>National Biodiversity Committee</p> <p>'Mangroves' mentioned once in NDCs</p>	<p>Developed the first national wetland policy in the 1990s</p> <p>Master Plan for Biodiversity</p> <p>National Strategy on Climate Change</p> <p>Decree on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Wetlands</p> <p>Action Plan on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Wetlands</p> <p>'Wetlands' mentioned once and 'mangroves' mentioned twice in NDCs</p>

Case study - Integrating Wetlands and Climate Change Policies

13 CLIMATE ACTION



The following table illustrates how different elements in the development of national wetland policy can be integrated with climate change policies to optimise mutually beneficial outcomes and to address the climate change agenda, for instance by delivering on commitments made under the UNFCCC Paris Agreement and supporting the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

National Wetland Policy	Implications for Climate Change Policy
<p><i>Establishing a National Wetland Committee</i></p>	
<p>A National Wetland Committee should comprise of representatives of multiple government ministries and, where appropriate, NGOs who can ensure a two-way exchange of information and activities across sectors.</p>	<p>A representative of governmental climate change policy should be actively engaged with the National Wetland Committee. In the absence of such a committee, wetland representation should be made in national discourses on climate change policy.</p>
<p><i>Define “wetlands” at a national level</i></p>	
<p>It is essential that a national definition exists for wetlands. This should be consistently applied across all sectors.</p>	<p>Wetlands (and especially those with high levels of organic material stored in their soils) should be described and embedded in climate change policies.</p>
<p><i>Identify stakeholders</i></p>	
<p>Wetlands provide multiple benefits to many sectors of society. The views of multiple stakeholders should be captured and articulated in a national wetland policy.</p>	<p>Wetlands offer opportunities for mitigating for and adapting to climate change. The views of how different wetland-related stakeholders can benefit from the wise use of wetlands should be part of climate change policies.</p>
<p><i>Set goals and principles</i></p>	
<p>A robust national wetland policy should articulate simple but consistent goal statements which emphasise the links between the wise use of wetlands and human well-being. The principles should capture the commitments of the government and be set within the cultural context of the country.</p>	<p>Wetlands can play a significant role in climate change policies. The wise use of wetlands should be embedded in climate change policies and the specific role of wetlands in contributing to NDCs should be highlighted along with wider mitigation and adaptation benefits.</p>
<p><i>Ensure clear linkages with other policies and harmonize across sectors</i></p>	
<p>The benefits of wetlands transcend multiple sectoral interests. National wetland policies need to clearly map the linkages between the wise use of wetlands and national and local policies within other sectors.</p> <p>Wetland policy decisions need to be harmonized across all other policy sectors to ensure cohesive governance and to remove the potential for policy inconsistencies and conflicts.</p>	<p>Establishing clear strategies, as annexes to wider national policies on wetlands and climate change, on mutually supporting topics, such as on cooperation on restoration of coastal wetlands, can enhance cross sectoral dialogue and outcomes.</p> <p>Establishing cross sectoral pilot projects (such as a wetland restoration scheme that targets carbon sequestration, water resources and agricultural production) as tangible manifestations of policy initiatives can be very effective in demonstrating mutually beneficial outcomes.</p>

Developing a Wetland Policy: An Ongoing Process

The development of a robust national wetland policy can involve many steps. The Ramsar Handbook on National Wetland Policies sets out the process from the instigation of planning a policy through to government endorsement and implementation. However, the development of wetland policies should be thought of as a process that is not static but requires routine review and improvement.



'Must do'

- Establish a functional cross-sectoral national wetland committee
- Ensure strong engagement, participation and support at all levels of government through to village level
- Evaluating the pros and cons associated with developing a single, stand-alone wetland policy, embedding wise use principles across multi-sectoral policies or, and ideally, implementing both approaches
- Understand what wetlands are, through a clear national definition and where wetlands are, through a robust national wetland inventory
- Identify specific threats to wetlands including perverse incentives and conflicting policies
- Develop sustainable and novel financing mechanisms, including through the private sector, to support implementation
- Build capacity within government agencies and across wider stakeholders and communities
- Seek mutually reinforcing outcomes through harmonizing across cross-sector policies
- Attain legal endorsement of policy actions
- Implement a routine monitoring and reporting framework to assess progress
- Exploring the potential to fully integrate national wetland policies across a variety of national and inter-governmental reporting obligations including the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), NDCs, Aichi Biodiversity Target and Ramsar Convention National Reports.

'Don't do'

- Do not develop wetland policies in isolation and without the input of wider government ministries and public stakeholders
- Do not expect other sectors to engage unless a mechanism for engagement is established
- Do not assume that other sectors will understand what wetlands are and where they exist in the landscape
- Do not exclude government or private sector from engaging in the development and implementation of wetland policies
- Do not fail to enforce legal obligations enacted through wetland policies
- Do not be overambitious regarding implementation and enforcement activities if funding is limited
- Do not neglect to monitor and review the success or otherwise of wetland policies
- Do not assume that a wetland policy will be relevant over a long timeframe, especially where policy changes may be rapid in other sectors

Further information

Ramsar Convention Secretariat (2010). *National Wetland Policies: Developing and implementing National Wetland Policies*. Ramsar handbooks for the wise use of wetlands, 4th edition, vol. 2. Ramsar Convention Secretariat.

Resolution VII.6 on Guidelines for developing and implementing National Wetland Policies. <https://www.ramsar.org/document/resolution-vii6-guidelines-for-developing-and-implementing-national-wetland-policies>

Indo-Burma Ramsar Regional Initiative (IBRRI): Strategic Plan 2019-2024 (2019). Bangkok, Thailand: IUCN. pp93. Regional Dialogue on Wetland Policies in the Lower Mekong (2019). Workshop report.

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