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BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY OF INLAND WATER ECOSYSTEMS: REPORT ON THE ASSESSMENT OF THE STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIVER BASIN INITIATIVE

Note by the Executive Secretary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The River Basin Initiative (RBI) was designed primarily as an information-sharing mechanism to support Parties in their implementation of river basin management under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention. The history of the development of the RBI is briefly summarized. Much effort was put into its earlier stages by various partners and Parties. A modest level of funding enabled the RBI to become operational as an initial phase throughout 2001 to 2003. This involved essentially a web-based information service with activities including an internet discussion group, an internet portal to facilitate easy information exchange, discussions with a range of countries about initial awareness or exchange activities at country or basin level and collation and distribution of manuals and guidelines. The RBI was scheduled to become fully operational from 2003. Funding proposals for this purpose were prepared but were not successful. Activities thereafter had to be scaled down and any significant work ceased from 2007. The RBI website, and its content (as of 2007), are still maintained but are effectively not operational due to lack of resources. Progress and constraints with the RBI have been regularly reported to both the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice and the Conference of the Parties. It is likely that the original objectives of the RBI remain valid. But in the intervening period the information landscape has changed considerably including a proliferation of initiatives in individual river basins, development of similar inter-basin support mechanism through partner agencies and the rapid advancement of social networking tools and related information technology.

* UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/15/1

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SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

The document is provided for the information of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice. A recommendation to welcome this document is included in the draft recommendations of the note by the Executive Secretary on biological diversity of inland water ecosystems: implications of changes in the water cycle, and freshwater resources, in the implementation of the thematic and cross-cutting programmes of work (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/15/8).

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 20 of decision X/28, the Conference of the Parties (COP) requested the Executive Secretary, and invited the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention, to assess the status of implementation of the River Basin Initiative and to report on this matter for the information of a meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) prior to the eleventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties. Accordingly the Executive Secretary has prepared this note, in collaboration with the Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention and the Global Environment Centre (also involved with administration of the River Basin Initiative).

2. The River Basin Initiative (RBI) was conceived as a means to support Parties in their implementation of the programme of work on the biological diversity of inland water ecosystems (annex to decision VII/4) and Ramsar Resolution VII.18 on guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management. Its goal was to establish a global network to share information. This was planned to be achieved mainly through the development and operationalization of an internet based information exchange mechanism amongst stakeholders involved in river basin management. The aims and objectives of the RBI are described in further detail in the annex to this note.

3. Section II of this note provides details of the current status of the RBI as such an information exchange mechanism; this reports that in terms of this functionality it is currently non-operational. In order to assist SBSTTA understand how this current status arose, section III provides brief details on the history of consideration of the RBI at Convention level, the history of administrative and other activities in support of implementation of the RBI, and a brief discussion on the contribution the RBI might have made to assisting Parties implement the two conventions. Section IV considers what options might be available regarding the future of the RBI, noting that the information landscape has considerably changed since the RBI was initially conceived.

4. This note incorporates comments received from the SBSTTA Bureau at a face-to-face meeting held on 05 – 06 June 2011 in Montreal.

II. THE CURRENT STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RBI

5. Currently, the RBI is not operating. The history of the RBI (see next section) reflects considerable initial interest from Parties and partners. Modest levels of financial support in its early stages (1999 – 2001) enabled the Initiative to eventually to become operational (an initial operation phase) in 2001 - 2003. This was to be followed by full operation from 2003 but this effectively stalled through lack of sustainable funding. The RBI currently only consists of a dormant website (<http://www.riverbasin.org/>) which maintains its main contents and functionality (as of 2003-4) but there has been no further significant development of it. The most recent information currently displayed is for October 2007. The site, and therefore the Initiative, is effectively dormant.

III. THE HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RBI

3.1 *Brief history of development of the River Basin Initiative at Convention level*

6. The need to adopt an integrated watershed, catchment and river basin management strategy for biodiversity was recognized by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at, *inter alia*, its fourth meeting (Slovakia 1998): for example in decision IV/4, annex, paragraph 9 (a) (ii) recommending that Parties encourage the adoption of integrated watershed, catchment and river basin management strategies to maintain, restore or improve the quality and supply of inland water resources and the economic, social, hydrological, biological diversity and other functions and values of inland water ecosystems. The seventh meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (Costa Rica 1999) adopted Resolution VII.18 on *Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management*, in recognition of the essential role that wetlands play in water resource management and the importance of seeing to it that the water management community ensure that water allocations and management provide for the wise use of wetlands.

7. At its fifth meeting (Kenya, 2000) the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, in para. 2 of its decision V/2, endorsed a proposed joint work plan for the period 2000-2001 for the CBD and Ramsar Convention (previously provided to SBSTTA-5 in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/12), which included, *inter alia*, a River Basin Initiative, and encouraged Parties, other Governments and relevant bodies to support and participate in the Initiative. The Secretariat of the Ramsar Convention, in cooperation with the CBD Secretariat, further promoted the development of a RBI under the second joint work plan between the two conventions. The Initiative was launched by the Ramsar and CBD Secretariats at the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

8. At the eighth meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (Spain 2002) contracting Parties, in Resolution VIII.5, para. 5, noted with pleasure decision V/2 of the CBD, which endorsed the proposed joint work plan for the period 2000-2001 of the CBD and the Ramsar Convention which includes, *inter alia*, a River Basin Initiative, and encourages its Parties, other Governments and relevant bodies to support and participate in the Initiative. At the same meeting, Resolution VIII.2, referring to the Report of the World Commission on Dams and its relevance to the Ramsar Convention, requested Contracting Parties to engage fully in national and basin level processes to assess options for, alternatives to, and improvements in, the development and operation of dam infrastructure, utilizing Resolution VII.18 on *Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management* and the CBD-Ramsar River Basin Initiative (which was under further development through the joint work plan between the CBD and Ramsar Convention, as detailed further below).

9. At its sixth meeting (The Netherlands 2002), the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, in decision VI/2: welcomed the progress made with the RBI (para. 1); recognized the importance of the RBI for implementation of the programme of work on biological diversity of inland water ecosystems and application of the ecosystem approach, and requested the Executive Secretary to strengthen collaboration with the Ramsar Convention on the implementation of the RBI (para. 4); urged the Global Environment Facility, other funding institutions, and development agencies to provide financial support for implementation of the programme of work on the biological diversity of inland water ecosystems as well as the RBI (para. 6).

10. The seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD (Malaysia 2004) adopted the revised programme of work on the biological diversity of inland water ecosystems (annex to decision VII/4) which incorporated the RBI: for example, activity 1.1.5. "Contribute to, and participate in, as appropriate, the RBI". Furthermore, activity 1.1.11 of the programme of work is that the CBD and

Ramsar Convention Secretariats finalize the development and move into full implementation of the RBI, with input from collaborating partner organizations, as appropriate.

11. The development and implementation of the RBI continued into the third Joint Work Programme (2002-2006) between the CBD and Ramsar Convention (UNEP/CBD/COP/6/INF/14) under activity 1. This noted the RBI completed its preparatory and establishment phase in 2001.

3.2 History of administration, management and implementation of the River Basin Initiative

12. Three phases, somewhat overlapping, were involved with the RBI: development phase, phase one (initial operation) and phase two (full implementation).

Development phase:

13. The CBD and Ramsar Convention Secretariats were obviously involved in supporting the development of the RBI from an early stage (pre-1999) and facilitated discussions at, and information exchange between, the respective subsidiary scientific bodies: SBSTTA and the Scientific and Technical Review Panel (STRP) and their Conferences of the Parties. A considerable number of partner organizations and Parties were also actively involved in discussions during the development phase and into phase one. The RBI was largely developed on behalf of the two conventions by the Global Environment Centre (Malaysia). The Global Environment Centre also played the leading role in operationalizing the RBI through phase one and into phase two.

14. In support of the implementation of Ramsar Resolution VII.18, the STRP of the Ramsar Convention established an Expert Working Group on Water Allocations and Management, which prepared further water allocation guidelines, including case-studies, for consideration by Ramsar COP-8 (see Ramsar DOC. SC25-12 for further details). The Ramsar Convention, as the lead partner of the Convention on Biological Diversity in the implementation of activities under the Convention on Wetlands, developed a toolkit that includes practical guidance for integrated planning and management of river basins and coastal zones. In addition, the Ramsar Convention has developed guidelines for the Global Action on Peatlands, for “allocation and management of water for maintaining the ecological functions of wetlands” (Ramsar Handbook 10) and for “Integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management” (Ramsar Handbook 9). These guidelines¹ were developed in parallel with the RBI and much information was shared between these processes.

15. Preparatory meetings to promote the RBI were held at the fifth meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (Montreal, February 2000) at which a representative of Global Environment Centre gave a presentation on RBI. Further discussions were held at the second World Water Forum (Den Haag, March 2000) where numerous organizations were involved such as UNEP, UNESCO, UNDP, the International Water Management Institutes (IWMI), the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM), WWF, IUCN, Wetlands International, the GEF and the Global Water Partnership. In addition, relevant matters were discussed with representatives of development aid agencies of The Netherlands (NEDA/PIN), Germany (GTZ), the United Kingdom (DFID) and Sweden (SIDA). The RBI documentation was revised in the light of these consultations. These organizations were invited to be represented at a meeting of the Advisory Committee of the RBI held in Montreal in May 2001.

16. The secretariats of CBD, Ramsar and RBI organized a side event on the RBI during the sixth meeting of SBSTTA, held in Montreal on 13 March 2001 to discuss needs and seek contributions from the CBD, Ramsar and other organizations.

¹ http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-pubs-handbooks/main/ramsar/1-30-33_4000_0

Phase one: initial operation (2001-2003)

17. The RBI entered its initial operational phase (2001-2003) in September 2001 with the following activities:

- (a) Establishment of a RBI Net Internet discussion group (at the time 250 members from 80 countries);
- (b) Establishment of an internet portal to facilitate easy information exchange between countries and initial identification of good practice case-studies and experience;
- (c) Discussions with a range of countries about initial awareness or exchange activities at country or basin level;
- (d) Collation and distribution of manuals and guidelines; and
- (e) Operation of an online workshop on the Virtual Water Forum as a contribution to the preparation of the Second World Water Forum (Japan 2003).

18. Discussions continued with a number of potential partner organizations. These fell into two broad categories. One comprised organizations, including Ramsar's International Organization Partners (IOPs) and others, who could contribute to identifying and preparing information on good practice activities through their networks and project portfolios, and whose networks would benefit from access to information on good practice river basin management. The second was multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and other organizations that may contribute financially to the development and implementation of the Initiative. Several of these organizations expressed interest in the opportunity the Initiative will provide for increasing access to information on past and current river basin projects in their portfolios. Discussions with potential partners established that, at that time, there was interest in contributing to the RBI not just from those organizations and networks concerned directly with wetlands and biodiversity conservation but also from the water management community.

19. The RBI's design was led by a Steering Committee of member organizations and CBD and Ramsar Parties. This included a 2001 user needs and contributions survey whereby the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity issued a notification (2001-025 dated 11 April 2001), with a similar notification issued by the Ramsar Secretariat (Ramsar Notification 2001/4), informing Parties, other Governments and relevant organizations that the RBI was moving into the establishment phase and had received UNDP project development funding. A questionnaire contributed to the country needs assessment process. A similar survey took place during the sixth meeting of SBSTTA (12-16 March 2001) to collect the views of participants in the meeting. The survey indicated strong Party support for the development of the Initiative.

20. A Management Group consisting initially of the CBD and Ramsar Secretariats, with the support of the Secretariat of the River Basin Initiative provided by the Global Environmental Centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, directed the operations and development of the Initiative. A detailed report on progress with RBI was provided to the Conference of the Parties to the CBD in 2002 (document UNEP/CBD/COP/6/INF/13).

21. The core of the initiative was the identification of, initially, around 30 good practice projects and activities from at least 20 countries that demonstrated incorporating different aspects of wetlands and biodiversity management in integrated management at the river basin level, and to provide network access to these examples to assist others in implementing such management. A number of candidate sites/projects/river basins for possible inclusion as good practice demonstrations were suggested by various interested organizations. To complement this focused promotion of internationally recognized

good practice activities, the RBI provided a more open-ended listing of river basin-related projects and programmes through an internet-based resource kit, providing all those active in wetland and biodiversity-related river basin management with the opportunity for listing and reporting on those activities. Internet-based information was supplemented by newsletters, demonstration project profiles, and other awareness-raising materials.

22. The Executive Secretary, in collaboration with the Ramsar Convention Secretariat organized a side event on the RBI during the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, where the Secretary General of the Ramsar Convention and a representative of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity launched the RBI portal on integrating biological diversity, wetlands and river basin management.

23. As a contribution to the Ramsar-CBD RBI, the Global Environment Centre prepared guidelines for South East Asian countries on “Integrating Wetlands, Biodiversity and River Basin Management”. This built on the Ramsar Handbook 9 on “Integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management”. It was produced in English and four Asian languages: Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian and Malay. The project was funded by the ASEAN Regional Centre for Biodiversity Conservation (ARCBC). The guidelines included case-studies from South East Asia and additional information on existing guidelines, useful publications and appropriate expert agencies in the region. Versions of the handbook were distributed to all South East Asia countries in the format of books, CDs and as downloadable documents on the internet via the ARCBC website and the River Basin Initiative Portal. Full text of selected case-studies was included in the CD version and made available online.

Phase two: full implementation (2003 onwards)

24. A Design Workshop for the RBI was held in May (2001) in Wageningen, The Netherlands. The activities and arrangements for GEF PDF-A (global review of and support to integrating wetland and river basin management) were further prepared during 2001. The Initiative was initially scheduled to become fully operational from mid-2002, subject to funding. The management group (the two Secretariats and the Global Environment Centre with other partners) and the Steering Committee of partner organizations concerned with wetlands, biodiversity and water resource and river basin management continued to guide progress towards full implementation.

25. The Executive Secretary in collaboration with the Ramsar Secretariat prepared progress reports on the implementation of the second joint work plan (2000-2001) of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Ramsar Convention, including the implementation of the RBI, as well as a draft third joint work plan (2002-2006) including implementation of the RBI, submitted as information documents to the sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties (UNEP/CBD/COP/6/INF/12; UNEP/CBD/COP/6/INF/13 and UNEP/CBD/COP/6/INF/14).

26. In collaboration the Ramsar Secretariat, the Executive Secretary organized a side event during the eighth meeting of SBSTTA (March 2003) to provide delegates with detailed information about the RBI. The side event facilitated the exchange of information under the inland waters item on the agenda of SBSTTA-8 and provided an update of progress made on the implementation of the RBI. Under its new web address (<http://www.riverbasin.org/>) the RBI created a portal for information relating to sustainable river basin management, which allowed users to establish and modify their own websites. This approach was considered to be extremely valuable because it attracted further information. However, the need for quality control was identified as well as mechanisms to extract best practices and lessons learned.

27. A meeting to discuss progress and operation of the RBI was held by the Management Group in the margins of the ninth meeting of SBSTTA (November 2003). It was noted that there was a need to secure funding for the second phase as a matter of priority. This was followed by the Secretariats further pursuing funding support. A progress report on implementation of the RBI was provided to the

Conference of the Parties at its seventh meeting (2004) in document UNEP/CBD/COP/7/20/Add.4. A side-event on the RBI at the seventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties was organized jointly by the two Secretariats. At that same meeting, document UNEP/CBD/COP/7/INF/2, containing an analysis of the second national reports under the Convention on Biological Diversity, recorded that slightly over half of the reporting countries indicated that they supported and participated in the activities of the River Basin Initiative.

28. Financial support for the development of the RBI was received, at various stages, from a number of sources including, *inter alia*, the Danish Cooperation for Environment and Development (DANCED), the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Microsoft Foundation Campaign. A preparation grant, for a full funding proposal, was received from the GEF, via UNDP. A UNDP-GEF medium-sized project proposal had been prepared in 2002, but delayed in order to reflect the needs of Parties in the light of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002) and relevant decisions/resolutions of the respective CBD and Ramsar Conferences of the Parties to the conventions in that year. This was eventually submitted in early 2004. The proposal was to develop a prototype knowledge sharing system, and the selection (through the Advisory Committee) of further demonstration sites/projects against an agreed set of criteria, followed by the inclusion of an expanded internet-based resource kit of information on these demonstration projects. However, GEF/UNDP project funding support was not forthcoming.

29. The Global Environment Centre played a key role in leading the technical support for the development of the RBI during the period 2000-2003. In the early stages the Centre advanced substantial funds to purchase website software and maintain the original website as well as hiring support staff. Modest funds were received during this period, including through the Ramsar Secretariat. From 2004 the activity became financially unsustainable for the Centre and the Ramsar Secretariat was also unable to sustain funding support. The Centre periodically updated the website during the period 2003-2007. Lack of resources led to limited maintenance since then. The high annual maintenance fee for the original website resulted in its transfer to a local website in 2007 which now essentially only involves the Centre continuing to pay for the *url*, with no maintenance of content. The Global Environment Centre reports a substantial net financial loss over this period.

3.3 *The possible contribution of the RBI to implementation of the conventions*

30. The limited information that is readily available on how the RBI assisted Parties implement the conventions is included above (based largely on reports submitted to meetings of SBSTTA and COP). This supports a relatively favourable assessment of its initial contribution. The above-referenced positive feedback on the RBI in the second national reports under the Convention on Biological Diversity was particularly encouraging. A more detailed assessment of the support it provided to implementation of the conventions at national level would require exploring the institutional memory amongst the relevant stakeholders at the time. Currently, such an exercise would have historical value but be more relevant if it were intended to consider revitalizing the RBI (see next section).

IV. OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE RBI

31. Since the RBI is effectively non-operational, the following information could be taken into account when and if actions that may need to be taken for the future of the Initiative are considered:

The changing information landscape since conceptualization of the RBI

32. It is now well over ten years since the concept of the RBI was initially conceived and the information landscape has considerably changed since then. First, there are now apparently a greater number of operational “river basin initiatives” at basin and organization levels. For example there are numerous initiatives dedicated to specific river basins: examples include the Nile Basin Initiative

(<http://www.nilebasin.org/newsite/>), the Zambezi River Basin Initiative (<http://www.icp-confluence-sadc.org/projects/zambezi-river-basin-initiative-zrbi>) and the Mara River Basin Initiative (a sub catchment of the Lake Victoria Basin; http://www.lvbc.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=115:mrbi-fact-sheet&Itemid=133); an initiative specifically for transboundary river basins was established by UNDP in 2000 (<http://www.undp.org/water/transboundary-river-basin-initiative.shtml>); and there is also a plethora of institutions such as “river basin organizations” and “river basin authorities” specifically established to manage river basins including at international (transboundary), national and local levels. There has also been considerable development of supporting mechanisms amongst partner organizations: for example, the IUCN hosts the Water for Nature Initiative (http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/water/wp_our_work/wp_our_work_initiatives/wp_our_work_wani/) which includes several projects at river basin level; and facilitating information exchange and dialogue between river basin managers is a core business of the International Water Management Institute although it does not have a “river basin initiative” as such. The ease by which web-based information portals can now be established, compared to the late 1990's, is partly the reason for the apparent proliferation of such “initiatives”. Second, not only is information technology easier to access and use, its nature has also changed particularly through the recent rapid development of social networking tools such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. For example, as of 9 May 2011, *U-Tube* lists 4850 videos about river basins, a good proportion of which are produced by river basin management practitioners.

Options for the future of the RBI

33. The history of the RBI is one of initial enthusiasm, considerable effort by a number of Parties and stakeholders backed by modest resources, initial implementation of agreed activities, followed by failure to maintain the momentum due to lack of sustainable funding. It is not known if the lack of sustainable financial support was due to changing priorities over the period. It is highly likely that the objectives, as such, of the RBI remain valid. But in view of the changing information landscape it is unclear whether the RBI, as originally conceived and implemented, remains the best or a viable way to address the relevant needs to achieve such objectives.

34. The following are, among others, options for the future of RBI:

(a) Without any recommendation on its future, the RBI will likely continue to remain quietly inactive;

(b) Stakeholders may recommend that the RBI be revitalized in its current form, without further consideration. That may not be a suitable response given the above history;

(c) The Conference of the Parties may wish to request the Executive Secretary and invite the Ramsar Secretariat, subject to financial resources, to review the current needs regarding the original objectives of the RBI and assess ways and means to meet those needs, if any, including the possible revitalization of the RBI, and invite interested Parties, donors and organizations to support this work.

35. Partners in the RBI and similar initiatives such as, among others, the International Network of Basin Organizations and the Latin American Watershed, should, in a coordinated manner, gather information on their experiences and, in accordance with existing national and international legislations, on the technologies used, and disseminate it through various means including training, as a contribution to facilitating implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and to poverty reduction.

Annex

OVERVIEW OF THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RIVER BASIN INITIATIVE

The RBI was designed to, *inter alia*, support Parties in their implementation of decision VII/4 of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the programme of work on inland waters biological diversity, and Ramsar Resolution VII.18 on Guidelines for integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management.

The goal of the RBI was to establish a global network to share information and link and support activities where the principles of integrated management of biodiversity, wetlands and river basins are demonstrated. Its general objectives included to:

- (a) Promote integrated river basin management with an ecosystem approach, including wetland and biodiversity conservation and sustainable use;
- (b) Strengthen cross sectoral dialogue and partnership between the water/land use sectors and biodiversity/wetland conservation sectors; and
- (c) Support implementation of decisions under the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and The Hague Ministerial Conference on Water.

The role of the RBI was to improve the flow of data, information and expertise between sectors involved in basin-scale water and wetland management both within and between basins, and enhance country capacity for basin-scale management. The RBI takes an ecosystem approach and incorporates good practice in providing for wetland and biodiversity conservation. Working with and through a number of partner organizations, the initiative aimed at establishing a knowledge- and information-sharing network that links and supports activities and projects that follow these good practice principles and practices. The Initiative was not intended to be directly developing or implementing on-the-ground basin management projects, as there are already a large number of these players. The Initiative, however, may stimulate or assist organizations in such projects where they contribute to the RBI goals.

The Initiative aims: to be country and user driven; to be cross-sectoral; to complement and promote understanding of other, existing initiatives; to be undertaken in a partnership manner; and to promote only those activities and information conforming to the guidance of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and Agenda 21.
