

## UNEP Water Branch: Regional Seas Programme

### General Strategy

The Regional Seas Programme was initiated by UNEP in 1974 as a global programme implemented through regional components. Since then the Governing Council of UNEP has repeatedly endorsed a regional approach to the control of marine pollution and the management of marine and coastal resources and has requested the development of regional actions plans.

The Regional Seas programme at present includes 13 regions and has over 140 coastal States and Territories participating in it. It is conceived as an action-oriented programme having concern not only for the consequences but also for the causes of environmental degradation and encompassing a comprehensive approach to combating environmental problems through the management of marine and coastal areas. Each regional action plan is formulated according to the needs of the region as perceived by the Governments concerned (UNEP, RSRS 15 and 53). It is designed to link assessment of the quality of the marine environment and the causes of its deterioration with activities for the management and development of the marine and coastal environment. The action plans promote the parallel development of regional legal agreements and of action-oriented programme activities.

The programme is under the overall co-ordination of the Water Branch of UNEP but its success critically depends on the work of specialized organization and centers dealing with specific regions covered by the programme or with specific subjects common to most or all of the regions (UNEP, b).

The substantive aspect of any regional programme is outlined in an "Action Plan" which is formally adopted by an intergovernmental meeting of Governments of a particular region before the programme enters as an operational phase. In the preparatory phase leading to the adoption of the action plan, Governments are consulted through a series of meetings and missions about the scope and substance of an action plan suitable for their region. In addition, with the co-operation of appropriate global and regional organizations, reviews on the specific environmental problems of the region and in corresponding priorities to be assigned to the various activities outlined in the action plan.

All action plans are structured in a similar way, although the specific activities for any region are dependent upon the needs and priorities of that region. An action plan usually includes the following components:

1. Environmental Assessment. This concerns assessing and evaluating the causes of environmental problems as well as their magnitude and impact on the region. Emphasis is given to such activities as: baseline studies, research and monitoring of the sources levels and effects of marine pollutants, ecosystem studies, studies of coastal and marine activities and social and economic factors that may influence, or may be influenced by, environmental degradation, and the survey of national environmental legislation.

2. Environmental Management. Each Regional programme includes a wide range of activities in the field of environmental management. Examples of such activities are: co-operative regional projects on training in environmental impact assessment, management of coastal lagoons, estuaries and mangrove ecosystems, control of industrial, agricultural and domestic wastes, formulation of contingency plans for dealing with pollution emergencies.

3. Environmental legislation. An umbrella regional convention, elaborated by specific technical protocols, most often provides the legal framework for co-operative regional and national actions (UNEP, c). The legal commitment of Governments clearly expresses their political will to manage individually and jointly their common environmental problems.

4. Institutional Arrangements. When adopting an action plan, Governments agree upon an organization to act as the permanent or interim secretariat of the action plan. Governments also are expected to decide upon the periodicity of intergovernmental meetings which are to be responsible for reviewing the progress of the agreed workplan and for approving new activities and the necessary budgetary support.

5. Financial arrangements. UNEP, together with selected United Nations and other organizations, provide "seed money" or catalytic financing in the early stages of regional programmes. However, as a programme develops, it is expected that the Governments of the region will progressively assume the full financial responsibility. Government financing is usually channeled through special regional trust funds to which governments make annual contributions. These funds are administered by the organization responsible for the secretariat functions of the action plan. In addition, Governments contribute by supporting their national institutions participating in the programme or by financing specific project activities.

It is essential to bear in mind that all components of a regional programme are independent. Assessment activities identify the problems that need priority attention in the region. Legal agreements are negotiated to strengthen co-operation among States in managing the identified problems. They also provide an important tool for national policy-makers to implement national control activities. Management activities, aimed at controlling existing environmental problems and preventing the development of new ones, are one of the means by which States fulfill their treaty obligations.

The key to the success of any regional seas action plan is the political agreement of the Governments concerned and the execution of the programme primarily by national and other appropriate institutions from the region in close co-operation with the relevant components of the United Nations system, regional organizations and other appropriate organizations (UNEP, d). The successful implementation of any regional seas action plan also depends to a considerable degree on sound preparations which take into account the specific socio-economic and political situation in a given region, the priorities in environmental protection as defined by the Governments of the region, the recognized capabilities and needs of the national institutions which are participating in the action plan, and the results of past and ongoing activities.

Consultations with the Governments concerned, the United Nations system and other appropriate organizations are essential for the preparatory phase of a regional programme. As a result of such consultations the general strategy of developing a regional programme should be clarified, priority programme elements should be proposed, and the timing of, and responsibility for, substantive actions during the preparatory phase should be determined.

The procedures and activities followed in developing an action plan are instrumental in determining the Governments' and experts' long-term commitment to the implementation of the plan's activities and whether or not the action plan corresponds to the real priorities and needs of the region. Without a strong governmental commitment and a realistic programme, efforts to promote regional environmental co-operation will be short lived. Consequently, the process leading to the adoption of an action plan is crucial.