

**Managing Wetlands resources:  
Lessons from Okavango Delta  
By ALEX MAINA**

## Okavango Delta

“A land where open plains meet thick, thorny acacia woodlands where the rustling papyrus reeds line narrow channels in the wetlands of the Okavango Delta.....”

*Bajanala: A tourist Guide to Botswana, Volume 5.*

“The Okavango Delta is of key importance as the largest Ramsar site in the world”  
*Secretary General of the Ramsar convention- 2006.*

### **Facts**

Okavango Delta is the largest inland river Delta in the World. It covers an area of 15,000 Km<sup>2</sup>. 1/3 of the Delta is covered by Moreni Game reserve. It is fed by Okavango River that begins in the Angolan highlands where the rainfall on the Benguela plateau reaches up to 2,000mm annually.

This Delta is an important wetland in the world and is situated in northern Botswana. It is considered to be the largest Ramsar site in the world and a popular tourist destination. Many globally significant biodiversity including birds, recorded resident and migratory species and is designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) are found there. These wetlands support the highest frequency of large mammals per unit area in the world, including important populations of predators such as the African Wild Dog and cheetahs, which are threatened elsewhere in the world. Also found here are a number of aquatic and terrestrial flora including many aquatic and semi-aquatic species, herbs and grasses and woody species and several species of fish. The area is also noted for its population of hippopotami, crocodiles and antelopes.

It is important to note that these wetlands provide important natural resources and ecological services to local communities, including fish, building materials, and grazing lands as well as the environment for the lucrative tourism industry. Its ecological integrity though remaining largely intact, faces human induced threat which include threats from production activities, such as development of tourism infrastructure, and unsustainable local use of veldt products and wildlife.

Approximately 120,000 people rely to varying degrees on the wetland's resources as part of their household economy.

## **Is there any blue Print on how it has been managed?**

There is absolutely no notable blue print on how this delta has been managed. However there is system called 'ecosystem approach' which has been applied. 'Ecosystem approach' can be said to be 'learning by doing' and is a good example of how learning can be applied to ecosystem approach has been applied).

## **What then is the key to its success?**

There has been an increased collaboration in the Okavango river basin will help in understanding of people's realities, how to improve livelihoods and preserve the important ecosystems.

## **Lessons from Okavango Delta Management Plan (ODPM)**

Okavango Delta Management Plan (ODMP) provides important lessons. They include:-

- ✚ Effective and meaningful stakeholder participation in management;
- ✚ Preparation of communication strategies;
- ✚ Balancing the interest of diverse stakeholder groups; and,
- ✚ Practical implementation of the ecosystem approach and data management aspects.

## **Point to ponder**

It is important to note that building linkages through dialogue is a crucial process. It is important to be able to understand each other's viewpoints and levelling the playing fields to build common goals.

Dialogue includes increasing number of informal or formal dialogues early on to inform planning processes and development.

## **Why the plan fitted well in the stakeholder involvement;-**

- ✚ It was set within the framework of Sustainable Development an approach that places the conservation, economic and social development goals on the same level of importance for development of society.
- ✚ Stakeholder participation is a key requirement for wetlands resources management under the auspices of the RAMSAR convention which calls for an integrated water resources management (IWRM) approach to wetlands resources planning.

## Point to Ponder

Paragraph 20 of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands' New Guidelines for management planning for Ramsar sites and other wetlands, the aim of Integrated River Basin Management or Integrated Water Resources Management is to bring stakeholders at all levels, from politicians to local communities.

- ✚ The ODMP secretariat has embraced the ecosystem's approach as advocated by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). This approach to natural resources management also places the stakeholders (especially resource users) at the centre of the planning process.

## ODMP guiding principle

'Creation and strengthening of ownership'

### Elements of this principle

This principle has been broken into the following elements:

- ✚ Creation and strengthening responsibility and accountability in the institutions that have the mandate to manage the delta and its resource; and,
- ✚ Promoting active stakeholder participation in the main stages of the planning process.

### How is active stakeholder participation promoted?

- ✚ Ensure that the plan addresses issues that stakeholders view as important;
- ✚ Identify and use traditional knowledge;
- ✚ Recognize and respect traditional resource use rights;
- ✚ Ensure that stakeholders responsible for managing the resources benefit directly or indirectly from them;
- ✚ Ensure stakeholder association to the decision making process;
- ✚ Demonstrate transparency in the planning process;
- ✚ Guarantee and facilitate stakeholder access to information;
- ✚ Promote stakeholder interest in subsequently engaging in plan implementation.

## How the planning process was conducted

- ✚ There was a lot of consultation in every phase of the planning process. Every consultation effort was reflected upon with a view to improve its effectiveness in fostering meaningful stakeholder participation;
- ✚ A series of meetings were held to introduce the project and project team to the community. The meetings were also meant to start collecting issues that communities wished for the plan to address;
- ✚ During these meetings ownership of the project and resources and integrated management were stressed as the project philosophy.
- ✚ In order to step up consultation efforts the project team decided to run community representative workshops;
- ✚ A smaller group of representatives was thought to be ideal for intensified dialogue and focused discussions though ensuring that most if not all resource use interests are represented.
- ✚ Following the first workshop, the team and community representatives then took the message on the progress and planned activities to the community through traditional meetings.
- ✚ At these meetings communities were expected to either present or elect a community focal person to join the ODMP team and act as the intermediary between the ODMP secretariat and component institutions and the community, adding another layer to the effort of local resource users' consultation and participation.

## Important point to note:

- ✚ By having community focal persons, the project moved beyond existing institutional arrangements and closer to the communities;
- ✚ Through out the consultation process greater effort was, made to capture community issues and involve communities in activity planning.