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- A conservation function – to contribute to the conservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation.
- A development function – to foster economic and human development which is socio-culturally and ecologically sustainable.
- A logistic function – to provide support for research, monitoring, education and information exchange related to local, national and global issues of conservation and development.

Biosphere reserves are not covered by an international convention but must simply meet a set of criteria allowing them to fulfil properly their three functions. Collectively, biosphere reserves form a world network. Within this network, exchanges of information, experience and personnel are promoted³.

It may be fair to say that the BRCs are a logical extension of the MIRCEN and biosphere reserve concepts. UNESCO remains very supportive of their development, and recognises the need for greater international coordination and cooperation in efforts to preserve biodiversity, and in particular to advocate for governments' commitment to these efforts.

The modus operandi of the BRCs of networking and information sharing is consistent with the strategy of the new International Basic Sciences Programme (IBSP) of UNESCO⁴. This programme focuses on networking and seeks to promote excellence in the basic sciences by building on the strength of benchmark centres to address national and regional needs and priorities. This is to be promoted through collaborative research and opening up of new opportunities for training, innovation and information exchange.

UNESCO's perspective on BRCs also includes recognising the important connection between cultural and biological diversity, as well as the central role of local and indigenous communities in biodiversity management and sustainable development. This perspective is taken within the biosphere reserves of the *Man and the biosphere* programme and is central to the Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Project (LINKS) of the natural sciences sector⁵. The LINKS project brings recognition to the expert biodiversity knowledge harboured within local and indigenous communities. It seeks to empower local and indigenous knowledge holders in the processes of resource management and sustainable development by drawing international attention to the invaluable contribution they make to creating and sustaining both domestic (the multitude of traditional animal races and plant varieties) and 'wild' biodiversity (the ecological mosaics created through the traditional use of fire, offering but one example). As such, local knowledge holders can contribute importantly to inventorying biodiversity, identifying shifts and trends in resource abundance and proposing locally-adapted modalities for *in situ* biodiversity conservation.

It is important to expand the BRC concept further and outside the OECD countries. Indeed, it is vital that scientists from both developed and developing countries have the opportunity to benefit from preservation and characterisation of biological diversity, with its inherent opportunities for technology transfer from research to applied benefits for solving the world's most serious problems.

It is important that the issues pertaining to protection of ownership of information be adequately addressed within the context

of management and access procedures and protocols of the BRCs. The issues of intellectual property rights, in particular for data ensuing from indigenous knowledge systems, and appropriate benefits sharing have to be taken into account, as well as the issues of the safe transfer and ethical use of the biological material and data.

Development of BRCs is also coincidental with other global initiatives that are complementary to it, such as the EU project Micro-organisms Sustainable use and Access management Integrated Conveyance System (MOSAICS), and its precursor project, the Micro-Organisms Sustainable use and Access regulation International Code of Conduct (MOSAICC) which particularly address some of the concerns arising from access and benefit sharing of biological resources⁶. As the UN agency with a mandate for science, UNESCO seeks to promote cooperation and collaboration between these initiatives, as well as with its own related programmes.

References

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