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Policy Brief No. 3 –
Maintaining Momentum
after the UNESCO
Designation through
Quality Management

Making UNESCO's

“Man and the Biosphere Programme” work

Main Messages

1. **Planning is the core element of successful management** – it is understood as a recurring and adaptive process of continuous coordination, communication and inclusion of, for and with different stakeholders.
2. **Participatory management** allows the integration of local and traditional knowledge and leads to a high management quality. At the same time, the involvement of the local communities increases the legitimacy of the management unit.
3. The drafting of a **management plan** presents a key opportunity to establish a joint vision for the Biosphere Reserve that is shared by local stakeholders and the management unit.
4. **Adaptive management as an addition to participatory management** is an optimal tool to safeguard the relevance of the management plan.
5. **Monitoring & evaluation activities are necessary** to prove that the desired results or milestones within the management plan have been achieved or that well-informed updates and adjustments can be made.

Background

This policy brief outlines recommendations on how to organize active management and effective community participation in Biosphere Reserves. Both aspects are crucial for maintaining momentum after the designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. It is argued that these activities are indispensable to ensure the Biosphere Reserve's long-term successful development. The designation is not the ultimate goal but rather a valuable step towards achieving effectively-managed, well-functioning areas that benefit local communities and nature.



I. Success Factor: Planning

The designation as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve marks the successful completion of the complex and time-consuming nomination process. It is an appreciation of the outstanding value of the natural resources in the Biosphere Reserve area and comes with high demands on its sustainable management. The designation will simplify access to high-level decision-makers, networks and funding sources. However, the designation is not an end in itself. It is the start of the long-term effort to sustainably develop the three zones of the Biosphere Reserve in the frame of the UNESCO site designation.

Successful management needs planning. It requires identifying long-term goals, milestones and ways to achieve these in a certain period of time with the resources that are available or that need to be acquired. In this process, the collective power and energy of a team or of a community must be focused toward common goals. The management unit alone can hardly make any lasting progress through isolated work. Therefore, it is imperative that planning is understood as a recurring and adaptive process of continuous coordination, communication and inclusion of, for and with different stakeholders.

The specific long-term and short-term goals of every Biosphere Reserve are highly dependent on the local and national context. **In all cases however, all three functions of a Biosphere Reserve need to be addressed in these goals.** These three functions comprise conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services, promotion of sustainable socio-ecological development and logistic support through research, education and monitoring.¹ Within a Biosphere Reserve, both conservation and socio-economic development are equally important objectives and core elements of what is understood as “sustainable development”.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are more important than ever to address current global challenges, such as the climate, biodiversity and poverty crises. As model regions for sustainable development, Biosphere Reserves are ideal instruments for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Decade of Action on the SDGs, and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

The World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) has been continuously growing in size and improving in quality. To date, there are 727 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in 131 countries (as of April 2022) and many countries have only recently established their first Biosphere Reserve.

In general, quality development of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve strongly depends on steady planning, effective management, monitoring and evaluation. Ensuring the full participation and collaboration of local communities and other stakeholders in these activities is essential.

It is important to recognise that no two Biosphere Reserves are the same and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to Biosphere Reserve management. Rather, there is a high diversity of management styles. It is imperative that the management unit (i.e. the team of full-time staff working for the Biosphere Reserve specifically) addresses local needs and incorporates local knowledge into the management style of the respective Biosphere Reserve.

In the following, the key success factors contributing to quality development of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves will be further described:

Planning needs to be documented in writing, so that the agreement among all parties concerned is reliably codified. This document constitutes the “management plan”, the result of the planning process. The [Management Manual for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Africa](#) further describes the planning process.² The same is true for the Technical Guidelines for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves³ (TGBR) that provide a comprehensive and practical overview of most formal aspects of establishing, planning and running a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

II. Success Factor: Stakeholder Participation with a Focus on Local Communities

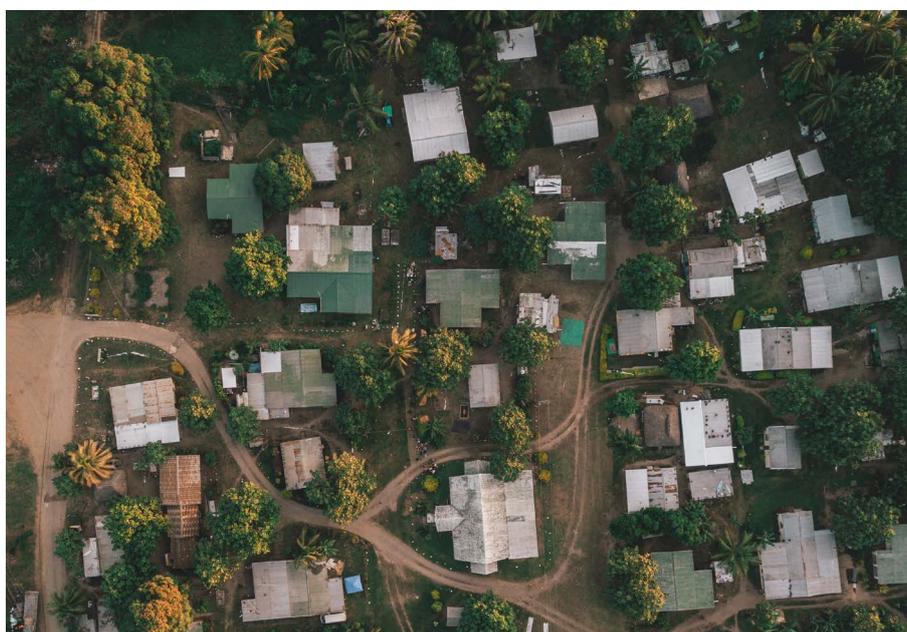
 In general, the term ‘stakeholder’ comprises everybody who is connected to the Biosphere Reserve and is related to and interested in its development to some degree. Stakeholders can be individuals, institutions, companies, Biosphere Reserve managers, and others. Stakeholder groups may influence and may be influenced by the Biosphere Reserve’s activities. Local communities form a core group of stakeholders because they are inextricably linked to the area.⁴

II.1 Local Communities – The Core of Every UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

Local communities and their well-being should be the main focus of every Biosphere Reserve. Therefore, they need to be actively involved in its management, including processes related to the formulation of a management plan or in the preparation of periodic reviews. In a 2008 study, a majority of Biosphere Reserve managers stated that the involvement of local communities and stakeholders is a key factor for the successful development of their respective Biosphere Reserve.⁵ Two strong arguments (besides others) account for this:

Firstly, the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes within the Biosphere Reserve is essential for the long-term success of a Biosphere Reserve. Local communities act as custodians of the landscape, since they are the ones who make use of the land and the natural resources while preserving the values attached to it. When communities are actively involved in decision-making processes, they support the decisions that have been taken, because they feel ownership over these. In the long run, this builds valuable trust towards the management unit. Once trust has been established, local communities are also more likely to support decisions that have been taken without their active involvement (such as everyday decisions that need to be taken quickly), because they understand why and how decisions have been made.

Secondly, local communities possess specific knowledge related to local contexts and resources (“local knowledge”), including complex traditional and/or indigenous knowledge that has been passed on and refined over generations. **Local knowledge is diverse, it entails agricultural techniques, knowledge about flora and fauna, healing methods, cultural traditions and others.**



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Thus, for the management unit this local knowledge is of unique value and irreplaceable for the contextual adaptation of the Biosphere Reserve concept to the specific area.

The benefits of participatory management are thus twofold: local knowledge improves the overall management quality of the Biosphere Reserve and local communities' involvement improves the management quality and legitimacy. **All in all, a participatory management structure creates an active and diverse Biosphere Reserve community and a common understanding for the Biosphere Reserve's mission and vision.** This in turn generates acceptance and support for the Biosphere Reserve, which lays a strong foundation for the years to come.

II.2 Key Element of Participation: Identifying Capabilities

While participatory management has great relevance and creates various benefits in principle, the management unit needs to address a number of challenges to establish truly successful and equitable participation:

For instance, participation can exacerbate already existing power imbalances and injustices, if not well-conceptualized. Communities and other stakeholder groups consist of individuals with a variety of different prerequisites, capabilities, access opportunities and interests. Often, local communities are represented by and request to be accessed through local leaders (e.g. "chiefs"). In such cases, the Biosphere Reserve management unit can only successfully involve marginalized groups and individuals upon the support and consent of these local leaders.

Processes that are foreseen for participation should then, first of all, be truly open for everybody and not just for those who are already powerful and well-positioned. However, being

"truly open", can be insufficient as well. Those who are particularly marginalized (e.g. ethnical/language minorities, disabled people) might need "extra support" to ensure that they can participate on an equal footing (e.g. translation). Creating equal participation opportunities ensures that everybody feels welcome. A true intention of openness and inclusion will guarantee that all those involved will better support the Biosphere Reserve, which includes those that do not need "extra support".

Beyond this general demand of inclusive openness, it is essential that local communities and other stakeholders are adequately involved in the Biosphere Reserve, based on their respective capabilities and interests. Thus, it is fundamental that the management unit establishes a clear picture of the different stakeholder groups and their interests in the Biosphere Reserve (stakeholder analysis).

Based on such analysis, the management unit needs to offer creative and varied participation formats. These should attract the participation of interested parties and address different groups of community members. A typical kind of participation format is, for example, consultation meetings.⁶ These can cover a variety of topics e.g. on the overall Biosphere Reserve concept, on how to establish sustainable livelihoods, and on new, additional ways of engaging the communities in development activities. All of these participation formats should be geared towards concrete results and follow-up.

It is a complex task to achieve productive and inclusive participatory management – thus, unfortunately, too often participation exists only on paper. **The key tasks of the management unit thus consist of coordinating, facilitating and identifying the capacities of all stakeholders.** While stakeholders should be engaged in a majority of management issues, not all decisions need to be actively decided by all stakeholders.

Roles and responsibilities within the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve thus need to be clearly defined and made transparent, so that stakeholders can make full use of their potential and can overcome existing hierarchical structures.

II.3. Participatory Development of a Management Plan

Once an area has been designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, the next officially necessary step is to create a detailed management plan (actually, UNESCO rules favour the creation of a management plan even before the UNESCO designation, but this is not obligatory). **Developing a management plan is a key opportunity to establish a joint vision for the area that is shared by local communities, local leaders and the management unit.** If this activity is realised in a participatory process, the goals, milestones and activities laid out in the management plan will be effectively tailored to local contexts, in order to meet needs and demands.

The UNESCO designation is a valuable label to attract donors and funding. Thus, having a clear idea of what is supposed to be done in the Biosphere Reserve in the next five to ten years makes it possible to establish a portfolio of possible projects. These can then be presented to potential donors with the backing of local communities. The fact that the projects have been created in a participative process will help to convince donors that these are well conceptualized, context-specific and legitimate initiatives.

Participation is a learning process, for the management unit and stakeholders. The joint task of developing a management plan is, therefore, an optimal occasion to serve as a starting point for this long-term task. On the one hand, the management unit can demonstrate to the stakeholders that they can participate and how they can participate. On the other hand, the management unit can develop clear roles and responsibilities based on the capabilities and interests of the stakeholders.



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III. Success Factor: Adaptive Management

III.1 Flexibility for a Long-term Positive Development

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves' character as model regions for sustainable development implies the experimental approach of this UNESCO designation. In practice, this means: The management unit together with local stakeholders develops and tests innovative measures to create long-term sustainable ecological and socio-economic development opportunities in the region. It implies that the Biosphere Reserve management unit itself needs to be open to continuous change and adaptation.

This dynamic nature of the situation in the Biosphere Reserves might be considered as an obstacle for establishing a long-term management plan. But, in fact, the dynamism is a key rationale for such a plan and ensures that the overarching goal is maintained, even during changing circumstances.

A typical Biosphere Reserve management plan covers a period of five to ten years. During this time span, Biosphere Reserves are often confronted with a number of uncertainties, such as changes in political circumstances, environmental conditions, and socio-economic factors, among others. Therefore, the management unit needs to continuously and critically assess the relevance of the management plan, once it has been established. Developing and updating a management plan is thus more than just drafting a document in order to fulfil formal requirements.⁷ While working towards a five or ten-year goal, the management unit of a Biosphere Reserve might notice that parts of the management plan do not or no longer work in a certain way. These findings inform the adaptation of the overall management, which safeguards the relevance of the management plan.

Adaptive management always needs to be an addition to participative management, not a replacement. The function of this management style is based on examining the goals, milestones, and activities that have been established through a complex participatory process. The management unit needs to base the findings that inform adaptive management on clear and transparent monitoring and evaluation activities that account for the goals and milestones.

III.2 Monitoring and Evaluation for Adaptive Management

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are an integral part of adaptive management to ensure the long-term positive development of the Biosphere Reserve. It is an instrument to compare the situation at the starting point with the intended outcome and the actual current situation. This requires that goals and milestones have been identified and formulated in the management plan. **M&E makes it possible to prove that the desired results or milestones have been achieved or that well-informed updates and adjustments to the management plan can be made.**

If done correctly, M&E is a win-win situation for the Biosphere Reserve, its stakeholders and possible collaborating scientific institutions like universities, laboratories, research organisations and others. It is, however, crucial that M&E activities fit into the frame of the indicators and milestones that have been laid down in the management plan. Otherwise, stakeholders will easily get frustrated or experience research fatigue when they feel that the data being collected does not actually contribute to the development of the Biosphere Reserve.

Even when M&E is robust, impartial and thoroughly done, results that indicate the rate of success of the activities undertaken may turn out negative. **In case M&E shows that certain activities do not contribute to the envisioned goals, or that important milestones have not been reached yet, this should never be seen as a failure – this is exactly the function of M&E.** It is key that such critical findings gain the attention they deserve, so that they inform an update of the management plan to get back on track.

In order to foster accountability, the management unit needs to share M&E findings with stakeholders who participated in the development of the management plan. Ideally, necessary and informed updates of the management plan will then be elaborated through participative management that includes local communities and other major stakeholders. Through this two-step management process, the management unit will be able to secure long-term buy-in of communities and other stakeholders.

Conclusions

To conclude, quality management is essential to maintain momentum after the UNESCO designation, to ensure that the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve can fulfil its function as a model region for sustainable development. While the UNESCO designation demonstrates quality and success, it also requires sites to adhere to a set of quality requirements laid down in key documents of the MAB Programme.

Most importantly, the management unit can only implement the Biosphere Reserve's goals in an effective and beneficial manner through cooperation with different stakeholder groups. It is thus advisable to establish transparent, permanent, inclusive and reliable channels of communication to local communities and stakeholders. Participation of different perspectives and local, traditional knowledge is the foundation of creative and context-specific approaches to local development.

Apart from being participative, management should also be adaptive to be able to effectively respond to dynamically changing external conditions. Continuous M&E will inform regular updates of the management plan. Positive as well as negative findings should be shared among the WNBR – thereby fulfilling a crucial part of the UNESCO designation.

To summarise, two things are key in order to maintain momentum: Planning and the active engagement/participation of internal and external stakeholders. It is crucial to combine these two elements and to carry out the planning process with stakeholders. By maintaining momentum after the UNESCO designation through quality management, the overall objective of reconciling nature conservation with sustainable socio-economic development in the Biosphere Reserve can be achieved.

Further Reading

The German Commission for UNESCO has published two policy briefs on key topics concerning UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. While **Policy Brief No. 1**⁸ covers the topic of the relevance of institutional structures in Southern Africa for Biosphere Reserves, **Policy Brief No. 2**⁹ illustrates the various benefits of Biosphere Reserves.

This Policy Brief bases key lines of argumentation on the comprehensive **Management Manual for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Africa**¹⁰. The field version¹¹ of this practical document provides a well-summarized overview of the key topics that are outlined within the Management Manual.

Regarding formal requirements as well as shared best practices and lessons learned, further online resources are freely accessible for consultation:

Key documents such as the **Statutory Framework**¹², the **Seville Strategy**¹³ and the **MAB Strategy 2015–2025**¹⁴ define in detail the requirements that UNESCO Biosphere Reserves need to fulfill.

With regard to quality, recent progress concerning the **“Excellence Process”**¹⁵ – having concluded the **“Exit Strategy”**¹⁶ in 2021 – ensures that the UNESCO designation keeps its reputation as a quality label. These documents as well as the 2020 adoption of the **Technical Guidelines**¹⁷ are also a valuable resource for quality management.

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