Digital Technologies to Empower World Heritage in Africa (3-6 June 2025)

Concept Note

Date	3-6 June 2025
Venues	Windhoek and Twyfelfontein or /Ui-//aes (Namibia)
Funding Project	World Heritage Online Map Platform
Funds and support	Government of Flanders (Belgium), UNESCO, Namibian Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture
Implementing Agency	UNESCO World Heritage Centre and Windhoek Office
Beneficiaries	World Heritage site managers, heritage experts, mentees of the World Heritage Mentorship Programme, scholars

Context and Rationale

Africa is home for a remarkable variety of natural and cultural heritage, with numerous World Heritage properties that are crucial for historical identity, cultural continuity, and economic development. However, these rich and diverse sites of outstanding universal value face increasing risk form different threats including inadequate documentation and management, climate change, uncontrolled urbanisation, illegal activities, armed conflict and illicit trafficking.

In recent years, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has led to the development of a wide array of digital tools such as geo-localisation, geospatial data, multispectral remote sensing, virtual and augmented reality, drones, photogrammetry, and mobile apps, that have transformed the management of World Heritage properties. These are rapidly changing the way heritage is documented, monitored, promoted and made accessible. Site managers and conservation practitioners are being able to collect and analyse accurate data, assess risks, implement evidence-based interventions, and bring the sites closer to the public for education purposes. As these innovative technologies become more widely accessible, enhancing capacities among World Heritage site managers to ensure they can effectively leverage these tools for heritage protection.

In this context, the event *Digital Technologies to Empower World Heritage in Africa* aims to gather around 40 participants –mainly World Heritage site managers, heritage experts, professionals and stakeholders– to reflect on the utilisation of new technologies in and for World Heritage. The overall objective is,

therefore, to further enhance the capacity of African professionals to leverage digital technology for heritage development in Africa. It also aims to promote regional collaboration through a network of professionals committed to advancing conservation, management and promotion through digital technology –consolidating a community of practice. Considering the availability and evolution of digital means for sustaining heritage-based socio-economic development, participants are expected to gain hands-on experience and best practices with methodologies that enable proactive responses to long-standing and emerging threats. Therefore, this event aims to bridge that gap by fostering knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and innovation.

Additionally, this workshop complements the "World Heritage Futures Lab: Southern and Eastern Africa edition" that was organised by UNESCO in January 2023, Windhoek, Namibia. It brought together 20 young people from Southern and Eastern Africa, 10 creative technologists and 10 local community members living in and around World Heritage sites. The objective was to ensure an increased appreciation and understanding of the rich World Heritage in the two subregions and to develop and disseminate new narratives about World Heritage in Southern and Eastern Africa through the creation of innovative and engaging digital products.

This event will be implemented in the framework of the development of the World Heritage Online Map Platform[1], supported by the Government of Flanders (Belgium). It is part of the implementation of the **Strategy for World Heritage in Africa (2022-2029),** a tool to achieve the UNESCO Operational Strategy for Priority Africa, specifically Flagship Programme 3: *Fostering cultural heritage and capacity development*, and contributes to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. It also contributes to the Regional Action Plan for Africa (2021-2027) stemming from the Periodic Reporting, specifically to its Strategic Objective − 2: *Improve conservation, effective management and promotion of World Heritage*, Expected Result 2.2, *Conservation of World Heritage properties is improved through effective governance, proper documentation and information management*, whose performance indicator is to have at least 15 sites using digital and new technologies for effective monitoring of their properties.

Objectives

As the event will include both a capacity-building component on digital technologies, and presentations of their actual application by site managers and professionals to develop and promote heritage in the region, the objectives pursued are:

1. **Foster the use of digital tools:** Showcase and train on cutting-edge technologies to improve World Heritage properties' monitoring, documentation, protection, and engagement.
2. **Strengthen collaboration and information sharing:** Promote the exchange of practices among site managers, professionals and heritage stakeholders to harness innovative technologies for the conservation, management and promotion of World Heritage.
3. **Boost accessibility and capacity:** Enhance capacity and democratize access to heritage through digital tools, particularly for youth and remote communities.

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[1] Funded by the Flanders UNESCO Trustfund (FUT), the World Heritage Online Map Platform (WHOMP) is the Geographic Information System (GIS) for World Heritage properties. It displays their georeferenced boundaries and buffer zones, overlaying them with geospatial data layers on factors potentially affecting the properties, harnessing Earth Observation for near-real time detection of sudden threats (flash floods, wildfires) or assessment of slow onset risks (coastal erosion, desertification).

Expected Outcomes

1. **Increased Adoption of Digital Tools:** Participants will gain practical knowledge and skills in using digital technologies, leading to improved monitoring, documentation, protection, and engagement of World Heritage properties.
2. **Enhanced Collaboration:** Strengthened networks and partnerships among heritage professionals, site managers, and stakeholders, fostering ongoing exchange of best practices and innovative solutions.
3. **Greater Accessibility** Enhance capacity and broaden access through digital tools to heritage, particularly for youth and remote communities.

Communication Strategy

To ensure the success and visibility of the event, the following communication activities are proposed:

o News and event items before and after the workshop.

o Social media updates with photos, videos, and quotes from participants.

o Post-event dissemination: Dissemination of photos, videos and presentation to participants.

Partnerships and Collaboration

The workshop is organized by UNESCO through its Office in Windhoek and the World Heritage Centre in partnership with Ministry of Education, Innovation, Youth, Sport, Arts and Culture and National Heritage Council in Namibia counting on the collaboration and participation of technology stakeholders in Africa and academic institutions specialising in digital innovation in Namibia. It is generously supported by the Government of Flanders (Belgium).

Workshop format

This **three-day** workshop will combine theoretical sessions, on-the-field demonstrations, best practices sharing, and collaborative discussions, including a day visit to the World Heritage property of Twyfelfontein or /Ui-//aes.