Unravelling Heritage (HPHE7002)

Olu Benson **2219610**

Assignment 2: Discuss the effectiveness and potential of community engagement in enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites

Section One

Introduction

This work is comprised of two sections; the first section offers an introduction and conceptual clarification, while section two attempts an exploration of the effectiveness and potential community engagement holds for enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites.

I believe that it is pertinent for the purpose of this work, to provide some conceptual clarification as to what is meant by community engament, sustainability, and heritage sites. Additionally, I believe it is important to appraise, briefly, at least, what heritage mean, in order to adequately address the question of the effectiveness and potential of community engagement vis-à-vis the sustainability of heritage sites.

Rodney Harrison's attempt at an interdisciplinary approach to the definition of the numerous tangible and intangible things such as museums, national parks, memorials and historic sites which have been defined as heritage (Harrison, 2013) offers invakuable insights into the global phenomenon called heritage and the ambiguity surrounding the concept as Lowethal, and Dawson respectively, perhaps aptly refer to as heritage's conceptual ambiguity (Lowenthal, 1998: 191).

Lowenthall and Harrison's assertion concerning the ambiguity of the concept of heritage resonates with Yahaya Ahmad's observation about the absence of standardisation or uniformity of definition of what heritage means amongst different countries.

The assertion by Welsh that heritage refers to relationships with the past, and sets of attitudes relating to the past (Walsh, 1992).

These relationships with the past are evidenced by the attachment to, and the reverence held for certain places and practices, and a selection of objects that are seen to exemplify or connect with the past in some way. Simplistics as this may appear, the forms these relationships adopt are variegated – particularly geographically and over time.

Heritage is reflected as symbolic and representative of a past that was handed over to the present in the hope that it will be passed on to future generations. Heritage is therefore valued as assets from the past that are documented and maintained for the benefit of both present and future generations (Scheld et al, 2014)

If there is a convergence of, or consensual understanding that heritage is about people and their relationships with the past, then, one may ask how these relationships with the past are created, forged, and maintained. I believe this is where community engagement can be a veritable tool for the enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites.

While the views of external actors are useful and important, the participation of member of the communities where these heritage sites are located is crucially important.

Community Engagement: Community is a broad term used to define groups of people – including stakeholders, citizen and interest groups. A community mayalso refer to a a geographic location. For the purpose of this paper, community refers to the people and geographical location where the heritage site is located.

Community engagement entails co-production and collaborative working.

Community engagement is about the involvement of, and in specific relation to heritage, and for the purpose of this work, includsive approaches designed to stimulate participation by the local communities where these heritage sites are located. These approaches may entail providing information, consultancy, involvement in debates and forums, as well as collaboratory practices targeted at the achievement of long-term and sustainable outcomes, relationships, decision-making and implementation.

Successful community engagementencompasses processes and strategies which take due cognisance of the location where these heritage sites are located.

Engagement is about connecting with the communityin ways that acknowledge, protect and enhance what they consider to be meaningful to them.

Community engagement is invaluable for the protection of heritage resources, and links up almost seamlessly with the idea of sutainability.

Sustainability*:* Broadly speaking, sustainabilityrefers to the capacity to msupport and maintain a process, over time and with consistency.

Sustainability, as the United Nations Educatonal Scientific and Cultural Organisation posits, has to do with development which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNESCO, 2015:17).

In relation to heritage, UNESCO's definition of sustainability offers implicit reference to some form of protection and management of heritage sites cherished by and valuable to people as places that inspire joy and wonder, while also representing the community's journey through time.

Sustainable development and heritage are inextricably linked – given that the goals of sustainable development would stimulate heritage conservation and help to generate awareness of heritage conservation in maintaining the identity of the community.

Heritage Sites: UNESCO's description of World Heritage Sites as trepresenting the diversity of planet earth and the humans who inhabit it, is useful for the purpose of this work – particularly in relation to the diversity of what represents heritage site across different cultures.

Heritage sites may therefore be places around which community activities are focused. These may include places of religious worship, landmarks that the community identifies with, significant buildings, monuments, shrines and groves.

For UNESCO, World Heritage Sites show the development of human history over thousands of years and celebratethe best of humanity (UNESCO, 2015).

Section Two

In this section, I explore the potential and effectiveness of community engagement in enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites.

Community engagement entails public engagement and participation, community consultation, citizen participation, and public involvement. Community engagement may be defined as the process for involving the community in conversations about decisions that interest or affect them.

Community engagement can do a lot more than just influence decisions. It has the potential to strengthen local communities, build connections, develop and maintain relationships, and in relation to heritage sites, contribute not just to the protection and maintenance of these sites, but also bolster the provision of better visitor experiences.

The potential and effectiveness of community engagement vis-à-vis enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites is explored in this work are subsumed under three broad categories: participatory interpretation, attachment toards specific heritage sites by members of the community, and the purpose of heritage sites. An exploration of the limitations and challenges of community engagement in enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites are presented at the end of this section.

Participatory Interpretation: Inculcating local values and traditions in presentation and interpretation of heritage sites has the potential for strenghtnening and fostering community community involvement in their sustainability. This is particularly important given the consideration of heritage as something valuable for ‘communication between the historical and present generations in a particular community’ (Oladipo et al, 2022: 1; ICOMOS, 1999).

Presentation and interpretation are a core part of the business of heritage and as such calls for the inculcation of local knowledge and practices in the interpretation of heritage sites. Participation, according to Bishop and Davis, are the strategies and actions directed towards the identification and incorporation of various stakeholders in the decision-making process (Bushop and Davis, 2002).

While the importance of the knowledge held by local communities regarding heritage sites, it is pertinent to note that participatory initiatives also have the potential to inspire people to connect more with the world around them, transmit world heritage values, and ultimately, enhance the sustainability of heritage sites.

Community engagement has further potential for the sustainability of heritage sites because communities often have multi-generational knowledge about what it means to live near heritage sites. Such knowledge may hold ample potential for the development of better visitor experiences which ultimately shape the sustainability of heritage sites.

Involving the community in protecting and managing the heritage site. Increased knowledge about the economic value of sustaining local heritage sites (Oladeji and Agbelusi, 2018). Within the African context, and more specifically, Nigeria, heritage sites are perceived as core components for the survival of communities, as well as the preservation of their religious practices – particularly in relation to worship and spirituality.

As a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society, Nigeria is made up communities with diverse views about heritage. While this may appear problematic, it also presents opportunities for collaboration, shared understanding of community-led interpretation and conservation practices which in turn inform the sustainability of heritage sites.

Most of these communities have a wealth of multi-generational knowledge about these heritage sites, and such knowledge can be inculcated into information about as well as interpretation of these heritage sites. There is so much to be gained from such knowledge as local residents are not passive but rather a huge resource for the sustainability of heritage sites.

For example, some residents of these communities may have worked as former site workers who had memories of the excarvations in the heritage site and such valuable knowledge may not have been documented. Their experiences of excarvation practices and knowledge, conservation practices, and technical recipes hold potential which can be maximised for current and future initiatives targeted at the sutainability of heritage sites.

Taking account of some of such local knowledge and practices which may not have been documented, is consistent with the mission of the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation's call for the improvement of the state of conservation of World Heritage Properties in Africa through the efficient and effective management strategies – including the engagement of local communities where these heritage sites are located (UNESCO, 2017).

In Nigeria, just like most other parts of the world, heritage sites are special places which hold significance for the communities. These heritage sites have intrinsic value for the local communities, and therefore priceless for the development of better visitor experiences as the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation asserts that 'host communities and indeginous people should be involved in planning for conservation and tourism' (UNESCO, 2017:4).

The assertion above, by the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation is predicated on the view that while the heritage of any region or place may have universal value, it is important that the needs and and perspectives of the communities or indigenous people should be respected.

For example, when the government of Edo State in mid-western Nigeria awarded a contract for the construction of a motorway in Somorika village in 1985 to facilitate tourism development in the area, residents of the local community expressed concerns that a sectioned of the road would be too close to the highly valued local shrine. For the people of Somorika, while having a new road constructed in their community was certainly a good thing, they were concerned that tragedy and pestilence would ravage the community if the shrne was not protected.

It is on record that road contruction machinery malfunctioned and trees that had been felled began to rise up near the area the shrine is located. Such was the gravity of the situation at the

time that the Edo State government sent delegates to the members of the community. The knowledge shared by the local residents were taken into account and the need for the protection of the shrine as presented by members of the community was recgnised.

The shrine in the above example is inrisically valuable for the socio-economic, spiritul and cultural life of the people of Somorika.

Perhaps, a better understanding of the vital role of community engagement in the sustainability of heritage sites is possible if we imagine a world in which the knowledge held by communities which host heritage sites are not considered valuable for conservation and development of visitor experiences.

Attachment towards Specific Heritage Sites: This may be particularly relevant in the Nigerian context where, in some communities, where local beliefs and practices have been profoundly impacted – particularly by Christianity and Islam. The cumulative effect of these influences on local practices has led to erosion, decay and in some cases dilapidation of otherwise historic buildings and monuments.

The influence of Christianity and Islam has meant that in some of the local communities where these heritage sites are located, the sites are seen as demonic because they are no longer deemed to be worthy of appreciation, recognition, or worthy of being associated with by the very residents of the area.

For example, there is the Igo Shrine amongs the Ibillo people of Opkmari in mid-western Nigeria where a kind of spiritual autopsy (non-invasive autopsy) is carried out when any member of the community dies before what is considered to be ripe old age. The practice is for the body of the deceased person to be laid uncovered on a wooden contraption made with three branches of a specific tree in the community. The Chief Priest of the shrine enters into conversation with the deceased person. The shrine's Chief Priest asks the deceased person to tell him who and what caused him to die. Whatever information the deceased person provides the Chief Priest is then announced to the rest of the community and appropriate funeral and propitiatory rites and then initiated and carried out.

While the practice provided in the example above may have been valuable for community cohesion in the past and perhaps valued by visitors to the area, attachment fr the local heritage site by members of the community themselves has waned. This has consequences for the sustainability of the heritage site as large swathes of the local community no longer consider the site to be a place or thing of value to them.

The Igo Shrine may fall into oblivion as it continues to come under the accelerating influence of Christianity and Islam. The experience of Igo Shrine underscores the valuable role that community engagement can play in the overall sustainabiliuty of heritage sites.

Heritage sites provide clues to the past as well as how communities have evolved through time. Heritage sites are pillars for the understanding of host communities, their history and traditions.

Sharing knowledge and providing information about world heritage values and the socio-ecnomic potential that the heritage sites (mentioned in the examples provided earlier) may have for the local community, perhaps would go a long way in contributing to the development of sustainability initiatives and prctices which can inject new life into the heritage sites.

Purpose of Heritage Sites: Another way to appraise the potential and effectiveness of community engagement for the sustainability of heritage sites is to consider the question of purpose. Purposes drive programmes and initiatives – including those concerning heritage sites.

Effective community engagement strategies have the potential to drive the sustainability of heritage sites if such purpose recognise of what the heritage site means to the host community.

I believe that this is particularly important if we look at the possibility of cross-purposes – for example certain stakeholders who may want the focus of sustainability to be hinged on conservation while others adhere very strictly to recreational value of the heritage site.

While both conservation and recreation (tourism) may appear to be at odds, they serve the same purpose vis-à-vis the sustainability. One may aregue that most communities where heritage sites are managed effectively to boost local tourism and generate revenue for the community are invariably involved in the conservation of the heritage site.

Heritage sites helps communities examine their traditions, history, as well as helping them understand and express identity or who they are.

As the keystone of culture many communities in Nigeria, and impacts local communities, businesses, politics and overall worldviews.

Constraints and Challenges of Community Engagement: Community engagement as I have argued thus far in this paper is a veritable tool for the sustainability of heritage sites particularly in the Nigerian context.

However, as useful and important as community engagement initiatives can be for the sustainability of heritage sites, they can also be fraught with constraints and challenges. For example, I believe it is important to consider the way in which we may view and exercise power. Fundamentally, when we talk about community engagement, what we are asking and challenging some stakeholders to do (heritage practitioners, for example) is to give power away, or at the barest minimum, share it with other stakeholders such as the host community, for example.

Community engagement is about collaboration, collaboration implies interaction between various groups, and these interactions are often characterised by competing interests and power struggle, as well as competing timelines, and need to be addressed.

Community engagement is thus faced with the challenge of how to apply the motley of opinions expressed by various community groups and other stakeholders in the implementation of heritage sustainability initiatives for heritage sites.

Lack of time is a major constraint for community engagement. Effective community engagement requires consultation, visits, correspondence and various other engagement techniques. Some groups in the community may not have the time, rersources and capacity to

respond adequately to engagement requests. This may have the added consequence of constraining community engagement in relation to the timing and scheduling of engagement requests.

Distrust for powerful stakeholders – such as the government, for example, emanating from previous negatve experiences, may serve to hamper community engagement which may have long-term effect on the sustainability of heritage sites.

Language may also pose challenges and constraints for community engagement initiatives.The priceleness of the need to understand all the language that are spoken in the community, and enlist the service of efficient translation/multilingual servces cannot be overemphasised.

Financial constraint is a further challenge that can impact community engagement initiative targeted at enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites, particularly in the context of Nigeria. There may be some community groups who may be constrained financially and consequently unable to attend community engagement events and programmes on the one hand, and the loss or non-access to their perspectves about the heritage sites(s).

Location may also constrain community engagement efforts. For example, some heritage sites in Nigeria – such as the Igo Shrine mentioned earlier, are located in areas where ther are no tarred roads at all and the only means of transport for accessing the area is the use of motorcycles. The location also constrains community groups as they may not be able to travel to or from their physical location thus resulting in diminished engagement opportunities.

Conclusion

I believe that if we can answer the question regarding the purpose of heritage sites, then direction of community engagement vis-a-vis enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites, becomes a whole lot comprehensible and clearer.

Olu Benson **2219610**

Heritage is about people, their environment, way of life and what it means to them intergenerationally. Community engagement involves sharing knowledge and power for a common purpose – here, enhancement of the sustainability of heritage sites.

Community engagement offers pathways for shared knowledge through the life experiences and material culture of the communities who ascribe meaning and value to these heritage sites.

Community engagement enables the convergence and coming together of various stakeholders for the purpose devising feasible initiatives targeted at enhancing the sustainability of heritage sites. It provides opportunities for the development of trusting durable and strong relationships amongst stakeholders including local communities.

Community engagement respects inclusivity, and serves to facilitate consultations, sharing and exchanging information, involve communities and stakeholders and engaging them in discussions and forums which would in turn encourage collaborations, identification of threats to the heritage sites, plan for how communities and groups can develop and sustain the collective value of the heritage sites, and form strategic alliances and partnerships targeted at positively impacting the sustainability of heritage sites as explore thus far in this work.

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