
Redefining the UNESCO-Geoparks relationship

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Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

There are currently 89 Geoparks across 27 countries, organised through the Global Geoparks Network (GGN). Despite UNESCO's central role in establishing this network, its relationship to Geoparks has been defined as 'ad hoc' for over a decade.

Recent UNESCO Executive Board and General Conference decisions have created an opportunity to influence the future of this relationship, which could have sizable and long-lasting budgetary and reputational implications. The UK National Commission for UNESCO's key recommendations in respect to this review are:

- The current 'ad hoc' arrangement between UNESCO and Geoparks needs to be revised.
- UNESCO should establish an International UNESCO Geoparks initiative which minimises disruption to the current GGN structure and strengthens accountability to UNESCO.
- Governance and resources should be the two major areas of scrutiny for any proposed changes.
- Any new arrangement must strike a balance between ensuring accountability and allowing the network to retain its bottom-up, stakeholder led approach.

1 / Introduction

A Global Geopark is a “unified area with geological heritage of international significance where that heritage is being used to promote the sustainable development of the local communities who live there.” The Global Geoparks Network (GGN) specifies how ‘international significance’ may be established, which includes a site assessment by the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS). Geoparks vary considerably in how they are set up and managed. Their activities are diverse and may cover education, sciences, culture, sustainable development and geotourism.

GGN and regional networks

The GGN is a voluntary membership body organised by UNESCO. GGN membership is a standard of excellence, but does not imply legal or financial responsibilities on the part of UNESCO, nor does it entitle a Geopark to use UNESCO’s name or logo. The GGN is primarily administered by UNESCO and meets every two years.

The GGN also functions through regional networks in Europe (EGN) and Asia Pacific (APGN), which have their own remits. For instance, the EGN coordinates all membership of the GGN in Europe, including applications and revalidations. These regional networks have their own governance structures which include UNESCO representation. An African Geoparks Network (AGN) was created in November 2011 to support the establishment of Geoparks in Africa.

UNESCO Geopark history

The ‘Geopark’ concept was first cited by UNESCO in its 1998-99 programme and budget (29 C/5).¹ As work developed in this area, a drive to formalise UNESCO’s relationship with Geoparks led to the commissioning of an independent feasibility study led by Dr Tony Weighell of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, UK. This study recommended against establishing Geoparks as a separate UNESCO programme, but rather suggested “hosting” Geoparks as an activity within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. This proposal however was rejected by the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) International Coordinating Council (ICC).²

Following this report, in April 2001 the Executive Board agreed “not to pursue the development of a UNESCO geosites/Geopark programme, but instead to support ad hoc efforts with Member States as appropriate”.³

1. UNESCO Programme and Budget for 1998-1999 (29 C/5), para. 02036

2. 161st UNESCO Executive Board document (161 EX/9), April 2001

3. 161st UNESCO Executive Board decision (161 EX/SR.12), April 2001

2 / Current situation

Resources

The GGN is run on a modest central budget, primarily financed through its members and partner contributions. The regional Geoparks networks in Europe and Asia Pacific also assume some management responsibilities. Costs covered by Geoparks and regional networks include:

- initial feasibility studies and quadrennial reviews;
- regional network Coordinating Committees and GGN conferences;
- the APGN does not have a membership fee, though the EGN has a €1,000 annual fee to cover centralised publicity activities.

UNESCO currently allocates \$25,000 USD from its regular programme budget and two part-time members of staff to Geoparks. These resources allow UNESCO to act as the GGN Secretariat and cover essential tasks including:

- co-organising the biennial International Geoparks' Conference;
- overseeing and coordinating application procedures and standards;
- organising (but not paying for) evaluation and revalidation missions.

Governance

The GGN and the regional Geoparks networks in Europe and Asia have two governing committees each. UNESCO sits on several, though not all of these committees in various capacities.

Review of the UNESCO-Geoparks Relationship

The growth of the Geoparks network led the Executive Board to request a status report in 2011, "including an in-depth analysis of the activities carried out and proposals for improving cooperation between UNESCO and the Global Geoparks Network."⁴ In response to this report, the 36th General Conference (October 2011) agreed that UNESCO's relationship with Geoparks needed to be re-defined.⁵ UNESCO was tasked with assessing the possibility of formalising this relationship, inter alia, by transforming it into an international UNESCO Geoparks programme or initiative. This matter is to be next reported on at the 190th Executive Board in October 2012.

4. 186th UNESCO Executive Board decision (186 EX/SR.9), June 2011

5. 36th General Conference decision – Cooperation between UNESCO and the Global Geoparks' Network (36 C/Resolution 31)

3 / Assessment Criteria

This section outlines the criteria that should be used to assess any UNESCO-Geopark proposal to help ensure that it leads to robust and constructive reform. This is followed by an analysis of the four options being considered by UNESCO. The main criteria are:

- **Added value** – no duplication with other programmes, coordination across relevant sectors and capitalising on network resources
- **Resources** – clear on budgetary implications, including impacts on staff time
- **Governance** – strengthening accountability and governance
- **Quality control** – ensuring the integrity of the UNESCO brand through rigorous quality control
- **Foresight** – long-term implications including shifts in the resource burden and risk management

1. Added Value

Any proposal should include a business case for change, including how the new arrangement would add value to UNESCO's work and further its objectives. Potential risks should also be identified and minimised.

UNESCO has previously explored and decided against making Geoparks part of an existing initiative or programme, namely the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, International Geoscience Programme (IGCP) or World Heritage. While in some cases these assessments were made over a decade ago, the core arguments against integration remain valid.

Avoiding duplication

While merging Geoparks with an existing programme is not considered a viable option, UNESCO should ensure that its support for Geoparks compliments existing programmes and does not duplicate or conflict with other areas of work. Any proposal should include a mapping of UNESCO's work relevant to Geoparks to identify areas for coordination. This mapping should not be limited to the sciences sector.

MAB, IGCP and World Heritage all have strong educational roles and are committed to sustainable development and stakeholder participation, which are core Geopark principals. Areas of specific overlap and coordination include:

- **International Geoscience Programme (IGCP)** – focuses on geoscience research and financially supports about 30 projects per year; Geoparks are encouraged to work with academic institutions to take part in research in the Earth Sciences, and other disciplines as appropriate
- **Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme** – the main instrument of the MAB programme are Biospheres, sites where conservation is integrated with sustainable use. While Biospheres focus on biological diversity conservation rather than geological diversity, common issues may include tourism, education and sustainable development

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- **World Heritage** – as with Biospheres, common lessons on tourism, education and sustainable development should be capitalised upon; should ensure that Geoparks compliment work with natural World Heritage Sites

Networks

Formalising the UNESCO-Geopark relationship may improve access to a network of high-quality sites which could support delivery of UNESCO's core objectives. However, this is strongly dependent upon improving how UNESCO currently utilises its networks. While there are variations across partner categories, overall UNESCO performance in this area must be improved.

Any proposal should be clear on how its utilisation of the Geoparks network will improve on current practice. Specific areas for improvement outlined in recent external assessments⁶ should be addressed in particular. Lessons learned from other partner categories such as Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites should also be built into UNESCO's new approach to Geoparks.

2. Resources

External Partners

As UNESCO is grappling with a budgetary crisis and looking for long-term efficiency savings, this opportunity should be used to secure external support for the Geoparks network. In addition to financing, long-term arrangements for the running of the GGN, such as hosting the GGN Secretariat, should be considered. This could free up resources, reduce the burden on individual Geoparks and UNESCO and potentially allow for the expansion of GGN activities.

The GGN's two major partners, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), should be approached in the first instance to gauge their interest in this respect, particularly in terms of hosting the GGN Secretariat. Any proposal on formalising the UNESCO-Geopark relationship should include an analysis of potential partners and summary of consultations held with these organisations.

Measuring and Managing Resources

In addition to exploring external funders, any proposal should clearly demonstrate zero budgetary implications for UNESCO, including in staff time. UNESCO's existing resource allocation should be used as a baseline, with proposed changes clearly resourced. If the current relationship were to be formalised, this would have implications for UNESCO's oversight role which would need to be accounted for in resource terms. To establish an accurate baseline of UNESCO resources devoted to Geoparks, a calculation should be made of how much staff time is currently spent attending GGN, EGN and APGN governing meetings, in addition to the dedicated part-time Secretariat.

The majority of resources (financial, in kind and staff time) for Geopark-related activities globally come from individual Geoparks and regional Geoparks networks. The GGN strategy should include guidance on how to focus and utilise these contributions, as well as how any core GGN budget will be spent. While most of these Geopark

6. Review of Management and Administration in UNESCO (JIU/REP/2011/8), Dec 2011, UN Joint Inspection Unit; Independent External Evaluation of UNESCO (IOS/EVS/PI/107) 30 September 2010

contributions are voluntary, sites should be encouraged to focus their activities and contributions towards common global objectives as well as regional proprieties. Authority for all budgetary decisions and budget management should be clear in any governance structure.

Full UNESCO branding must include a commensurate increase in UNESCO oversight

3. Governance

Full UNESCO branding, as allowed through a UNESCO initiative or programme, must include a commensurate increase in UNESCO oversight. The principles that should be applied in this respect are:

- existing governance structures, such as the GGN General Assembly and Bureau should be used to avoid undue disruption and save resources;
- lines of reporting and authority between any Geopark governing bodies and UNESCO's governing bodies should be clear;
- the relationship between the Asia Pacific and European Geoparks Networks and any new global governance structure (such as a restructured GGN Assembly) must be clear, particularly in the area of membership approval and renewal;
- the process for developing and approving strategy should be clear, including the respective roles of the GGN and UNESCO governing bodies;
- UNESCO should have mechanisms to ensure that the strategy of the GGN aligns with its programme and budget (C/5) and medium term strategy (C/4);
- UNESCO should be able to take part in Geopark governing body discussions as a full member, including the ability to introduce agenda items;
- the GGN Secretariat should have clear responsibilities for managing and reporting on the implementation of strategies and budgets;
- UNESCO should have the authority to sanction individual sites, including their removal from the network, thus stripping them of their right to use of the UNESCO name. This can be either directly or through a representative body;
- regulations governing any UNESCO-Geopark relationship should be in harmony with UNESCO's current branding directives (34 C/86). Section III.1.2 of these directives is explicit on this requirement.

4. Quality Control

The GGN employs a robust application and revalidation process which matches or exceeds the standards applied to similar UNESCO sites or programmes. The criteria and guidelines for applying to the GGN are clearly outlined on the GGN website. This includes submitting a detailed application form followed by an evaluation mission. There is a clear timetable for submitting applications and all sites must follow the same process.

Every member of the GGN is reviewed every four years, which includes a written report from the Geopark and a revalidation visit from the GGN. Should the Geopark not fulfil the necessary criteria of the review, recommendations for change are made with a further review in two years time, after which membership may be revoked. There have been six cases of Geoparks being 'delisted', which demonstrates that the network is serious about its standards. UNESCO has also been involved in the Geopark governing bodies which have approved all current Geopark applications and revalidation assessments.

There are however areas for improvement. UNESCO's Geopark guidelines state that UNESCO will notify the relevant National Commission for UNESCO of the outcome of Geopark periodic reviews. This practice is not consistently followed. The Geopark revalidation criteria and application and revalidation forms should also be available on the GGN website, as they are on the EGN website.

5. Foresight

One of the most likely long-term issues UNESCO and Geoparks will deal with is the growth of the network. This raises challenges which should be planned for and dealt with in advance, including:

- potential dilution of the brand and its benefits, including proceeds from tourism and external funding;
- increased resource burden on UNESCO and the GGN in coordinating applications, revalidations, networking and reporting;
- without proper management, the contributions of individual Geoparks (financial and in kind) to global objectives may become more fragmented and disparate as the network grows.

If the title 'UNESCO Geopark' were to be introduced, it is likely that the already healthy growth of the GGN will accelerate. In some instances, steps have already been taken to address this at the national level. Finland for example has defined a national quota for the overall number of Geoparks, based on an expert assessment of the core aspects of geology in Finland.

Any proposal should include either a clear means of addressing this issue, such as limits to the number of Geoparks globally, or a clearly defined timetable as to when and how this issue will be discussed.

4 / Options

The options being considered by UNESCO for the future of the UNESCO-Geopark relationship are:

1. No change to the current relationship
2. International UNESCO Geoparks Initiative
3. International UNESCO Programme (such as IGCP)
4. Intergovernmental UNESCO Programme (such as MAB)

This section assesses the pros and cons of these four options, followed by a summary table.

Option 1: No change to the current UNESCO-Geopark relationship

The current 'ad hoc' arrangement is not ideal and needs to be revised. Both UNESCO and Geoparks would benefit from changes to the current arrangement.

The GGN has developed successfully for several years under the current arrangements with little cost to UNESCO. Change could entail risks and undue disruption to both parties including:

- loss of Geopark autonomy, particularly at the regional level;
- stifling of 'bottom-up' approach;
- heightened expectations and pressure on UNESCO to increase its financial and administrative support to Geoparks;
- new reporting and information sharing burden on UNESCO.

The current 'ad hoc' arrangement however does not allow UNESCO and Geoparks to capitalise upon many of the potential benefits of a more formalised relationship. The growth of the Geoparks network has also created potential long-term risks which need to be addressed. These potential benefits support the case for reform and demonstrate why maintaining the status quo is not a preferred option:

- clarification of lines of authority from Geopark governing structures to UNESCO's governing bodies, with greater accountability to UNESCO;
- improved access to a network of high-quality sites with the potential to support delivery of UNESCO's core objectives;
- rationalisation of UNESCO's approach to Geoparks, including alignment with UNESCO's (currently draft) Comprehensive Partnership Strategy;
- address weaknesses in current arrangement before they potentially lead to larger accountability and reputational risks in future.
- Geopark access to UNESCO branding, which could help raise the profile of sites, strengthen recognition of Global Geoparks as a brand and convey internationally recognised quality and standards;

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- improved likelihood of Geoparks securing extrabudgetary resources through association with UNESCO;
 - raise the profile of geological heritage at UNESCO and among Member States;
 - rationalise and simplify existing arrangements, which can be unclear and cumbersome.

Option 2: International UNESCO Geoparks Initiative

An international UNESCO Geoparks initiative would formalise the UNESCO-Geopark relationship while minimising disruption to the current GGN structure, strengthening accountability and controlling resource implications. Based on other initiatives, it's particularly important that the objectives, strategy and performance of a Geoparks initiative be regularly reported on and reviewed.

UNESCO has no standard framework or pre-requisites for a UNESCO initiative, though there are wide-ranging examples of initiatives from every sector. Most initiatives are thematic and regional in scope, such as the Brain Gain Initiative, the Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa and Earth Science Education Initiative. Others relate to a thematic grouping of projects and activities, such as the UNESCO Biodiversity Initiative and the UNESCO Initiatives to Celebrate the International Year of Youth.

The scope, partners and objectives of initiatives can evolve significantly, which reflects their comparably flexible and bureaucratically light framework. Reporting on initiative outputs and impact are not regularly available however, making the added value and performance of an initiative difficult to identify. There are also examples of initiatives which have not been formally wound down, despite showing little or no activity for extended periods of time.

Given that there are no pre-requisites for an initiative, the current GGN governance structure can be reorganised to address the criteria outlined in this brief. An initiative would also allow the term "UNESCO Geoparks", which is important for realising many of the potential benefits for Geoparks. It is essential however that a Geoparks initiative improve on current examples of initiative monitoring and reporting. A dedicated governance structure, which is rare among initiatives, and current Geopark reporting practices, should help in this regard.

Option 3: Intergovernmental Programme

An intergovernmental Geoparks programme would have significant resource implications for UNESCO and would adversely affect the bottom-up approach of the Geoparks network.

The clearest benefit of an Intergovernmental Programme would be stronger accountability. There would however be significant resource implications in establishing a new intergovernmental structure which would need to replace the current management of the GGN. Creating an intergovernmental framework would also disrupt the Geopark-led approach of the GGN, which has proven largely successful to date.

Option 4: International Programme

An international programme would formalise the UNESCO-Geopark relationship and strengthen accountability. Monitoring and reporting of international programmes is far more established than it is for initiatives, though room for improvement remains. There could potentially be resource implications for UNESCO, particularly in the long-term.

As with a UNESCO initiative, there is no standard framework for an international programme, though there are statutory meeting requirements. Examples of international programmes include the International Geoscience Programme (IGCP) and the International Basic Sciences Programme (IBSP). These programmes have statutes, governing committees, dedicated UNESCO staff and generally a more clearly defined body of work than an initiative.

Ideally, a Geopark Programme's statutory meeting requirements could be fulfilled using a restructured GGN Assembly and Bureau, without changes to how these meetings are currently funded. Over time however, there would likely be pressure to align with other international programmes where UNESCO pays for statutory meetings. There may also be long-term pressure on UNESCO to increase its resource allocation to bring it into the region of support offered to many other international programmes.

The statutory requirements of an international programme may also lead to increased bureaucracy within the programme. This could potentially damage the bottom-up Geoparks-led approach which has allowed the network to develop on a modest centralised budget.

The following table analyses the four UNESCO-Geopark relationship options against the five criteria of the previous section.

	Status Quo	International Initiative	Intergovernmental Programme	International Programme
Added Value	Missed opportunities for UNESCO and Geoparks; potential for duplication if not coordinated; underutilisation of Geopark Networks	Potential for duplication if not coordinated; added value of network of high-quality sites	Potential for duplication if not coordinated; added value of network of high-quality sites	Potential for duplication if not coordinated; added value of network of high-quality sites
Resources	Maintain current UNESCO resource allocation	Maintaining current resource level possible; likely reallocation of current UNESCO resources to cover new governance requirements	High cost with new governance structure	Maintaining current resource level possible; reallocation of resources towards new UNESCO governance requirements likely; potential for additional resource requirements for statutory meetings if existing structures can't be used
Governance	Lack of oversight on the part of UNESCO's governing bodies	Repurpose existing GGN governance to allow stronger UNESCO role for improved accountability and oversight	New governance structure replaces GGN Assembly and Bureau; strong oversight and accountability	Accountability and transparency through stronger UNESCO role; ideally, repurpose existing GGN governance, though potential requirement for new governance structure
Quality Control	Maintain current high-quality review process	Maintain current high-quality review process	Change to process required to reflect new intergovernmental management structure	Maintain current high-quality review process
Foresight	Challenges with growth of network; accountability deficit to UNESCO	Challenges with growth of network	Challenges with growth of network; potential rapid growth of governing body with new Geoparks; stifling of bottom-up approach	Challenges with growth of network; likely long-term pressure on UNESCO to sizably increase resource allocation given expectations around UNESCO programmes

5 / Recommendations

UNESCO's relationship with Geoparks should be formalised under an international initiative. This would benefit UNESCO and Geoparks through improved governance, networking and better utilisation of resources. There is not a case for pursuing an international programme over an international initiative, particularly as a UNESCO programme carries certain expectations on resource allocation and prioritisation within UNESCO. A proposal for an international initiative should address the following key points:

1. Any proposal should include **a business case for change**, including an assessment of the risks and benefits.
2. Any changes must clearly demonstrate **zero budgetary implications** for UNESCO, including in staff time. This will likely mean diverting resources from UNESCO's current administrative support for Geoparks to contribute to new governance structures.
3. UNESCO should look to secure a **permanent external partner** who will contribute to GGN operating costs.
4. A mapping of UNESCO's work relevant to Geoparks should be included in the proposal to identify areas of potential **duplication and added value**.
5. Any proposal should be clear on how its **utilisation of the Geopark network** will improve on current practice.
6. Existing GGN governance structures should be repurposed to **strengthen UNESCO's oversight role**. Clarification of the authority of regional Geopark networks is particularly important.
7. The current Geopark **quality control standards should be maintained**.
8. A clearly defined timetable for **addressing the growth of the network** should be included in any proposal.

References

UNESCO Activities and Geoparks, 186th UNESCO Executive Board document (186 EX/41), April 2011

Cooperation between UNESCO and the Global Geoparks' Network, 36th General Conference document (36 C/14), October 2011

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