

# A COMMITMENT CHARTER FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTORS OF THE BIOSPHERE RESERVES

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**ABSTRACT:** *A commitment charter has been drawn up to recognise the socio-economic actors of the Biosphere Reserves and acknowledge their commitment to the environment and sustainable development. This progress strategy complements the labelling of products and services and has set up networks of eco-actors, who are partners and ambassadors of the Biosphere Reserves.*

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In order to be recognised models contributing to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, the Biosphere Reserves must promote green and sustainable initiatives and the social economy. To do so, they are advised to encourage comprehensive development initiatives, the creation of labels for products and services supporting their goals integrating biodiversity conservation and human development (UNESCO 2017).

At the end of the 1990s, this topic developed as part of the global network of Biosphere Reserves, under the green economy label. In Europe, the Biosphere Reserves of Rhön (Germany), Entlebuch (Switzerland) have registered trademarks so that the enterprises of their territories can enhance the promotion of their products (especially food) and services (mainly touristic).

In France, socio-economic actors living and working in the Biosphere Reserves asked MAB

France for the authorisation to use the image of the Biosphere Reserve and of UNESCO on their products, in order to recognise their commitment to the environment. The request also included affixing the Biosphere Reserve logo on their products.

Several enterprises also mentioned the Biosphere Reserve in their communication and on their packaging, with no specific authorisation.

This situation generated several problems: a problem regarding the use of the Biosphere Reserve name and a legal problem for the ensuing allegations, absence of harmonisation between the actors as regards the communication of transmitted values, lack of readability for consumers and the risk of illegitimate image appropriation by enterprises that do not apply the principles of the Biosphere Reserves (Mercier et al. 2006).

What mechanisms could be used to promote enterprises contributing to Sustainable Development Goals in the Biosphere Reserves?

The question of establishing a Biosphere Reserve trademark was thus raised. A trademark is a sign that can be used for graphic representation to distinguish the products or services of a natural or

legal person, according to article L.711.1 of the Code of Intellectual Property in France.

Another possibility explored was the recognition of certification in relation to a standard, i.e., a standard produced by the professionals, public authorities and consumers concerned (ISO).

The inventory of existing labels and trademarks showed that there was a multitude of them in France (Mercier et al., 2006), particularly for agricultural and touristic products. As a result of this plethora of trademarks (appellations of origin, labels and quality standards...), most consumers no longer understood what they meant.

Studies carried out showed that setting up and controlling trademarks and ISO certification was costly and required the development of specifications and regular audits.

It should be noted that Biosphere Reserves are not very visible in France as they do not generally have their own legal structure and they are often managed by an area protected under national law (national park or natural regional park). This overlap is not generally a problem for the implementation of functions, as the objectives of these types of protected areas are similar to those of the Biosphere Reserves. However, readability for the public is often unclear as communication generally focuses on the park including the Biosphere Reserve rather than on the “UNESCO Biosphere Reserve”. In addition, their means of communication are relatively limited, particularly in comparison to those of major commercial brands. Finally, the promotion of products or

services is not their core profession. Their purpose is to lead conservation actions, to support local development and the development of the territory, to educate the public... in view of territorial development combining nature, culture and the economic and social development of the inhabitants. In this context, the French Biosphere Reserves did not seem to be in a position to effectively promote a new trademark in order to make it visible and desirable for consumers.

The utility of a new trademark (and its logo) thus appeared to be questionable from several points of view for the Biosphere Reserves, although they were interested in ways of helping, recognising and promoting enterprises in the Biosphere Reserves, provided that they were involved in local sustainable development.

A decision was thus taken to promote enterprises in the Biosphere Reserves committed to sustainable development approaches. The mechanism chosen for this is a commitment charter.

#### *The Biosphere Reserve commitment charter*

The implementation of a commitment charter highlights a common identity around the Biosphere Reserve, as it is based on values shared by the designation of the territory in question as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, on one hand, and on its natural, cultural and social attributes, on the other. Establishing the terms of this document requires numerous exchanges allowing each actor to grasp the expectations of a Biosphere Reserve, and to share the issues of the territory in question

and promote dialogue focusing on the notion of local sustainable development.

Whereas the branding of products and services and certification are governed in a centralised way and correspond to a "top-down" philosophy of action (experts apply a method to the actors of the territories in question), the commitment charter is an approach leading to collective action. The Charter draws up the theoretical framework of the management of collective assets (Ostrom, 1990), refers to ways of acting in the domain of cooperation and dialogue in order to preserve a "treasure" together, "all around the table".

It combines the values of the territory that this treasure represents (its biodiversity, landscapes, the uses and traditions that humans have developed there) and international recognition by the prestigious UNESCO institution.

In this way, the charter enables territorial actors who make efforts to promote the environment and sustainable development to stand out from other actors who use the regional image as a sales pitch. Indeed, the image of the site is used by all kinds of economic actors, regardless of their approach to sustainable development and the ecological and social impact of their activity. The aim of the Biosphere Reserve Charter is thus to indicate this geographic attachment for those who "guarantee" that they respect biological diversity, that they experiment sustainable development, share experiences and operate as part of the network. The idea is thus to exclude those who make no efforts with these points.

The stakeholders must thus share the functioning of the Charter and understand the effects of the actions of each participant on the others. The collective construction of the Charter is a phase requiring a lot of time and investment from the different actors. Each participant is then in a position to understand the impacts of their actions on the system as a whole. In this process, mutual confidence is very important. It is fundamental during the co-construction of the terms of the Charter. This is the consolidation phase of a founding group, the phase that determines the "membrane" that identifies the group in relation to the rest (Servigne and Chapelle, 2017). The solidity of the membrane will then be crucial for accepting new members. It will develop if the group is strengthened by increased visibility as part of the Charter or the Biosphere Reserve.

Confidence is also essential for the smooth running of the commitment charter. Each actor will be required to make commitments, keep their word, report their activities and observations. This may seem logical for the founding members, but is it not automatically transposable for members who will ask to adhere at a later stage and who will not yet have invested in the structure. By making commitments and promoting the Charter of the Biosphere Reserves, actors will grow together, and benefit from increased visibility. There will be no rivalry between them. If they respect their commitments, their reputation will grow, and thereby strengthen the collective structure. Finally, these committed actors can use the rules

and trust capital created by the Charter and supported by the Biosphere Reserve, and its reputation, for personal means.

But if the trust capital is overexploited, or not maintained or updated, it will collapse. The erosion of trust is a risk in systems of certification such as this one, as it is not based on a structure guaranteed by the State (K. Levin & al, 2009). In other words, the commitment charter is liable to collapse if stakeholders do not develop it or if they do not respect their commitments.

It is thus essential to set up a system of surveillance and sanctions. The commitment charter proposed to the Biosphere Reserve enterprises is a system of continuous improvement: they formally make concrete commitments in relation to their activities, to be accomplished within a specified time (2 or 3 years in general), possibly with the help of sponsors. They are asked to make their commitments known to their clients and the public, in order to contribute to strengthen the credibility of the Charter and to breathe new life into it. In this way, each one can check whether the commitments made are respected or not. The total transparency of the commitments made, and the operating rules of the Charter enable social monitoring and contribute to the trust capital. Other types of surveillance, in addition to this social control, can be envisaged: by an independent outside structure, by a commission of control consisting of actors from different sectors. This is clearly the least costly formula for structures with limited means.

Sanctions contribute to lending credibility to the commitment charter when they are clearly applied to offenders according to shared rules. As it can sometimes be problematic to apply them at a local level, a mechanism of national exclusion can be used in case of local conflicts: in this way the Charter is signed by the enterprise, the director of the Biosphere Reserve in question and by the leader of the MAB at a national level.

This commitment charter embraces the whole diversity of enterprises and can also be applied to other actors present in the Biosphere Reserves (associations for example): in the domains of agriculture, tourism, but also services and industries, provided that they agree to the aims of economic and social development in the region, while safeguarding its biodiversity, its landscapes, its natural cultural values and ecosystem services. The commitment charter requires an institution for admitting new members, surveying the quality and credibility of the commitments made and their implementation. The charter committee generally comprises the Biosphere Reserve leaders, founding members representing their values, and personalities representing the main territorial issues, who are able to critically discuss the terms of the commitments and the way they are accomplished. This committee defines the tempo of meetings (generally one to two per year) and continues participative work.

The networks of eco-actors

The commitment charter thus formalises relationships between the actors of the Biosphere Reserve and its supporting structure, as a means of strengthening and sustaining the project. They are designated “eco-actors of the Biosphere Reserve of...”. The sharing of values and discussions on the sustainable development of their region results in the construction of networks: they exchange on their practices, help each other and can also develop common projects. The supporting structure must contribute to the network, by organising meetings and encouraging participants to take the initiative to set up formal and informal consultations. In addition to the statutory meetings of the charter committee, training sessions are set up to contribute to improving and sustaining actions and festive sessions are organised in order to consolidate the network.

## ASSOCIATED CONTENT

The presentation of the commitment charter and examples of its implementation are accessible on <http://dwink.pro/86/>

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