**Managing wetlands**

Raza Hussain Qazi

Saturday, Feb 03, 2024

The writer is a climate governance expert who works for global development organizations in the fields of research, advisory, policy analysis, and legislative reforms. He tweets/posts @razashafqat

The world observed World Wetlands Day on February 2. This annual global observance highlights the significance of wetlands and the advantages of promoting their conservation. The day also marks the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands on February 2, 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar on the shores of the Caspian Sea.

This year’s theme was ‘Wetlands and Human Wellbeing’, with the objective of emphasizing the interdependence between wetlands and the diverse dimensions of human wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental and environmental health.

This year, the occasion also served as an opportunity for people to deliberate on the importance of wetlands in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by conserving biodiversity, maintaining water quality, and contributing to the climate resilience of both human populations and natural ecosystems.

Wetlands should be acknowledged as vital for both human society and the natural environment, emphasizing the intrinsic value of wetland ecosystems and their benefits and functions. This encompasses their contributions to the advancement of sustainable development and enhancing human wellbeing.

In November 2022, the Conference of the Contracting Parties (COP14) to the Ramsar Convention 1971 – also known as the Convention on Wetlands – adopted the Wuhan Declaration, which sets out key principles for integrating wetland ecosystems into all frameworks and initiatives for both human and natural systems. It also includes commitments to take appropriate and urgent measures towards halting and reversing the global decline of wetlands.

The declaration recognizes the wetlands as one of the key global ecosystems, and their conservation, restoration, management, and wise and sustainable use are vital to effectively address pressing environmental, social, and economic challenges. It addresses existential challenges such as climate change and massive biodiversity loss, while also safeguarding the health and wellbeing of both humanity and the planet as a whole.

It is an established fact that among the world’s most productive ecosystems, wetlands offer freshwater, food and building materials, flood control, and climate change mitigation. However, despite their priceless worth to both natural ecosystems and human wellbeing, they are facing persistent declines in their extent and quality. It is estimated that approximately 35 per cent of wetlands have been lost since the 1970s, and this trend shows no indication of abatement.

Given the intricate nature of the interconnected forces that contribute to or worsen the challenges confronting humanity today, it is time for us to establish connections between wetlands and their intersection with the SDGs and climate change initiatives by adopting different means. The declaration indicates the urgency for their conservation as it is critical to halting and reversing the decline of biodiversity, as well as in mitigating, adapting to, and building resilience in the face of adverse effects of climate change. For the first time, it also emphasizes the role of conservation in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, for the benefit of present and future generations.

There is a ubiquitous interplay among the SDGs, climate change, and preserving wetlands that can help address several SDG targets. For instance, one relates to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) by ensuring conservation for both human consumption and ecosystem health. Wetlands are integral to the achievement of the SDGs by supporting life on land (SDG 15) and life below water (SDG 14) through preserving biodiversity and providing habitats for numerous species. Wetlands also help buffer against the impacts of climate change, such as flooding and droughts, by storing excess water and providing resilience in ecosystems and communities.

Wetlands play a crucial role in addressing climate action (SDG 13) through the sequestration of carbon and the mitigation of climate change impacts. Additionally, they contribute to sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) by decreasing flood risk and improving urban water management, which aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. They also play a role in urban sustainability by helping in managing stormwater, reducing the risk of floods, and enhancing water quality.

Similarly, the influence of wetlands on gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10) has always remained uncalculated and underappreciated. In numerous societies, women are heavily reliant on wetlands for their sustenance, especially in the realms of fisheries and agriculture. Recognizing and promoting women’s participation in wetland management can lead to economic and social empowerment, thereby contributing to gender equality and the reduction of inequalities.

Wetlands are vital ecosystems that provide numerous ecological, economic, and social benefits to communities globally. They play a crucial role in bolstering community resilience, especially for women and children, as they offer a variety of essential services. They serve as natural buffers against natural disasters such as floods and storms, thereby mitigating risks and safeguarding vulnerable populations. Their steady supply of clean water for drinking and sanitation plays a critical role in reducing waterborne diseases that often affect children. They also help foster biodiversity, which eventually ensures food security and enhances nutrition.

In this regard, the Wuhan Declaration offers a pragmatic framework to signatory countries for incorporating the wetlands into their national sustainable development plans and integrating it with their national policies and strategies. There exists a dire need for national strategic and action plans to be aligned with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), identification of capacity gaps, and creation of enabling conditions to implement national strategies.

The world can turn the tide of wetlands degradation but only through a robust, wider and greater movement by engaging civil society, academia, government, and non-governmental stakeholders, particularly women, youth, and local communities with inclusive approaches. Both public and private sectors have major roles to play in the preservation, rehabilitation, administration and prudent and sustainable utilization of all categories of wetlands for the wellbeing of people and the environment.

Stakeholders can contribute to the sustainable management of wetlands and reduce anthropogenic pressures by raising public awareness, introducing a multi-level education curriculum regarding the importance of wetlands, and engaging local communities in their preservation.

In recent years, several conservation initiatives have been collaboratively implemented by the government, including the Ministry of Water Resources, the Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, and WWF. The recently initiated project ‘Recharge Pakistan’ which is financed by the GCF serves as an exemplary illustration of the collaborative endeavours in this respect.

However, it is important to further improve and support the capabilities of governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, and communities to oversee and regulate wetlands. The coordination among federal and provincial authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities is also essential to streamline wetland conservation efforts and ensure an effective fulfilment of Ramsar obligations.

In the face of today’s formidable challenges posed by the planetary crisis, the country’s climate change policy, water policy, biodiversity and SDGs strategic plans need more integrated approaches both in their formulation and rollouts. The national water policy explicitly spells out the need to adopt a national wetland management plan for the conservation and protection of wetlands and Ramsar Sites. Similarly, the national climate change policy underscores the importance of protecting, sustaining, and enhancing wetlands.

Only through specific policy measures articulated in the Ramsar convention can we make these invaluable natural endowments resilient which are a lifeline for us.