

Forum: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: The preservation of heritage sites in developing regions

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Introduction

Cultural heritage is an essential aspect of human civilization, representing the collective history, traditions, and identity of communities worldwide. The preservation of heritage has become even more important in today's rapidly developing world, for it faces significant risks to its survival due to wars, climate crises, and development pressures. Conventional constituents of cultural heritage include objects, practices, and monuments passed on through generations. To be actual and relevant to contemporary identities, such forms have to continue having an importance that contributes to the maintenance of historical continuity.

In many developing regions, preserving cultural heritage is not just about saving ancient structures but about ensuring cultural continuity. In connecting communities to their past, with shared identity and pride, such sites also represent local historical and cultural narratives that link the past to the present. Examples include Petra's old city, which is not only appealing to tourists but also symbolizes the local population's historical and cultural narratives. Such places continue to be alive with the memory of shared ancestry and therefore anchor the cultural identity in the midst of modernization.

Conserving heritage also has immense economic and developmental value: in most cases, sustainable tourism engendered by heritage conservation may be an important means of generating revenues in local economies. It is estimated that the Angkor Wat Temple complex in Cambodia receives over two million visitors yearly, bringing an estimated \$108 million into the Cambodian economy, representing a portion of its GDP. These revenues are crucially earned for the development of the country with a view to linking heritage conservation with economic growth. This shows one example of how the preservation of cultural heritage sites has a tangible financial impact on a community.

However, heritage conservation faces numerous challenges, including underfunding, shifting political priorities, and lack of capacity. Effective protection of these sites often requires international cooperation and local engagement. The preservation of heritage is not simply a cultural imperative but a political and economic one, since such concerted efforts are needed to ensure these treasures continue to enrich societies and contribute to sustainable development.

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage is the tangible objects and intangible attributes passed on from past generations to the present to be transferred to future generations. It includes monuments, buildings, landscapes, traditions, languages, and customs that identify a group of people with their culture and history. It provides a base for cultural continuity that helps people and communities become attached to their past.

Tangible Artifacts

Tangible artifacts are physical objects of historical, cultural, or social importance. Examples may range from ancient ruins, sculptures, and paintings, to historical buildings, manuscripts, and items related to daily life in past societies. These will serve to enable the understanding of the history and evolution of human societies; for example, insight into the lives, beliefs, and practices of the people living at that time.

Sustainable Development

It implies that sustainable development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The other way round, it translates into conservation practices of heritage sites in such a way that they are conserved, enabling economic growth and social inclusion, taking care of the environment. It emphasizes balancing the need for preserving heritage sites with the promotion of their use for tourism or local development.

Tourism and Economic Growth

Tourism associated with heritage sites can be a strong driver of economic growth in developing regions. Economic benefits are realized when visitors come to see the cultural site through guided tours, craft, and hospitality services. It helps the local economy and people gain employment as well as funds for preservation.

Intangible Heritage

Intangible heritage covers all such aspects of culture that have no tangible form, including traditions, rituals, languages, folklore, music, dances, and social practices. This represents the living expressions passed down through generations and contributes to the identity and continuity of communities. Protecting intangible heritage maintains cultural diversity and enables cultural pride.

Cultural identities

Cultural identities are the shared values, beliefs, traditions, and historical experiences that define a community or group. They give individuals a sense of belonging and connect them to their heritage. Heritage sites are key to preserving these identities, embodying unique histories and fostering continuity between generations. Protecting these sites ensures that cultural identities endure despite modern pressures.

Employment

Employment denotes the job opportunities due to conservation and tourism connected with cultural heritage sites. Conservation and sustainable tourism create jobs not only in site management but also in guiding, hospitality, and even crafts conducted within the local community. Such jobs serve not only to stimulate the local economies but also actually enable communities to participate actively in the management of their heritage,

assuring thereby that economic benefits accruing from preservation reach residents at the local level.

Conservation of Historic Sites

Conservation of historic sites involves protecting and maintaining structures, artifacts, and locations of cultural, historical, or architectural significance. This process safeguards heritage sites against deterioration, damage, and neglect, allowing them to endure for future generations. Conservation efforts include restoration, protection from environmental threats, and sustainable management, ensuring these sites continue to reflect the history, culture, and identity of the communities they represent. Effective conservation is essential for cultural continuity, tourism, and economic development. Most often, conservation requires international and national collaboration in the challenges to be confronted: lack of adequate funding, political instability, and environmental hazards. UNESCO offers the necessary support through technical assistance, funding, and capacity-building initiatives to enable local authorities to continue maintaining and protecting heritage sites. Additionally, community involvement is required because it bestows an ownership feeling, enabling communities to be more actively involved in the conservation process. These conservation benefits continue in the long term, where protected sites contribute to the local economy, promote education exchange, and increase social bonding within and between nations.

Key Issues

Threats from Urbanization and Development

Rapid urban growth in developing regions often leads to the destruction, alteration, or relocation of heritage sites to accommodate new infrastructure such as roads, shopping centers, and residential buildings. The thrust for economic development has often meant the intrusion of encroaching projects upon the cultural landmarks, at the cost of historical value and integrity. Zoning laws and urban planning policies frequently lack a focus on heritage preservation,

making it challenging to shield these sites from urban sprawl. Lacking robust regulatory frameworks and sustained government support, heritage sites run the risk of deterioration or destruction to give way to the unending quest for immediate economic gain at the cost of irretrievable history as cities grow.

Impact of Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Climate change encompasses significant, long-term alterations in temperature, precipitation patterns, and extreme weather events largely driven by human activities such as fossil fuel combustion and deforestation. For heritage sites, these changes pose critical threats, as they expose historic structures and artifacts to accelerated deterioration. According to recent studies, about 13% of UNESCO World Heritage sites are at risk from rising sea levels, which can erode coastal monuments, while increased temperatures and humidity destabilize traditional materials, leading to gradual decay. Without robust adaptation measures, sites in regions vulnerable to intense storms, flooding, and droughts may face irreversible damage.

Adapting to these threats is particularly challenging in developing countries with limited resources. Funding from international bodies like UNESCO and the World Monuments Fund helps, but gaps remain, and without strengthened national support, these efforts fall short. Comprehensive conservation strategies must integrate climate resilience to protect the cultural legacy and ensure that economic growth does not come at the cost of irreplaceable heritage.

Conflicts and Political Instability

Political instability, armed conflict, and social unrest can also directly and greatly threaten the heritage sites. During these periods, cultural landmarks may be attacked for their symbolic value or looted for valuable artifacts, and the loss is irreparable. Other examples include sites that are used as military bases, thus exposing the areas to combat damage. Funding and interest in the concern of the preservation of culture may further be diverted during those times when there are political instabilities but without actual conflict, as resources may be diverted to more immediate security or humanitarian needs. This loss of cultural heritage in these instances of destruction denies not only historic identity but may further lead to social cohesion and loss of transmission in cultural knowledge.

Over-Tourism and Poor Management Practices

Where tourism can provide a source of revenue for conservation, if there are no controls over visitor numbers, wear and tear on heritage sites will be accelerated with consequent physical damage to artifacts and/or structures. For example, footfall wears down ancient pathways, and touching or climbing on monuments will damage their condition. The absence of effective visitor management, maintenance schedules, or regulatory frameworks exacerbates the degradation. It can also disrupt the local ecology, where places become more polluted or natives are forced to move out. This many times commercializes heritage sites in ways that detract from their cultural significance. In 2019, the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported that international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion, marking a 4% increase over the previous year. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has noted that nearly one-third of the 1,157 designated World Heritage Sites face significant risks from over-tourism, with sites like Machu Picchu and Venice struggling to cope with visitor volume. In Machu Picchu, for example, regulations now limit daily visitors to 2,500, but foot traffic still wears down paths and accelerates erosion.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Republic of India

India is home to 40 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including iconic landmarks such as the Taj Mahal in Agra, the historic city of Jaipur, and the ancient ruins of Hampi. These sites are not only symbols of India's rich cultural heritage but also significant contributors to the country's tourism industry, which accounts for approximately 9% of India's GDP. The Government of India considers the preservation of heritage to be an important concern for the country's identity, tourism, and economic development. With the rapid urbanization and industrialization, India has taken a multi-dimensional approach in the form of legislation, funding, and community participation. These heritage sites are still not without their own set of challenges: a number of national historic monuments are threatened by urbanization and pollution—for instance, the particulate matter in Agra is more than 150% over the threshold for safety limits—which has discolored its historically immaculate white marble façade. Overcrowding is another such issue: "Destination" places like Jaipur see upwards of 10 million visitors every year, putting intense pressure on resources, infrastructure, and the places themselves, accelerating the wear and tear. In order to address these challenges, India has put in place several initiatives. The National

Culture Fund apportions roughly \$50 million annually for heritage conservation projects, while the "Adopt a Heritage" Scheme engages more than 500 private entities and local communities in preserving 20 heritage sites through public-private partnerships. Besides, initiatives such as the 2019 Hampi Restoration Project, involving international expertise and considerable resources, underpin the vulnerabilities of heritage sites and the need for concerted action in the face of economic pressures. These are measures reflecting India's commitment to preserving its heritage for future generations.

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

Jordan boasts five UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with Petra being the most renowned, attracting approximately 1.1 million tourists annually. These sites are integral to Jordan's cultural identity and economy, particularly through tourism. Jordan prioritizes heritage preservation as a means to bolster national pride, cultural continuity, and economic development. The government emphasizes sustainable tourism and community involvement as key strategies for effective conservation. Preservation has included working in cooperation with international organizations like UNESCO and the European Union to protect against erosion and the negative impact of tourism on the site. Regional instability, specifically conflicts in neighboring countries, has continued to impact tourism and funding. Over the years, the Jordanian government has tried its best to involve local communities at all levels of conservation projects so that sustainable development is fairly matched with the protection of the cultural heritage.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is home to eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela and the ancient city of Aksum. These sites are pivotal to Ethiopia's cultural heritage and play a significant role in attracting tourism, which contributes to about 2% of the country's GDP. The government of Ethiopia considers heritage preservation crucial for promoting national unity, cultural continuity, and economic development. Preservation is framed within a wider development strategy that will balance growth with the protection of heritage. Threats include natural causes of erosion, climate change, and lack of finances to maintain the sites. As if these were not enough, political instability and economic stringency increase the challenges in conservation. Therefore, Ethiopia has cooperated internationally with bodies such

as UNESCO and the World Bank to secure funding and technical assistance toward restoration works, hoping for its continuing protection into the future. The government has involved local populations in maintenance and tourism management, promoting sustainable development alongside heritage protection.

People’s Republic of China

China is home to one of the highest numbers of UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including iconic locations like the Great Wall of China, the Forbidden City in Beijing, and the Mogao Caves. The Chinese government takes cultural preservation seriously, investing significantly in extensive restoration programs and developing policies to mitigate threats posed by rapid urbanization, pollution, and natural disasters such as earthquakes.

For example, the government has implemented comprehensive measures, including the use of advanced technology for structural monitoring and restoration, which have proven effective in preserving the integrity of these sites. Collaborative efforts with international partners and NGOs have facilitated the adoption of best practices in heritage conservation, enhancing the effectiveness of local initiatives.

However, balancing economic development with cultural conservation remains a significant challenge. While large-scale projects often become entirely Chinese affairs to optimize resource utilization, this can lead to conflicts between development goals and preservation needs. As a result, while efforts have led to notable improvements in site management and preservation, the ongoing tension between rapid development and conservation efforts necessitates continuous dialogue and adaptive strategies to ensure that both objectives can be met constructively.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
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1972	UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage	The convention thus initiated the process of recognition and protection of cultural and natural heritage in the world, setting the pace for future protection.
1985	Creation of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)	ICOMOS came into being with the express aim of ensuring the conservation and protection of sites of cultural heritage; heightened awareness and campaigns of heritage preservation thus became part of the agenda.
1990s	Rising Global Awareness of Heritage Loss	The press, public interest, and resulting advocacy for preservation were given to heritage site destruction as a result of conflicts, urban development, and general neglect.
1992	World Heritage Committee's Decision on Cultural Heritage in Armed Conflicts	This ruling gave special status to the protection of heritage sites during war, as was the case in regions such as the Balkans, where the destruction of culture along these lines had run rife.
2001	Destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan	The Taliban government's destruction of these statues listed under UNESCO would bring into the fore the sensitivity of cultural heritage before the appeals of extremist ideologies- an act that incubated international condemnation.

<p>2003</p>	<p>UNESCO's Emergency Safeguarding of the Iraqi Cultural Heritage</p>	<p>Following the War on Iraq, UNESCO launched a scheme for the safeguarding of the rich cultural heritage of Iraq, exemplifying the effects of war on heritage areas.</p>
<p>2011</p>	<p>Arab Spring and Its Impact on Cultural Heritage</p>	<p>The political turmoil in many Arab nations led to the mass-scale destruction and pillaging of heritage sites, really putting the issue into the limelight of effective preservation.</p>
<p>2015</p>	<p>Cultural Heritage and Climate Change Conference</p>	<p>This conference brought together a changing climate and cultural heritage as it recognized that rising sea levels and natural disasters are destroying vulnerable sites.</p>
<p>2017</p>	<p>Global Movement Against the Trafficking of Cultural Property</p>	<p>As such, efforts to counter the illicit trade in cultural artifacts were becoming more intense, placing into the limelight the many national and international policies regarding heritage preservation.</p>
<p>2020</p>	<p>COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Cultural Heritage Sites</p>	<p>It made many heritage sites and museums shut down due to the pandemic, showcasing how economically vulnerable they are and how much it is necessary to have sustainable management practices.</p>

<p>2023</p>	<p>Adoption of the Glasgow Declaration on Climate Action for Heritage</p>	<p>It recognized that there was an urgent need to take up the challenges posed by climate change on cultural heritage through collaborative action by states in heritage protection.</p>
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Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

International NGOs

The World Monuments Fund is an international organization that works for the preservation of endangered cultural heritage sites around the world. Since its founding in 1965, WMF has worked in more than 80 countries, providing financial support, technical expertise, and advocacy to ensure the conservation of significant monuments and sites. WMF advocates for the protection of cultural heritage as a very important part of global history and identity. It emphasizes sustainable preservation practices, which balance the need for conservation with that of local communities and economic development. WMF provides over \$50 million annually in grants to support conservation projects for heritage sites in developing regions. WMF has successfully restored and preserved over 300 heritage sites globally. For instance, the restoration of the Old Town of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia led to a 25% increase in tourist visits within two years of project completion. The Global Heritage Fund (GHF) is an international NGO focused on safeguarding cultural heritage sites that are under threat from economic, social, and environmental pressures. Founded in 2004, GHF operates in over 50 countries, prioritizing sites that are crucial to the cultural identity and historical narrative of their regions. GHF considers cultural heritage preservation to be deeply intertwined with sustainable development and social cohesion. The organization advocates for the inclusion of heritage sites in larger economic and community development planning to ensure that preservation actively supports local prosperity.

The 2011 UNESCO Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape

On UNESCO’s 36th session during General Conference in 2011, it adopted the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL). This Recommendation was set up in response to the emerging pressures of urbanization faced by historic sites around the globe and

the urgent need for finding a balance between development and heritage preservation. The approach in HUL was to integrate and resolve the issue of cultural heritage and urban planning for sustainable development while retaining respect for the characters involved in the historic urban settings.

The HUL Recommendation was focused on the improvement of the protection and management of historic urban landscapes by resorting to a more integrated approach to understanding urban heritage. It encourages the member states to identify the values of historic urban areas, including not only the monuments and sites but also the setting, community life, and socio-economic aspects. It does this by looking at the general landscape and not monuments in isolation to preserve integrity and authenticity in urban heritage, hence allowing the survival of cultural identities in the rapidly changing urban contexts.

Implementation of HUL consideration, therefore, calls for active participation by local communities through planning, their role in sustaining the cultural practices and preserving the significance of historic landscapes. UNESCO encourages member states to develop policies on integrating considerations of cultural heritage into urban planning frameworks as a measure to avoid detrimental outcomes of urban development in terms of gentrification and loss of traditional practices. Indeed, cities like Istanbul in Turkey and Barcelona in Spain have already adapted HUL principles into guiding their strategies of urban development with emphasis on the need for retaining cultural identity while considering necessary growth and modernization. This approach would contribute to safeguarding historic and cultural resources, besides fostering social cohesion and economic dynamism in the cities.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Local Legislation and Governance

One of the more effective methods to maximize heritage site conservation would be to strengthen local laws and levels of governance. Developing regions could focus on a number of things like: establishing comprehensive legal protections for cultural heritage, including strict regulations on development near heritage zones, creating heritage management authorities with the expertise and resources to enforce these laws and oversee preservation efforts, implementing

penalties for acts of vandalism, neglect, or unauthorized construction near heritage sites. For instance, the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of India calls for buffer zones around protected monuments, while the Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological Sites of Mexico prioritizes strict oversight of urban development. Similar legislation, tailored to the specific needs of developing regions, can mitigate threats to heritage conservation.

Empowering local communities

Heritage preservation must achieve inclusive and sustainable outcomes through empowerment of the local communities. These can be directly involved through training in conservation techniques and heritage management, creating employment opportunities in tourism, restoration, and site management, raising awareness about the cultural and economic value of heritage preservation. The initiatives are also likely to be committed to long-term protection when local communities own them. Jordan's approach in integrating local communities into conservation projects of Petra shows how such inclusive strategies build pride and dedication among residents.

Leveraging Technology for Conservation

Technology can also be used to provide new modes of preservation and protection of heritage sites. Technologies such as 3D scanning and modeling can document and restore sites with great precision, while real-time monitoring systems can track structural integrity and environmental impact. Virtual tourism platforms provide alternative ways for people to explore heritage sites without contributing to physical strain on fragile locations. China's use of digital imaging and advanced structural monitoring for the Great Wall of China exemplifies how integrating technology into conservation efforts can yield significant benefits. Developing regions can adopt similar technologies through international collaborations to enhance their preservation strategies.

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