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UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the diversity of cultural contexts within the sustainable development paradigm

Summary

In 2015, the State Parties to the World Heritage Convention adopted the UNESCO Policy Document for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention. The document attempts to reconcile heritage conservation with development at World Heritage sites by using the sustainable development framework as described in the global 2030 Agenda. It lists three overarching principles that should guide the processes supporting its implementation, namely: respect for human rights, pursuit of equality and achieving sustainability through a long-term perspective. This policy brief revises these principles in order to emphasise the importance of the cultural context as a key aspect of the proposed approach to heritage management and conservation in Africa. In view of making it a tool for ensuring the well-being of people in line with their culture-specific knowledges and cultural values, it recommends that cultural sensitivity be added as a stand-alone precept to the document. It further proposes that the overarching principles put forward are broadened to make them more comprehensive in embracing the holistic nature of the sustainable development paradigm, with its intertwined dimensions considered all together.

Introduction

On expiry of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, world leaders adopted the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Concurrently, the African Union (AU) approved Agenda 2063, which stipulates seven aspirations of the continent towards building a better Africa. Following these two important frameworks, the heritage sector responded by issuing policies

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and declarations that called for the alignment of heritage conservation with the principles and goals of sustainable development. Accordingly, the State Parties to the World Heritage Convention adopted, in 2015, the UNESCO Policy Document for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention (The Policy Document is also known as the World Heritage Sustainable Development Policy: WH-SDP). The document sets out the principles and processes in line with which the management and conservation of World Heritage properties should support the goals of sustainable development. It addresses four premises: inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability and fostering peace and security.

Within the African continent, the 2018 Position Paper on World Heritage and Sustainable Development in Africa, prepared by the African Members to the World Heritage Committee and African experts, addresses the conflictual relations between heritage conservation and development. Endorsed by the AU Specialized Technical Committee on Youth, Culture and Sports, it reasserts Africa's commitment to the vision of Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and appeals for 'a pragmatic approach towards the effective balancing of conservation needs and socioeconomic development within and around World Heritage properties while keeping abreast with the lifetime realities currently facing the African continent' (AU 2018). The signatories of the paper emphasised the need to consider the context of interventions, which has been largely missing in the MDGs.

The AU declared 2021 as the Year of Arts, Culture and Heritage, with the theme 'Arts, culture and heritage: Levers for building the Africa we want', thus echoing the Agenda 2063 and emphasising the need to see heritage as a driver of sustainable development. Next year, the UNESCO World Heritage Convention will celebrate its 50th anniversary. It seems therefore suitable to reflect on the dialogue between heritage conservation and development in light of the WH-SDP and, especially, to focus for a moment on the importance of context within which both are considered.

Balancing heritage conservation and development

The market-driven approach to cultural heritage has been gaining popularity in Africa in recent years as a viable way of using the economic potential of past vestiges for the purpose of local development, due largely to the existing socioeconomic challenges that the continent faces. Nevertheless, conservationists have been raising concerns about the threats the commodification of cultural resources presents to sustainable heritage management by compromising the values of heritage sites and monuments. To achieve a balance between heritage conservation and development, a number of principles have been proposed to help assess the sustainability, in both cultural and economic terms, of development projects that make use of cultural capital of heritage (see Throsby 2002: 109–110).

The 2015 WH-SDP is a further attempt to reconcile heritage conservation with development at World Heritage sites by using the sustainable development framework as described in the global 2030 Agenda. The document sets out key guidelines and recommends a course of action towards the integration of two presumably conflicting approaches to heritage – one that prioritises its cultural value, and the other that focuses on its economic value. The effectiveness of the recommendations resides in considering them within a specific cultural context in which the heritage resources have been produced and are being used today. This policy brief therefore focuses on the principles that guide the processes described in the WH-SDP in an attempt to 'mainstream' cultural context as a key aspect of the document. It recognises that 'heritage' and 'development' are both embedded in community worldviews (cultural and social contexts), while functioning within national and international politics.

> The ultimate question to answer is how to make heritage management and conservation in Africa, conceptualised within the UN sustainable development framework, a tool for ensuring the well-being of Africans in line with their culture-specific knowledges and cultural values.

The Agenda and the Convention

The WH-SDP was adopted by the General Assembly of States to the World Heritage Convention in 2015. It asserts that the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage is well situated within UNESCO's mandate to foster equitable sustainable development and to promote peace and security, as stipulated by the UNESCO Medium Term Strategy 2014–2021 and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development more broadly. Consequently, the document posits that conservation of heritage within the framework of the Convention needs to consider economic, social and environmental dimensions of the sustainable development paradigm, within which it currently operates, to contribute to the well-being of people (UNESCO 2015). The document adds fostering peace and security as the fourth pertinent aspect towards which the World Heritage properties can contribute. Concurrently, the WH-SDP suggests that integrating these four dimensions into the conservation and management strategies developed

for the World Heritage sites and monuments may help support the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the properties. It calls the State Parties to embrace social responsibility by harnessing the potential of the World Heritage properties to contribute to sustainable development, while protecting the OUV. Considering mutual benefits for heritage and society from embracing sustainable development, the WH-SDP calls to integrate a sustainable development perspective into the World Heritage Convention processes.

Framework and process

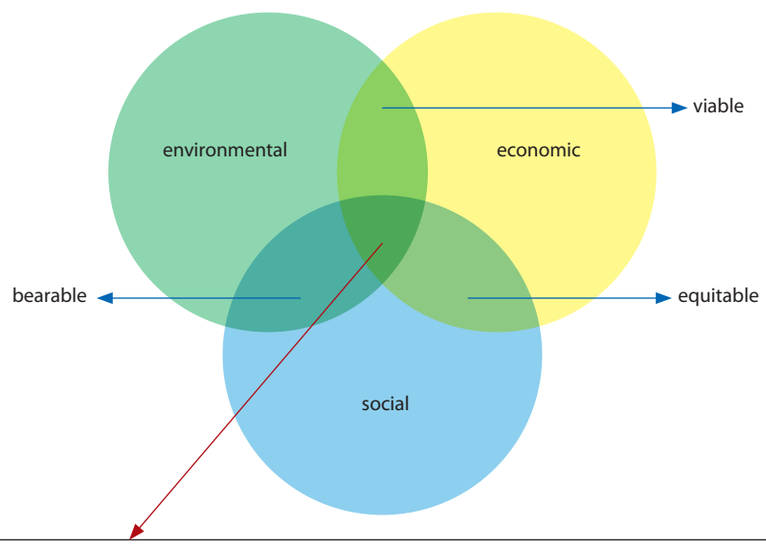
The 1972 Convention identifies, among other things, processes that need to be established by each State Party to 'ensure that effective and active measures are taken for the protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural and natural heritage situated on its territory' (UNESCO 1972: 3). Article 5 lists five steps that should be considered: setting up services; developing scientific and technical studies and research; building capacity; establishing appropriate legal and administrative measures; and securing financial resources for the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and rehabilitation of heritage. It further recommends adoption of 'a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes' (UNESCO 1972: 3).

Given the diversity of sites and the variety of contexts within which they are situated, the nature of identification, protection, conservation and presentation of irreplaceable cultural and natural heritage will change with the cultural setting and geo-historical background of the property considered, and also as a result of political influences and the socioeconomic needs of the communities whose lives will be affected. The approaches to heritage adopted by each country to ensure transmission of the OUV to present and future generations will differ accordingly. Moreover, the national and regional strategic directions each State Party to the Convention follows will also play a role.

Agenda 2063, the continental strategy for Africa, is aligned with the precepts of the sustainable development framework – described in what is known as the Brundtland Report (Brundtland 1987) as comprising economic, social and environmental dimensions (Figure 1) – which also constitutes the basis of the global Agenda 2030. This plan of action to transform the world, by making it more socially equitable, economically viable and ecologically bearable in the next 15 years, is supposed to speak to universal values in addressing the economic, social and environmental issues in an integrated and balanced way. Putting people, planet and prosperity at its core, the Agenda also recognises the importance of maintaining peace for the sustainable development to exist (UN 2015, Preamble).

The Agenda for Sustainable Development, although a global framework, is just one of a string of strategies agreed on by global leaders over the years. It is not free of disentanglement in the colonial matrix of power. It also does not really backtrack on the previously adopted models of development. Born out of the contestation of the global 'one size fits all' development strategy which was the basis of the MDGs, it tries to reconcile growth and the environment, and to introduce more contextualised thinking of development – one that would align the strategy to local societal values and philosophies. It therefore asks people to choose solutions to their challenges and follow their diverse needs, but within the confines of a specific sociopolitical system and some predefined general objectives.

Figure 1: The relations between the three dimensions of the sustainable development paradigm



Sustainable development
Concept that emerged in the 1980s and focused initially primarily on the issue of conservation and proper use of natural resources for the sake of the well-being of future generations. It was born of fears that the generations to come would not be able to maintain their living standards due to overuse of resources, rapid population growth and overconsumption. Composed of three interrelated and mutually reinforcing dimensions – economic, social and environmental – it is a framework for meeting the development needs of present societies while sustaining natural systems that provide resources and ecosystem services for future generations.

What is being integrated into what?

The Agenda was developed to provide structure and direction; it is supposed to guide action towards a specific goal. Like any other framework, while indicating a preferred way of achieving an objective, it needs to be flexible and adaptable in response to contexts and changing circumstances. In addressing a problem, different approaches can be adopted within one framework; these approaches usually have defined sets of principles, methods and processes. Frameworks may be designed without clearly defined methodologies. Processes may be embedded into methodologies or may exist independently. However, to be effective, processes need to consider the context of a methodology, just as the methodology is adopted within a specific context of a framework. By implication, frameworks must respond to the context within which they are applied to bring results.

Initially, the main objective of the UNESCO World Heritage List has been to preserve heritage for future generations and protect it against the risks associated with development. The overriding priority has been to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the resource at World Heritage sites. Hence, the emphasis of the UNESCO Convention is on the conservation of and raising awareness about heritage. However, the designation as a 'World Heritage site' also drives tourism to these locations, with the associated cash flows. Consequently, the label became a good marketing tool. The WH-SDP seems to open up space in the management of the World Heritage protected areas for economic objectives. Accordingly, the direction has changed from 'protection from development' to 'protection and development' (Figure 2). The quest is now to maintain the OUV while providing economic and social benefits to local communities, and balancing environmental sustainability in the process.

Since UNESCO decided to align its 1972 Convention with the sustainable development paradigm, in response to the 2030 Agenda, the processes undertaken within the scope of the Convention must support the principles of the new framework. Therefore, rather than integrating the sustainable development perspective into the existing systems, as the title of the WH-SDP seems to suggest, it would be more accurate to speak about adapting or revising the processes of the Convention to align with the guidelines of the framework, which provides a new direction and the context for action. Sustainable heritage conservation is part of sustainable development, with the latter being larger in scope. The text of the WH-SDP seems to miss this distinction at times. For instance, it speaks of 'applying a sustainable development perspective *within* the implementation of the World Heritage Convention' (UNESCO 2015: 3, emphasis added), while in another place it rightly encourages the State Parties to 'integrate conservation and management approaches for World Heritage properties *within* their larger regional planning frameworks' (UNESCO 2015: 3, emphasis added).

Context matters!

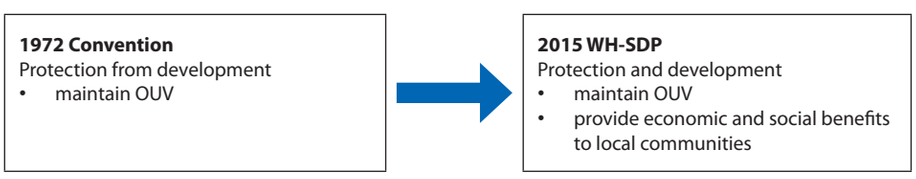
Processes, methodologies and frameworks can only bring lasting results if they are designed with the specific context in which they are supposed to work in mind. One of the failures of the MDGs was their presumed universalism in tackling problems. The problems may be common, but they do not necessarily have the same source and, consequently, the responses to them and solutions will also differ. They will be linked to local societal norms and aspirations. Sustainable development was conceptualised in a way that respects the diverse developmental paths of societies according to their values and philosophies. For 'sustainability is cultural by being contextual, historically and geographically concrete; everything human beings do is woven into culture in terms of webs of meaning created by human beings' (Birkeland 2015: 165). Given that culture constitutes a foundation of one's identity, it is a force that regulates and shapes development.

By focusing on the needs and aspirations of people, and recognising the agency of local communities, the Agenda for Sustainable Development has placed an accent on human well-being. How this well-being is understood, envisaged and what contributes towards it can only be decided by the people themselves. Hence, this newest strategy is, in principle, a bottom-up model that needs to be adapted to the context in which it is to function.

Contextualising sustainable development: Policy observations

The WH-SDP describes an approach to heritage conservation that is to serve, concurrently, the objectives of sustainable development. It provides a set of principles and suggests steps that the State Parties should follow, on the one hand, to protect the OUV of the World Heritage properties within their territories and, on the other hand, to contribute to the well-being of people in sociocultural and economic terms, and in an environmentally balanced way. The

Figure 2: The different directions of the 1972 Convention and the 2015 WH-SDP



2015 WH-SDP posits that to achieve these objectives, there is a need for 'full respect and participation of all stakeholders and rights holders, including indigenous peoples and local communities, the setting up of effective inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and provisions for the systematic assessment of environmental, social, and economic impacts of all proposed developments, as well as effective monitoring'. The scope of the Policy is therefore clearly broader than what Article 5 of the 1972 Convention envisaged.

The WH-SDP details specific areas and recommends steps to be considered within each of the identified dimensions of sustainable development. And so, in terms of environmental sustainability within the World Heritage properties, the document speaks particularly of protecting biological and cultural diversity and ecosystem services and benefits, as well as strengthening resilience to natural hazards and climate change. With reference to inclusive social development, it addresses measures that should be taken at the World Heritage sites in order for them to contribute to inclusion and equity; enhance quality of life and well-being; respect, protect and promote human rights; respect, consult and involve indigenous people and local communities; and achieve gender equality. As for inclusive economic development, the WH-SDP addresses the need to ensure growth, employment, income and livelihoods; promote economic investment and quality tourism; and strengthen capacity-building, innovation and local entrepreneurship. Finally, with regard to peace and security, the document speaks to the role of State Parties to the Convention in ensuring conflict prevention; protecting heritage during conflict; promoting conflict resolution; and contributing to post-conflict recovery.

It is of note that each dimension is treated in the WH-SDP separately, even though the sustainable development framework emphasises the interdependence of all its components. As the dimensions are intertwined, none should be overlooked if the sustainability condition is to be fulfilled. Moreover, the WH-SDP treats the peace and security aspect as an added component of the framework even though the 2030 Agenda acknowledges it rather as an overarching principle, in line with the adage that 'there is no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development' (UN 2015, Preamble).

The dimensions and diverse concepts used in the Policy are defined in a broad way, using the articulations of the UN system. Hence, they seem to be understood as universal notions that can exist in a cultural and historical vacuum. For instance, when discussing gender equality, the document acknowledges differences and inequalities between women and men as requiring attention, and argues for gender responsive and gender transformative approaches. It defines these approaches as articulating policies and initiatives which 'address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of women and men' (gender responsive) and 'challenge existing and biased/discriminatory policies, practices, programmes and affect change for the betterment of life for all' (gender transformative) (UNESCO 2015: 14–15). One is tempted to ask, who is to decide what to consider as 'biased' or 'discriminatory', if the aspirations and capacities vary? Clearly, these are culturally sensitive issues.

Culture in the WH-SDP is mentioned mostly in relation to know-how and inclusion. The State Parties are called to 'recognise, respect, and include the values as well as cultural and environmental place-knowledge of local communities' (UNESCO 2015: 6). Culture as a foundation of one's identity and one's frame of reference is barely acknowledged – for example, it is mentioned in that sense with reference to the interpretation of World Heritage places associated with conflicts. Cultural sensitivity does not feature among the key precepts of the WH-SDP, either. Within its General Provisions, the document lists three overarching principles that should guide the processes:

- respect for **human rights**
- pursuit of **equality**
- achieving **sustainability** through a long-term perspective.

Policy implications

While the specific steps that each State Party can choose to take towards the implementation of the WH-SDP depend on their own national and regional strategies and development plans, the above-mentioned core principles should resonate with everybody and govern each approach taken. Looking at the suggested precepts and the varied domains listed with regard to the contribution of World Heritage properties to sustainable development, the lack of cultural sensitivity as a stand-alone aspect is particularly surprising. **Culture gives meaning to (sustainable) development**. It has a direct impact on environmental sustainability, especially given the interrelation between biological diversity and cultural context, acknowledged by the WH-SDP. **It influences ways in which communities define social and economic development and pursue these**, and it has a bearing on inclusivity by providing the normative context for human behaviour. Finally, **culture plays a leading role in sustainable peace**. As a control mechanism, it defines the fair social conditions that need to be in place for positive peace to prevail. Being a mediating force within the sustainable development paradigm, culture needs to be acknowledged in each of the recommended actions.

It is therefore recommended that cultural sensitivity be added as an extra precept, without which sustainable development as a framework providing context for the Convention cannot be upheld. It is further proposed that the overarching principles put forward in the WH-SDP be broadened to make them more comprehensive with regard to the specific actions set out under each aspect of the framework in embracing the holistic nature of sustainable development paradigm, with its intertwined dimensions considered all together. Based on the WH-SDP text, the general principles, provided in Table 1, are recommended as requisite for the effective implementation of the World Heritage Convention under the framework of sustainable development.

Policy in practice

As examples from different World Heritage sites show (Labadi, Giliberto, Taruvinga & Jopela 2020), integration of adequate protective measures with the relevant uses of heritage, geared towards maintaining the OUV and sustainable development is not such a straightforward task – especially when the different agendas of various stakeholders are at play. A balance between the protection of the OUV and the recognition of other values that people associate with their heritage is key to achieving social justice and creating a more sustainable future. Yet, redressing unfair mechanisms in place and introducing equitable ways of sharing benefits deriving from the use of heritage resources usually demands political will and State Party commitment to providing assistance, including financial means, for integrating heritage management into national and regional sustainable development agendas. The case of Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls Transboundary World Heritage property (Zulu 2020) demonstrates that even World Heritage sites, which should be beacons of sustainable heritage management and inclusive socioeconomic development, struggle to effectively implement the 1972 Convention under the framework of sustainable development. The Mosi-oa-Tunya property is an example of the pitfalls of neglecting local knowledge and traditional management systems within the formal structures and systems established for protection and management of the site, which clearly affects the sustainability of this heritage. It is also a case of lack of cultural sensitivity when it comes to the protection and interpretation of the heritage resource, the meaning of which is restricted to the UNESCO-defined OUV, with no regard for the sociocultural values associated with the place by the local people with a historical connection to it. It is thus a case in point of the need for an inclusive management of World Heritage sites, recognising

Table 1: The revised principles for the implementation of the 1972 Convention under the sustainable development framework

Inclusivity	Sustainability	Social justice	Cultural sensitivity
• Both in economic and social terms (the right to participation) • Subsidiarity and inclusive governance (decentralised decision-making, with local people included in project management) • Equity of rights and responsibilities of stakeholders and rights holders – core group[1] • Collaboration with the stakeholders throughout the entire process towards a common good • Transparency of processes	• Long-term decision-making • Continuity in generation of tangible and intangible benefits (reciprocal benefits for heritage and society) • Precautionary approach (avoiding damage, irreversible change and prevention of negative impacts) • All sustainable development dimensions balanced and integrated, reinforcing each other • Integrating local knowledge (at various levels) • Recognition of interconnection between the biological and cultural diversity	• Rights-based approach (recognising the dignity of the human person) • Reducing inequalities – intergenerational (interests of present and future generations considered) and intragenerational equity (access to the benefits across groups of the population) • Respecting environmental, economic, social and cultural rights (social responsibility & stewardship of the environment) • Fostering peace and security (promotion of peace and strengthening resilience) • Responding to different needs of stakeholders (well-being in the context) • Solidarity (recognition of interdependence of the world) • Recognition of interdependence (acknowledgment of connections between cultural resources and benefits they bestow) – equity in use of heritage resources • Tangible and intangible benefits shared equitably • Redress unfair mechanisms in place	• Gender responsive approaches adapted to the cultural context • Culturally pluralistic approaches to conservation and management of heritage, and interpretation • Ethics defined within the context • Upholding cultural diversity (contribution to the preservation of the cultural diversity of the community)

1. Understood as the community that is living on the site and/or practising their living heritage in relation to the site, in contrast to the broader community that is only using the place for different purposes, for example for tourism.

socioeconomic necessities and cultural rights of local communities, while simultaneously addressing the problems of environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Conclusion

The purpose of sustainable heritage conservation under the sustainable development paradigm is to contribute to the well-being of communities, who are the stakeholders to heritage, in socioeconomic and environmental terms while protecting the values of this resource for present and future generations. At the World Heritage properties, it would mean providing reciprocal benefits for heritage and society while not compromising the OUV of the sites. The principles of inclusivity, sustainability, social justice and cultural sensitivity should be jointly respected with regard to interventions aimed at identification, conservation and interpretation of heritage, on the one hand, and provision of socioeconomic development through heritage, on the other. The ultimate fruit of the fair social conditions thus created should be peace (Figure 3).

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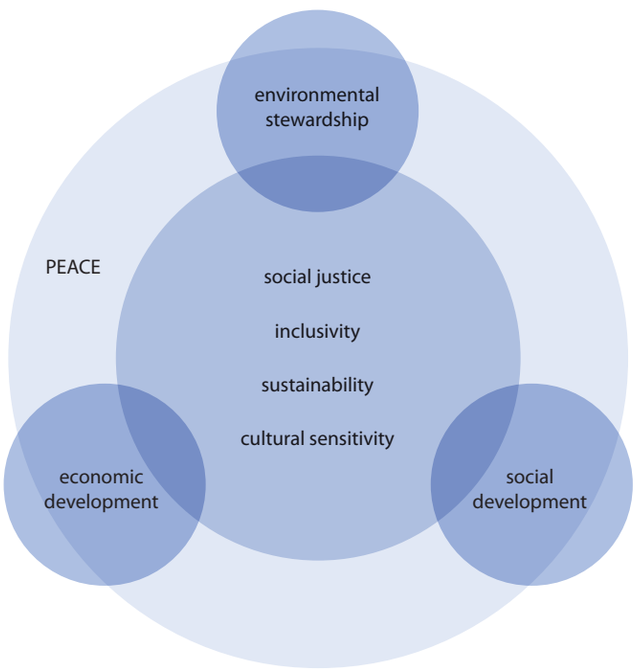
Figure 3: The recommended framework for sustainable heritage management and conservation under the sustainable development paradigm



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