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Conference report

“Restoring Livelihoods Through Culture in Yemen”

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On 26 and 27 May 2021, around 1000 policy-makers, experts, creative professionals, cultural civil society organisations (CSOs) and academics met online to share knowledge and know-how about the landmark UNESCO-EU project [Cash for Work: Promoting Livelihood Opportunities for Urban Youth in Yemen](#). The key themes discussed by over 20 high-profile speakers and creatives during the [Restoring livelihoods through culture in Yemen](#) conference are summarised below, before setting out perspectives on next steps and future growth, in particular, emphasising the role of the EU in its close partnership with UNESCO.

1. Engaging young people in community heritage protection

Yemen's seven-year conflict has led to poverty, an acute humanitarian crisis and multiple threats to cultural heritage. The cultural void caused by the conflict has caused disillusionment among young people, which in turn risks an increased likelihood of youth enrolment in the conflict. This theme was referenced by several panelists, including **Wesam Qaid** (Social Fund for Development) and **Sarah Rinaldi** (European Commission, DG INTPA). Rinaldi concluded that investment in culture in crisis and conflict contexts is indispensable as a means to create alternative livelihood opportunities, and that culture and heritage should be mainstreamed in wider development action.

Youth unemployment has been – also prior to the crisis – a significant challenge in the country (youth unemployment stood at 24% in 2019 according to the ILO). For **H.E. Moamer Al-Eryani** (Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Yemen) and **H.E. Mohammed Jumei** (Permanent Delegate of the Republic of Yemen to UNESCO), Yemeni youth are the key to future success and should continue to be invested in. They also expressed their wish for a continuing and closer partnership with UNESCO.

The cash for work emphasis on ownership and empowering young people is partly informed by the experience of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage. The project offered an opportunity to encourage the ownership and valorisation of cultural heritage by young people and to demonstrate the role of culture in recovery in a conflict context. To this end, 2.500 youth were employed in cash-based urban rehabilitation works while 500 young artists and culture operators were engaged in professional development and training. The joint work of UNESCO and RNW Media, introduced by **Jacqueline Lampe**, focussed on digital content creation as key to increasing digital and media literacy and, as a result, civic engagement, in order to empower youth to consider better futures and to promote wider movements towards peace (e.g. by the [#enoughwar campaign](#)).

2. An integrated and human-centred approach to culture in crisis

The human-centred approach to the project was introduced by **Dr Anna Paolini** (UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen). Reflecting on the challenges faced in the cash for work programme, **Nabil Munassar** (UNESCO Sana'a office) highlighted that poverty is the main threat to Yemen's built heritage due to the fact that it is often private property, and that the involvement of civil society is a good opportunity to build community engagement and valorisation of cultural heritage. The project reflects EU priorities and UNESCO know-how by moving away from a focus on 'monumentality' towards the prioritisation of domestic architecture and community engagement. 70-80% of urban heritage in Yemen are [people's homes](#).



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This focus on [private houses](#) and heritage in the public space also benefited from civil society engagement, in the renovation of 151 buildings and in surveying 8,000 historical buildings in four of Yemen's old cities. **Mazen Sharif** (Aden Again) emphasised the importance of creating projects that linked citizens to their heritage and identity.

This approach is reflected in emerging policy discourses and other implementation mechanisms to positive effect. **Dr Damien Helly** (culture Solutions) outlined that effective cultural heritage protection relies on community empowerment, policy support and conflict sensitivity. **Dr Maja Kominko** (ALIPH Foundation) explained how local expertise and skills transfer is central to ALIPH's approach to heritage preservation, with ALIPH only bringing in foreign expertise to help fill gaps locally. With programmes led by Yemenis for Yemenis, communities are brought together through shared efforts to solve common problems and to protect shared heritage. The human-centred approach represents positive progress towards stabilising Yemeni heritage on the endangered heritage list, as described by **Dr May Shaer** (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Focussing on the implementation of international standards for heritage preservation in conflict and crisis contexts, **Fatima Al-Ansari** (Qatar Fund for Development) recommended a long-term perspective that focuses on capacity-building and disaster preparedness (echoed by **Dr May Shaer**, UNESCO World Heritage Centre) to avoid a reversal of progress made towards achieving the SDGs and steps taken to mitigate the loss of heritage. **Dr Kay van Damme** (Ghent University) stressed the need to think of culture and nature as inextricably linked in rural and urban settings, with an emphasis on local community traditions, technology and expertise as being critical to meeting international climate targets. With a similar holistic approach, **Tom Leiermann** (International Conservation Expert) argued that World Heritage Sites should not be approached as isolated locations, but rather as part of heritage ecosystems that comprise the communities that are connected with and sustain them. The preservation guides developed for the project's four cities reflect the need to invest in harnessing and developing local community expertise alongside wider urban infrastructure and liveability.

3. Experimenting with the first cash for work methodology in the context of cultural heritage

The project marked the first application of the cash for work modality in cultural preservation efforts. It was described by invited panellists and partners as an empowering creative economic tool that fostered dignity by encouraging people to work rather than waiting for aid. In an already challenging humanitarian situation, project implementation has had to cope with climate-related degradation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

For many in Yemen, daily wages are a main income source. As described by **Wesam Qaid** (Social Fund for Development), the project provided wages that supported sustainable livelihoods and complemented this with mechanisms to support people to encourage long-term saving. Despite this, daily wage mechanisms present challenges that were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic and deteriorating economic situation. **Ahmed Nooraldine** (Yemeni livelihood expert) stressed that for the sustainability of the initiative, cash for work needs to be complemented with economic activity like export and other mechanisms to lead to sustainable employment. There were several calls from the conference audience for the wider dissemination of knowledge and know-how about the cultural heritage cash for work modality so that it could bring value and be applied to other conflict or crisis contexts.



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“Through the UNESCO-EU Cash4Work, we worked well with actors on the ground, we have demonstrated that we care about the people, while our international partners got a reality check of what works and what does not in a conflict situation”,

Dr Anna Paolini, UNESCO Representative to GCC and Yemen,
Director of UNESCO Doha Office

4. Mainstreaming gender in cash for work activities and cultural projects

Mitigating the challenges of female participation in cash-for-work programmes and in heritage preservation and protection was one of the project aims. The human-centred approach to the project created an opportunity for **gender mainstreaming**, focussing on the idea of equal pay for equal work. Many initiatives have been designed to encourage female creative entrepreneurs to professionalise and see creative careers as a sustainable venture, which is timely considering the widening acceptance of women working beyond traditional fields like cosmetics and textiles, as described by **Ahmed Nooraldine** (Yemeni livelihoods expert). Equal participation was not always achieved. **Jacqueline Lampe** (RNW Media) described the challenges, for example, of finding female musicians, and introduced the low female participation rates on social media, with the knock-on effect this has for being introduced to new perspectives and increasing digital and media literacy. Of the 500 creative practitioners who gained creative entrepreneurial skills, 200 were women. Where some activities struggled to ensure female participation, others were able to ensure equal or more than half female participation. Whereas cash-for-work programmes are traditionally-male orientated, creative solutions were often found, for example, in employing women to manage endemic tree growth that had a negative impact on protection of the urban environment against climate disaster. Challenges to ensuring equal participation of women in cash for work projects remain, but these won't deter efforts by the project implementers. Building on the project successes and challenges, **Wesam Qaid** (Social Fund for Development) informed the audience of the creation of i) a focussed team on gender issues, ii) online gender training for those involved in project delivery, and iii) a gender checklist to be used in the implementation of future projects.

5. Heritage and cultural protection is worth the investment

In Yemen's conflict setting, **Ismini Palla** (UN SG Special Envoy for Yemen) described how those working to stimulate peace-making dialogue have since the last year been increasingly reaching out to cultural operators because of their potential contribution towards advancing peace. Like **Dr Anna Paolini** (UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen) at the beginning of the conference, she echoed that in conflict contexts it was the responsibility of international actors to protect and support cultural actors and in turn, freedom of expression and a post-conflict vision. A creative approach has enabled ways for international actors to explore conflict zones in augmented reality and amplify the voices of Yemeni citizens through digital civic consultations. **Jacqueline Lampe** (RNW Media) emphasised that safe digital spaces are key to uniting young Yemenis to work together for peace. In the cultural context, safe creative spaces that ensure independence from political influence - or that do not dictate a response to conflict or crises - are key to ensure artistic freedom of expression and the development of sustainable creative ecosystems. Building on this, **Rima Mismar** (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture) emphasised that support must be flexible and responsive to needs without being leading. In drawing parallels between AFAC's work in Beirut after the blast tragedy and their work in Yemen, Mismar emphasised that a lack of investment in the creative sector in crisis situations ran the risk of the complete devastation of creative ecosystems, from which there might be no recovery.



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“Yemen is a place where artists have to push more than 20 times as hard as artists in any other country”,

Asim Abdulaziz, artist, director, producer from Aden, Yemen

The damage of Yemen’s rich heritage was described as a severe loss to humanity. **Ernesto Ottone Ramirez** (Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO), opening the conference, highlighted how investing and protecting cultural heritage creates resilience among local communities. In their collaboration in Yemen, UNESCO and the EU have set out to demonstrate the role of culture for recovery, economy and peace. For **Mazen Sharif** (Aden Again), civil society can play a very important role in protecting heritage and building knowledge of heritage assets in need of protection, and represents a positive decentralisation of action. The UNESCO/EU Yemen project aims to create 500,000 working days by August 2022 and to enhance livelihoods for 4,000 young men and women who might not normally have been engaged in heritage protection or cultural value chains promotion. Reflecting the perspective shared by **Wesam Qaid** (Social Fund for Development) that investing in heritage and livelihoods is investment in community empowerment rather than a cost, the EU is stepping up its support to the Yemeni private sector. The possible ratification of the 2005 UNESCO Convention by the Yemeni government is further likely to open up additional opportunities for technical assistance, funding and support to the creative and heritage sector in Yemen.

2021 is the [International Year of Creative Economy for Sustainable Development](#). The contribution of [cultural diversity to the global creative economy and sustainable development](#) goes hand in hand with increased investment in the managerial skills of cultural leaders and infrastructural development of grassroots cultural civil sector organisations, described as key areas of priority by **Safiya Al Jaberi** (SMEPS) and **Shaima Jamal** (Basement Cultural Foundation) respectively. **Ahmed Zaouche** (Project Manager, UNESCO GCC and Yemen Office) described the need for further capacity-building for cultural entrepreneurship, the development of incubators to nurture and grow talent, and the accreditation/certification of skills programmes to add to the legitimacy and sustainability of heritage and creative livelihood interventions. Key to all of this, he emphasised the need for a legal and policy framework to support the CCIs to help to make heritage preservation more economically sustainable.

As evident in the presentations by film-maker **Entesar Al-Douais**, **Ismi Palla** (UN SG Special Envoy for Yemen), **Jacqueline Lampe** (RNW Media) and content creator **Somaya Gamal**, and the closing intervention of **Dr Anna Paolini** (UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen), strengthening the cultural and creative industries and empowering and employing local creative actors creates the opportunity to develop a more balanced narrative that looks beyond the conflict to present ‘another Yemen’ (like in Gamal’s UNESCO-supported [Youtube series](#) and the UN’s forthcoming documentary). With this in mind, and building on existing successes and learnings in the project’s embedded approach to monitoring and evaluation (as introduced by **Hind Alawi**, Social Fund for Development) the project’s potential second edition aims to expand its scope to rural areas where economic hardships are even more acute.

6. Future UNESCO-EU collaborations in heritage protection?

With an EU contribution of €10m, the three-year [Cash for Work](#) project in Yemen is a major component of the [strategic partnership](#) between the EU and UNESCO that has developed over the past decade, with their priorities aligning in the cash for work project, as described by **Karolina Hedstrom** (Delegation of the European Union to Yemen).



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Numerous speakers emphasised the opportunities of partnerships with CSOs, the private sector and the diaspora with a view to strengthening the cultural sector's post-conflict stability. Looking ahead, **Dr Anna Paolini** (UNESCO Representative in the Arab States of the Gulf and Yemen) emphasised the twin objectives of sustainability and impact. In this realm, multilateral cooperation and a multisectoral approach to culture have become a necessity, and one which the diverse representatives at the conference are willing to embrace. According to Hedstrom, the EU strives for a closer examination of the links between peacebuilding and cultural heritage, including the imperative of do-no-harm approach in the cultural heritage context. The forthcoming EU Council conclusions on cultural heritage in crisis will be the next step in the international cultural heritage framework.

References and audiovisual resources:

- Watch the full conference proceedings on the UNESCO [event page](#).
- Read culture Solution's [background note](#) which sets out the key successes and challenges, as well as the context of the cultural heritage cash-for-work project in Yemen.
- Find out more about the [Cash for Work](#) project in Yemen.
- Watch the [short documentaries](#) by 12 Yemeni film-makers until the end of June 2021.
- See all videos capturing the activities and participant experiences of the programme on UNESCO's [Youtube page](#).

culture Solutions was invited to facilitate the conference and support knowledge dissemination that contextualised the Cash4Work project's outcomes in broader developments around cultural heritage protection and EU policy-making processes.