

4. Wetland Policies and Policies for Wetlands

KEY POINTS

- **Wetland policy-making is about politics, and building political influence**
- **Wetlands are a challenging policy area because they involve many interest groups**
- **Discussions with individual government agencies on a one to one basis about specific policies may be the easiest way to show how wetlands are important and influence policies.**
- **Exploring the practical value of wetlands for the different goals of politically powerful agencies is a good way to get wetlands onto the policy agenda**
- **Wetland policy making must link to the field level and build policy there to address the real issues faced in wetland use for poverty reduction.**



Wetlands are valued by a range of stakeholders for different reasons

SUMMARY

Wetlands are not high on the policy making agenda of most governments, while organisations concerned with wetlands are often politically weak. Given that policy making is a political process, wetland agencies need to explore first how to generate political support. This is probably best undertaken by investigating how existing government policies, especially ones which relate to MDG goals, affect wetlands, and how these goals can be supported by sound wetland management policies. One to one discussions with development ministries focusing on demonstrating the practical environmental and development benefits of a commitment to sustainable wetland use may be a productive entry point. For the more complex national wetland policies an inclusive approach that recognises the linkages to different agencies and their goals, is needed. Recognition of the multi-functional nature of wetlands is an essential basis for policy dialogue, with field experience from village natural resource management committee an essential component.

1. The Policy Challenge

There is a tendency amongst wetland related NGOs to expect governments to realise the importance of, and need for, wetland policies. This is a rather arrogant attitude, which can be counter productive. Why should governments want to develop wetland policies which involve complex inter-agency discussions and bring conflicting views about wetlands and their values into face to face discussions?

It is argued here that it could be more productive for those concerned with wetlands to start a dialogue with individual government agencies on a one to one basis. In this way they can explore how existing policies impact upon wetlands, and discuss with specific agencies how to ameliorate any negative impacts whilst building the necessary capacity and political support for some actions on policies relating to wetlands.

The basis of this argument is practical experience which has identified two areas of concern. First, wetlands are not seen as important in their own right by most governments and by most of their various agencies. Recognition of wetlands is only achieved if their impact upon other aspects of the society is understood, such as contributing to food security, water availability and flood control. Secondly, the organisations which are pushing wetland policies are politically unimportant. They have little or no political influence and generally cannot generate much public or government interest in their wetland concerns.

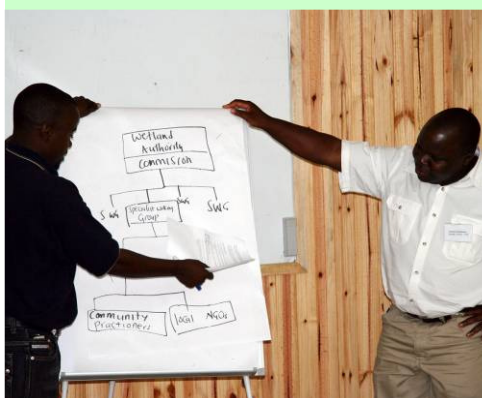
This second point links to an essential understanding, which must be central to any policy discussions, that policy making is a political process. As a result it is only those important and influential in political terms who can influence policy. To have any political influence, those concerned with wetlands have to be of use to those who do have political power, and be able to help them achieve their goals or provide useful funds. This can be the basis of alliances which can help develop wetland policies.

2. Policy Making Process

For wetland-interested organisations to be influential in policy formulation a first step is to engage in dialogue with the politically powerful agencies in the



Policy dialogue; opening of a roundtable meeting of government and NGO stakeholders



Working Group results being shared in the National Dissemination and Advocacy Workshop

government. This could involve, for example, discussions with the Ministry of Agriculture about the role of wetlands in helping achieve food security, and how sound wetland management is essential for sustaining wetland crop production in the long term. The challenge then would be to work with the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that agricultural policies are sensitive to wetlands. Conversely wetland policies should recognise the importance of wetland agriculture for poverty reduction and food security.

Similarly, another entry point might be through the Ministry of Water Resources or the Ministry of Economic Development to explore the role of wetlands in meeting the Millennium Development Goal relating to access to safe water. In many areas wetland-fringe wells are important and poor management of wetlands (and their catchments) can undermine this source of water. Hence water access policies need to consider wetlands and ensure sound management of these areas and their catchments. Working on a one to one basis in this way is arguably more effective in developing wetland policies than engaging with all the stakeholders at the same time.

Such dialogue with key and powerful agencies provides opportunities to help raise awareness of the value of wetlands. But this must focus on demonstrating the practical environmental and development benefits of a commitment to addressing wetland issues, both in the short and long-term.

3. Approach of Wetland Agencies

In order to move wetlands, and policies for wetlands, higher up the policy making agenda, there is a need to have an outward-looking agency championing the cause of wetlands. This should be engaged with wetlands not solely for their own sake with a conservation perspective, but rather seek to highlight among stakeholders the importance and role of wetlands in achieving diverse, but politically important, development goals.

These external linkages can be complex and far reaching as the case of road infrastructure shows in Malawi. The loss of wetlands and their functions in regulating rivers is thought to be one reason for the very high discharges which occur in rivers throughout Malawi during the wet season. These increasingly severe floods have led to an almost annual loss of bridges on the main road network. Restoring wetlands in the upper reaches of the river systems is one possible long-term solution to this problem. However, this restoration should also consider degraded catchments, the rapid runoff from which has led to erosion and down-cutting in wetlands, which has destroyed them. Hence, an integrated catchment management approach benefits the road infrastructure, as well as leading to improvements in domestic water supplies due to greater water infiltration. This confirms the need for an inclusive approach in pursuing wetlands related policies, understanding all the complex linkages.

4. Problems with National Wetland Policy Processes

In both Zambia and Malawi, where the SAB project has been working, national wetland policy processes have been underway for many years. However, these have lost their momentum for a variety of reasons, not least because they are multi-stakeholder processes which involve agencies with different and conflicting interests in wetlands. (This is analogous to the problems faced with integrating sustainable development into government policies). For example, water resource agencies see wetlands as water storage or flow moderating mechanisms; wildlife agencies see them as natural areas to be protected as critical seasonal habitats, especially for migratory bird species; and for agriculture and economic development agencies, wetlands are resources to be developed in order to meet the food security and safe water targets of the Millennium Development Goals. Achieving a policy consensus in this situation is difficult, as there are many

vested interests which agencies regard a sacrosanct. Successful discussions must involve willingness on the part of all participants to understand the views of others and to be prepared to compromise. Far too often the different agencies fail to realise that a balance has to be struck, and that some agreement and progress with compromise is better than no progress at all.

5. Value of the Multi-Functional Wetland Approach

The critical basis for policy discussions across the various wetland stakeholders is the recognition that wetlands are multi-functional areas. The full range of ecosystem services, and how they contribute to different aspects of ecological security and livelihood development, needs to be recognised, and their values, or the replacement costs in the absence of wetlands, made clear to the stakeholders. To take a national wetland policy forward there has to be something of interest and benefit for all the stakeholders.

The land use model for sustainable wetland use, developed by the SAB Project, is one example where the multiple-use of wetlands is recognised. This provides a basis for dialogue between the agencies interested in Wildlife / Conservation, Agriculture / Economic Development, and Water Resource. In this model both agriculturalists and conservationists can value the protected core and transverse bunds of natural vegetation because they prevent gully formation and increase water infiltration while also providing habitat for wildlife. But just as the wildlife agency is not claiming that all the wetland needs to be protected, or the agriculturalists that all the wetland should be cultivated, so the other interested agencies must not claim sole rights to wetlands. A similar, multiple use approach can be taken at a different scale in a river basin, with individual wetlands allocated to different uses depending on their characteristics and suitability for sustainable use in different ways.

Ecosystem services derived from wetlands (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005)

Provisioning

- Food
- Fresh water
- Fibre and fuel
- Biochemical
- Genetic materials

Regulating

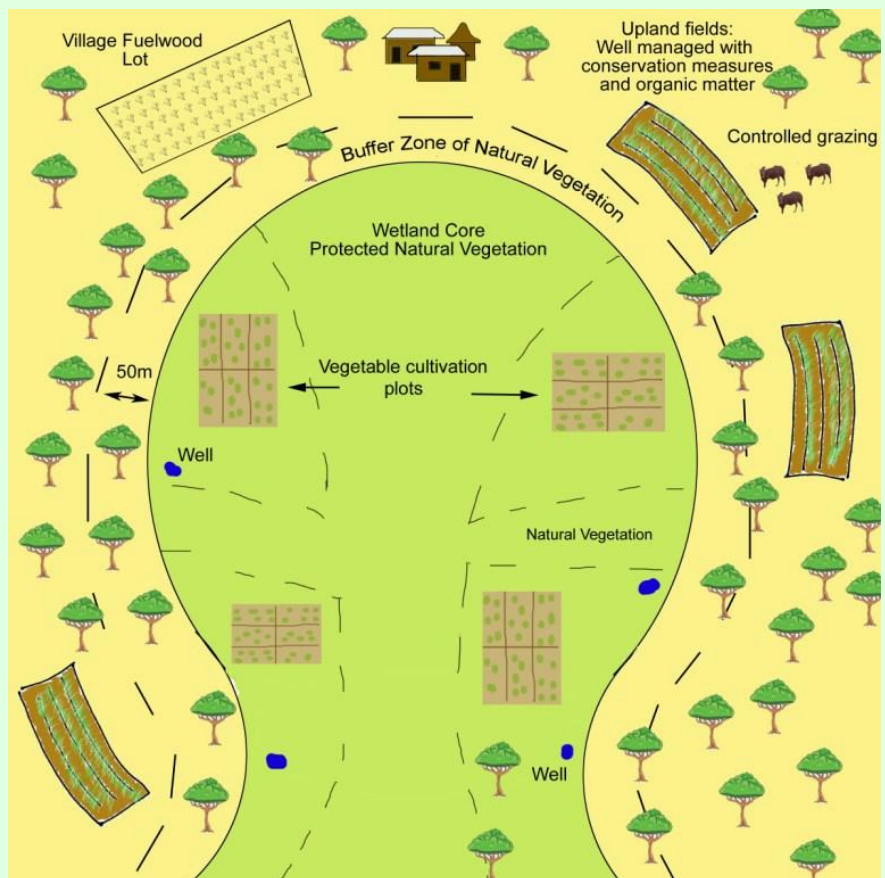
- Climate regulation
- Water regulation
- Water purification
- Erosion regulation
- Natural hazard regulation
- Pollination

Cultural

- Spiritual and inspirational
- Recreational
- Aesthetic
- Educational

Supporting

- Soil formation
- Nutrient cycling



The SAB catchment-wetland land use model



The multiple use approach ensures hydrological regulation services are maintained, to the benefit of other ecosystem services



Learning how it really is – ground-truthing for policy development



Community discussions of wetland management must inform national policy making

6. Grassroots Inputs into Policies for Wetlands

While policy making is political, this does not mean that it should only be influenced by the inter-agency discussions at the national level. Sectoral policies at the national level should reflect, and be informed by, the needs of the local population and practical experience in the rural communities. In the case of wetlands, national policies should also be informed by local understandings of catchment-wetland processes, since government institutions rarely have the capacity to monitor and understand such specific environment-livelihood interactions at the community level.

Local people should, therefore, be regarded as valuable resources in the policy making process, for both governments and for NGOs. The ways in which Village Natural Resource Management Committees and their associated bylaws have been established (PBN 2) provide valuable lessons for policy makers in terms of how to adopt a holistic and sustainable approach to managing multiple use wetlands with a range of benefits. This 'scaling up' of the community-level experience to the national level is also a means of ensuring that national policy is complementary and sensitive to local, indigenous management structures. This will help ensure policies are relevant, beneficial and acceptable to local people. However, progress in this direction requires a serious commitment on the part of government to engage with local communities, and listen to the voices of the poor and marginalised in society.

7. Conclusions

Wetland policy-making is about politics, and establishing political linkages with key agencies where wetlands are relevant. It also about linking to the field level and building policy there to address the real issues faced in wetland use for poverty reduction. As such wetland policy making, whether it is at the national, district, NGO or community level, requires exceptional skills and sensitivity. It remains a major challenge for those committed to sustainable wetland management as a way of reducing poverty and improving environmental health.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Wetland Action is a not for profit NGO which provides technical support to field level organisations working on wetland and livelihoods. Its aim is to support the ecologically sound and socially sensitive use of wetlands for sustainable livelihoods. www.wetlandaction.org. For further details contact:

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Other partners in the SAB Project are:

- **Self Help Africa:** www.selfhelpafrica.org
- **MALEZA:** Malawi Enterprise Association. E mail: hmsusa@malezamw.org
- **NLWCCDP:** North Luangwa Wildlife Conservation and Community Development Programme. E mail: nlwccdp@zamnet.zm

The **SAB Project** seeks to reduce poverty among wetland-dependent communities in central Southern Africa. It achieves this by developing and testing strategies for the sustainable management of seasonal wetlands, including technical measures related to land husbandry and the maintenance of a functional landscape, and by influencing policies at the NGO, national and international levels, so that the role of wetlands in poverty reduction is better recognised.

This project is one of four Demonstration Projects of the **Wetlands and Poverty Reduction Project of Wetlands International** which has sought to influence national and international policies to ensure that the interconnections between the worlds' poor and wetlands are recognized. See www.wetlands.org.

POLICY BRIEFING NOTES AVAILABLE:

1. Valuing wetlands for livelihoods - the basis for sustainable management
2. Local institutions and wetland management
3. Ecological assessment of wetland health