

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO LIVING HERITAGE: NGO PERSPECTIVES

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GLOBALLY CONNECTED, LOCALLY ROUTED APPROACH TO LIVING HERITAGE: A BRITISH COUNCIL CASE STUDY

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Abstract

[Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth](#) was an action research programme, developed and led by The British Council between 2018 and 2024. Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth adopted a cultural relations approach to explore how heritage can act as a catalyst for change and strengthen the British Council's ability to enable longer-term conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth in different cultures, communities and countries. The programme aimed to enable communities to represent and safeguard their living heritage on their terms through a people centred approach for community participation at all levels of the programme.

Paper

'Cultural heritage is more than just fragments of the past which have persisted into the present as a bounded set of objects, monuments, or traditions; it is 'alive' in the here and now. Cultural heritage is everywhere, and it takes diverse forms in people's everyday lives.

Heritage is not simply a representation of how life was lived in the past, but also about what we value in our present and how we could and should live in the future. A community's cultural heritage is the collective inheritance which it wishes to carry forward, adapt and use creatively as the basis of its self-determined development.' ([Dalglish 2023, p.13](#))

UNESCO has long asserted that strategies to achieve sustainable development need to be people-centred, whereby culture is a key driver of people's participation, ownership and creativity:

'By safeguarding cultural heritage in all its forms, both tangible and intangible; promoting the diversity of cultural expressions; ensuring access to cultural spaces, infrastructure and institutions; and protecting the rights of all peoples to enjoy and share their culture free from fear, people are rightly placed at the heart of local and national strategies for sustainable development.' (UNESCO 2016, p. 238).

From the perspective of UNESCO and many other cultural actors, culture is therefore a 'missing pillar' of sustainability. Its centrality to addressing development challenges and in particular its potential contribution to truly sustainable development had been underappreciated and that culture should have been more explicitly represented within the SDGs. [The Missing Pillar report](#) prepared for the British Council (Nordicity, 2020) specifically examined the role of culture in supporting development and came to a similar conclusion arguing that:

'As highlighted in a recent study by UNESCO, many countries have begun to view culture as an asset in eradicating poverty, addressing social inclusion and inequality, and creating economic growth.' (Nordicity, 2020, p. 11)

The Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth Programme

The British Council's broad development aims are summarised in its purpose statement, to support peace and prosperity by building connections, understanding and trust between people in the UK and countries worldwide. The British Council has a physical presence in more than 100 countries, many of which are eligible for Official Development Assistance funding, and reaches more than 200 countries through digital programmes.

In a 2018 report, [Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth](#), The British Council explored the notion that cultural heritage could contribute to inclusive growth. The report shares findings from a sector consultation and international research suggesting that when people or communities are given the opportunity to engage with, learn from and promote their own cultural heritage, it can contribute to social and economic development.

Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth was a live action research programme, developed and led by The British Council between 2018 and 2024. [Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth](#) adopted a cultural relations approach to facilitate the exchange and collaboration among local cultural heritage stakeholders and between the UK and countries overseas. The programme explores how cultural heritage can act as a catalyst for change and strengthen the British Council's ability to enable longer-term conditions for inclusive and sustainable growth in different cultures, communities and countries.

Through pilot projects in Colombia, Kenya and Vietnam, the action research programme explored cultural heritage for inclusive growth as a global concept with local solutions. The projects were community- and people-led, and were devised and managed with local partners on the ground, supporting local communities to promote their own cultural heritage, leading to economic growth and improved social welfare.

The programme aimed to explore the relationship, theory and practice between people-centred approaches, cultural heritage, and inclusive, sustainable growth (development), through:

- taking a global issue and exploring local solutions with local contexts over time,
- flexible ways of working together,
- finding shared cocreated approaches and processes,
- active listening and learning together as the programme developed and
- finding solutions together as a programme.
- The programme USP is taking an action research, people-centred approach in exploring the holistic value of Cultural Heritage for inclusive, sustainable growth.
- The programme has reached over 42,000 people and supported over 110 organisations.

Colombia's programme, known as 'Semb'ando Nuestros Saberes' or 'Sowing our Knowledge,' worked with six Indigenous groups to recover and strengthen their cultural heritage. It provided opportunities for intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, heritage protection, social and economic sustainability and wellbeing across the whole community.

Kenya's '#CultureGrows' programme aimed to increase visibility, ownership, accessibility, inclusivity and transmission of cultural heritage by promoting contemporary practice, youth participation and technology. With partner Book Bunk, the project revived an old colonial library and community spaces as centres of culture, learning and engagement.

In Viet Nam, the programme was launched under the name [Heritage of Future Past](#), with the overarching goal of harnessing cultural heritage to foster inclusive growth. The country programme consists of two main components: Community Cultural Heritage (CCH) and Film, Archive, and Music Lab (FAMLAB). The CCH component focuses on capacity building and facilitating opportunities for all members of targeted communities to engage in researching, devising plans, and executing activities that preserve and promote their cultural heritage. On the other hand, FAMLAB aims to connect Viet Nam's music and film heritage with artists, creative practitioners, and other stakeholders in the cultural and creative industries. The evaluation of the Viet Name programme found that the: -

'Enablement of community-led activities for safeguarding cultural heritage: Community members have been provided with support to conduct research, generate initiatives, define objectives, anticipate outcomes, and implement activities. The involvement of adults in heritage preservation has increased significantly, particularly through capacity building, teaching, and training. Simultaneously, younger generations have become more engaged in various roles to ensure the continuity of cultural practices. People are now at the forefront of actions for cultural heritage in many facets. The funding allocated to the projects was carefully designed to promote inclusive growth by providing opportunities for all members of the community who wished to be involved. Both men and women, particularly those from minority ethnic groups were encouraged to apply for funding and take leadership roles in the projects. As a result, nearly 50% of the funded projects (10 out of 22) were led by women, with six of them coming from minority ethnic backgrounds.' (Chung & Quang 2023, p.21)

Through the external evaluation of the programme, Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth delivered a range of outcomes:

- People developed their understanding of the value and opportunities that their cultural heritage can bring.
- Communities took new opportunities created by their revitalised cultural heritage.
- The programme nurtured a stronger sense of community.
- People participated in learning and influencing a new kind of cultural heritage practices that aimed for inclusive growth.
- People developed their understanding of the value and opportunities their cultural heritage could bring.
- Local communities played an active role in designing the programme.
- Communities exchanged knowledge and developed a deeper understanding of cultural heritage.
- Endangered cultural heritage of minority ethnic groups was revitalised.
- There is strong evidence of the creation of new sustainable income generating activities. Community members and organisations have shown ownership and grown in capacity to take these endeavours forward.
- Policy and decision makers engaged more in cultural heritage for inclusive growth practices.

The external evaluation of the Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth programme also examined the programme's approach and found:

'The global approach of the multi-country Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth programme enabled it to deliver a stronger, more enriched and diverse programme – in essence, doing more and doing better than it would otherwise. The cultural relations approach imbued into the global programme deployed a flexible, mutual, balanced and supportive way of working that allowed the programme elements in the different countries to develop a uniqueness, whilst also maintaining the core ethos, principles and ingredients.

In embracing and encouraging a bottom-up approach from the three countries, the global programme empowered local solutions whilst facilitating sharing and learning cohered across the global team. It also provided the British Council with a means of more quickly and effectively increasing its capacity and expertise in the

field of cultural heritage – an area in which the British Council is only recently emerging as a leader.'

By applying action learning from different sources and contexts, the British Council has been able to learn and apply knowledge, expertise and credibility quickly and effectively. The role of the global programme convening across countries adds prestige and credentials to all elements, expanding its reach, influence and outcomes.' (Nordicity 2021, p.64)

Taking a people-centred approach, through cultural heritage, can contribute to a supportive, inclusive and sustainable ecosystem. The programme lead modelled a people-centre philosophy throughout, coaching the country teams, introducing many people-centred mechanisms including an action research framework and strong, self-reflective learning programme in an iterative, experimental way.

Reflections on the Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth Programme Approach

Through the programme learning and evaluation and key number of reflections which are useful for other cultural heritage programmes operating in this space.

Adopting a contextually relevant approach from the inception to the end of the project. This includes displaying acute cultural awareness and respect for social norms. Taking a flexible, locally led, and long-term approach collectively across society to explore a new kind of growth through cultural heritage. Mobilise cross-sector and cross-geography interventions and explorations between community, practitioners, organisations, policymakers and thought-leaders.

Developing trusting relationships with the communities and partners. Cultivate ownership by truly placing decision-making power in the hands of the delivery partners and the community. This includes the project's focus, decisions on the timeline and the introduction of specific resources and expertise.

Operate in a people-centred way, to authentically meet and address the needs and aspirations of local communities. Being people-centred is about both power and process. At its most radical, people-centredness challenges existing norms and power structures almost by definition. Yet expert-facilitated process also has a role to play – using

techniques like human-centred design or asset-based community development. People-centred projects are (at their best) flexible and emergent, often with open-ended outcomes. They may take longer to deliver than more traditionally managed projects.

Ensuring participation, inclusion and crucially local ownership is at the heart of the work. Meet people where they are and allow the space and time for things to develop organically. Support the needs, aspirations, and benefits of local communities through active listening and responding. Ensure local ownership and being locally led is at the heart through participation, inclusion, and decision-making.

Final Reflections and Learnings

Reflections through Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth there is the potential for real impact from a locally led approach across society which is about exploring growth and cultural heritage. The value of cultural heritage in generating local solutions is also key to celebrating cultural diversity.

The programme was designed to take a long-term view and be adaptive to local people and the heritage they valued. What this meant was about supporting to create and defined opportunities for their own heritage and for their own benefit and working across society with organizations and decision-makers.

Also important was working together, learning from each other, and building trusted and mutual relationships between locally led programmes and also being globally connected across countries and organisations.

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Author Bio

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