

PRAXIS Policy Brief

Heritage Research to Address the SDGs, September 25 2020

The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has funded more than 200 projects through the Global Challenges Research Fund. Many focus on how culture and heritage can advance multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These projects engage with local communities and with local knowledge to build resilience, promote reconciliation, respond to natural disasters and conflict, etc. This policy-facing event hosted by The Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and PRAXIS brought together AHRC projects to explore the interface between policy and research, and to look for implementable outcomes from the research. We welcomed researchers from a range of projects: Lisa Boden, Paul Cooke, Karina Croucher, Adrian Evans, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Owen Greene, Elena Isayev, Alison Phipps, Eleanor Robson, Stuart Walker. The following sections highlight the key findings generated from the discussions.

1. Research communication and action should be embedded in local communities. Participants noted the need for engagement with local communities and priorities, for example through engaging with local community leadership. Research agendas should be 'locally-led, locally-set, with results fed back locally'. Here, participants recognised the importance of communicating in multiple languages. There are opportunities to increase local engagement at a time when international visitors to museums and galleries are likely to be fewer.

The discussion highlighted the importance of embedding research within local community structures and mobilising local knowledge as well as the challenge of ensuring that different stakeholders are aligned – international responses should not undermine local actions.

2. Everything is connected – integrating action for SDGs across different disciplines and research areas. Linked to the importance of co-creation and co-production, is the recognition of the interconnected nature of the disciplines and research topics being explored. Participants noted that learning from traditional and local knowledge is intrinsically linked to place and local ecology. The link between cultural and environmental heritage requires taking a holistic perspective on 'people and places and species'.

The discussion highlighted the importance of deploying interdisciplinary teams as well as ensuring that research aims and objectives integrate and address multiple SDGs and include a perspective on heritage that is multi-faceted and holistic.

3. Harnessing cultural heritage strengths and opportunities. Participants highlighted the opportunities that investment in cultural heritage research and action can bring. For example, one participant pointed out that helping communities engage with cultural heritage provides an entry point and facilitator for bridge-building between communities.

Dual outcomes benefitting participants and preserving heritage are possible to achieve, for example in supporting heritage and mental health research (e.g. research with former child soldiers on mental health proverbs and dance as part of resilience; in another project, cultural heritage preservation enabled access to water for the community). Finally, speaking about research on design for sustainability and economic aspects of craft making, a participant noted contexts where government support has made a significant contribution to the sustainability of heritage cultures as well as increasing local economic opportunities.

The discussion highlighted the importance of supporting and building on the economic opportunities that cultural heritage research and investment can bring to communities in the UK and elsewhere.

Takeaway Reflections and Recommendations

- Long term investment for cultural heritage recovery is critical. While logistical and financial structures remain challenging to navigate for research partners the GCRF 'Network Plus' model facilitates more sustainable investment by allowing projects to work together and learn from one another over time.
- To address the challenge of representation of academic partners from diverse contexts and backgrounds there's an opportunity to learn from organisations achieving diversity and inclusion and to increase equitable partnerships over time through models like 'Network Plus'.
- Unequal power dynamics in cultural preservation reflect the critical importance of inclusion/co-creation/wider custodianship. While this must be addressed for all disenfranchised groups, there is a particular need to work with young people who are often not seen as active agents in heritage or development.
- Mobilising local knowledge across disciplines and geographical boundaries includes recognising the historical context of refugees and host communities to avoid unintended consequences of research and development programmes.
- Local community cohesion and resilience are key factors in achieving peacebuilding and security processes. Where cultural heritage projects are embedded in participatory processes in the community they can produce concrete benefits for communities.
- To achieve better communication between research and policy there is a need to work with the right intermediaries. Examples of these partners include UNESCO and national organisations like Chatham House. There is also a critical role for knowledge brokers who sit in government and academia and have flexibility and fluency across a range of disciplines.