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Harnessing cultural heritage for sustainable development: an analysis of three internationally funded projects in MENA Countries

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ABSTRACT

The importance of cultural heritage as an enabler of sustainable development is widely acknowledged. However, its role has remained marginalised in past and current international development agendas. This paper provides an original interdisciplinary study interrogating the potential of harnessing cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible) for sustainable development. It also reflects on how international policies and narratives on cultural heritage for development have been implemented on the ground. In particular, it critically examines the contribution of cultural heritage to worldwide developmental issues, with an approach that traverses the three sustainable development dimensions. It investigates how cultural heritage has been used to tackle global challenges, such as poverty alleviation in marginalised groups (economic dimension); gender equality and the empowerment of women (social dimension); and environmental sustainability (environmental dimension). The analysis focuses on three heritage for development projects funded through the 'Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund', jointly implemented by UNESCO in partnership with other United Nations organisations and local partners in the Middle East and North Africa between 2008 and 2013. The article sheds light on multifaceted aspects of cultural heritage for sustainable development by discussing key achievements and common pitfalls.

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sustainable development; cultural heritage; poverty alleviation; gender equality; environmental sustainability; international development agenda

Introduction

This interdisciplinary and innovative study aims to explore whether and how cultural heritage – in its tangible and intangible dimensions – contributes to sustainable development. Whilst numerous papers, declarations, policy documents, and project implementations (see for example Galla 2012; van Oers and Pereira Roders 2014, 122–124; UNESCO 2015a, 2018; Labadi et al. 2021) make claims about the fundamental role of heritage for (sustainable) development, there are few analyses of the actual contribution of heritage for development on the ground. Does using cultural heritage for sustainable development actually work? What are the key achievements and common pitfalls? This paper will provide a better understanding of how cultural heritage has been used as an enabler for sustainable development in the past, highlight key issues, and discuss how it can be better mobilised in future international development practices building on local heritage.

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This paper contributes to filling this critical gap by analysing the implementation of heritage for development projects in three lower-middle income countries of the Middle East and North-African (MENA) region funded through the Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F). This ground-breaking experimental investment by the Government of Spain, totalling 96.5 million USD (Baltà Portolés 2013, 8), was aimed at using culture and heritage to accelerate the achievement of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the first time. Implemented between 2008 and 2013, these projects had a pioneering and intersectoral approach in addressing global challenges, i.e. poverty alleviation (MDG 1), gender equality and women's empowerment (MDG 2), environmental sustainability (MDG 7), and global partnership for development (MDG 8). These projects are particularly relevant for an investigation of this kind as they incorporated many ideas and concerns that were later included in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and their results were also used by UNESCO to provide evidence on the relevance of culture and heritage during the negotiations for defining the SDGs.

Following a section on cultural heritage for sustainable development (conceptual framework), the materials and methods used for the analysis are illustrated, together with an overview of the projects selected for investigation. The results of the analyses are then discussed thematically, considering the following global developmental challenges: poverty alleviation (MDG 1; SDG 1; SDG 8), followed by gender equality and women's empowerment (MDG 3; SDG 5), and environmental sustainability (MDG 7; SDG 11; SDG 15). Finally, the article ends with some critical and conclusive remarks.

Cultural heritage for sustainable development

The relevance of cultural heritage for sustainable development has been widely recognised and advocated for by leading international organisations (e.g. United Cities and Local Governments 2010; ICOMOS 2011; UNESCO 2013, 2015b; UN-HABITAT 2016; Labadi et al. 2021). Attempts to incorporate cultural heritage into development discourses have occurred in parallel with the concept of sustainable development. From the 1970s onwards, the notion of development has gradually shifted from a mono-dimensional, economically-focused, and Western vision of development towards a multi-dimensional, co-evolving, equitable, human-rights based, and context-dependent approach (Torggler et al. 2015, 4; Labadi 2019a, 5–9). In this framework, harnessing cultural heritage can foster an alternative, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and cross-sectoral approach to development (Bandarin, Hosagrahar, and Albernaz 2011, 19).

Despite this shift, culture and heritage were absent from the definition of the MDGs, which were agreed on and adopted in 2000 to address global developmental challenges by 2015. Fifteen years later, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted as a plan of action addressing the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social, and environmental – through 17 highly interdependent SDGs and 169 targets (United Nations 2015). Despite the absence of culture as a stand-alone goal, as had been advocated for by several international actions (Vlassis 2015; Labadi 2019b), a specific target calls for the strengthening of global efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage (SDG 11.4). Recognising the intrinsic importance of heritage protection and safeguarding for sustainable development, the inclusion of this 'heritage target' in the most recent international development agenda constituted an unprecedented achievement for the heritage sector (Wiktor-Mach 2019, 1602–1603). However, the potential of cultural heritage for tackling broader developmental challenges beyond its narrow conservation has remained marginalised. In fact, the 2030 Agenda still considers heritage as an object to be protected rather than as an active driver for development (Nurse 2006, 35; Throsby 2017, 142; Labadi 2018a, 46; Labadi et al. 2021, 12–14).

Also in 2015, a concrete policy was adopted by UNESCO (2015b) to integrate a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the World Heritage (WH) Convention, and to increase the contribution of heritage towards wider social, environmental, and economic challenges, thereby

fostering peace and security in line with the UN development agenda (Larsen and Logan 2018, 5). The adoption of this policy was a 'landmark achievement' for promoting more holistic approaches linking heritage with planet, people, and the economy (Boccardi and Scott 2018, 21). The importance of interconnected approaches has also been emphasised in other recent UNESCO publications focusing on intangible heritage contribution to sustainable development (UNESCO 2015a), and on the provision of an innovative framework to assess and monitor culture's contribution across different SDGs and policy areas (UNESCO 2019, 10). Yet, implementation of this policy has been slow and uneven (Labadi et al. 2020).

Whilst the 2015 policy highlights the importance of a comprehensive vision of heritage for sustainable development, the majority of existing publications in the field discuss the topic from narrow perspectives, such as: the use of tourism for economic development; gender; or natural resource management and its implications for local communities, without linking these issues (e.g. Hampton 2005; D'Auria 2009; Keitumetse 2009; Otuokon, Chai, and Beale 2012; Tucker and Boonabaana 2012; Labadi 2018b). Notable exceptions include Galla (2012), UNESCO (2018), Giliberto (2020), British Council (2020), and Labadi et al. (2021), which provide a collection of practical and cross-disciplinary case studies demonstrating the importance of heritage for sustainable development and the SDGs in a variety of contexts. However, these publications tend to adopt a rather positive approach by advocating for a greater recognition of the importance of culture and heritage for sustainable development. Therefore, there is still a critical need to reflect on the (positive and negative) contribution of cultural heritage for sustainable development and under what conditions it can be effectively mobilised and achieved in the long-term. Framed around the holistic and comprehensive approach expressed in the UNESCO 2015 Policy on WH and sustainable development, this paper will shed light on multifaceted aspects of cultural heritage for sustainable development, using an interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach, cutting across the broader sustainable development dimensions (economic, social, and environmental).

Materials and methods

This paper focuses on three MDG-F heritage for development projects implemented in Egypt, Morocco, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). These projects [henceforth also called Joint Programmes (JPs)] were the only JPs of the 'Culture and Development Thematic Window' implemented in the MENA region. In addition to the fact that they all took place in lower-middle income countries belonging to the same geographical region, these projects were chosen for study because they aimed to address the same multiple development dimensions and MDGs (1, 3, 7, and 8), facilitating a cross-referenced analysis of the research findings. With a budget of 3 to 5 million USD, each project aimed at alleviating poverty and improving local living conditions through the creation of new income generation activities (IGAs) in the field of tourism, creative industries, and local agro-biodiversity products (economic dimension; MDG 1); promoting environmental sustainability (environmental dimension; MDG 7); and mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment in all of their activities (social dimension; MDG 3). In addition, our results are compared with data and outcomes from Labadi's own research, which has examined the long-term impacts of other MDG-F heritage for development projects implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa (Namibia, Senegal, Mozambique, and Ethiopia) through desk-based research and extensive interviews with project participants (Labadi [Forthcoming](#)).

Each project was implemented by UNESCO together with several UN agencies (under the 'Delivering as One' framework) and other international organisations, national governments, NGOs, civil society, and other stakeholders (Evaluation Management Group 2012, 3). More specifically, in Egypt, the project 'The Dahshour WH Site Mobilisation for Community Development' (2009–2013) was implemented with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), the UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). The JP aimed to preserve the WH site of

Memphis and its necropolis together with the unique natural ecosystem of the Dahshour seasonal lake and palm grove (Birket Dahshour) and the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshour, as well as to promote community development and employment generation in the five surrounding villages. The JP ‘Cultural Heritage and Creative Industries as Vectors for Development in Morocco’ (2008–2012) was implemented with UNDP, UN Women, the UN Populations Fund (UNFPA), and UNIDO. The programme aimed to develop national strategic and legislative measures for the protection and enhancement of Moroccan heritage as well as the definition and implementation of local socio-economic development plans (LDPs) starting from cultural heritage and the creative industries in the Eastern Region (Taza-Al Hoceima-Toaunate, Souss-Massa-Draa, and Guelmin Smara) and a confluence zone formed by four Southern Oases. Finally, the project ‘Culture and Development in the OPT’ (2009–2012) was implemented with UNDP, UN Women, and the UN Food and Culture Organisation (FAO). The JP aimed to promote Palestinian cultural diversity as a means for inclusive economic growth and social development in the Northern West Bank and Gaza Strip, two rural and marginalised areas. Moreover, the programme supported the update and local operationalisation of a National Plan for the Palestinian Culture, closely linked with a major development reform recognising the importance of culture in the creation of a future Palestinian State (Beasca 2011, 13–14).

All of the JPs’ available official documents and evaluations – including the JPs’ documents explaining their goals and outputs; mid-term evaluations; final narrative reports (FNR); final evaluations (FE) and knowledge management documents prepared at the end to measure the results, identify best practices, criticalities, and lesson learned – were thematically analysed through a desk-based assessment. NVivo (a software for qualitative analyses) was used to organise, manage, and compare large amounts of information from multiple sources. Research data were coded and compared according to the main thematic subjects of study (poverty alleviation, gender equality, and environmental sustainability) and to more specific sub-themes that emerged during data interpretation and are discussed in the following section, namely: promotion of locally driven tourism; enhancement of heritage-based economic sectors; gender mainstreaming and political representation; women’s empowerment through IGAs; enhancement of environmental protection; and participation and awareness raising.

Heritage and poverty alleviation

Fostering locally driven tourism

As is often the case, heritage-based tourism was selected as a promising sector for economic development and poverty reduction. A vast literature exists on both the potential and the difficulties of using tourism (especially sustainable tourism or pro-poor tourism) for poverty alleviation (see Sofield et al. 2004, 4–8; Chok, Macbeth, and Warren 2007, 146; Meyer 2007; Hummel and van der Duim 2012, 331–2). What were the strategies developed for tourism development, and how have difficulties been considered in the selected projects? A number of concrete activities were implemented in all three selected countries. Probably the most comprehensive approach was rolled out in Egypt by UNWTO and the Ministry of Tourism (MoT). All the cultural and natural resources of Dahshour were mapped by type and market appeal, with the aim of transforming them into touristic products: a Spatial Tourism Plan was elaborated; two tourist circuits designed; marketing and promotional activities undertaken; and touristic excursions organised.

A key shortcoming of this strategy, however, was the focus on narrow end products, without consideration of the wider environment and infrastructures essential for tourists and locals alike. The mid-term evaluation did request a refocusing of the project on solid waste management and the provision of infrastructures, as suggested by both local communities and authorities. However, this refocus did not occur and there was no sign of commitment from the project’s involved organisations and other stakeholders to deliver some necessary infrastructures and services. While the

project contributed to drawing attention and governmental support to Dahshour, only the MoT demonstrated a political and financial commitment to building some of these infrastructures at the end of the project to ensure real changes for the region. These included three roads leading to Dahshour (already under construction at the end of the JP), and a visitor centre (*Dahshur WH Site Mobilisation* 2013, 11). Yet, in the final evaluation of the project it is clear that ‘without these infrastructures (roads, waste management system, etc.) tourism is not likely to prosper’ (Otero 2013, 34), highlighting the shortcomings of a project that focused mainly on heritage.

In addition, training, technical and financial assistance were provided to stimulate new business and self-employment in the tourism sector. Networks between trainees, tour operators, and the overall tourism market were supported to maximise projects’ impacts. In Egypt, 22 local guides were instructed and certified and a total of 3,000 people were trained in basic hospitality and horse cart driving. These training activities were well received by the beneficiaries. However, our analysis showed no evidence that these courses improved their socio-economic conditions. A fundamental issue was that these training components did not alter the ‘predominant business model designed to benefit big tour operators’ (Otero 2013, 3). For this reason, the new jobs created remained precarious and unstable. Moreover, the projects mostly focused on building touristic attractions, a necessary first step, but with no guarantee that tourists would want to come to Dahshour. Furthermore, training activities did not take account of the extreme volatility and complexity of the tourism sector, especially considering the complex geopolitical instability of the country. By relying only on tourism activities, the positive effects generated by the training activities were significantly impacted by the collapse of the tourism industry due to the 2011 revolution (Arab Spring) in Egypt and the more recent COVID-19 pandemic (Farrell and Twining-Ward 2005, 113; Sobaih et al. 2021, 1–2).

Data accessed revealed local communities’ reluctance to work in the tourism industry in the Dahshour region, especially after the 2011 revolution. The project disbursed 294 loans of up to 3,000 EGP to be used to develop projects on tourism or handicraft production. 85 micro/small and medium-size enterprises were created or improved in Egypt thanks to the financial scheme. However, there is no evidence that the businesses created within the microcredit scheme were developed in the field of tourism or handicraft production, nor that trainees took advantage of the microcredit scheme to develop their own businesses (Baltà Portolés 2013, 21; Otero 2013, 25). New activities were often developed informally and without the appropriate licences, thereby remaining precarious and fostering a ‘black economy’ (Zhao and Brent Ritchie 2007, 135; Otero 2013, 26). This reveals not only the lack of flexibility in the project’s priorities following the revolution, but also how distanced it was from the realities of local communities. Finally, the provision of microcredit, even if it has grown substantially as a poverty alleviation strategy, has not yet met expectations, and the evidence indicates largely inconclusive and contradictory results (Sayed Samer et al. 2017, 894–895). Further issues with loans are considered in the section on the empowerment of women below.

Enhancing heritage-based economic sectors

All the considered projects delivered training for beneficiaries to acquire more knowledge, skills, and competencies, and to stimulate job creation, self-employment, and entrepreneurship in heritage-based economic sectors. Training activities are a crucial factor in the success or failure of many development projects (Kroesen and Darson 2013). Training was found to be extensive rather than intensive. For instance, in Egypt, a total of 1,000 people were trained in handicraft and entrepreneurship (*Dahshur WH Site Mobilisation* 2013, 4). In addition, ILO delivered a training programme on project management, start-up businesses, and self-employment to over 300 people, and UNDP a comprehensive training on business development through the Social Fund for Development (Otero 2013, 20–21). The JP in Morocco benefitted 358 artisans, particularly those working in couscous making, weaving, and basketry (UNESCO 2012, 23). In the OPT, 90 women were trained on how to manage and market jewellery and clothes, and three groups of mostly unemployed young

designers (around 14 artists per group) were trained by international experts on innovative design from traditional handicrafts (Rajab 2013, 38). Following training, young designers were placed in local crafts shops and community-based organisations to get further hands-on experience in production techniques. Some trainees were hired to produce home appliances and lighting fixtures for a Guest House and Community Centre in Nablus, and 17 young designers were skilled up to produce furniture for another community centre in Gaza. The design quality attracted the attention of companies, NGOs, and international bodies, which appointed some of the trainees (Rajab 2013, 44). Other trainees were hired after their placement in selected companies and workshops, and 8 designers (5 women and 3 men) started their own business, 'Khan Designs', partnering with targeted organisations.

However, the JPs' efforts may be ultimately undermined without further implementation of business development, strong linkages to the market to commercialise the handicrafts, and, more generally, a supply of clients to buy these products (Otero 2011, 22). Cultural and creative industries are rarely self-sustaining or self-sufficient. They are strongly dependent on supportive cultural policies and a mix of social, economic, and political factors, which may present obstacles (Kaymas 2020, 73). The latter factor is particularly relevant for countries like Egypt and the OPT characterised by extremely fragile political contexts. Moreover, the success of the intervention was strictly dependent on the artisans' capacity to produce, market, manage, and distribute their cultural products in a very risky and taste-dependent business sector (De Beukelaer 2015, 82).

In both countries, the JPs facilitated products' commercialisation and access to markets by strengthening existing or introducing new economic networks. In Egypt, for instance, the Local Economic Development (LED) Forum was created to connect artisans with producers, designers, NGOs, trade fairs, and traders. Beneficial relations were also established with key external stakeholders. At the end of the JP, trainees were able to sell products with a value of 24,000 EGP (about 4,000 USD) and a small number of trading deals were signed with Egyptian traders in Cairo, enlarging the market and revenues of handicraft associations (*Dahshur WH Site Mobilisation* 2013, 6). In the OPT, young designers and artists were supported to increase their visibility and to commercialise their arts, crafts, and jewellery products at a worldwide level through the e-commerce portal 'Al Housh', the first cultural networking and e-commerce portal for contemporary art and design from the Arab world.

However, our research revealed that these different mechanisms and platforms were not durable and did not survive the end of the financial and administrative support provided during the projects. In OPT, the e-commerce portal 'Al Housh' played a fundamental role in raising the international visibility of artists and designers struggling to find a local and national market due to the increased fragmentation of the Palestinian territory (with the separation wall over the Palestinian land) and the fact that 60% of Palestinians live below the poverty line (Rajab 2013, 23). However, the 'Al Housh' portal is no longer active. In addition, the FNR for the project in Egypt clearly stresses that, although the LED fulfilled an important mission, it lacked legitimacy as it did not represent all stakeholders and did not have a budget or activities to support itself (Otero 2013, 26). It is clear from the final report that this mechanism was not going to survive the end of the project. Worse, in Morocco, it was found that the products developed were not of sufficiently high quality to thrive durably and that the strategy focused on product development, whilst business plans for the marketing and selling of the finished products did not reflect the reality on the ground, neglecting key questions such as when and how to sell them (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 39).

Finally, all the projects were very similar in their approach and did not really account for local characteristics, including the complex socio-economic and political situation of the OPT. The final evaluation for the project in Morocco details that the different activities were selected without the input of local communities (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 29). This has resulted in the discontinuation of training components that were not found relevant for development, as was the case for basketry in Morocco.

Heritage, gender equality and women's empowerment

Gender mainstreaming and political representation

Gender is a multifaceted concept, including not only men and women, but also queer, transgender, and non-gender identities (Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012). Nevertheless, the JPs considered gender through a heteronormative perspective, focusing only on the binary division between men and women, and targeting exclusively women. Many obstacles still impede women's full participation in public life and equal access to resources. These include inequities of social class, lack of education and of technical and professional training, political under-representation, limited access to financial resources, unequal division of labour and children's care, and domestic violence, amongst others (Tran and Walter 2014, 119). Traditional heritage customs and practices can support the perpetuation of these and other inequitable practices, being a threat to human rights (Logan 2012, 239–240) and the achievement of the SDGs.

The JPs aimed to foster gender equality and women's empowerment by mainstreaming gender issues in their activities, from design to monitoring and evaluation, particularly in context analyses and need assessments; institutional and capacity development; financial support; active participation in local development plans; and awareness-raising activities (Baltà Portolés 2013, 42). One clear strategy of all the considered JPs was to ensure better political representation of women and their concerns in different strategies and policies. In the OPT, a gender expert was hired by the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) to provide training for ministerial personnel and to carry out a gender gap analysis. This process increased governmental awareness and led the MoA to hire more women in high-level ministerial positions, as well as to integrate a gender dimension into the existing agricultural strategy, considered the most significant gap (Rajab 2013, 36, 40). However, despite the positive outcomes achieved, the FE highlights that gender equality was still not considered a relevant priority in many ministries (Rajab 2013, 47). In Egypt, women representatives from the Dahshour community were included as equal partners for discussion in the abovementioned LED Forum (*Dahshur WH Site Mobilisation* 2013, 13). However, only 25% of the board members were women, demonstrating that there was still a gender imbalance in leadership and in decision-making processes in this institution, despite attempts to change the situation. In addition, as already stressed, this forum was short term.

In Morocco, a gender perspective was incorporated into the elaboration of both national policies and the LDPs for six municipalities of the confluence zone. The LDPs were in line with a national strategy for socio-economic decentralisation and reinforcement of participatory governance and had a 6-year duration to ensure their sustainability over time (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 89). As part of this process, several participatory surveys targeted 140 women, and a decision-making tool called 'Gender Sensitive Budgeting' was used to assess the level of integration of gender issues and women's involvement in one LDP (*Le Patrimoine Culturel* 2012, 9). The results of this pilot process were presented in a guide to be shared with local partners so that they could replicate the model in 54 municipalities targeted by significant programmes for the social, economic, and territorial development of Southern Morocco and its Oasis (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 24). This process aimed to strengthen women's capacity in local governance and as active citizens and political actors (UNESCO 2012, 41). According to the FNR, women involved in the JP's implementation became more aware of their rights, international conventions and national policies adopted to support women rights, and gender equality (*Le Patrimoine Culturel* 2012, 20). This process was facilitated through training on women's leadership and human rights delivered by UN Women to 220 women to support gender-sensitive local governance. Both the FNR and UNESCO's own evaluation affirm that several Moroccan women, empowered by their participation in the elaboration of LDPs and in other JPs' activities, presented themselves at political elections in five of the municipalities affected by the JP, and 12 of them were elected in 2009 (*Le Patrimoine Culturel* 2012, 20; UNESCO 2012, 41). This is certainly a positive result; however, our analysis does not demonstrate a causal relationship nor provide convincing evidence showing that these

achievements were a direct consequence of the JP. Besides, whilst all the JPs made conscious efforts to ensure better political representation of women at both local and national levels, Labadi's ethnographic research on similar projects and efforts has revealed that better representation does not necessarily lead to an increased consideration of gender issues (Labadi [Forthcoming](#)).

Women's empowerment through IGAs

Empowerment is a critical and multidimensional component of development, especially in those initiatives that aim to address poverty and social exclusion in an integrated way (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 23; Kulb et al. 2016, 715–716). All the JPs considered here aimed to support women's empowerment and self-confidence through training, technical, and financial services to develop businesses in the fields of tourism, creative industries, and handicrafts. Considering that women in the targeted areas are unique custodians of knowledge and practices for traditional food processing, another strategy was to support the development of new IGAs using local traditions and agro-biodiversity products. This integrated approach to environmental sustainability, gender equality, and economic development was also needed to enhance women's role in the safeguarding, sustainable consumption, and inter-generational transmission of these agro-biodiversity products (Abdelali-Martini et al. 2008; Montanari and Bergh 2019b).

Education and vocational training are fundamental to enable women to develop new skills and improve their standard of living and that of their families (Ennaji 2008; Hilal 2012). In Morocco, for instance, the JP supported 284 women in developing IGAs in line with Green Morocco Plan, the main national agricultural strategy for 2008–2020 (Montanari and Bergh 2019a). It targeted 161 women in the field of food processing (couscous and dates) and 123 women in traditional handicrafts production (textile for carpets and nomad tents, embroidery, and basketry). Beneficiaries were also supported through training and capacity-building on administration, financial management, and product commercialisation, as well as through building construction and equipment provision in partnership with local councils (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 38).

These traditional productions were generally carried out individually at home, or in small formal or informal groups. JPs' training activities supported women to increase their capacity at all stages of product development and commercialisation and to expand their potential market. The JPs also supported the creation of networks, cooperatives, and Groups of Economic Interests (GIEs) to facilitate contacts among beneficiaries and other community members, better organise their activities, and multiply their actions in a coordinated manner. As a result, 14 IGAs were developed or supported in Morocco, and some of them were grouped into GIEs to facilitate their access to formal commercial markets. Several of these women's associations were connected to local and international markets to increase their product marketability, and funding was provided to cover the travel costs of attending regional and national fairs.

In addition to the shortcomings previously highlighted, our research revealed that the JPs were too ambitious in their scope and lacked a satisfactory context-sensitive approach to producing long-lasting results. Too much was expected of women, particularly the fact that they were expected to have been transformed from housewives or farmers into competent producers, managers, accountants, and salespersons, almost overnight (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 33). It was unrealistic to expect women to be able to perform all these different roles, which each require specific skills. Besides, whilst these are cultural projects, quite ironically, these projects did not take account of local and cultural circumstances, which suggest that they were externally imposed. Indeed, the patriarchal structures of these three countries often force women to prioritise their domestic work, rather than other training, professional, and remunerative activities.

Moreover, some of the activities developed increased women's responsibilities and their liabilities in some areas. This was the case, for instance, with some of the loans provided in Egypt. Women took the loans and thus took on the financial risks of opening a business. Some of these businesses, such as restaurants, were quite successful as a result of women and their children doing

the cooking and serving the clients. However, it was often not the women but their husbands who were the legal owners of the business. Furthermore, men often made decisions about how to use extra resources from the restaurant, due to their gendered role as the ‘driving force’ of business and the main provider for the family (Otero 2013, 25). Instead of becoming empowered, these women therefore ended up with increased responsibilities, work, and financial liabilities, without being able to challenge gender roles, family divisions of labour, and household power relations (Aboukhsaiwan 2014; Kurlanska 2019, 123–138).

Heritage and environmental sustainability

Enhancing environmental protection?

The JPs promoted an inter-sectoral and integrated approach to the development and implementation of legislative frameworks, assessment studies, plans, and guidelines for the protection and management of cultural and natural heritage. The joint nature of the JPs themselves, defined and implemented by UN agencies with different mandates, encouraged the implementation of integrated and coordinated strategies, sometimes being the first of this kind in these countries (Rajab 2013, 21). Considering the close interconnection between natural and cultural heritage and their communities, actions for environmental sustainability must adopt a holistic approach, encompassing not only ecological aspects, but also social, economic, and cultural dimensions (Keitumetse 2011; Pollock-Ellwand 2011). However, our analysis showed that the JPs mostly focused on the achievement of poverty alleviation, rather than gender equality and environmental sustainability, leading to the latter’s marginalisation (Beasca 2011, 15; Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 10; Baltà Portolés 2013, 29).

More specifically, in Morocco, the JP contributed to the revision of the national law for the conservation, protection, and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage in cooperation with the government. It also supported the development of a ‘National Charter for the Safeguarding of Cultural and Natural Heritage’, which defined heritage categories, legislative competences and partnerships, modalities for preservation, and the roles of different stakeholders. In the OPT, two conservation plans were developed and adopted for enhancing land use, landscape planning, and environmental impact assessments in Sebastiya, Arrabeh, and Yaabad (Rajab 2013, 37). Moreover, 40 plant species of the most culturally, environmentally, and economically important local crops and related traditional agricultural practices were inventoried, with training provided to support their preservation, and environmental sensitisation campaigns organised with FAO. However, the measures proposed were not all formally adopted by the relevant Ministries, decision-makers, and other stakeholders (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 33; Otero 2013, 33). In addition, no budget was allocated or planned and, similarly, no clear governmental mechanisms were established to ensure long-term stakeholder commitment and resource allocation for the implementation of these measures (Armitage et al. 2009, 101; Otero 2013, 19).

The most significant gap can be identified in Egypt, where the project failed to provide an official protection status to Birket Dahshour, the natural area surrounding the WH site. The lack of protected status and of adequate environmental management – together with the consequences of the Arab Spring revolution – compromised the ability of the programme to meet its expectations for tourism development. UNESCO did lobby for the incorporation of Birket Dahshour into the overall management of the WH site. Three environmental assessments were carried out to build robust arguments supporting the declaration of Birket Dahshour as a protected area, in addition to two studies developed to guide and tackle the environmental challenges of the area, such as solid waste and water management, complementing the Spatial Tourism Plan (Otero 2013, 11). However, our analysis shows that, at the end of the JP, there was no indication that future environmental strategies would be subsequently implemented by local stakeholders in accordance with these studies, nor that the UNESCO management plan would be practically

implemented. Moreover, the Ministry of Defence, which gained more power as a result of the revolution, opposed the declaration of the site as a protected area, and the lake was instead placed under the more flexible format of ‘environmentally managed area’. This less strict declaration allowed more flexible agricultural management, building permits, control of hunting activities, and biodiversity protection through the establishment of a committee to manage the new area. This approach was highly dependent on local decision-makers’ interests and contingent political will. The newly established committee was at an embryonic stage and the more flexible designation did not allow a proper legal, budgetary, and institutional support under the umbrella of the Ministry of Environment, like other protected areas in Egypt, which would have increased the sustainability of the project (Otero 2011, 22–3, 2013, 33). Finally, it is clear from the evaluations that what would really lead to the protection of the environment is not a protected status, but environmental management with sewage treatment, garbage collection, and public networks of potable water (Otero 2011, 11).

Participation and awareness raising

The JPs put a strong emphasis on the roles of local communities as key actors for making concrete steps towards environmental sustainability, given that it strongly relies on the interactions between people and nature, which are constantly evolving in interdependent and mutually reinforcing ways (Bandarin, Hosagrahar, and Albernaz 2011, 21). The JPs contributed to increased awareness among communities, civil society, private organisations, and public authorities on environmental sustainability, which can only be achieved if there is a proper understanding of the site’s ecological significance, skills development, and community participation (Keitumetse 2009, 238). Environmental and biodiversity sustainability depends in part on people’s values, beliefs, behaviours, consumption patterns, and practices for natural resource protection and management. In this context, education has an important role to play in progressively transforming people’s behaviour towards long-term sustainability (Abdelali-Martini et al. 2008, 371). For this reason, the Egyptian JP launched a considerable educational, training, and awareness programme on ecotourism, reaching out to 500 students, 300 citizens, and 10 governmental bodies, and creating a platform to stimulate the discussion at all levels on environmental issues. It also promoted a ‘Clean Up Campaign’ which aimed at raising awareness on solid waste management around the lake of Dahshour. Similarly, in the OPT, the JP promoted a two-week training on natural resource management, targeting 38 participants from schools, municipalities, and Ministries, and an environmental, agricultural, and cultural campaign carried out in 16 schools with the Ministry of Education.

The JPs certainly contributed to increased awareness on environmental issues and natural resource management. However, awareness-raising and education alone will not work unless they go hand in hand with states taking responsibility for environmental protection through the provision of services. The previous section has detailed the difficulties in establishing these services. Furthermore, meaningful participation at all levels in both environmental decision-making processes and cultural and natural heritage management should also occur (Keitumetse 2011, 51).

Our study shows that a bottom-up participatory process was carried out to support the revision of the Moroccan national law and the development of the National Charter, which involved a large consultation with institutions, stakeholders, and the general public. Even in this case, however, it is not clear if and to what extent local communities’ needs and opinions were taken into consideration by the Ministry of Culture in the definition of the Charter and its future implementation. Moreover, in Egypt, the lack of involvement of the two major stakeholders (Dahshour communities and local authorities) from the very beginning proved to be one of the most important pitfalls (Otero 2011, 10). In fact, the lack of involvement of the military could have contributed to the Ministry of Defence opposing the declaration of the site as a protected area.

Conclusions

This paper has provided a critical reflection on how cultural heritage was mobilised to foster sustainable development by three JPs implemented in MENA countries, identifying key achievements and common pitfalls. The analysis showed how harnessing cultural heritage supported all these international development projects in addressing the complexity and variety of global development challenges (i.e. poverty reduction, gender equality, and environmental sustainability) through the implementation of pioneering, integrated, and interdisciplinary approaches. However, it also showed how a revision of current practices is still needed to provide a more incisive contribution to sustainable development by harnessing the potential of cultural heritage.

The positive results achieved by these projects are well-highlighted in the official project narratives and the UNESCO evaluation of the MDG-F 'Culture and Development Thematic Window experience', which provide a remarkable amount of data, mainly quantitative, to demonstrate the JPs' ability to achieve their expected outcomes. A narrative of success was based on the number of people trained (including women), the number of jobs created, and the awareness-raising campaigns rolled out on gender rights and environmental sustainability. However, statistics and quantitative indicators were often inconsistent and lacked the ability to capture the multi-faceted complexity involved at the impact level (Bajeddi and Lahbil Tagemouati 2012, 18–21; Otero 2013, 17). Our analysis has interrogated the JPs' capacity to produce substantial, transformative, and long-lasting changes, particularly taking into consideration the challenging geo-political contexts of the countries where these projects were implemented (for instance the Arab Spring in Egypt), and the patriarchal nature of local cultures. Moreover, even if the provision of adequate infrastructures (e.g. tourism, waste disposal, garbage, etc.) and more binding tools for heritage protection (e.g. establishment of protected areas) were outside the area of the JPs' competence, this paper has revealed how these elements were essential for their practical effectiveness in addressing broad developmental issues.

Based on our research results, future heritage-based projects for international development would benefit from a greater sensitivity to context in the definition of projects' activities; a more flexible and continuous planning process, including project management strategies to anticipate possible risks and implement mitigation actions; the greater involvement of multi-level and multi-sectoral stakeholders at every stage of the process (from project design to monitoring) to increase national and local ownership; and wider stakeholders' political will and financial commitment in the long-term implementation of projects' strategies. Moreover, future research could also provide additional insights not only on how cultural heritage can be effectively mobilised to address global developmental challenges outside the scope of this research (e.g. adaptation to climate change or fostering global health and wellbeing), but also on how heritage can constitute a barrier to sustainable development.

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