In Focus  Sustainable cities

Culture: Key to the sustainability of cities

Francesco Bandarin
Assistant Director-General
Culture Sector
UNESCO

The historic center of Salvador de Bahia (Brazil) was almost completely abandoned by the local residents because of the exclusively touristic use of the area.
In October 2016, the United Nations together with heads of states, ministers, mayors from around the world and the international development community will gather at the Third United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) in Quito, Ecuador to adopt the New Urban Agenda for the forthcoming twenty years. Decision-makers will aim to create an action-oriented roadmap for implementation at the regional, national, sub-national and local levels, reflecting UNESCO’s commitment to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

This is the setting UNESCO has chosen to launch the first Global Report on Culture and Sustainable Urban Development, which analyses the role of culture and the main trends, challenges and opportunities of urban development, based on a global survey. Drawing on research and data provided by partner institutions across the world, and supplemented by contributions from international experts and UNESCO’s longstanding experience, the Global Report will provide recommendations to support policy design and operational strategies.

In recent decades, the urban context has progressively taken a more central position in UNESCO’s work in the field of culture, notably through its six culture conventions on tangible and intangible heritage, the diversity of cultural expressions and creative industries, and the illicit trafficking of cultural goods. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention is a case in point. Historic urban areas present some of the most complex and challenging conservation issues, demonstrated in the more than 300 historic urban properties currently inscribed on the World Heritage List. This figure continues to increase, pointing to not only the growing value of urban heritage as a prime cultural, social and economic asset, but also the commitment of UNESCO Member States to conserving these areas for future generations.

The rationale of the Global Report culminates a process of reflection, commitment and operational work by the Organization, which has come to fruition through the UNESCO Culture and Sustainable Urban Development Initiative, launched following the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. This watershed agenda ensured, for the first time, the recognition of the inherent added value of culture within the framework of universally applicable development goals. Culture in all its dimensions, from cultural heritage to creativity, is closely linked to many of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to poverty reduction, sustainable cities, environmental sustainability, education, inclusive societies, gender equality and health. However, the role of culture is particularly salient within Goal 11 to ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’, which dedicates Target 11.4 to: ‘Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage’.

At the same time, the Global Report has come into being in a world faced with several exponential challenges. Cities and human settlements are not immune from broader national, regional and global transformations that, moreover, are increasingly being shouldered and addressed at local level. These transformations have called on a paradigm shift that requires new perspectives to respond effectively to these challenges, as well as build on the opportunities it bestows.

**Cities at a crossroads: unprecedented challenges**

The past century was marked by unprecedented rates of population growth. In 1900, only 15 per cent of the world’s population lived in cities. Today, more than 50 per cent does. Based on current trends, urbanization will only increase in scale and speed, particularly in the regions of Africa and Asia that are set to be 54 and 64 per cent urban by 2050, while the world is projected to have 41 mega-cities by 2030, each home to at least 10 million inhabitants. Massive and rapid urbanization can often exacerbate or proliferate challenges for cities, ranging from informal housing and inequitable access to public spaces, services, infrastructure, employment and sanitation, to social inequalities, discrimination and violence, as well as environmental issues.

Migration flows, within and between countries, present a variety of challenges for urban development and, at the same time, offer substantial opportunities to build on the capacity of migrants to contribute to urban life, economically, socially and culturally. The safeguarding and promotion of cultural diversity, including the cultural heritage and creative and cultural expressions of the receiving cities and of the migrants themselves, is thus becoming a key tool for social inclusion in cities.

Globally, the widespread growth of cities has resulted in the deterioration of the urban environment, and an increase in poverty and the number of people living in slums with limited access to public services and infrastructure. In addition to weakening cultural resources, recent urbanization patterns have not only eroded local ecologies and depleted natural resources, but have also limited access to cultural infrastructure, institutions and spaces.

While urban inequalities and social tensions have intensified as gaps between rich and poor have widened, intra-state conflicts that target cities as their battlegrounds have also significantly risen. Historic centres, often being the heart of
Culture – if integrated into urban strategies – places people at the core of urban development and leads stakeholders towards a path of sustainability.

The rehabilitation of Humayun’s Tomb (India) was made possible by local cultural entrepreneurship, supported by integrated municipal development policies.
Several changes have occurred over time to the port and monuments of Cartagena (Colombia) and its surroundings, especially related to development and increasing tourism.
cities, can become the front line of wars where urban heritage can be the target of deliberate destruction to obliterate the identity of individuals and groups. As a result of deliberate attacks, damage to – and loss of – culture can deprive a city of its source of strength and unity, heightening its vulnerability and spurring violence. Together with the enhanced vulnerability of cities to natural hazards and disasters, each and all represent a particular, contemporary threat to culture.

Facilitated by the development of ICTs, rapid urbanization has also been accompanied by globalization, which has often favoured a process of homogenization and standardization that threatens cultural diversity and the safeguarding of traditional knowledge and practices, creating the risk that distinct, local identities will be lost. Changes in the physical fabric of urban environments can often directly affect intangible cultural heritage practices; safeguarding cultural spaces and places for the performance of intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts is therefore an issue of key importance.

Challenges to the authenticity of cultural heritage and practices can be exacerbated by the impact of uncontrolled tourism, particularly in historic centres, which can result in the exclusion of vulnerable populations. Today, the World Heritage property Salvador de Bahia (Brazil) is working to recover its historic centre from exclusively touristic use, resulting from rehabilitation strategies in the 1990s that placed a heavy focus on tourism to the detriment of the historic centre’s residential and community functions. The historic centre was almost completely abandoned, with local residents displaced to the city peripheries, thus depriving the historic centre of its living culture and depressing local industry. A delicate balance is also needed regarding gentrification processes in historic centres, which can risk driving out local inhabitants by tailoring the use of urban spaces purely to economic benefits. In the case of the World Heritage property Historic Centre of Macau (Macao SAR, People’s Republic of China), gentrification has brought about the relocation of inhabitants, local commerce and street vendors to other areas of the city as they can no longer keep up with rising rental costs in the historic centre.

Culture at the core of sustainable urban development

A pragmatic response is necessary to overcome the unprecedented challenges of our time. Such a pragmatic response will need to closely involve all levels of governance and build on the capacities of local authorities, as their role has been increasingly key in addressing challenges posed by poverty in all its forms, inequalities, environmental concerns, urban sprawl, the loss of authenticity of historic neighbourhoods, and homogenization.

As we have seen in the rehabilitation of Humayun’s Tomb and its surrounds in Old Delhi (India) led by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC), or in Ségou (Mali) where local cultural entrepreneurship has been supported by integrated municipal development policies for broader societal benefits, culture is a transversal thread, which runs through the economic, social and environmental dimensions of the urban fabric. Historically, it has been a driving force behind urban development. As a wellspring of identity, expression, memory, creativity and interaction, culture – if integrated into urban strategies – places people at the core of urban development and leads stakeholders towards a path of sustainability.

Culture-based strategies can encourage the development of compact cities, and help reduce urban sprawl and the emergence of slums. Compact cities are characterized by their dense and proximate urban development patterns, and maintain essential connectivity through public transport systems, ensuring accessibility to urban services. As such, dense, compact cities mitigate their impact on the environment, nourish the economy by increasing the efficiency of infrastructure investment, reduce carbon footprint, and improve citizen access to services and jobs. In Mumbai, India the designation of the Kala Ghoda arts precinct and the restoration of its historic buildings has served to give Kala Ghoda a unique identity in a city of more than 18 million people where public space is at a premium. Today, the highly-walkable Kala Ghoda is enjoyed by tourists and residents alike. Underpinning a green growth perspective, Copenhagen’s integrated transport and land-use strategy has transformed the Danish capital from a congested and polluted metropolis into a network of dense, walkable urban centres connected by rail-based public transport.

Ensuring quality public spaces and promoting cultural activities and infrastructure, especially in marginalized urban areas, can bridge social gaps, enhance cohesion and reduce urban violence. Paired with investment in urban services such as transportation, public spaces – including parks, squares and markets – render culture accessible for all and encourage sustainability. Public spaces provide opportunities for inclusion, dialogue and exchange, serving as a common platform by which all citizens can develop links with each other and with their city, thus strengthening their sense of community. In a similar vein, cultural centres act as unifying hubs and sources of resilience. For example, the construction of the library park Biblioteca de España in Medellín, Colombia has allowed the city to regenerate its urban pattern and reduce social inequalities in areas that used to be plagued by urban violence and drug trafficking. With a metro line connecting the city centre to low-income areas, the library park has brought together diverse communities, endowing populations that were once denied access to quality public
and cultural services with a renewed sense of dignity and belonging. From 1991 to 2010, Medellín’s homicide rate dropped by 80%, showing that culture-based strategies as part of broader municipal policies can have substantial and sustained impact.

The adaptive reuse of built cultural heritage is an efficient response simultaneously permitting the safeguarding of cultural heritage and ensuring the continuity of a community’s history and identity. The rehabilitation of built heritage and the development of energy efficient vernacular heritage modules for housing and public buildings can yield economic benefits for the city, boosting the vitality of social life and enhancing existing urban resources to save energy. The citizen-led rehabilitation project of ‘Soho Málaga-Barrio de las Artes’ in the Ensanche Heredia neighbourhood of Malaga, Spain, which transformed a degraded area adjacent to the port – once a mainstay of prostitution and violence – into a bustling cultural district, is a prime example of the importance of community empowerment and the involvement of artists and culture professionals in conservation efforts. Setting forth a unique city model, the initiative aimed to promote culture, creativity and sustainability to improve the livelihoods of Malaga’s citizens. Municipally funded, with the support of the European Union, Soho Málaga has so far succeeded in recovering abandoned historic buildings, creating and improving public spaces, generating employment and strengthening social cohesion, thereby attracting both tourists and citizens to this new creative incubator. Turning to Latin America, the Conservation Plan for the Historic Centre of Cartagena in Colombia provides flexible regulations for the adaptation of heritage buildings that support economic use while conserving the cultural attributes of the urban setting.

Culture versus poverty and conflict

Evidence shows that culture can help alleviate both the social and economic aspects of poverty. For instance, heritage conservation in historic areas that includes pro-poor housing frameworks, innovative public-private partnerships, and microcredit-based support for economic activities or community maintenance of vernacular heritage brings numerous advantages to cities; it improves living standards, generates revenue and creates employment. Community-led development based on inclusive participation of women and youth, and focused on poverty alleviation and micro-financing, can increase the value of historic urban regions. These mechanisms can help those with limited or no access to traditional funding structures and facilitate inclusion and benefit-sharing of lower income segments of society. In Bangladesh, the non-governmental organization BRAC, for example, has taken on micro-financing as part of a holistic approach to development. Such financing works to improve livelihoods and support income-generating activities for the urban poor, while enabling them access to a range of social services such as education, health and legal advice. Similarly, in Quito, Ecuador the quality of life of city dwellers in the historic centre has been markedly improved through initiatives founded on cooperation at all governance levels coupled with stimulating partnerships between private property owners, foundations and charitable institutions.

Culture also has the power to drive change and nurture sustainable production and consumption patterns, while the promotion and protection of cultural diversity is conducive to innovation, creativity and economic growth. Culture-based regeneration projects that take into account local needs and traditional knowledge can support vulnerable populations, particularly women and youth, notably in the cultural and creative industries. Craft, as the long-standing economic backbone of the World Heritage property Medina of Fez (Morocco) is an essential element of its historic urban landscape. To address its safeguarding, government-led policies have supported the development of the sector through rehabilitating several fondouks (caravanserais), reviving and strengthening traditional craft techniques, and promoting environmentally sound production methods. In Baku, Azerbaijan the Government of Azerbaijan has recently extended the training and research activities of its State Museum of Azerbaijani Carpets and Applied Folk Arts to further strengthen Azeri carpet-making, a predominantly women-led practice that is a source of pride amongst Azerbaijanis.

Likewise, indigenous practices and local knowledge can foster environmental sustainability and lay the foundations for resilience. This is demonstrated by UNESCO’s work in Ecuador to safeguard the customs of the Shuar people and their conservation-species seedbeds through the revitalization of agricultural biodiversity. The active participation of Shuar people in preserving traditions through the creation of work parties focused on transmitting knowledge by enhancing dialogue with elders provides a clear example of the positive impact of traditional knowledge and local practices on environmental protection. As a result, participating families have been empowered from both a cultural and economic perspective, and the biodiversity safeguarding skills of young people considerably strengthened.

Culture, in all its forms, is an anchor for...
The Medina of Fez transmits a life style, skills and a culture that persist and are renewed despite the diverse effects of the evolving modern societies.

©Peter Coffin
In Focus  Sustainable cities

Hoi An (Viet Nam) receives over 1.5 million tourists a year.
identity, belonging and social cohesion. In conflict and post-conflict situations, following the destruction of invaluable sites such as Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra (Iraq) and the ancient mausoleums of Timbuktu (Mali), reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts have demonstrated compelling evidence of the power of culture to restore social cohesion and improve livelihoods, while paving the way for dialogue and reconciliation. In Timbuktu, the local community has been deeply involved in heritage restoration initiatives, as key beneficiaries of the social, historical and economic wealth of cultural heritage. The reconstruction of mausoleums and libraries has helped generate employment, raise awareness on the value of culture, testifying to its capacity to transcend all borders, and strengthen monitoring of sites and resilience for the future. The safeguarding of cultural heritage should be considered as a humanitarian and peace-building imperative; no sustainable peace or development is possible without it.

Developing an integrated approach

Historic cities and districts can also drive urban development through sustainable tourism, employment and local investment. In their uniqueness as functionally- and socially-mixed centres, however, they can fall victim to the impact of mass tourism, large-scale planned developments and informal settlements, risking the loss of their distinctive character and residential nature. If not adequately planned or managed, tourism can be detrimental to local communities, undermining traditional livelihoods and practices, and heightening commodification. Yet a sustainable approach to cultural tourism can indeed foster social change and revive the living heritage of a city. In the space of the past fifteen years, the World Heritage property Hoi An (Viet Nam) has witnessed tourism to the small city surge almost tenfold to over 1.5 million visitors a year. The reinvestment of the economic benefits of tourism into heritage conservation and community development has demonstrated ways in which cultural heritage safeguarding can contribute to sustainable development. Policies introduced by the Strategic Policy for Tourism in Hoi An as part of the country’s Master Plan on tourism development stipulate that 75 per cent of revenue generated by the sale of visitor entry tickets be reinvested into heritage conservation. Local communities are the main actors in sustainable tourism services, and municipal data over the past decade demonstrates a reduced number of poor and low-income households in Hoi An, together with improved living conditions and infrastructure. Such examples testify to the integral value of culture for local communities through generating employment, ensuring dignity and improving living standards.

In 2011, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the landmark Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), which calls for an integrated approach to cultural heritage conservation for sustainable urban development, reaching beyond traditional efforts that limit conservation to the monuments and physical elements of historic centres. The city of Ballarat (Australia) is a pioneer example in the implementation of the HUL pilot programme, through the promotion of civic engagement and the introduction of regulatory systems, financial tools and a mapping tool on the Historic Urban Landscape. Building on the HUL approach, examples around the world now clearly call for integrated policies and practices of conservation of the built environment within the wider international goals of urban development, while respecting creativity and intangible cultural heritage as a key resource for sustainable development.

Towards Habitat III and beyond: Ways forward for culture and sustainable urban development

Looking forward, sustainable urban development must be addressed through holistic approaches that integrate culture at the policy and operational levels, in order to avoid working in silos and to break away from a one-size-fits-all perspective. Based on its mandate and its unique set of international conventions to ensure the safeguarding and promotion of all forms of culture at the national and international levels, UNESCO is fully committed to promoting and implementing culture as a driver of sustainable urban development. In this regard, the Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development will mark an important step in UNESCO’s commitment to place people at the centre of urban development and instil culture as a vehicle for sustainability for all cities.