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The Cultural Heritage and Reinvigoration of Socio-Economic Activities in Timbuktu

CONTEXT

Home to 54,453 residents the City of Timbuktu covers an area of 21Km² and it has been listed as a UNESCO world heritage site since 1988. The city was an important intellectual and spiritual capital as well as a centre for the propagation of Islam in the African continent during the 15th and 16th centuries and some of its standing monuments still recall this golden period. Timbuktu has been for these reasons always an important meeting point and cultural and historical crossroads for the exchange of products and cultures from the Mediterranean and the South Sahara; its heritage is charged with history.

However, from May 2012 to January 2013 Timbuktu was occupied by armed rebels. During this period a massive displacement of the local communities towards the south of Mali and its neighbouring countries took place and municipal services and decentralised administrations were pillaged and ceased to function. As a result, the area's socio-economic fabric completely collapsed, accentuating an already spread poverty. This resulted in the State of Mali asking for aid from the international community through UNESCO.

The cultural and tourist sectors were particularly affected. The occupation caused significant

damage to cultural heritage, practices, and expressions: population displacement; destruction of innumerable historical monuments, memorial sites and ancient manuscripts; intense pillaging of archaeological sites and museums; and prohibition and weakening of cultural practices and traditions. In Timbuktu 14 of the 16 mausoleums on the World Heritage List were destroyed together with the El Farouk independence monument. The door of the Sidi Yahia mosque, considered sacred by local residents, was torn down and 4,203 manuscripts in the Ahmed Baba Institute for Islamic Graduate Studies and Research (l'Institut des Hautes Études et de Recherches Islamiques Ahmed Baba (IHERI-AB)) were burned.

"The Cultural Heritage and Reinvigoration of Socio-Economic Activities in Timbuktu" project emerged out of this context and it ran from March 2014 to February 2016. It was supported by the International Association of French-speaking Mayors (l'Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (AIMF)) and the City Hall in partnership with the National Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Direction nationale du patrimoine culturel (DNPC)), having been carried out in conjunction with the UNESCO office of Bamako.

The project was run as a partnership and demonstrated how indispensable cooperation between the local community and State services is for the implementation of sustainable development projects.

GOALS, CHALLENGES AND PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

The main objective was the rehabilitation of the cultural heritage and tourist sectors and the revitalization of crafts (which employs two thirds of the population) in order to counter-balance the social and economic effects of the occupation. More precisely, it attempted to achieve this by renovating damaged houses, creating an arts and crafts map, reinforcing the social fabric and civic participation, providing specific training for different groups, and finally, by strengthening the institutional and operational capacities of the local government in terms of conservation and management of cultural heritage. A mission leader from the DNPC was recruited to work alongside the city council and supervise the project. A supporting study on the feasibility of revitalising the socio-economic fabric was conducted in April 2014.

The project had a positive transversal effect, largely due to the approach used that went well beyond a simple heritage renovation project. It tackled from its outset a wide group of factors that only through a multi-approach and cooperation model could restore and heal the negative impact of the occupation for the city's heritage, but most importantly, to its local population.

It gave the local government the opportunity to work with a significant group of public and private stakeholders in cultural heritage. These stakeholders, like the masons' guild, the federation of the chamber of skilled trades, artisans and the local union of artisans, were crucial and played a central role in the project's implementation. Citizens were brought into the project through actions aiming at the increase of awareness and access to information about the project and its wider context and development objectives. Several discussion meetings were organised that involved the participation of families, district managers, the



masons' guild and cultural associations. A great example of the cooperation in place is the fact that residents took part in the committee that identified and selected the 30 old houses that were renovated and aimed to provide accommodation to vulnerable families.

Some activities were implemented with participants from schools, radio stations, the public reading programme and the Regional Reading Assistance for Development Cell (Cellule Régionale d'Appui à la Lecture pour le Développement (CERALD)).

The traditional houses were renovated with sustainable materials through construction techniques that represent the local identity, supporting in this way, heritage-related activity sectors and income generation for the population. Artisans were supported through the strengthening of their material conditions (repair of equipment, materials and tools), setting up working capital to help build a stock of basic supplies, the creation of a training centre, and support for artisans in breaking into international markets and trade fairs.

The local government employees improved their ability for mobilising financial resources, using computers, and managing cultural heritage through specific training organized at local level. Training

and learning opportunities for senior staff also took place at an international level.

Even with all of this organised effort, the challenges found on the ground were many, the first major obstacle being the almost complete absence of financial resources available to the local community, making it necessary to reach out to international financial partners. The lack of specialised personnel was also felt at different stages of the project, which led to placing emphasis on training at different levels and specific recruitment of key professionals like a cultural agent thanks to financial backing from the AIMF. Although the occupation of Timbuktu has ceased, the geo-political and economic instability in the region has persisted, meaning that even the access to materials and their transportation represented a major challenge.

For all of these reasons, the link created between the built heritage, the development of know-how and of traditional construction techniques helped to unite residents around participatory initiatives for the re-appropriation of their living spaces and their cultural expressions. International cooperation strengthened local organisational abilities in terms of cultural resources. The attention given to young people and to communication favoured intergenerational dialogue, and thus created the conditions to allow the results and investments to last for a long time.

The project also offered the City of Timbuktu the opportunity to foment and strengthen cultural exchanges at local level through the actions carried out in cooperation with the adjacent municipality of Alafia and at national level through the Mali Network of Municipalities (AMM). International cooperation focused on educational trips and short-duration training sessions on the preservation of cultural heritage was also established with the municipalities of Saintes (France), Tempe (Arizona, United States) and Marrakech (Morocco).


IMPACTS

In Timbuktu's current situation, after suffering the damaging effects of the crisis caused by the conflict, culture remains the method of resilience and rebuilding that allows residents to develop



new strategies for survival and harmonious and sustainable cohabitation. The regeneration of the social fabric and healing of cultural bonds and traditions have been at the heart of this project.

Not only urgent measures and actions were put into place to minimise some of the damage inflicted by the occupation, the project has contributed to the improvement of a range of skills among the different involved groups – knowledge and skills of former masons were shared and passed on to young masons in the guild; the local government employees gained valuable cultural management skills; and artisans were empowered by better and more coordinated support efforts. This has meant that the project implementation has widely contributed to the creation of more jobs for the community. During its implementation, the project directly and indirectly helped to create over 100 jobs. Through a cultural and transversal approach, the project for the renovation of built heritage has worked in alleviating the highly precarious situation in which certain families found themselves following the crisis, specially those run by women in need and widows who owned their homes.



The dialogue with the different involved stakeholders and the quarterly activity reports indicate the advantages and difficulties of the project: from the number of houses renovated to the benefit of families in need, the number of studies carried out on the impact of the crisis, the number of promotion initiatives carried out, and the number of jobs created. The reports have therefore highlighted the renovation of 32 houses instead of the 20 initially planned, the completion of the two studies devoted to the impact of the crisis (one relating to the economic impact and the other to ancient architecture) and a map of Timbuktu's artisans.

Looking forward and based on the already mentioned outcomes, learning, investment and efforts made throughout the project, the local government plans to boost the local economy through the cultural industries related with heritage. Indeed, Timbuktu houses many ancient manuscripts that could inspire a branch of income-generating economic activities, as has already happened in the past. Since the 18th century, there has been a local dynamic book industry with an economy that gave birth to the professions of calligrapher, scribe and binder for the ancient manuscripts, creating jobs for young people. The manufacture of archive boxes and catalogues is also a very old practice, which creates further employment.

Nonetheless, international efforts remain in place so further funds can be canalized through UNESCO and the World Bank aiming at consolidating the relationships between the various activities and projects currently underway in Timbuktu. This project has demonstrated the importance, need and value for the city of having in place a long-lasting action plan and cultural policy for the support of arts and professions related to cultural heritage.

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