

Assessing governance of biosphere reserves in Central Europe

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ABSTRACT

The biosphere reserve (BR) concept, developed within UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, represents a hallmark in seeking to reconcile conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The MAB Programme functioning mechanisms leave the responsibility for the translation of its BR objectives to the management authorities of the participating countries. While a shift to broad social and livelihood perspectives is emerging in the BR Programme, reflecting contemporary requirements for the sustainable management of larger territories including protected areas, it suffers from implementation deficits at the local level.

This study analyses BR governance structures to highlight the relevance of social and institutional interaction for the successful application of the BR concept. We assess BRs from Central Europe using qualitative interviews with stakeholders and relevant local actors. The purpose is to test the effectiveness of the MAB vision and business plan at the local level. Data were systematised to identify strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities and threats pertinent to the institutional and management arrangements for the case studies.

The assessment shows that institutional and structural flaws in the system of MAB institutions are amplified by governance weaknesses in the three case study countries. The governance deficits revealed the relevance of national governance matrices, professional expertise, national communication efforts and active participation for successful BR management. There is a lack of both vertical integration regarding the MAB institutions and national authorities, as well as sufficient and appropriately trained personnel, funding and political back-up in local implementation.

We conclude that existing weaknesses in the implementation of the BR concept in the three case study regions can be corrected by enhancing communication among stakeholders, fostering active participation and pushing capacity development. Despite these efforts in the national context, the MAB Programme should consider to strengthen the role of MAB National Committees as communication hub and facilitator of a national dialogue on sustainable development.

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Introduction

The evolution of the Man and the Biosphere Programme

In the early-1970s, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in order to reconcile biodiversity conservation and human development, initiated a programme entitled 'Man and the Biosphere' (MAB). The primary objective of the programme is the careful management of the biosphere, integrating nature conservation and sustainable use. A worldwide network of interlinked natural and cultural landscapes known as biosphere reserves (BRs) was launched for the further refinement and implementation of the concept. The function of the BRs within

the context of the programme is threefold: conservation, international research and monitoring, and sustainable development (Batisse, 2001; Price, 2002; Ishwaran et al., 2008).

One of the programme's outstanding features is the flexibility of its implementation mechanism: article 2, paragraph 3 of the Statutory Framework for BRs specifies that "individual biosphere reserves remain under the sovereign jurisdiction of the States . . . States take the measures which they deem necessary according to their national legislation" (UNESCO, 1996: 16). This regulation allows participating countries to tailor BRs to their national institutional conditions, but it also opens the door for national 'solutions' that do not fit the vision of the MAB Programme (Ishwaran et al., 2008).

As BRs are part of a nested system (ecologically, institutionally, legally, and socially) described as "fundamentally cross-scale in space as well as in time" (Holling et al., 1998: 355), cross-level and cross-sector issues such as compatibility of rules, communica-

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Complexity of BR coordination in a multi-level governance system

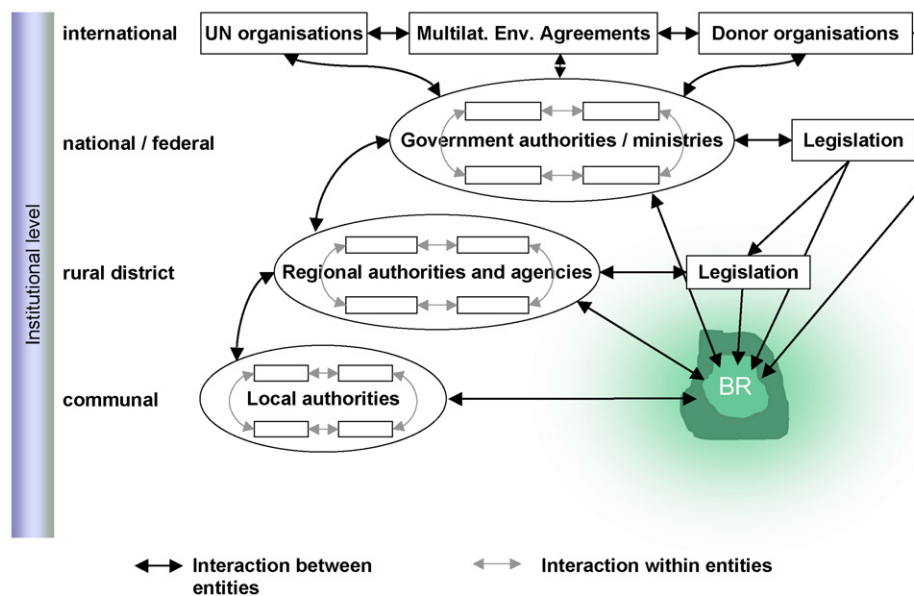


Fig. 1. Complexity of BR coordination in a multi-level governance system as a potential source of weakness in national MAB implementation (likelihood of multiple government agency coordination both nationally and regionally, leaving local manager with confused management signals and resulting in disorganised funding).

tion, and coordination become crucial for BR coordination (Berkes, 2007). The complexity of social and ecological systems requires institutions (i.e., structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation that govern the behaviour of individuals) which are capable of linking the various levels of social and political organisation because “Complexities of this multi-level world introduce additional challenges in reconciling local and global objectives of conservation” (Berkes, 2007: 15193).

The central role of governance-related factors as critical aspects of the further development of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) and implementation of the BR concept has been acknowledged by UNESCO-MAB's, 2008 Madrid Action Plan (UNESCO-MAB, 2008).

In our analysis, we concentrate on the cross-sector integration of BRs at the regional¹ (rural district) and local (communal) level, as well as on the vertical interplay between the MAB institutions and national institutions (see Fig. 1).

The significance of the biosphere reserve concept for integrated ecosystem management

According to the Seville Strategy (UNESCO, 1996), BRs are expected to fulfil three main roles: (1) *in situ* conservation of natural and semi-natural ecosystems and landscapes, (2) demonstration of ecologically and socio-culturally sustainable use, and (3) logistic support for research, monitoring, education, training, and information exchange. The BR concept recommends the realisation of the combination of these different roles through a zonation system that includes one or more core areas, buffer zones, and transition areas. The core areas have to be strictly protected in order to meet the conservation objectives, the buffer zone should be clearly delimited

for management purposes, and the transition area can extend over the territory where cooperation with local people for sustainable development can be organised (UNESCO, 1996). The core-area concept requires full-hearted sustainable development coordination with coordinated administration and cooperative funding schemes.

The BR concept represents a hallmark in the reconciliation of conservation and sustainable biodiversity use (UNESCO, 2000). The current understanding of BRs is commented upon by Bridgewater (2001), who states, “The new generation of BRs is a precursor of the types of flexible, large-scale co-management systems, seen by IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas as an imperative for viable protected areas in the future”. Lessons learned from BRs are to be considered in the design of protected areas (PAs) as well as in their integration into the broader landscape (IUCN, 2005).

Governance of biodiversity in the biosphere reserve context

Environmental² and development issues in the context of BR coordination are subject to different levels of governance: whereas, for example, land use is connected to the specific local conditions, other issues such as watershed management exhibit regional structures or are even of national concern (Stoll-Kleemann, 2005; Von Moltke, 2006; Borri-Feyerabend et al., 2006).

Young (2002) uses the term ‘interplay’ when referring to the spatial dimensions of biodiversity governance. ‘Vertical interplay’ is the interaction of institutions across scales from the interna-

¹ In the terminology of the MAB Programme, the term ‘regional’ covers more than one country to denominate a supra-national level. In this paper, we use the term ‘regional’ to describe the sub-national rural district level in order to distinguish it from the local level.

² In the present document, “governance” is defined as “the interaction among institutions, processes, and traditions that determines how power is exercised, how decisions are taken on issues of public and often private concern, and how citizens or other stakeholders have their say”. Fundamentally, governance is about power, relationships, and accountability: Who has influence? Who decides? How decision makers are held accountable? The term “governance” can be used in different contexts: global, national, and local, as well as social and institutional. Governance is present wherever people organise themselves (both formally and informally) to develop rules and relationships with each other in pursuing their objectives and goals (Institute on Governance, 2002).

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