

Local Development through Cultural Heritage Preservation in Palestine



By Mohammad Abuhammad

Since 2011, Palestinian national development frameworks have emphasized the need to foster local development through effective mechanisms that include strengthening local governance and ensuring proper financing. At the time when Palestinian national authorities were excavating the potentials inherent in the specificities of each locality, however, an important objective was achieved on the local level through key actors working in cultural heritage preservation. These actors had managed, after years of continuous work, to pave the way for the utilization of cultural heritage preservation as a catalyst for development in Palestine; they benefitted from cultural heritage's intrinsic potentialities that can establish multiplicities of ties within their environment. In fact, rehabilitation and revitalization interventions on single historic buildings, sites, and landscapes reveal the intertwined nature of built cultural heritage and demonstrate the importance of placing such interconnectedness at the core of local development initiatives. This article will shed some light on an interesting experience in this regard that has unified the efforts of local and international organizations working in the field of cultural heritage preservation in Palestine. These efforts are led by UNESCO's Ramallah Office, and considerable accomplishments have been realized.

In May 2012, the Government of Sweden – through the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) – and UNESCO, signed an agreement to enable the effective implementation of a project titled International Local Development through the Rehabilitation and Revitalization of the Historic Built Environment in Palestine, with the overall objective to improve the quality of life for Palestinian marginalized communities and to foster their social and economic development through the revival of their historic built environment. The project has involved the four main cultural-heritage organizations

Local development theory looks to identify and utilize the available resources and endogenous potentialities of a given territory that can be a community, city, or rural locality. Since economic and non-economic determinants affect local development, and as diverse non-economic determinants include social, institutional and cultural factors, their skillful utilization can be decisive in achieving a successful local development process.



Azh-Zhahiriyya, Hebron. Photo courtesy of RIWAQ Photo Archive.

(CHOs) in Palestine: RIWAQ Centre for Architectural Conservation, the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) in Bethlehem, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC), and the Old City of Jerusalem Revitalization Programme (OCJRP). The project in its essence is a continuation of a previous program that Sida had funded in Palestine for several years; however, the new project came with the spirit of enforcing joint discussions and interactions among the involved partners for the sake of deeper coordination and cooperation towards affecting positive developmental change.

The project's point of departure has been the utilization of heritage preservation for sustainable use and

for the management of change in a cultural heritage environment. The notion of preservation of heritage has extended beyond limited physical interventions towards integration with the surrounding environment, including the requirements of development processes. Cultural heritage, as a significant constituent of the built environment, allows for such integration, since the built environment at the local level is among the assets most in need of urgent interventions. In addition, cultural built heritage is the rightful cradle and medium for the traditional cultural and creative industries, located mainly in historic urban centers, such as the production of glass, ceramics, pottery, and mother-of-pearl artefacts, in addition to numerous types of food processing industries. Interventions



Taybeh kids event. Photo courtesy of RIWAQ Photo Archive.

constituting heritage preservation in such a context originate from a people-centered approach, create quality public spaces and amenities, and provide social services – all for the well-being of community groups and individuals.

During its five years of implementation, the project has rehabilitated 50 sites in Palestinian cities and rural localities, including Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. These 50 sites have been adapted to serve as facilities to be utilized by civil society organizations, municipalities and village councils. The social services provided at these sites include kindergartens, youth and women centers, libraries, museums, and community centers. The local communities benefit from each intervention at least throughout the site's leasing period, which usually reaches up to 12 or 15 years, as determined in the project framework based on the respective agreement with the owner/s in exchange for rehabilitation costs. The organizations using the rehabilitated sites are furthermore contributing financially or in kind to prove ownership and dedication. These organizations participate in the design process of the interventions in order to adapt the interior and exterior spaces to their needs, while respecting the standard specifications of working in valuable cultural heritage assets.

On a micro-economic level, the project generated 80,000 working days over five years, providing temporary job opportunities in each area where the project intervened. Contactors who receive technical guidance are asked to depend on the local market

when obtaining materials, services, and manpower. Besides making an economic contribution through physical rehabilitation works, the project provides proper and safe access to cultural heritage sites that are located mostly in the hearts of Palestinian cities and villages and displayed derelict and decaying conditions prior to renovation. Access to preserved heritage sites allows the public to appreciate their heritage through the revitalization of a virtual scene that depicts the life of ancestors and illustrates the way they mingled with their spaces. It creates a special image for each site that conveys a message of awareness to both youth and elderly, stressing that heritage is invaluable and that the contemporary environment will look more diverse and beautiful if heritage sites remain protected within.

RIWAQ Centre for Architectural Conservation, the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation (CCHP) in Bethlehem, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee (HRC), and the Old City of Jerusalem Revitalization Programme (OCJRP) have joined forces with UNESCO to rehabilitate 50 historic sites in a project titled International Local Development through the Rehabilitation and Revitalization of the Historic Built Environment in Palestine.

Hebron. Photo by Palestine Image Bank.





Photo by Steve Sabella, courtesy of the Old City of Jerusalem Revitalization Programme (OCJRP).

To ensure the transmission of the proper know-how in cultural heritage preservation according to recognized standards, the project ensures technical training for young professionals. On-job training is used as part of a continuous learning process and aims to lead to a wider interest in heritage and its potential among the younger generation. During such training, focus is placed on cultural heritage preservation as both an economic and an environmental process. The physical interventions applied during rehabilitation enhance the quality of urban historic spaces and leave nearly zero environmental threats, especially when compared to the impacts of new constructions. The level of intervention and the type of materials used are environmentally effective.

The benefits of heritage preservation to local development are multifaceted. Ensuring the

sustainability of these benefits is as challenging as recognizing the role of cultural heritage as a driver and engine for development; issues that need to be addressed at local and national levels. The continuous use of heritage sites for housing or for community services, and the use of spaces in historic centers while associating them with artistic and public activities are important management tools that can help create and preserve living cultural heritage sites.

Through physical interventions and service provision, cultural heritage preservation can be seen as a facilitator of local economic development. It can furthermore be considered a contributor to the individual and collective well-being of a society, as it produces high quality spaces and strengthens ties and relationships with the sites' surroundings. To ensure comprehensive sustainable development at the local level, cultural heritage preservation in Palestine should be made a high priority within the development agenda. The wealth of possibilities that heritage and culture present implies the need to look back in time in order to assess and rethink the development approaches that are currently pursued, in order to recognize what treasures our society owns and how to it should be maintained.

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¹ Roberta Capello, "Location, Regional Growth and Local Development Theories," *AESTIMUM*, no. 58 (2011): 1-25, available at <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/ceset/article/view/9559>.

² Palestinian National Authority, *National Development Plan 2011-13: Establishing the State, Building our Future*, available at <http://www.apis.ps/up/1332062906.pdf>; State of Palestine, *National Development Plan 2014-16: State Building to Sovereignty*, available at http://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/palestine_ndp_state_final.pdf; State of Palestine, *National Policy Agenda 2017-22: Putting Citizens First*, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/npa_english_final_approved_20_2_2017_printed.pdf.



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