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International Co-ordinating Council of the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme

Thirty-third session

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ITEM 5 OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA: Report of the Secretariat of the MAB Programme

1. This report provides the International Co-ordinating Council (ICC) of the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme with a brief overall update on the development of the MAB Programme since its last online session in Paris, France, in October 2020. The report is accompanied by a slide presentation and is available online with other MAB-ICC documents.

2. Statutory duties and procedures related to MAB Programme and WNBR

2.1 The 32nd session of the MAB-ICC took place online in October 2020 due to the COVID-19 health crisis and following the decision of the Bureau of the MAB Programme. This online session was held in two parts to allow for the election of the new Bureau, which had to be conducted in presentia prior to the regular proceedings. In the first part, Prof. Adepouju Adeshola (Nigeria) was elected as the new Chair of the MAB-ICC and new Vice-Chairs were appointed. The second part, which focused on regular items, took place online on 27 and 28 October 2020.

2.2 At its 32nd session, the MAB-ICC approved 25 new biosphere reserves, one of which is a transboundary site encompassing two national biosphere reserves and one existing transboundary biosphere reserve (TBR). Five new Member States joined the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR): Andorra, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Luxembourg, and Trinidad and Tobago. As of October 2020, the WNBR comprises 714 biosphere reserves in 129 Member States, including 21 TBRs, of which two are transcontinental and transregional respectively. As of today, around 275 million people live in biosphere reserves across the world.

2.3 Currently, biosphere reserves represent 5% of the world's terrestrial surface, an area about the size of Australia, of which 1.5% is composed of core areas under strict protection, an area larger than Peru. As such, biosphere reserves are a major contribution to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) target to place 30% of the Earth's surface under conservation status and 10% under strict protection by 2030.

2.4 The Bureau met virtually three times during the 32nd session of the MAB-ICC. The first meeting on 19 October 2020 brought together the outgoing Bureau to select the 2020 MAB Young Scientists Awards to be presented for endorsement by the 32nd MAB-ICC. Two meetings of the newly elected Bureau were held on 23 and 26 October 2021 focusing on a substantial discussion on proposals for new biosphere reserves and extensions/modifications/renaming of biosphere reserves already part of the WNBR. At this occasion, the Bureau also examined the additional information received since the last International Advisory Committee on Biosphere Reserves (IACBR) meeting held in February 2020.

2.5 On 20 April and 17 June 2021, two Bureau meetings were organized to discuss the progress of the 33rd session of MAB-ICC preparation, set the dates and agree on an appropriate format for the session in line with the COVID-19 related sanitary measures.

2.6 In June 2017, at its 29th session, the MAB-ICC adopted the 'Process of excellence and enhancement of the WNBR as well as quality improvement of all members of the WNBR' to ensure that biosphere reserves serve as models for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). An ad-hoc working group was established in 2018 and will continue its work until end of 2021.

2.7 The ad-hoc working group was tasked to (a) address permanent mechanisms of quality assurance within the WNBR; (b) further develop the concept for a 'short and easy review mechanism, coordinated by the MAB national committee and/or focal point, five years after the designation of a biosphere reserve or last periodic review report'; and (c) combine this with proposals for a more streamlined periodic review process.

2.8 The ad-hoc working group met six times virtually and prepared a proposal for the consideration of the MAB-ICC with the understanding that every 'Exit Strategy' will be completed by the next session of the MAB-ICC in 2021 and that the 'Process of Excellence' will prevent any further 'Exit Strategy'.

2.9 In accordance with the adoption of the 'Exit Strategy' in 2013, biosphere reserves were requested to submit periodic review reports to attest of their compliance with the Statutory Framework of the WNBR by 2020. Due to COVID-19, completion of the 'Exit Strategy' has been postponed to the 33rd session of MAB-ICC as a specific item of the agenda.

2.10 In 2013, 270 sites in 75 Member States were concerned by the 'Exit Strategy'. For the most part, these sites had been nominated before the Seville Strategy, when criteria were different, with zonation and governance as the main issues affecting the functioning of these biosphere reserves.

2.11 Significant progress has been made since 2017, with all Member States responding to this request to institute the 'Process of Excellence', while 10 Member States decided voluntarily to withdraw a total of 49 biosphere reserves from the WNBR. Out of the 16 sites currently undergoing the 'Exit Strategy' and three sites in conflict areas, only six sites in five Member States subject to the 'Exit Strategy' have been recommended for withdrawal by the 27th session of the IACBR.

2.12 The 27th meeting of the IACBR was held virtually in March 2021, with its recommendations communicated by the MAB Secretariat to the MAB Bureau and all the Member States concerned in a timely manner. The Advisory Committee examined 23 proposals for new biosphere reserves, including two transboundary sites, one of them between five Member States, and two requests for extensions and/or renaming of existing biosphere reserves. Among the biosphere reserve proposals received, four Member States are aspiring to be included in the WNBR for the first time: Lesotho, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Zambia.

2.13 Furthermore, the IACBR examined 47 Periodic Review (PR) reports and Follow-up (FU) reports on the MAB-ICC recommendations of the 31st and 32nd sessions, including on 14 sites subject to the 'Exit Strategy'.

3. Highlight of MAB activities since the 2020 MAB-ICC

3.1 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual meetings were held with MAB regional and thematic networks to reconnect and support all members, and redefine work plans:

- Since October 2020, three online meetings have been organized in the AfriMAB Network: (1) Information meeting on the 50th anniversary of MAB (January 2021); (2) Mobilisation of MAB Youth network (March 2021) followed by a meeting to create a dedicated MAB Youth network in Africa organised by young people themselves on 10 April 2021; (3) AfriMAB members decided to update the MAB Statutes and Charter in order to highlight the new global agenda and importance of AfriBiofund. An extraordinary General Assembly took place on 17 June 2021, during which updated amendments were validated.
- On 26 November 2020, SeaBRnet held a Special Online Session to support continued cooperation and exchange among its members during the COVID-19 pandemic. The meeting focused on ongoing research activities in biosphere reserves as well as impacts of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the participation of around 50 representatives from biosphere reserves, MAB national committees and research partners from 11 Member States across the region.
- The EABRN Steering Committee held two virtual meetings, in October 2020 and May 2021, in order to re-programme activities to be implemented in Spring 2022 because of COVID-19, such as the 16th EABRN meeting and training workshop in Mongolia, and start the implementation of alternative activities to be held in the second part of 2021, such as a series of five training webinars and the EABRN contribution to the MAB 50th Anniversary Exhibition in Beijing and Kunming, People's Republic of China.
- On 20 May 2021, the IberoMAB Youth Network held its second virtual meeting to present the first draft of its Action Plan and to discuss the preparations of the second IberoMAB Youth Forum planned in 2021.

3.2 The MAB Programme and the World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves (WNICBR), through its secretariats in the biosphere reserves of Menorca, Spain, and Jeju Island, Republic of Korea, 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 a grant of a maximum amount of USD 15.000 each. The selected projects will be implemented in the Taka Bonerate-Selayar Archipelago Biosphere Reserve (Indonesia), Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve (India) and El Vizcaino Biosphere Reserve (Mexico).

3.3 Several MAB activities implemented in Africa are contributing to UNESCO Global Priorities Africa and Gender Equality.

- The Regional Postgraduate School for Integrated Planning and Management of Tropical Forests and Territories (ERAIFT) is a UNESCO category 2 centre based in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, with a long experience in training and capacity building on ecosystem management. UNESCO has partnered with ERAIFT for the development of a professional Master's degree course and a massive open online course (MOOC) on the MAB Programme and biosphere reserve management. This course was launched in July 2021 in Kinshasa and is a first in Africa. It is aimed at a variety of stakeholders, ranging from technicians to political decision-makers and

community leaders. It involved experts from several institutions, including Abdou Moumouni University in Niger, Cheikh Anta Diop University in Senegal, Paul Sabatier University in Toulouse and IUCN. The training is open to all African countries. The course is part of the Biosphere and Heritage of Lake Tchad (BIOPALT) project, which provides support for the creation of biosphere reserves, training and capacity building for the management of these sites. This project is funded by the African Development Bank and implemented in collaboration with the Lake Chad Basin Commission.

- The EVAMAB project “Economic valuation of ecosystem services in Man and Biosphere Reserves: testing effective rapid assessment methods in selected African MABs (EVAMAB)” (2017-2019) has been completed. The project, funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO) was implemented in the biosphere reserves of Pendjari (Benin), Lake Tana (Ethiopia), Mount Elgon (Uganda) and Lake Manyara (Tanzania). One important outcome is the 'Manual for the Valuation of Ecosystem services in African biosphere reserves', which has been approved by UNESCO's Publication Board and is currently under production.
- The extra-budgetary flagship project 'Applying the transboundary biosphere reserve model to promote peace in the Lake Chad basin through sustainable management of its natural resources' - in short BIOSphère & PATrimoines du Lac Tchad (BIOPALT) - implemented in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, is a major contribution to Priority Africa and AfriMAB priorities. The project was successfully launched at a dedicated international conference in Nigeria in February 2018 and will be completed by the end of 2021.
- In 2021, BIOPALT achieved several important results with its five beneficiary Member States:
 - Promotion of green economy income-generating activities (IGA) and restoration of degraded ecosystems in favour of 30,000 indirect beneficiaries among the most fragile populations (including 13,000 women). These activities contribute to mitigating the socio-economic impact of the crisis linked to COVID-19;
 - Assisting the Member States of the Lake Chad Basin in the preparation of nominations for new biosphere reserves and World Heritage sites;
 - Training and capacity-building on the MAB Programme, World Heritage and the peaceful management of natural resources targeting nearly 50,000 indirect beneficiaries;
 - Updating and improving knowledge on the biodiversity, cultural heritage and hydrology of Lake Chad through a dozen scientific studies. BIOPALT is a technical partner of the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), a multilateral effort to restore 100 million hectares of land in Africa by 2030.
- The 'Be-Resilient' project aims to strengthen South African biosphere reserves and their communities to address climate change challenges and associated water-related hazards. The selected biosphere reserves will pilot effective pathways towards climate change adaptation through climate change impact assessment, the development of tools for Disaster-Risk Reduction (DRR), and the promotion of education for sustainable development and citizen science.
- In Madagascar, the Nairobi office is supporting the Malagasy government in a project aimed at reducing deforestation and forest degradation, and supporting local

communities in developing green income-generating activities, applying the model of the MAB Programme. The national parks of Marojejy and Andohahela and the Montagne des Français will benefit from these activities to ensure the monitoring and long-term conservation of these sites.

3.4 With the support of the German Commission for UNESCO, a USD 2 million project to support biosphere reserves in Germany, Poland and Spain was approved by Volkswagen AG. The project will benefit the biosphere reserves of Schaalsee in Germany, Puszcza Kampinowska in Poland, and Bardenas Reales, La Rioja and Ordesa Viñamala in Spain. The selected projects will be focusing on sustainable mobility, education for sustainable development, the preservation of biodiversity and the improvement of local water supply.

3.5 A small-scale activity for USD 50,000 on 'Nature-based solutions for marine and coastal biosphere reserves' is being implemented in cooperation with the Government of Flanders of the Kingdom of Belgium and the International Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO. Working closely with the local populations, this project seeks to enhance the spatial planning of island and coastal biosphere reserves in Chile, Ecuador and Peru by improving the understanding of natural risks and vulnerabilities, and identifying relevant nature-based solutions to address these risks and vulnerabilities. The project is currently under implementation at the local and regional levels, and will be finalized by December 2021.

3.6 The MAB Programme coordinated the celebration of the International Day for Biological Diversity, which took place on 22 May 2021. The UNESCO Forum 'Living Together on Earth' was organised on 27 May 2021 to highlight the multiple aspects of the links between humans and nature, including the perspective of activists, researchers, artists and young people. The event was organised around three axes: heart, mind and body, addressing emotions, knowledge and action, respectively. It concluded with a call to action, as announced at the launch of the 'Living together on Earth' movement during the UNESCO Forum on Biodiversity on 24 March 2021. The movement will gather and share experiences around the world that highlight harmonious living of humans in nature. Five online panels were organized where expert discussed about the COVID-19 pandemic and nature-based solutions. MAB Youth also contributed to this Day from around the world by giving an insightful overview of the conservation activities and sustainable use of biodiversity in their biosphere reserves.

3.7 The MAB Programme took part in the celebrations of World Environment Day, which marked the launch of the United Nations Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. As part of the official launch of the UN Decade, UNESCO organised and live-streamed a high-level panel and side event on the reconciliation between humans and nature to present how UNESCO's programmes favour transdisciplinary cooperation between scientific, indigenous peoples and local communities, education for sustainable development, and protection of cultural and natural heritage, particularly at UNESCO designated sites. UNESCO has been tasked by the Board of UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration to lead a panel on the 'Human-Nature' link.

3.8 The MAB Programme will enhance its participation with the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), including in the second work programme and scoping phase of the new assessments.

3.9 The MAB Programme signed a five-year partnership with the Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) group to support the work of the MAB Programme on biodiversity. The MAB Programme provides scientific support to LVMH Maisons to enable them to make a positive and lasting impact beyond their supply chains, and to demonstrate that it is possible to reconcile economic development and preservation of nature via MAB's network of 714

biosphere reserves, as well as the international scientific expertise developed by the MAB Programme and WNRB. Collaboration within the UNESCO-LVMH partnership includes a programme addressing the drivers of deforestation and water pollution in eight biosphere reserves of the Amazon Basin in Bolivia (Pilón-Lajas, Beni), Ecuador (Yasuní, Sumaco, Podocarpus-EI Condor), Brazil (Central Amazon) and Peru (Manu, Oaxapampa-Ashaninka-Yanesha). The partnership also includes the 'Women for Bees' programme with Guerlain aimed at empowering women in biosphere reserves through training and exchange of knowledge and know-how for sustainable beekeeping, and developing capacity-building on pollination processes and the role of beekeeping in maintaining biodiversity. Within the scope of this partnership, the LVMH group has been present alongside UNESCO at major international events, including the 'Our Planet, Our Future' Forum organized by UNESCO (24 March 2021) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress (3-11 September 2021). The agenda for future events includes the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15) due to take place in October 2021 in Kunming, People's Republic of China.

3.10 In the framework of the United Nations Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP), coordinated by UNEP and UNESCO, AfriMAB established a network of 'biosphere reserves home to Great Apes'. The MAB Secretariat, with the support of the French National Museum of Natural History (MNHN) and Sebitoli Chimpanzee Project in Uganda, is implementing a project to survey and monitor great apes and their habitats in 19 African biosphere reserves with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which reduce human disturbance in protected areas and prevent any risk of transmission of zoonotic diseases. The project, which is undergoing the testing phase of its monitoring protocol, focuses specifically on biodiversity health, following the One Health approach. Five sites in Cameroon (Dja Biosphere Reserve), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Luki Biosphere Reserve), Guinea (Badiar Biosphere Reserve), Senegal (Niokolo Koba Biosphere reserve), and Tanzania (Kibale National Park) will serve as pilot sites to develop the monitoring protocol.

3.11 The collaboration with the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) has expanded through the BIOPALT project in close collaboration with the UNESCO Yaoundé Office. The MAB Programme and biosphere reserves have been fully integrated in the road map of the German Facilitation of the CBFP for 2020-2021 and is involved in transhumance issues in the region.

3.12 The Climate, Risk and Resilience Platform of UNESCO sites in Latin America and the Caribbean was launched by the UNESCO Montevideo Office in September 2020 at the first meeting of the regional Technical and Scientific Advisory Group (TSAG). The TSAG is chaired by the President of the IberoMAB Network and the Coordinator of the Latin American and Caribbean Geoparks Network. The TSAG consists of approximately 20 to 25 regional experts on climate change, risk and resilience, and stakeholders from biosphere reserves and UNESCO Global Geoparks in 11 Member States in Latin America and the Caribbean. The TSAG has met three times to advance its work in three main workstreams: (1) Vulnerability and risk analysis for UNESCO Global Geoparks and biosphere reserves; (2) capacity building; and (3) Social inclusion and participation. By the end of 2021, the Platform will have offered a capacity-building webinar series on wildfires (September 2021), and developed a tool for establishing a baseline assessment of climate change vulnerability and risk in UNESCO Global Geoparks and biosphere reserves (December 2021). The Platform is also working with regional intergovernmental organization 'Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean' (FILAC) to develop a proposal for the social mapping of indigenous peoples and their role in managing natural hazards and climate change at UNESCO sites.

3.13 The official launch of the 50th Anniversary of UNESCO's MAB Programme took place during the UNESCO Biodiversity Forum on 24 March 2021. Several activities have been organized by the MAB Secretariat, the WNBR and its partners. A special item will inform MAB-ICC members in detail about these activities.

4. Improving participation, quality and the related instrumentation of WNBR

The Technical Guidelines for Biosphere Reserves (TGBR) is an open document providing clear guidance on how the MAB Programme and the WNBR should function to comply with and complement the Seville Strategy and the Statutory Framework of the WNBR. The TGBR is available online in three languages and it is actively used by MAB Community.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The current COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for the MAB Programme and the WNBR. Part of the fieldwork had to be delayed, but the MAB Programme supported its biosphere reserves by mobilizing funds and through technical support. The MAB Programme has proven its resilience, effectiveness and continued relevance, with a significant number of new nominations received and new people involved in the Programme and the WNBR.

5.2 The MAB Programme and its WNBR have been working hard this year to commemorate 50 years of the Programme, always keeping in mind the work done by its pioneers, but also by increasingly involving young generations.

5.3 The MAB Programme and its WNBR expect to sustain this pace of implementation, finalise the 'Process of Excellence' strategy by 2022 and expand the use of TGBR. The MAB agenda continues to mobilise all stakeholders at the local, national, regional and global levels.

5.4 The MAB Programme is actively seeking new partnerships to provide further support to its stakeholders, particularly young people involved in the programme. The MAB Programme continues to be a leader in developing new ideas and innovative concepts for the implementation of the SDGs.

5.5 Following the call by the Director-General of UNESCO and with regard to the WNBR, the MAB Programme would like to invite all UNESCO Member States to actively join the Programme by establishing MAB National Committees, and nominating more and larger biosphere reserves, with the purpose to achieve biodiversity conservation and integrated sustainable development.

6. The MAB-ICC is invited to review the report and guide the Secretariat to improve the service of the MAB Secretariat in all aspects concerned.