

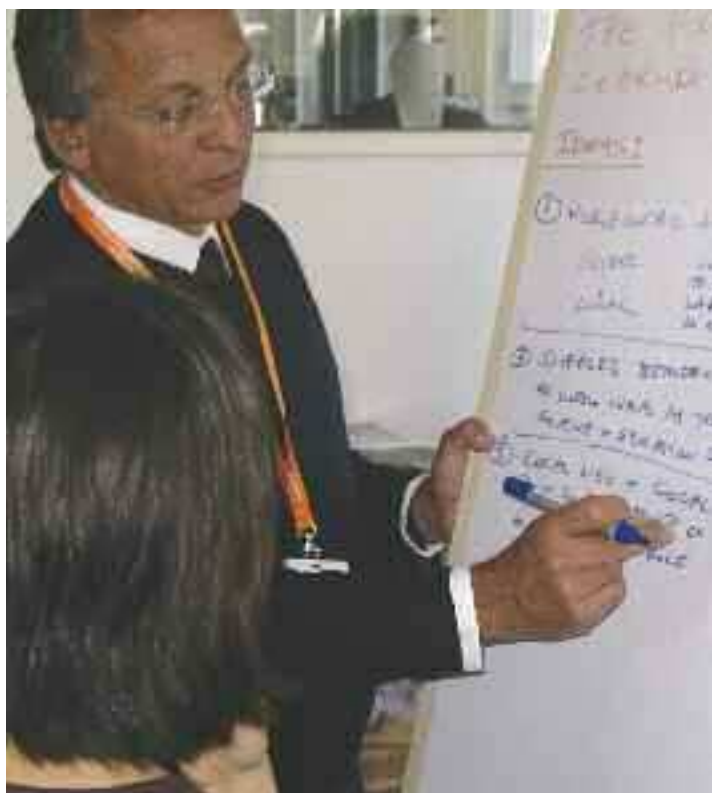
## Workshop 9: UNESCO Biosphere Reserves as Learning Sites for Integrating Local and Global Sustainability Issues

**Coordinator: Natarajan Ishwaran, UNESCO**

### **Conference Objective 1: To Highlight the Essential Contribution of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to All of Education and to Achieving Quality Education**

#### **Why is ESD relevant?**

Biosphere Reserves and partnerships between them – nationally, regionally, between continents and with outside partners – offer a unique contribution to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), as they provide a multi-level framework for mutual learning. Since the visions and goals of all Biosphere Reserves have a common basis in the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme (MAB) addressing sustainable development, they serve as a platform for easily establishing international cooperation and exchange of experience. They thus provide a platform of mutual intercultural learning for sustainable development.



Workshop coordinator Natarajan Ishwaran gathering results

Unique problems need unique solutions, with all general concepts needing local realisation and implementation. Through multidisciplinary approaches, Biosphere Reserves address the entire system of “Man and the Biosphere” including human behaviour patterns, instead of only symptoms, and thus provide effective solutions. Biosphere Reserves offer a key mechanism to combine the approaches and results of scientific research, and of traditional and local knowledge. Through the valuation of their knowledge, the communities are empowered, and they take on an active role in the sustainable development process.

### **Conference Objective 2: To Promote International Exchange on ESD**

#### **What can we learn from each other?**

International Biosphere Reserve partnerships demonstrate that many Reserves face the same challenges, both in developing and in developed countries. As lessons from concrete partnerships show, issues of common concern need to be worked on together and people need to meet in person to build trust. Partnerships lead to the understanding of the local level of being embedded in a larger picture. Global partnerships also lead to greater solidarity, as a social basis of sustainable development.

Learning in terms of Education for Sustainable Development, as opposed to lecturing, is always mutual and continuous. All partners in a learning process learn from each other (e.g. scientific researchers and local communities, both bottom-up and top-down). Learning this way is based on mutual communication and on jointly defining the research questions and learning objectives. It is advisable to support communities in defining their own sustainable development options, for the sake of better acceptance. Research and learning processes in Biosphere Reserves deal with very complex issues and require systemic approaches, while at the same time requiring strategies for reducing complexity.

Many international examples demonstrate Biosphere Reserves as learning platforms for ESD programmes (formal and informal), as research topics or study

sites. Examples also showed Biosphere Reserves' great potential as learning regions by themselves (institutional, organisational etc). Appropriate problem solutions and responses to challenges are shared not only between policy-makers, scientists and managers of Biosphere Reserves, but also between the respective local communities. As "collaborative learning platforms" they serve not only for the exchange of knowledge and content, but also for approaches and methodologies.

International cooperation between Biosphere Reserves can also serve for a discussion of new/alternative values and ethics of addressing sustainable development options, such as "sustainable shrinking".

### **Conference Objective 3: To Carry out a Stock-taking of DESD Implementation What have we achieved so far, what are the lessons learnt?**

Partnerships are the basis for learning – it is the core mission of Biosphere Reserves to establish and strengthen partnerships for sustainable development projects and strategies. Partnerships in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves exist on different levels – locally with the education sector and among all local stakeholders (as platforms for learning); globally between partner Biosphere Reserves.

Biosphere Reserves have long-standing experiences for informal learning on different levels. The cooperation with the formal education sector can however be improved: there is a need for the formal education system to better understand the potential of Biosphere Reserves for developing locally-based and hands-on competences and skills.

Biosphere Reserves have made great achievements and have gathered many experiences as a basis for external ESD activities, own ESD projects as well as learning sites in the most comprehensive sense. However, these accomplishments and experiences have hardly been documented internationally. There is an urgent need, both within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and for the DESD as a whole, for making best practices and lessons learnt better visible and available in a systematic way. Therefore, better mechanisms for sharing such experiences are needed, also using synergies to existing databases and networks. This also applies to functioning national and regional structures, such as MAB National Committees.

### **Conference Objective 4: To Develop Strategies for the Way Ahead**

#### **Where do we want to go from here?**

Strengthen partnerships and synergies of Biosphere Reserves with UN Agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as well as the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and UNESCO networks such as Chairs, the UNESCO Associated Schools and National Commissions.

The potential of Biosphere Reserves for sustainable development implementation and learning needs to be promoted more intensively and through more channels (e.g. through private partnerships, through UNESCO National Commissions, through a potential "International Year of Biosphere Reserves"). While Biosphere Reserves nowadays are regarded mainly as sites for realising sustainable development strategies in cooperation with local communities, Biosphere Reserves of the "first generation" still focus on nature protection and research. They need to be adapted and improved in order to fulfil this role as learning sites for sustainable development. More Biosphere Reserves need to share experiences among each other, informally and through formal cooperation networks.

#### **General conclusion:**

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have a high value in the ESD process, locally and globally, as spaces for mutual learning among communities, researchers, managers, decision-makers and other stakeholders. The lessons they provide in participatory approaches to combining scientific, local and traditional knowledge to pursue sustainable development choices need to be made widely available during 2010-2014.

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