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KEEP ON: Effective policies for durable and self-sustainable projects in the cultural heritage sector

How can cultural heritage be made durable and sustainable? Although the largest share of cultural budgets in most countries is spent on heritage, and despite the fact that a number of European Union programmes cover heritage, thus providing substantial funds, this does not necessarily ensure the sustainability of heritage assets. Many cultural institutions still have difficulty covering even basic maintenance costs. This issue is of great importance to the whole EU area, in which the recent economic downturn and COVID-19 pandemic crisis have put cultural heritage lower on the priority list.

The concept of sustainability is complex and does not necessarily relate to funding; nor does funding necessarily ensure sustainability. It largely depends on the modality of heritage asset management, local community involvement, environmental issues, safeguarding of heritage values, and so on. KEEP ON is an Interreg Europe project spanning from 2018 to 2023 and funded by ERDF. It aims to improve public policies in the cultural heritage sector in terms of delivering high-quality projects that allow the results to remain sustainable with reasonable public funding. It should have a long-lasting impact on regional development. The policies addressed and

improved by the project should bring to an end the shameful but customary approach to heritage sustainability: “When the project is over, everything is over.” Surprisingly, few cultural institutions are thinking explicitly about sustainability as yet. Sustainability planning needs to begin long before project implementation, and it should be carefully addressed by the funding authorities in their policy documents. On the other hand, it is also important to activate private resources apart from public sources of funding, especially against the backdrop of a sharp decline in public and private investments in many EU member states and the implications of globalization. The main questions addressed by the project are the following: When the public funding is over, how do institutions sustain their work for the future? How do they secure funds for their future operational costs? What impact do sustainable heritage projects have on broader aspects of society (economy, urban planning, community, etc.) and how can public policies support beneficiaries in keeping their projects self-sustainable? An EU-wide, interregional perspective is taken to find answers.

Partners from seven countries (Croatia, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland,

Portugal, and Spain) work on the project, addressing six policy instruments (three ERDF programmes and three regional/local strategies) through concrete action plans to be prepared. The countries involved are extremely rich in cultural heritage, but most of them also have the most vulnerable economies (i.e., Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece). They are accompanied by Poland as the largest EU cohesion policy beneficiary, the Netherlands with its cultural policy model with high involvement of local communities (which may have a strong impact on sustainability), and an advisory partner from Croatia. So far, experience gained within the partnership shows that there are substantial differences between the countries' approaches to heritage sustainability. For most countries, the greatest challenge still lies in securing sustainable cultural heritage funding, accompanied by insufficiently innovative knowledge of cultural heritage management. Some countries, on the other hand, have overcome those challenges; one of them is the Netherlands. There the sustainability of heritage funding is sought, for example, in adaptive reuse of cultural heritage assets, often aimed at wider markets. One of the challenges frequently addressed in the Netherlands is specifically related to religious heritage; due to the decreasing

number of religiously observant people, churches are finding new uses as concert halls, hotels and restaurants, educational centres, or student housing (Figure 1). This not only ensures steady funding, but also impacts the building's durability because it is in regular use. This also enhances control of moisture and all the other natural phenomena that may affect the building's longevity. Examples of such adaptive reuse of heritage assets may be inspirational for other countries but are sometimes very context-dependent. For example, in countries whose populations are closely tied to their religion, such practices may seem inappropriate.

Apart from specific practices, the Dutch experience may also be inspirational for other countries in terms of policy planning: heritage policies are usually long-term policies (spanning 20–30 years), reflecting sustainability, and are independent from political influence even when the ruling parties change. On the other hand, the greatest challenge the Dutch face is environmental and ecological sustainability. Rising carbon emissions have made a big impact on the water levels in many Dutch cities. This also represents a direct threat to heritage and is a serious challenge in the long term. This is why public policies often focus on decreasing carbon emissions and energy consumption, using resistant materials and insulation in heritage restoration, and the use of renewable energy sources. These issues are not addressed only by cultural policy but rather involve a holistic approach with contributions from urban planning, education, industry, science, and so on. Special attention is also paid to raising public awareness. This, however, requires a long-term approach.

Examples from other countries also show interesting approaches. The Polish case of the Royal Castle in Chęciny is a good example of a cultural tourism boost, whereas the Portuguese Eco-Mu-



Figure 1: Mariënborg Convent: a former monastery complex in the Municipality of 's-Hertogenbosch (source: Internet 1).

seum of Flax in Ribeira de Pena (Figure 2) can be commended for its participatory approach to museum planning and management. As in the Dutch case, reuse of religious buildings, especially in rural areas, is also one of the urgent topics in Spain. The project to restore and reuse the old monastery in the Ribeira Sacra region (Figure 3) was an answer to the problem of creating a new use for this historic space. By restoring the historic monastery building for a hospitality function, turning it into hotel, the safeguarding of built heritage is ensured, the monastery has maintained its architectural value, and it has also now become a new driving force for the tourism development of the whole area. There are several main stakeholders involved, including Paradores de Turismo de España, a public, state-owned chain of Spanish luxury hotels in adapted castles, palaces, fortresses, convents, monasteries, and other historic buildings. This company invested funds in the monastery conservation, with additional funding provided by the Spanish Ministry of Culture and its General Directorate of Cultural Heritage.

The interregional learning approach adopted within the KEEP ON project

partnership may benefit the preparation of action plans, which are considered as interventions in policy instruments that address previously detected gaps in ensuring heritage sustainability. Once introduced, they should ensure that future projects funded under these instruments would justify the investments and result in durable and sustainable heritage projects.

The whole process is participatory in nature and involves stakeholders in each country that contribute with their knowledge and expertise. It started with a comprehensive summary of the relevant policy instruments, which served as a basis for the policy instruments and experiences benchmark exercise. Analysis of policy instruments from the six countries showed that cultural heritage is not always clearly identified as a priority, but there is an awareness of its developmental potential. This is why it is integrated into the respective development plans through some wider topics. Policy improvements, however, are needed in the sense of setting up clear and specific indicators that will show the funded projects' impacts on their local communities and regional development. If policy instruments fail

to measure their impacts according to previously set indicators, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the success of the intervention and to plan future development accordingly.

Cultural heritage managers were then surveyed in order to detect good practices in heritage sustainability. In addition, good practices already funded within the existing policy instruments were analysed and collected. The latest deliverable produced by the project is a practical guide on durability and sustainability of cultural heritage, which first detects challenges and threats to cultural heritage sustainability and then responds with “how-tos” in order to provide solutions to those challenges. The greatest challenges are seen in economic, environmental, sociocultural, and political pressures, but they also concern heritage values and heritage standardization. Heritage management challenges are specifically addressed, because good governance is a key factor in ensuring sustainability and durability of heritage projects and justifying the investments.

The work carried out thus far serves as a basis for preparing the action plans in each country. The final four semesters of the project are reserved for implementing and monitoring the action plans and, in this way, important feedback on the project results will be provided. The project should thus ensure better understanding of the importance of self-sustainability as a smart tool to ensure a long-lasting return on investment. Public policies can serve as catalysts in achieving improved durability and self-sustainability of heritage assets while also striving for excellence. Because good practices spread among policy makers, beneficiaries, and stakeholders, this should have impact on their increased capacities. In the end, better understanding and activation of private funding in cultural heritage projects could be ensured.



Figure 2: Museum of Flax in Ribeira de Pena (source: Internet 2).



Figure 3: Saint Stephen's Monastery in the Ribeira Sacra region (source: Internet 3).

The KEEP ON project intends to provide a valuable input to all EU stakeholders with a special focus on the forthcoming post-2020 cohesion policy. The new 2021–2027 EU Cohesion Policy sees the key role of cultural heritage in addressing social and economic challenges and has a strong focus on results in order to facilitate monitoring and measuring project outcomes and to introduce changes. The plan is to ensure a substantial budget increase for culture (17%), in which heritage is set as one of the priorities. Also, synergies be-

tween culture and education are advocated, which is an opportunity for remedying insufficient knowledge of cultural heritage management. Thus, the plan is to double the Erasmus+ budget. The economic dimension is again in focus, alongside social and identity aspects which, again, offer new opportunities for heritage. One of the reasons for poor sustainability of heritage projects so far has been their poor evaluation and inadequate success indicators. The new cohesion policy prioritizes setting up concise and appropriate indicators,

so that sustainability of heritage might finally be achieved. Strategic planning, therefore, should not be only a buzzword, but an instrument for enhancing and sustaining heritage values for present and future generations. The era following the COVID-19 crisis might, however, set up new priorities and give birth to new challenges for heritage. This may require even greater creativity and innovation for ensuring heritage durability and sustainability, whereby the role of action plan preparation within the KEEP ON project may be even more important and challenging.

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Project information and sources

Project homepage: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/keepon/>

Internet 1: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Voorkant_Mari%C3%ABnburg_%27s-Hertogenbosch.jpg.

Internet 2: <http://www.ecomuseu-rpena.pt/museu-do-linho/>.

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