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Managing our coastal wetlands: Lessons from the Western Region

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Managing our Coastal Wetlands: Lesson from the Western Region

SUMMARY

THOUGH THE GOVERNMENT OF GHANA HAS MADE CLEAR COMMITMENTS FOR WETLANDS MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION, THERE REMAIN SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CONSERVATION STRATEGIES AND ENCROACHMENT AND DEGRADATION CONTINUES TO EVOLVE. THE WESTERN REGION IS HOME TO SOME OF THE RICHEST AND MOST DIVERSE COASTAL WETLANDS AREAS IN GHANA AND YET THERE ARE NO FORMAL MECHANISMS FOR THEIR MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION. THESE WETLANDS PROVIDE A HOST OF CRITICAL FUNCTIONS AND SERVICES BUT THEY ARE INCREASINGLY UNDER THREAT FOR ACCELERATED DEVELOPMENT RESULTING FROM THE RAPIDLY EVOLVING OIL AND GAS SECTOR AND RECORD HIGH COMMODITY PRICES FOR A HOST OF PRODUCTS EXPORTED FROM THE REGION. THIS PAPER PROPOSES A "WAY FORWARD" THAT CALLS NOT ONLY FOR COMMITMENT WITHIN AGENCIES OF GOVERNMENT BUT ALSO THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND A CHANGE IN THE ATTITUDE OF THE TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES AND PRIVATE SECTOR INTERESTS THAT ARE FUELING, DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY, THE THREATS TO THE COASTAL WETLANDS OF THE WESTERN REGION. IT ALSO SUGGESTS MECHANISMS FOR MANAGING AND PROTECTING VITAL WETLANDS RESOURCES IN THE WESTERN REGION.

WETLANDS ARE NOT WASTELANDS

Most Ghanaians see wetlands as inhospitable places that serve little purpose. There is therefore little reaction or objection when they are filled or used as dumps. There is little appreciation for the essential socio-economic services and functions that wetlands play. Yet wetlands conserving fresh water, absorb flood waters, are nurseries for several important species of marine fish and many forms of wildlife, furnish a diversity of renewable natural resources for local livelihoods, purify the air and provide recreational places that all can enjoy. At a global level, they serve as one of the most important mechanisms for sequestering climate changing carbon from the atmosphere. They are important repositories of biodiversity. Though some local stakeholders are aware of these benefits, either through their importance to their livelihoods or through awareness of their critical role in absorbing flood water in periods of prolonged rainfall, there is little appreciation for these benefits among those allocating land for various forms of development

(Chiefs and District planners and regulators) and the developers, banks and insurance companies that support them.

Fish is a critical part of the Ghanaian diet and yet there is a lack of consideration for how this essential source of protein and micro-nutrients ends up on the plates. Many of the marine species of fish that are consumed in Ghana spend part of the juvenile stage of their lives in coastal wetland areas (lagoons, estuaries, mangroves) before re-entering the sea. Wetlands are the nursery grounds for many in-shore species. The threats to the coastal wetlands are also threats to Ghana's food security and to the livelihoods of fisherfolk in coastal communities throughout West Africa. Coastal wetlands must be recognized as a critical component of food security. Throughout most of the world, and in Ghana, politics and planning are driven by the notion that economic development is the generator of improved living conditions and the reduction of poverty. However, focusing on unbridled economic development in the short-term without considering the long-term consequences can produce

perverse outcomes. The global pattern of wetlands destruction is playing out in Ghana and in the Western region even though Ghana recognized the importance of wetlands through ratification of the international RAMSAR Convention in 1988 and, by 1992, the designation of six RAMSAR sites for special management and preservation. Though management planning was completed at local, district and national levels, five of the six RAMSAR sites and most of the coastal wetlands along Ghana's coast, remain seriously threatened by the encroachment of human settlements, filling, over-harvesting of their natural resources, and their use as dump sites for wastes of every description. The five year "National Wetlands Conservation Strategy and Action Plan" (2007-2012) has yet to be implemented due to inadequate commitment, resources, and a social climate that favors economic development at almost any cost. Estimates of the area of Ghana's mangrove wetlands suggest that a quarter were lost between 1980 and 2006 (UNEP 2007; Ajonina et al, 2008).

THE CURRENT STATE OF WETLANDS IN THE COASTAL DISTRICTS OF THE WESTERN REGION

Remote sensing data using satellite imagery to assess the coastal areas in the Western

Region have inventoried an estimated 35,000 hectares of wetlands from the Pra River estuary in the east to the lagoons adjacent to New Town on the border with the Ivory Coast. Over 15% of these areas are mangroves. The balance are concentrated in the greater Amanzule swamp peat forest. Recent field surveys conducted by the Hen Mpoano Initiative suggest that half of the mangrove wetlands have been reduced or degraded during the past two decades.

Wetlands are often the only remaining undeveloped areas within coastal towns and their immediate surroundings. When urban areas such as the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan area, or large settlements in the Shama District, experience accelerated expansion, small and large scale infrastructure developers seek to be close to markets, power lines, roads, and other settlements. Developers often take what they consider to be the easiest solution to the need for more developable land - fill in the wetlands and build. Many learn their lessons later when the results are seen in drainage problems, periodic flooding and a host of associated impacts. By then, it is too late.

Ghanaian law states that any project that will impact a wetland must first conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment. In most cases, these assessments are not completed. The ratification of the RAMSAR convention and the National Wetlands Conservation Strategy and Action Plan has done little to slow encroachment. Though recent spatial planning processes conducted by the Town and Country Planning Department at both the regional and district scales now include major wetlands areas as conservation zones, there are no specific policies for their protection. In this unprotected status, wetlands in the coastal districts of the Western Region are increasingly threatened as the development boom triggered by oil and gas unfolds. Fortunately, the Western Region has a unique opportunity to utilize the ongoing detailed spatial planning underway through the Western Region Spatial Development Framework process and district



spatial planning support provided by the Town and Country Planning Department. The Hen Mpoano program is currently experimenting with a variety of co-management approaches. These include the development of wetlands protection byelaws at the district level that, once adopted, will specify the procedure and the regulations affecting encroachment into wetlands. In addition, several Community Resource Management Areas (CREMA) have been established to involve the local population in wetlands conservation. However, in many cases, it remains unclear as to how CREMA rules relate to land use decisions by Chiefs,

Districts or Ministries in Accra. Success of the byelaws and CREMA is not a foregone conclusion. In conservation work, and for wetlands in particular, we all know that the real work begins when a byelaw is endorsed or management plans completed. The critical period is the first ten years after adoption of a plan or byelaw since in this time it will become apparent whether implementation has occurred or the plan has gathered dust on the shelf. Local capacity is essential for implementation and reaping the benefits of wetlands protection.





THE ESSENTIAL PILLARS OF WETLANDS MANAGEMENT

involved in approving compulsory acquisition requests at the national level, need to have a well-grounded understanding of Ghana's policies and environmental laws as they apply to wetlands. Most important, they need to know how wetlands function as ecosystems and the many goods and services they generate for people. The commitment to conserve and where feasible to restore wetlands is most critical in District Assemblies and traditional authorities that allocate land and provide permits for development. Developers and investors, as well as their partner banks and

COMMITTMENT

An essential pre-condition to any wetlands management or conservation planning effort is commitment by the government. Decision makers at the Region and District levels, and those involved in approving compulsory acquisition requests at the national level, need to have a well-grounded understanding of Ghana's policies and environmental laws as they apply to wetlands. Most important, they need to know how wetlands function as ecosystems and the many goods and services they generate for people. The commitment to conserve and where feasible to restore wetlands is most critical in District Assemblies and traditional authorities that allocate land and provide permits for development. Developers and investors, as well as their partner banks and

insurance companies, need the knowledge and the skills to understanding the dynamics of wetland areas and be committed to assessing the impacts and risks of development projects in areas where wetlands are a feature of the landscape. Additionally, the National Disaster Management Authority (NADMO) should be supported further in efforts for pro-active management of flood plains and wetland areas and thereby avoiding the conflicts, costs and social impacts illustrated by the Accra floods of late 2011.

CLEAR MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND STRENGTHENED LAND MANAGEMENT CAPACITIES.

Wetlands management will require clear and simple objectives that are easy to communicate and that engage the communities in defining land management goals and the rules governing how spatial development will proceed. For



IN 2009, THE SEKONDI – TAKORADI METROPOLITAN ASSEMBLY, IN RESPONSE TO THE RAPIDLY ACCELERATING DEVELOPMENT FUELED BY THE OIL AND GAS SECTOR, ALLOCATED WETLAND AREAS FOR INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AT AN ALARMING RATE. THOUGH THE EPA WAS ABLE TO HALT SOME PROJECTS, THE ENCRoACHMENT INTO ALL 3 WETLANDS WITHIN THE TWIN CITIES (ESSEI LAGOON, BUTUA LAGOON, AND WHIN RIVER ESTUARY) WAS MORE THAN THEY COULD TAKE ON. THE STMA MUNICIPAL CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE TIME WAS QUOTED ON LOCAL RADIO STATIONS AS SAYING “WE WILL FILL IN ALL THE WETLANDS” TO MAKE WAY FOR DEVELOPMENT. A RESULT OF THE FILLING CAME IN JUNE OF 2010 WHEN THE STMA EXPERIENCED THE WORST FLOODING ON RECORD AND THE TAKORADI MARKET CIRCLE WAS UNDER WATER. TIMES HAVE CHANGED. THROUGH TARGETED EFFORTS OF CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS, AND TRAINING OF KEY STMA OFFICIALS SUPPORTED BY THE HEN MPDAND PROJECT, THE SITUATION TODAY IS VERY DIFFERENT. THE STMA TOWN & COUNTRY PLANNER HAS BECOME A VOCAL CHAMPION OF WETLANDS CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT. THE THREE STMA WETLANDS ARE NOW SLATED TO BE SET ASIDE AS URBAN CONSERVATION AREAS AND PROTECTED BY INNOVATIVE STMA BYE-LAWS.

this to happen, stakeholder consultation and educational programs, as well as participatory planning are a pre-requisite. Capacity building programs for community groups and managers must not be “one-off” training programs. They should instead be designed to feature long term networking among planners and implementers that encourage the sharing of experience among communities. The Wildlife Division and Fisheries Commission will need support as they develop new and innovative wetlands conservation extension programs.

AUTHORITY AND THE RULE OF THE LAW

First and foremost, there is the need to

formally recognize the values of wetlands and put in place the spatial plans and regulations that call for their protection. Policies and laws are only as good as the degree to which they are respected and enforced. It is currently rare to see the arrest and prosecution of those responsible for degrading or filling wetlands. Occasionally, investors filling in wetlands may have their project halted by the EPA or District regulators but illegal destruction of wetlands is typically not treated as seriously as illegal forest activities. For Districts to set aside wetland areas for protection, and communities to manage them for the goods and services they provide, it is essential that the policies and laws be backed up by enforcement and appropriate court action. The Environmental Protection Agency will need strengthened mechanisms by which to deflect political pressures when prosecuting illegal development offenders. Another priority is to put in place the measures and means for protecting wetlands from an eventual oil spill. In 2010, we

all saw televised images of oil covered wetlands and wildlife from the Deep Water Horizon spill off the Gulf coast of the USA. Many of those working in the oil and gas industries now operating in Ghana, in “off the record” conversations, say that one day, sooner or later, there will be a spill. What will happen

then to our wetlands, fish, water supplies, and livelihoods? Though plans have been made, with funds provided by the oil and gas sector, more should be done to provide for the rapid response to spills that would prevent polluted water from entering coastal rivers, lagoons and wetlands.

A WAY FORWARD

Several steps can and should be taken to strengthen wetlands management in Ghana.

AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

1. The Wildlife Division and Environmental Protection Agency could develop communications and training programs for district assemblies and communities on the ecological functions and services that wetlands furnish to local settlement and the implementation and enforcement of wetland conservation policies and regulations. Such a training program could draw from the educational programs in the Western Region offered by the Wildlife Division and the Hen Mpoano Program.

2. The Forestry Commission could expand its community management (CREMA) program by recruiting additional Wildlife Division agents to work with trained National Service Personnel to establish a long term wetlands monitoring and extension program that works with local communities and existing CREMA. Using National Service Personnel would build wetland management capacity in the districts and communities. A pilot program using National Service Personnel is being piloted in the Western Region.

AT THE LEVEL OF WESTERN REGION COORDINATING COUNCIL

3. The regional directors of the National Disaster Management Authority, the Town and Country Planning Department and the Regional Planning Coordination Unit should work with the Districts to identify critical wetlands and floodplains and adopt appropriate management measures. Settlements that are increasingly vulnerable to flooding should receive special attention.

4. The Regional Coordinating Council could build on the example of the fisheries courts in the Western Region to improve the effectiveness of prosecution of those that engage in wetland destruction. This would strengthen environmental courts where judicial personnel are trained in environmental law and the ecological and social justification of the regulations.

AT THE DISTRICT LEVEL

5. Adopt and implement byelaws designed to protect coastal wetlands protection. The Anankwari River flood plain mapping and byelaws in the Shama District provide an example of what pro-active planning can be. The process for the local plans for the Akwidaa fishing community of the Ahanta West District also provide examples of localized planning in light of evolving climate change impacts. Assemblies should take advantage of evolving spatial

planning programs to zone wetlands and flood plains as areas where development and refuse dumping are prohibited. Districts bye-laws and spatial plans that provide for wetland conservation could be encouraged by the provision of financial resources made available through a fund disbursed by mechanisms adopted from the “Functional Operating Assessment Tools” (FOAT) and “Urban Development Grants” programs.

AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

6. A citizen’s wetlands watch program could use cell phones to report wetlands infractions to the Wildlife Division and EPA. This would both assist in the enforcement of laws and engage the local population in wetlands protection. A pilot program that has been developed for fisheries enforcement in the Western Region could be expanded to cover wetlands.

7. Private sector and corporate social responsibility funds could be used to encourage such actions through an “Adopt a Wetland” program.

8. Tourism options for many wetlands areas could be assessed and developed with private sector operators. Use of wetlands as a tourism resource is a far better option than re-engineering wetlands for salt production.

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