



United Nations  
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for UNESCO



AfrimAB



Policy Brief  
No. 2 – Benefits  
of Biosphere  
Reserves for  
Southern Africa

# Making UNESCO's

# “Man and the Biosphere Programme” work

## Main Messages

The concept of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves **matches very well with existing development strategies in Southern Africa** and is a useful **instrument for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations**. Examples from across the African continent prove that a Biosphere Reserve has the potential to bring concrete and lasting additional benefits to the designated area:

- Biosphere Reserves trigger **local economic development** by promoting new sustainable income generating activities across sectors, e.g. through the production of agricultural products, the marketing of traditional handicrafts and the promotion of sustainable tourism.
- They add value to existing protected areas and **community-based resource conservation**.

- They strengthen **local identity and ownership**.
- They draw upon **sustainable development solutions** from a strong **international network** and generate **international recognition through their functioning as “model regions for sustainable development”**.
- Thus, they provide high potential to attract **national and international funding**.

If you are interested in initiating a Biosphere Reserve, you can revert to a **wide network of supporting partners**. They will jointly coordinate the designation process with you. Your first contact point should be the National Commission for UNESCO, the MAB National Committee or the MAB Focal Point in your country – they have the necessary knowledge and experience to assist and link you with funding partners and the right stakeholders.

# Introduction

Designating an area as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve activates it as “model region for sustainable development”: **UNESCO Biosphere Reserves balance nature conservation with the improvement of livelihoods.** Therefore, Biosphere Reserves are ideal tools for fostering local environmental, social and economic development, as demonstrated by numerous case studies<sup>1</sup>. Biosphere Reserves are the key instrument of UNESCO’s “Man and the Biosphere” (MAB) Programme.

Out of the 80 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves on the African continent, 15 are located in Southern Africa: ten in South Africa, two in Malawi, one in Zimbabwe, one in Eswatini and one in Mozambique.<sup>2</sup> To make further use of the potential of Biosphere Reserves, a number of initiatives for new Biosphere Reserves has developed in Southern Africa over the past years. They build on existing regional and national frameworks, policies and programmes for conservation and sustainable development.

This policy brief outlines **the advantages and benefits of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves**, drawing on examples of African Biosphere Reserves, and demonstrates **how the concept of Biosphere Reserves matches with existing protected areas and land management approaches** in Southern Africa. Moreover, this briefing provides **recommendations for stakeholders** who are interested in initiating a Biosphere Reserve on how to **connect with supporting partners** and to **move forward with the designation process.**

## I. Strengthening the development of local economies and generating income

**UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are landscapes where people live and work.** Biosphere Reserves provide a frame for economic development and at the same time they realise both: **effective nature conservation and the improvement of local livelihoods.** In many rural areas in Africa, people depend to a large extent on natural resources for food, energy, shelter and monetary income. To avoid their degradation and to conserve these resources – also for future generations – it is crucial to use them sustainably. New technologies (e.g. in terms of renewable energy, water conservation and use, building, crop and livestock production) and institutional innovations (e.g. producer co-operatives) offer employment

opportunities and simultaneously protect the environment. Biosphere Reserves can serve as model regions to develop, test and implement technological and institutional innovations that generate added value and create local employment. As Biosphere Reserves have a mandate to foster research, this may happen in cooperation with local universities or international research teams, too.

A number of examples across Africa show that the establishment of a Biosphere Reserve in an area can increase **income and employment opportunities**, e.g. through the production and marketing of agricultural products, the promotion of traditional handicrafts or the positive impacts of cooperation frameworks fostering sustainable land use.



Besides, more and more products from UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are becoming premium products on the world market – such as the world-famous **Argan oil from Arganeraie Biosphere Reserve in Morocco**, the **premium wild coffee products from Kafa Biosphere Reserve in Ethiopia** or the **“Comoé Honey” from Comoé Biosphere Reserve, Cote d’Ivoire**. The result has been a continuously growing income for local communities.

## II. Developing sustainable tourism – an example for new employment opportunities

Visitors consider **UNESCO designations as quality labels**: Research results show that **tourists choose their destinations because they are designated as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves.** By raising an area’s visibility for domestic and foreign visitors, **new economic opportunities in sustainable tourism** may emerge. This is especially helpful in areas with few other opportunities for income generation.

Yet, sustainable tourism in UNESCO Biosphere Reserves means much more than having a lodge powered with renewable energy. It means, for example, developing a combination of experiences for tourists, so that they stay in an area for several days instead of moving in and out for a day tour of wildlife spotting experience. It also means sharing benefits with local communities and co-ownership of community-run tourism outlets. **Sustainable tourism serves to sustain the natural habitat and also the cultural features of a Biosphere Reserve:** As soon as the habitat becomes

an economic asset for local communities, they will promote its conservation and sustainable use for their own interest. It is important to point out that “sustainable” tourism is not equivalent to “small profit” – it means **creating a special tourist destination with employment opportunities and new environmentally sustainable income sources.**

 **Songor** in Ghana was designated as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 2011 and its mangroves marshes and beaches attract high numbers of national and international visitors every year. **Ada**, the major town in the Biosphere Reserve, has become one of the top tourist destinations in Ghana and sustainable tourism is one of the main economic drivers for the local population.

### III. Adding value to existing community-based conservation efforts

The designation as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is a useful tool to strengthen existing protected areas and land management schemes. **The UNESCO designation provides stability, visibility and legitimacy** and is acknowledged and respected by national and international authorities. Simultaneously, a Biosphere Reserve reinforces the notion of local self-management of an area. **Existing conservation and management schemes** will be supported and further strengthened through the establishment of a Biosphere Reserve. This means an **appreciation of their successes and values.**

A number of countries in Southern Africa have long traditions in linking conservation efforts with community-based management. Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Botswana, Malawi and Namibia is an example in this regard. The concept of CBNRM has much in common with UNESCO’s Biosphere Reserve concept as **community-based management** and the **empowerment of local stakeholders** are major components of both. In fact, both approaches supplement each other, with UNESCO Biosphere Reserves providing a supportive institutional frame for CBNRM and creating international visibility. They also add further robustness in case of changes in national political priorities, challenges in local governance and internal conflicts of interest. Moreover, Biosphere Reserves can offer assistance to overcome challenges for community-based resource management: as globally visible and stable institutions with participation at the core of their concept, **UNESCO Biosphere Reserves help to foster collective decision-making and economic benefit sharing.**

 The **Lubombo Biosphere Reserve** in Eswatini, designated by UNESCO in 2019, is an excellent example that shows how a Biosphere Reserve complements already existing types of community-based land management and conservation efforts. The Biosphere Reserve connects and builds upon initiatives such as the Lubombo Transfrontier Conservation Areas (LTFCA) and the Strengthening the National Protected Areas System (SNPAS)-Programme. It is the explicit aim of the Lubombo Biosphere Reserve to contribute to the promotion of community-based resource management through its integrated multi-stakeholder approach.



Sustainable agriculture and the marketing of sustainably harvested wild coffee as a premium product for European markets became additional sources of income for smallholders in Kafa Biosphere Reserve/Ethiopia. © Angelika Berndt/NABU

## IV. Strengthening local identity and community empowerment

The designation as UNESCO Biosphere Reserve **increases local communities' appreciation of their environment and home area**. A Biosphere Reserve promotes the sensitization of its inhabitants towards the sustainable use of natural resources and the preservation of their intangible heritage and traditional knowledge.

It has been demonstrated that Biosphere Reserves can create a **strong sense of identity and pride for their region**. This often results in positive social and demographic trends like less outward migration from rural areas, thus reducing urban influx.

Another factor contributing to strengthening local identity is the aspect of **ownership and participation**: Successful UNESCO Biosphere Reserves involve local communities and interested stakeholders in all aspects of their planning and management. Such inclusive engagement reduces conflicts of interests and improves economic opportunities.

**Jozani-Chwaka Bay Biosphere Reserve** on the island of Zanzibar in Tanzania serves as an interesting example of inclusive decision-making and revenue sharing in a Biosphere Reserve: a large share of the tourism income generated by the management unit is transferred to local communities. These communities have developed a collective process in which they decide about concrete projects that are funded from this income.



Sustainable Tourism creates new economic opportunities and income sources for local communities. This photograph shows a lodge in Mlawula Nature Reserve/Eswatini, part of the 2019 designated Lubombo Biosphere Reserve. © UNESCO/Lubombo Biosphere Reserve – Kingdom of Eswatini.

Malawi's national tree – the **Mulanje Cedar** – occurs naturally only in the **Mount Mulanje Biosphere Reserve**. The Cedar forest cover has declined drastically in the last thirty years and as a result, the Mulanje Cedar is now almost extinct. Surrounding communities in the Biosphere Reserve have been engaged in the “Save our Cedar”-Project that aims to restore populations of the Mulanje Cedar. The project establishes sustainable community nurseries which specify on the sale and planting of the seedlings of the Mulanje Cedar. This generates sustainable income sources for local people who still rely on the economic use of the tree and this way improves the livelihoods and strengthens the local identity of the participating communities.

## V. Acting as model regions for sustainable development

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are model regions for sustainable development: They are “learning laboratories” in which **innovative ideas for sustainable development are being explored and implemented**. This generates benefits not only within their borders – but also beyond, as Biosphere Reserves **share their solutions for development challenges with partners worldwide**. If proven successful, these approaches can set examples and inspire other areas to follow similar development paths.

The World Network of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve offers a huge wealth of knowledge and practical experience to address many development challenges. In addition, it provides numerous opportunities to partner with other Biosphere Reserves worldwide. Simultaneously, the World Network is an **ideal platform for a country to present its local success story at an international stage**.

An example of a mutually supportive relationship between Biosphere Reserves is the partnership between South African **Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve** and Rhoen Biosphere Reserve in Germany. The cooperation was initiated more than 10 years ago through mutual study visits of representatives from both areas. Today, it involves many forms of partnerships: among schools, among municipalities and among economic actors. Such partnerships provide an ideal framework for mutually addressing challenges towards sustainable development and jointly aiming to implement the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations and the 2063 Agenda of the African Union.



Biosphere Reserves aim at balancing nature conservation and socio-economic development. The photograph shows fishermen in Songor Biosphere Reserve/Ghana. © DUK

## VI. Attracting donors and funding

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves can be considered as **“donor darlings”** – ideally suited for long-lasting relationships with international funding organizations or sponsors from the private sector. **There are many assets of Biosphere Reserves that attract donors:** a long-term stable framework, an accountable management unit, a culture of participation and cooperation and global visibility through UNESCO’s quality designation. In the long run, each Biosphere Reserve should be managed financially sustainable and receive funding for its infrastructure and development projects from national and local sources. Until this long-term goal has been reached, a Biosphere Reserve can establish a diversified funding portfolio and receive funding from different sources.

Many **bilateral and multilateral donors** have financially supported African Biosphere Reserves in the past. To name just a few: the European Union (e.g. “W Region” trans-boundary Biosphere Reserve in West Africa), France (e.g. Pendjari Biosphere Reserve in Benin) or Germany (e.g. Lubombo Biosphere Reserve in Eswatini and the aspiring Biosphere Reserve around T’sehlanyane National

Park in Lesotho). The same holds true for several UN agencies and development banks. Besides, a number of Biosphere Reserves have received funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) under the authority of the World Bank.

At the same time, **partnerships with the private sector** can be considered as an interesting option – this includes collaborations **with local businesses and partnerships with international companies.**

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 🔍 An example for a collaboration between a Biosphere Reserve and an international private sector business is that of the German pharmaceutical company Merck with **Kruger to Canyons Biosphere Reserve** in South Africa in the context of a project that aims to offset carbon emissions from travel and accommodation. Another example is that of Ecopia, an Ethiopian company that partners with small-scale producers in **Ethiopian UNESCO Biosphere Reserves** and sells their products on the European market.

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 🔍 An example for the successful management of a broad funding portfolio is the Mount Mulanje Conservation Trust, an endowment trust established by the World Bank through GEF to coordinate funding for **Mount Mulanje Biosphere Reserve** in Malawi.

# How does a Biosphere Reserve work?

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have three equally important functions:

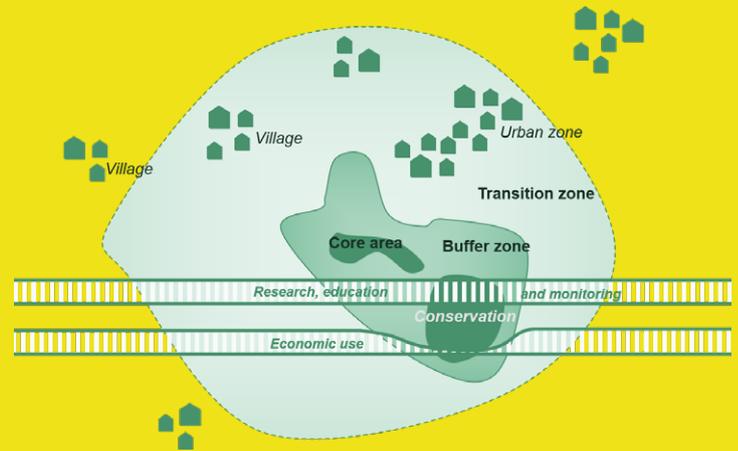
- 1) socio-economic development;
- 2) conservation of ecosystems;
- 3) research, monitoring and education.

These three functions provide the general frame. Goals and specific objectives of a particular Biosphere Reserve have to be identified and defined by each Biosphere Reserve individually.

The goals and functions of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve are pursued through the concept of zonation: While the “core area” represents a legally protected site, in the “buffer zone” and especially in the “transition zone”, human activities (from subsistence crop and livestock farming to commercial agriculture, trade, industry and tourism, and in some cases mining)

are promoted and carried out in a sustainable manner.

The governance of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves varies substantially, depending on the national context of each Biosphere Reserve. In some cases, Biosphere Reserves are administered by government agencies, in other cases, they are operated by NGOs.



## Initiating a Biosphere Reserve – How to start?

Stakeholders in Southern Africa (as anywhere else) who are interested in establishing a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve can access a wide network of partners from which a lot of support can be gathered. **The first contact point should be the respective National Commission for UNESCO** – the secretariat possesses the necessary knowledge and experience to assist with the nomination process and knows which international organisation might offer technical and financial support. In countries that have already established an **MAB Focal Point or a MAB National Committee**, these institutions are responsible for coordinating the nomination process and for reaching out to **further national and international partners**. At the end of a **participatory process**, including comprehensive consultations with all relevant local communities and stakeholders, the **nomination dossier is submitted to UNESCO through the national government**.

For more information about the designation process, you can access the **Management Manual for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Africa** (73 pp.; German Commission for UNESCO, 2015) and find the respective **nomination dossier template online**.

### 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) Programme:  
☞ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/man-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](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 2019, cf. [www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/africa/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/biosphere-reserves/africa/) (including all Biosphere Reserves designated until 2018) and <https://en.unesco.org/news/18-new-sites-join-unescos-world-network-biosphere-reserves> (new designations 2019, including Lubombo Biosphere Reserve in Eswatini).

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