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AfrimAB



Policy Brief
No. 1 – Lessons
about institutional
structures from
Southern Africa

Making UNESCO's

“Man and the Biosphere Programme” work

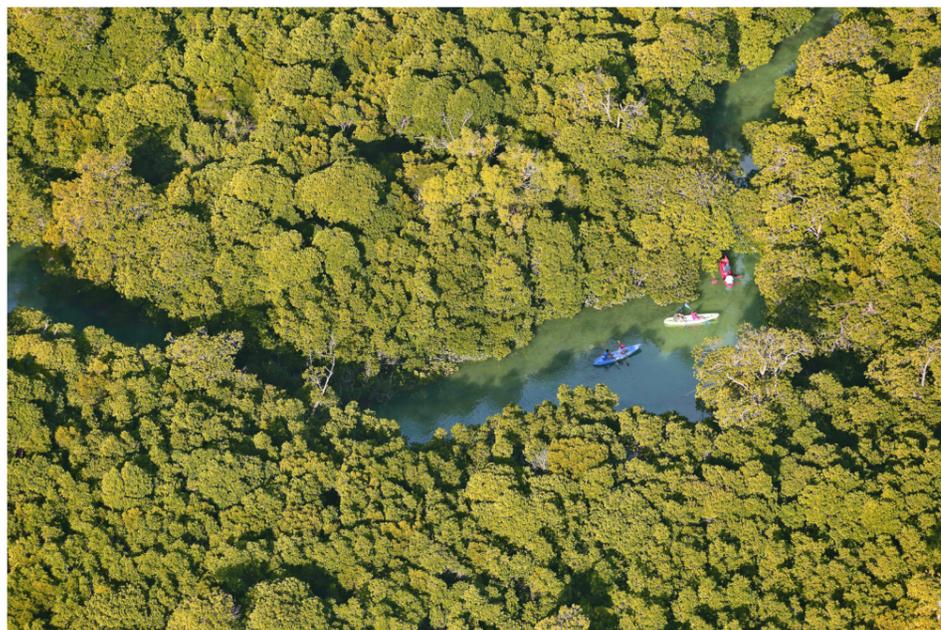
Biosphere Reserves – an important instrument of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme – have a huge potential to advance the 2030 Agenda. They foster social, economic and ecological development and provide opportunities for sustainable innovation, education and research. Yet, experience shows that missing this potential is often a result of challenges related to a lack of functioning national MAB structures, political support and funding. This policy brief addresses national decision makers and explains how to overcome these challenges in order to advance sustainable development through MAB implementation.

UNESCO's MAB Programme and its major tool, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, are useful instruments for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United

Nations, as multiple past and present case studies have demonstrated.¹ As “model regions for sustainable development”, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves aim at balancing nature conservation with the concrete social and economic improvement of local livelihoods. Today, UNESCO has designated a total of 686 Biosphere Reserves (BRs) in 122 countries which form the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR).

In 2011, AfrimAB, the African Network of MAB stakeholders, declared Southern Africa as a focus area, to further utilize the programme's potential and its implementation in the region. In comparison to other (sub-)regions on the continent, implementation had been hampered by a number of reasons. Typically, most of these relate to the national institutional frameworks of the MAB Programme.

This policy brief proposes possible approaches for effective national MAB structures that can serve to overcome generic obstacles. Such structures include an effective institutional framework that is supported by political decision-makers on different levels of government. For its realization MAB stakeholders have to develop a convincing communication strategy to reach out to decision-makers and elaborate a reliable financing strategy.



Quirimbas Biosphere Reserve was designated by UNESCO in 2018 as the first biosphere reserve in Mozambique. © UNESCO/Quirimbas Biosphere Reserve, Mozambique

I. Identifying success factors of the MAB Programme in Southern African

Out of the 80 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Sub-Saharan Africa, 14 are located in Southern Africa: ten in South Africa, two in Malawi, one in Zimbabwe, and one in Mozambique.² Initiatives to set up new Biosphere Reserves as well as ideas and committed stakeholders to advance the MAB Programme exist all across Southern Africa. However, observing such initiatives and processes in different countries over the years shows especially a lack of institutional capacity, political support and/or financial assistance as main challenges throughout the subregion. These major obstacles were also confirmed in early 2018 through a qualitative survey and discussions held during the kick-off meeting of a new project for supporting the MAB programme in Southern Africa.³

Progress in the following three fields has been identified as crucial for advancing the MAB Programme in Southern Africa.⁴

- 1) Building **effective institutional frameworks** for the national MAB implementation,
- 2) strengthening **political support** through better communicating benefits and
- 3) securing **reliable financing**.

This policy brief proposes **approaches** in order to reach such progress, drawing on analysis of Southern African countries as well as on broader experience from within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR). The conclusion contains **policy recommendations for stakeholders** on how to move forward the MAB Programme and establish Biosphere Reserves as model regions for sustainable development in their respective countries.

II. An effective institutional framework for national MAB implementation

The national “institutional MAB framework” in a country is the combination of the relevant stakeholders, their formal cooperation structures and (informal) interplay that organise and manage the national implementation of the MAB Programme. “Stakeholders” include relevant line ministries, the MAB Focal Point, the MAB National Committee, the National Commission for UNESCO as well as other national, provincial and local authorities, scientists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). “Formal structures” are e.g. decrees that institute a MAB Focal Point, Terms of References of a MAB National Committee or laws or decrees that institute Biosphere Reserves as legal entities.

1. The MAB Focal Point

Designating a MAB Focal Point is comparable to designating a Focal Point for any other intergovernmental programme or convention. Establishing such a Focal Point is a useful and advisable first step to develop the MAB programme within a country. It ensures reliable communication flows between the international level and relevant national authorities. Beyond communication, an effective Focal Point makes different MAB actors mutually aware of their activities, integrates isolated initiatives and ensures follow-up and continuity for major efforts such as Biosphere Reserve nominations. Designating a MAB Focal Point is never an end in itself and its absence is not a formal obstacle. However, experience from Southern Africa shows that such a lack of Focal Point can be an obstacle in practice.

A MAB Focal Point should be instituted as a **well mandated and sufficiently empowered coordinator**. In exceptional cases, a “split” or “double” Focal Point can be useful, for example during major efforts such as the nomination of a Biosphere Reserve, if the persons have trustful relationships and complementary capacities. Staff time requirements may vary between half a day or one day per week to full-time depending on the actual activities carried out.

MAB Focal Points are established within different institutions, with varying success. Establishing it within or attached to the government improves accountability and communication with outside partners. In

Southern Africa, most stakeholders seem to be convinced that a MAB Focal Point should optimally be located **within the Ministry for Environment, at high hierarchical level**, based on a clear assignment/mandate and **with operative support** from one dedicated ministry official – who is ideally not subject to rules of frequent staff rotation.

2. The MAB National Committee

Most countries in Southern Africa have established MAB National Committees to pool the relevant MAB expertise. Global experience corroborates the vital role of MAB National Committees to link national stakeholders and to guide action. However, they need to be set up in an **effective form**. Unfortunately, some National Committees **lack a clearly defined mandate, adequate capacities, official government support or proper institutional placement**.

The **mandates** of the MAB National Committees in Southern African countries differ. Some have solely advisory roles, others have more wide-ranging mandates with decision-making power. Both models can be successful, as long as Committee members can effectively contribute their expertise and engage pro-actively in MAB implementation, such as Biosphere Reserve nominations. The mandate should also be clarified in terms of content: Is it focused on nominating, evaluating and promoting Biosphere Reserves or is it wider, covering e.g. also the promotion of ecological research?

Adequate capacities encompass, inter alia, an allocated budget and an active chairperson who ensures that scheduled meetings are held and who is also available in between meetings for follow-up and communication. Committee members should be designated by function, in order to ensure continuity and neutrality. Capacity of committee members is also needed in terms of content, i.e. an understanding of the goals, functioning and benefits of the MAB Programme.

Official government support can include a decree to institute the Committee, and/or regular participation by several line ministry officials in meetings and/or having a high-ranking government official as Committee chairperson. This support will make financial resources more easily accessible, i.e. for meetings and for activities such as elaborating Biosphere Reserves nominations.

The **institutional placement** of Committees in Southern Africa differs as well. A general recommendation is to place the Committee and the Focal Point within the frame of the same line ministry. Moreover, if the Biosphere Reserves of a country are governed according to the “authority model” (in contrast to the “NGO

model”)⁵, it would be favourable to place the respective management authority within the same ministry (and not under a different ministry).

3.

The role of National Commissions for UNESCO

National Commissions for UNESCO can have an important role for national MAB implementation. This observation holds true for most countries in Southern Africa. Formally, they liaise with the Focal Point and the MAB National Committee and thus ensure consistency of national positions and policies across different UNESCO programmes. They also offer access to other line ministries and can promote multi-dimensional political perspectives on the MAB Programme. In most countries, they are also ex-officio members of MAB Committees. Informally, they often provide additional ad-hoc staff time, expertise or even financial resources assisting the work of the MAB Committee. If given sufficient capacities and the mandate, National Commissions may even be the optimal solution to serve as interim MAB Focal Point in a first step of MAB implementation.

III. Political recognition and support through communication strategies

Being a UNESCO programme, national MAB progress requires political support, both for establishing adequate institutional frameworks and for programme implementation itself. Such support may include for example the provision of financial resources, embedding MAB implementation in the national legislation, re-attributing land rights, advancing individual Biosphere Reserves or negotiating local land-use disputes.

Lack of political support is a frequent challenge at all stages of MAB implementation. Some countries in Southern Africa report the lack of political recognition and support as the main hindrance for advancing the MAB Programme. Support may be lacking at the national level, e.g. from parliaments, presidential office or relevant line ministries, as well as from provincial, district and local level.



Basotho shepherds in rural Lesotho. The country is in the process of establishing its first Biosphere Reserve around T'sehlanyane National Park. © Chiemgau Biking (Flickr CC BY-ND 2.0)

The key to gaining political support is generating understanding and knowledge about **the social, economic and political benefits of Biosphere Reserves** and – where relevant – the added value in comparison to other concepts for sustainable development. This requires “lobbying” for MAB. In many countries in Southern Africa, MAB stakeholders refer to “lobbying with relevant institutions” as one of their main priorities. In order to achieve buy-in from decision-makers, **a well-targeted, differentiated and long-term communication strategy is essential.**

Key decision-makers need to be identified, they may be ministers, ministry officials, parliamentarians, chiefs or elders from the areas of Biosphere Reserves. If their number is rather small, messages should be highly personalised and the communication style adapted to known political interests of the individual addressees. Even if the number of individuals is larger, messages should never be generic, but tailored to interests.

The communication on the MAB Programme should always be differentiated and should **prioritise tangible benefits.** Biosphere Reserves should be presented as useful instruments for achieving national and local policy targets, rather than for complying with global commitments. Referring to a decision-maker's personal political agenda can be helpful. Usually, messages about nature conservation work less effectively than messages about income generation, job creation, and poverty reduction – Biosphere Reserves from around the world offer excellent success stories in this regard. This is also applicable in Southern Africa, where many nature conservation efforts are already underway and new initiatives should therefore in particular stress economic benefits. References to international prestige and tourism attractiveness achieved through a UNESCO designation can be effective arguments, too.

Often, ministry officials change positions and new politicians enter the arena after elections. Therefore, communication strategies should be considered as repeated and long-term efforts. Moreover, in order to safeguard support, it would be helpful if Biosphere Reserves and the MAB Programme could be manifested in national laws and regulations, political strategies and action plans.

IV. Reliable financing

Some funding is needed for the work of the National Committee and the Focal Point, in order to carry out periodic reviews, implement research and pilot projects for the needs of local communities. Moreover, funding is needed for managing and maintaining existing Biosphere Reserves as well as for supporting the establishment of new Biosphere Reserves.

UNESCO itself does not provide direct funding for the national MAB implementation or the establishment of Biosphere Reserves.⁶ Simultaneously, while funding from local and national government sources seem to be the only long-term options, many governments in Southern African countries are initially reluctant to provide funding. Thus, MAB stakeholders should be prepared to initially **seek a diversified funding portfolio** from local, national and international sources. If allowed, charging entry fees for protected areas can be part of the solution, as can be setting up trust funds and foundations. Also partnerships with the private sector, either domestically with local business owners or from abroad, are interesting options. Demonstrating tangible benefits, e.g. in tourism, can inspire local businesses to support a Biosphere Reserve. In fact, evidence shows that a UNESCO designation can increase income from tourism as well as from the production of agricultural products (e.g. high quality and specialty organic and fair trade products). Time-bound project-based funding from international donors is a frequently sought option, but it often requires the involvement of the national government.

Experience from Sub-Saharan Africa and worldwide shows that **the effective use of available funds for Biosphere Reserves is essential.** “Effectiveness” in terms of a viable Biosphere Reserve also includes benefit-sharing and the allocation of parts of the revenues for concrete benefits for the local population. This will foster the perception of a Biosphere Reserve as a helpful tool for community development.

V. Conclusions and lessons learned

Southern African countries are in general in a very good position to benefit from UNESCO's MAB Programme, since they have excellent frameworks for biodiversity conservation and sustainable development already in place which the MAB Programme can bring to the next level.

The existing challenges in implementing effective MAB structures and establishing Biosphere Reserves in Southern African countries can be overcome through

- **readjusting the national MAB institutional framework**, through establishing a well mandated MAB Focal Point and an adequately equipped National Committee and a close cooperation with the National Commission for UNESCO and other relevant stakeholders,
- **formulating a targeted political communication strategy**, and
- **developing a diversified funding portfolio** to attain **reliable financing** structures.

This policy brief has discussed these issues in the Southern African context, but similar challenges can also be observed in other regions around the globe. While the MAB Programme and Biosphere Reserves are very sensitive to specific local conditions and overcoming such challenges is therefore highly context-dependent, the recommendations elaborated in this Policy Brief can also act as general guidance for stakeholders that work on MAB implementation worldwide.

Further Information

Project "Promoting the SDGs in Southern Africa":
■ <http://www.bfn.de/en/activities/international-nature-conservation/projects/africa/promoting-the-sdgs-in-southern-africa.html>

UNESCO's "Man and the Biosphere" (MAB) Program:
■ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/an-and-biosphere-programme/>

Sustainable Development Goals:
■ <https://sustainable-development.un.org/>

German Commission for UNESCO (2015), Management Manual for UNESCO Biosphere

Reserves in Africa:
■ https://www.unesco.de/sites/default/files/2018-01/Manual_BR_Africa_en-1.pdf

Sources

1 cf. "Biosphere Reserves – Inspiring Action for Agenda 2030" (GIZ 2016).

2 ■ As of September 2018, cf. www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/africa/.

3 The two-year project "Promoting the SDGs in Southern Africa through UNESCO's 'Man and the Biosphere' (MAB) Programme" has been launched in early 2018 and is coordinated by the German Commission for UNESCO and supported by the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation (BfN) with funds from the German Ministry for the Environment. It builds upon previous cooperation projects between BfN and partners in Southern Africa and encompasses the cooperation with nine countries of the Southern African subregion: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, South Africa and Zimbabwe (cf. project presentation).

4 Of course these challenges do not apply to all countries in the same intensity and combination. But given the findings of the underlying evaluation, these are indeed common and widespread fields of challenges that are each evident in almost all of the nine Southern African countries.

5 Most Biosphere Reserves in Sub-Saharan Africa are managed according to the so called "authority model". In this model, the management unit of a Biosphere Reserve is typically part of a government authority and therefore has a strong mandate. For this approach, much effort needs to be invested in ensuring community involvement, e.g. through advisory boards and/or employment of local community workers. The alternative model is the "NGO model" that is used in South Africa. Here, non-governmental stakeholders have a decisive role in the highest decision-making boards. While enforceable authority and access to resources may be reduced, this model can ensure participation and balance the interests of local stakeholders more directly.

6 The AfriBio Fund, initiated by AfriMAB and adopted in 2017 by the UNESCO General Conference, has not received any substantial funding so far.

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