

# **Input from the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme**

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### **Thematic review of the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in 2022**

#### **1. BACKGROUND on the MAB Programme:**

UNESCO, thanks to its unique mandate within the UN system, is at the forefront of the interconnectivity of territories - through its unique network of sites - and the interconnection of knowledge, cultures, values and consciences. The organization aims at reconciling people with each other and with the living fabric of our planet, restoring a healthy and harmonious relationship between humans and nature. UNESCO aims at initiating a shift in our current value system by building the ethical and philosophical framework of this new ethic of living together, while at the same time inspiring change with real-life examples of practical and transformative actions through its programs and designated sites. As outlined in the 41 C/5, UNESCO's biodiversity strategy is based on three pillars:

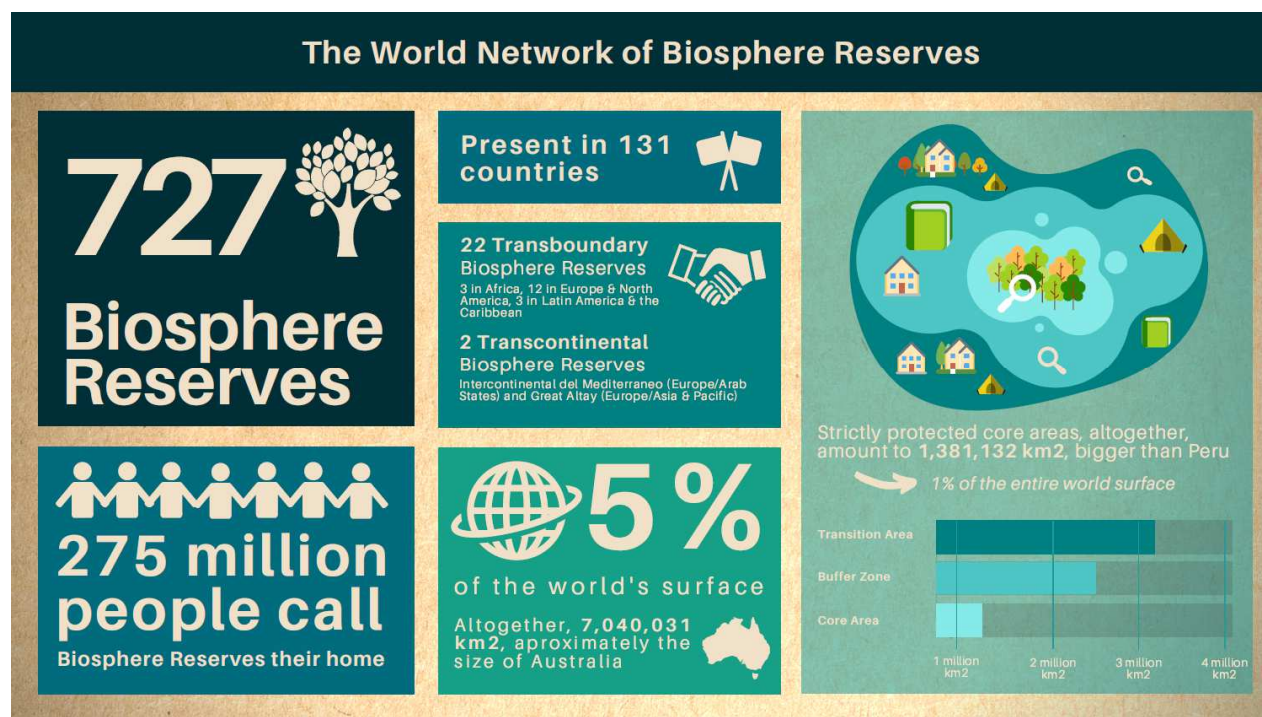
- **Restore** the relationship between humans and nature and regenerate ecosystems through education, science, local and Indigenous knowledge, based on shared values: trust, solidarity, respect for diversity;
- **Conserve** the harmony of our ecosystems by mobilizing the knowledge, good practices, methodologies and tools and know-how from the unique network of sites such as Biosphere Reserves, World Heritage Sites and UNESCO Global Geoparks to conserve and sustainably use the planet's key ecosystems;
- **Amplify** the power of youth by ensuring universal access to this diversity of knowledge, and empowering young people and future generations through our networks of sites, experts, UNESCO Chairs and Associated Schools.

This approach is fully in line with the recommendations of the international scientific community (IPCC, IPBES and others) for going beyond the sole objective of expanding protected areas and promoting the effectiveness and representativeness of protected areas.

UNESCO's objective is also to provide an essential support to Member States in this transition towards a new relationship with the living, by providing a support in the implementation of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, the Paris Agreement, the Lima Action Plan, and other relevant international frameworks.

The Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme plays a central role in the implementation of UNESCO's Biodiversity Strategy. Launched in 1971, the MAB Programme is UNESCO's oldest intergovernmental scientific programme, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2021 and 2022 (<https://en.unesco.org/mab/50years>). The MAB Programme and the Biosphere Reserve model have, over the past 50 years, become an international example of sustainable territorial development and highlight UNESCO's and the MAB's commitment to the global biodiversity agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. That is why, following the decision of the 41st session of the General Conference, November 3 will be celebrated each year as the International Day for Biosphere Reserves.

Encompassing all types of ecosystems and sometimes urban areas, the World Network of Biosphere Reserves has a global presence, comprising 727 sites, 22 of which are transboundary sites and 2 transcontinental sites, in 131 countries. More than 275 million people have their home in a biosphere reserve. Altogether, these sites protect about 5% of the earth's surface, or more than 7 million km<sup>2</sup>, an expanse roughly equal to the size of Australia, of which 1.5% is composed of core areas under strict protection, an area larger than Peru.



Only a profound change in our system of values will allow us to restore our relationship with nature and to move from the dominance of economic values towards values promoting collective well-being. UNESCO, in collaboration with FAO and UNEP, is committed to launch the "Our Humanature Path" panel as part of the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration strategy. This panel of experts will address fundamental questions about humanity's role in establishing a healthy and harmonious relationship with nature and designing alternative ways of living.

Humanity should also go beyond quantitative spatial conservation targets to achieve 100% reconciliation between humans and nature, relying on UNESCO designated sites. The UN aims at protecting 30% of the planet by 2030, both on land and at sea. But protecting 30% of the planet will be pointless if the remaining 70% continues to be destroyed. Humanity must go beyond this objective, relying on the expertise developed within UNESCO designated sites, education and valorization of local and traditional knowledge of indigenous populations.

Intergenerational and intersectoral exchanges must be consolidated through the transmission of knowledge and practices. The "Earth Network", an intersectoral cooperation program financed by Italy, aims to create a network of volunteer experts bringing their scientific, indigenous and local knowledge to UNESCO designated sites in order to strengthen capacities in terms of ecological restoration and regeneration of the links between humans and nature.

## **2. INPUTS:**

### **(a) Progress, experience, lessons learned, challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of SDGs 15 from the vantage point of the MAB Programme and its World Network of Biosphere Reserves:**

Since early 2020, the UNESCO MAB Programme encouraged its various regional/sub-regional networks to strengthen their cooperation and exchanges, also by telecommuting means, to address critical issues related to the impacts they suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic, and their response to it.

The Southeast Asian Biosphere Reserve Network (SeaBRnet) demonstrated the ability of Biosphere Reserves to build more resilient and sustainable communities in the post-pandemic context, by:

- Mobilizing local partners and reviving local economies through targeted development;
- Knowledge sharing and education;
- The delivery of locally-based goods and services while ensuring the protection of biodiversity.

Video reports from Cibodas and Komodo BR in Indonesia on how they managed UNESCO-designated sites during the pandemic, can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Z48qq8piFM> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXmR-lzt6Gw>.

The Ibero-American and Caribbean Network of MAB Committees, Focal Points and Biosphere Reserves (IberoMAB), mobilized to confront multiple economic, human rights and conservation challenges that were exacerbated or arose in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It issued an official statement to reaffirm the importance of using cooperation platforms like the Biosphere Reserves to explore new avenues for development taking into due consideration the biophysical and cultural conditions of a given territory together with the dynamics of natural cycles. Biosphere Reserves, therefore, have the potential to provide answers and innovative solutions based on nature that integrate the rural and urban population in a common vision of the environment, diversity and well-being. This Declaration of the IberoMaB Network was sent to UNESCO and to the CIC countries. See more at:



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[https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/iberomab\\_declaration\\_covid19.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/iberomab_declaration_covid19.pdf)

The MAB Programme and the World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves (WNICBR), launched a call for project proposals aimed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in island and coastal biosphere reserves. Thirty-two proposals from 17 Member States were received and four projects were selected for being implemented in the Taka Bonerate-Selayar Archipelago Biosphere Reserve (Indonesia), Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve (India) and El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve (Mexico). The projects are implemented in a wide array of topics such as food sovereignty, ecosystem restoration, education and capacity building and conservation of marine and coastal biodiversity.

In Africa, UNESCO is implementing various projects that face the challenges of how to re-build after such a sanitary crisis, addressing not only sanitary and socio-economic priorities, but the environmental one as well.

1. The BIOPALT Project (BIOSphère et PATrimoines du Lac Tchad ) indicates already a few interesting solution pathways. It includes a wide range of activities from setting up an early warning system for droughts and floods to restoring degraded ecosystems such as spawning grounds, spirulina and the Kouri cow (*Bos taurus longifrons*) - an endemic species that plays an important role in social cohesion. Particular attention is also paid to income-generating activities through the promotion of green economy and the valorization of the basin's natural resources. The project also focuses on accompanying Member States in the preparation of a dossier for the creation of a transboundary biosphere reserve in the basin and a nomination of the lake as a World Heritage Site. This involves updating and improving knowledge of Lake Chad's natural resources, and building capacity for the management and protection of these resources by managers, training and conservation technical institutions, authorities. The transboundary dimension of the Lake Chad Basin provides an opportunity for subregional cooperation and integration that the BIOPALT project will underpin to promote peace, safeguard and enhance natural and cultural resources in order to improve local communities' sources of income and thus contribute to poverty reduction.
2. Protecting Great Apes in Biosphere Reserves: Great apes are our closest cousins in the animal kingdom. With an estimated population of between 518,000 and 688,000 gorillas, chimpanzees and orangutans living in the wild, all Great Ape species are either Endangered or Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List and CITES Appendix 1, indicating that they are at very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future, probably within our own lifetime. The protection of these species, which play a fundamental role in the ecological balance of tropical forests and ecosystems, and thus in adaptation to climate change, is essential. As us, humans, great apes are vulnerable to viruses and infectious diseases. In the 2000s, gorillas and chimpanzees died of Ebola; in some places, up to 95% of gorillas were decimated by the disease. Today, as SARS-Cov-2 spreads across the globe, eyes are also turning to the great apes. Although it is not yet known whether apes can contract this strain of coronavirus, OC43, a human-transmitted strain of coronavirus, was detected in chimpanzees in Côte d'Ivoire a few years ago. The proximity of human and animal populations, mainly due to the destruction of the natural habitat of great apes, increases the risks of zoonoses while human activities sometimes induce pathologies in chimpanzees. The great apes, a species already threatened with extinction, are therefore potentially vulnerable to this new virus. UNESCO, through its network of biosphere reserves hosting great apes, is working in close collaboration with the managers of these sites to monitor

the situation. At the height of the pandemic, most gorilla tourist sites were closed. Similarly, in the Gombe Masito Ugalla Biosphere Reserve in Tanzania, the Jane Goodall Institute has implemented health safety protocols for the protection of chimpanzees.

In 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, UNESCO organized an online conference for 19 African biosphere reserve managers to raise awareness and provide training on how to prevent the spread of the virus from humans to humans, and from humans to apes. The conference focused on why and how diseases are transmitted from great apes to humans, and exchanges of experiences, how to prevent it, recognize the first signs and, if necessary, the measures to be put in place especially in terms of protection and ecological monitoring of the habitat.

**(b) Assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “leaving no one behind” against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda:**

Since the onset of the pandemic, deforestation across the Amazon and the meso-american forest corridor have increased, with a number of reports linking this to the pandemic. At the same time, attacks on environment defenders, especially indigenous peoples and afrodescendent communities, have reached alarming levels, with Latin America leading the world in assassinations. UNESCO and the IberoMaB Network undertook a scoping study to understand the impacts of such violence and harassment on UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Latin America and to devise recommendations and an initial plan of action to confront the problem. Not only is it fundamental to ensure that everything is done to protect the human rights of Biosphere Reserve managers, indigenous peoples and local communities, but they are also the heart of the sustainable territories that are Biosphere Reserves.

The report, which will be launched in 2022, provides recommendations of relevance to SDG targets 15.5 (reduce degradation, protect and prevent extinction of threatened species); 15.7 (take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking); 15.9 (integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values); 15.c (combat poaching and trafficking); 10.3 (reduce inequalities of outcome); 16.3 (promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice for all); 16.7 (ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making); 16.10 (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms); 16.a (strengthen capacity to prevent violence).

In Africa, as said above, the BIOPALT project promotes the safeguarding of Lake Chad and the sustainable management and use of its natural resources as a basis for the peaceful development and prosperity of communities, focusing in particular in the crucial role women, youth and indigenous people play in this view. In this view, UNESCO is implementing activities that should stimulate a green economy generating sustainable livelihood to the communities. In the present context of a global pandemic, these activities contributed so far to the mitigation of socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. In Niger, these activities are strengthening the resilience of about 30,000 people, in particular 13,000 women belonging to the urban community of Diffa. Their activities of oil extraction from *Balanites aegyptiaca* contribute to the fight against deforestation while improving their livelihood. 450 liters of oil are produced monthly, generating a total yearly increase in revenue of 19,000 US\$ for 45 women involved, and this required the organization of numerous awareness raising campaigns, the implementation of 2 botanical surveys, the

establishment of a local committee for the protection of the environment, the training of 90 villagers and the provision of adequate equipment to 45 women.

This example, among others, proves that the various green economies that can be mastered at the local level, from production to commercialization, are examples of nature-based solutions that contribute to biodiversity conservation, poverty reduction and sustainable development in the Lake Chad. In this area livelihoods and security of communities are intimately linked to their surrounding biological resources, which will be a bulwark against the economic consequences of COVID 19 and prevent such crises in the future.

**(c) Actions and policy recommendations in areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the implementation of the SDGs under review:**

UNESCO's unique network of Biosphere Reserves builds on more than 50 years' experience from protection to integrated management of connected landscapes and seascapes, demonstrate that it is already possible to live in harmony with nature. Good practices can inspire to reconnect beyond the boundaries of protected areas to empower all sectors of societies for the environment, for health, for green development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed indirectly to an increase in deforestation rate in Latin America. This is contributing to increasing socio-ecological vulnerabilities of global significance, including possibly reaching the so-called Amazonian "tipping point" in which climate change, deforestation and fires contribute to changing the ecological system to the point that the forest converts to savannah. UNESCO has responded with a series of webinars on integrated fire management and climate change in the framework of the LAC UNESCO Sites Climate Change, Risk and Resilience Platform. Key findings of the webinars include that 90% of the fires recorded in Latin America are anthropogenic in origin.

Moreover, deforestation, groundwater use change, reduced monitoring and rapid response, reduction of cross-cultural exchanges, accelerated land change and the use of fire for non-traditional agricultural and livestock activities are all contributing to the expansion of areas negatively affected by fire and fire's spread to UNESCO sites.

In this context, UNESCO recommends the development of integrated fire management policies at multiple scales.

Great apes (chimpanzees, orangutans, gorillas) represent an important part of the biomass of frugivores in tropical forests in Africa and South-East Asia. They participate in the dissemination of seeds and thus in the regeneration of forests. Protecting great apes, also from infectious viruses like SARS-Cov-2, means protecting tropical forests, which are essential in the fight against global warming, and maintaining a multitude of ecosystem services that they provide.

**(d) Policy recommendations, commitments and cooperation measures for promoting a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the pandemic while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda:**



To support a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery, UNESCO MAB has worked with ILO and the Argentinian government on the project “Towards an environmentally sustainable and inclusive post-pandemic tourism in Argentina”. This project highlights the importance of tailoring initiatives for the inclusion of indigenous peoples to ensure that they are not left further behind in the post-pandemic recovery (SDG target 15.6).

**(e) Key messages from UNESCO’s MAB Programme for inclusion into the Ministerial Declaration of the 2022 HLPF:**

We are at a critical time for the biosphere and the planet. The COVID-19 Pandemic has shown how essential sustainability and resilience are at local level, and that Biosphere reserves have the potential to provide answers and innovative nature-based solutions that integrate rural and urban populations as part of a common vision for the environment, diversity, health and well-being. Key messages from the MAB Programme are:

1. This health crisis shows us that environmental degradation and the "predation" of humans on biodiversity, if it continues, will lead humanity into an increasingly dark and uncertain future. This inescapable fact, like that of climate change, must remain at the heart of our reflections even when the danger is over. In the "reconstruction" phase, countries will have to fully integrate biodiversity conservation and human development, as advocated by the approaches of the MAB Program and biosphere reserves for nearly half a century.
2. Biosphere Reserves remain the only UN initiative dedicated to working collectively at the level of a landscape, and this should be of inspiration for all, also in wider scale contexts. UNESCO MAB calls for other UN Agencies and Programmes to consider more concretely the possibility to join forces in the promotion of more sustainable development pathways, from the local to the international level.
3. Biosphere Reserve managers, indigenous peoples and local communities are key to resilient, sustainable and inclusive biosphere reserves that meet the SDG targets. To achieve the Agenda 2030, we must put the resilience of those at the frontlines at the center of our agenda. In particular, efforts should be made to tailor initiatives for the inclusion of indigenous peoples to ensure that they are not left further behind in the post-pandemic recovery (SDG target 15.6).
4. Biosphere Reserves offer themselves, in all parts of the world as, as platforms for the cooperation of all relevant stakeholders when addressing disaster risks such as floods, drought, landslide, earthquakes or, as we have learned since 2020, pandemics, working with managers and stakeholders on mapping disaster risks, building local preparedness and multistakeholder/multisectoral coordination mechanisms, providing equipment and skills, and considering local and indigenous knowledge as crucial bases for sound decision making and integrated actions.
5. Biodiversity is the living fabric of our planet. It is an invaluable source of cultural diversity, intangible cultural heritage, creativity and innovation, crucial to sustainable development for human dignity and well-being. Through its scientific programmes and culture conventions, UNESCO recognizes the diverse values of biodiversity, which shape decision-making about



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conservation strategies and sustainable use and management practices as exemplified in UNESCO designated sites.

6. To inspire and restore positive human-nature connections is a fundamental prerequisite for long-term sustainable development. SDGs can be achieved only if individuals and societies change the way they think and act, and Education is key to achieving this transformation. UNESCO's role as the lead UN agency on Education for Sustainable Development (SDG), that can leverage the power of designated sites as educational and acculturation tools, is to help individuals and groups to find solutions to sustainability challenges into the closely interrelated fields of biodiversity conservation and human health.