

ALIPH is a Swiss-based foundation established in 2017 to protect cultural heritage in conflict and post conflict areas. So far, it has funded over 100 projects in 22 countries. Our ambition is to support projects which deliver concrete conservation outcomes, build local capacity, and at the same time contribute to local development, peace and reconciliation. This is not to say, however, that we exclude projects which do not achieve all these goals. Indeed, we often run into questions concerning the tension between cultural heritage as a vehicle of development and as a right and value in itself. It is on these questions, that I would like to focus here.

While the integration of cultural heritage into broader development efforts is without a doubt beneficial, in a post war reconstruction the cultural heritage is all too often treated not as a value in itself, but rather as a means of achieving economic or social goals. To an extent, such considerations are understandable because of the scarcity of funds and the need to provide concrete help to local people. In practice, cultural heritage almost always can contribute to development goals, but a troubling consequence of such approach is that significant historic monuments and cultural phenomena may occasionally be discounted for support because they cannot provide any immediate social or economic benefits. Regrettably, this shows a degree of inequality in heritage and in rights to heritage, because the issues of economic or social benefits, while important, are not the main consideration for monuments in developed countries. My first question is therefore about a potential mission creep in cultural heritage protection: is the increasing emphasis on heritage as vehicle for local development not taking away from cultural rights?

Such questions arise for many monuments and cultural phenomena, but one recent example for us is the conservation of the Arch of Ctesiphon, supported since last year. This monumental sixth-century arch is the last visible monument of Ctesiphon, the capital of the Persian Empire. Located 35 km southeast of Baghdad, it is the world's largest freestanding arch built until modern times. Its size and uniqueness represent a major conservation challenge, the conservation is urgent, and the cost will be significant. This unique monument without any doubt has a potential for tourism development, but the pandemic and the current security situation may limit any immediate economic benefits. The project will provide some jobs to local people, but the complexity of this work means that most of the jobs will be highly specialised and will require participation of experts from Baghdad and international experts. Realistically, the necessary investment will likely outweigh any direct economic benefits for some time. But should we reduce preservation of heritage of Iraq to a cost-benefit equation?

There is also another consideration: this is a Persian monument, often culturally claimed by Iran, and its relationship with the politics in modern Iraq has been often complex. This brings me to the second question, one of cultural identity and ownership, both closely related to the issue of rights. This

question is particularly difficult in countries which recover from a conflict that may have happened along ethnic or religious fault lines. Whilst working across these divisions is difficult, efforts to identify and engage “the community” to which the heritage belongs can be problematic. A historic Sunni Mosque in Mosul is important for the Sunni community who uses it, but this is not to say that non-Sunni Maslawis do not value it, and do not see it as an important part of their city and their heritage. Historically, many sanctuaries have been used by several different communities: for example, Mar Behnam Monastery South East of Mosul was a pilgrimage place not only for the local Christians of various denominations, but also for Yazidi and Sunni communities. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why the tomb of the saint has been targeted by DAESH. The overemphasis of a single religious and cultural identity, to the detriment of the right of others, in extreme cases may play to the hands of religious and political radicals, but legal frameworks for religious monuments rarely allow for a nuanced approach accommodating historical connections between religious communities. Another issue related to the work with the “communities” is defining who “the community” is, and who can speak on its behalf. Questions of identity and ownership aside, a community is a group of people, whose views may diverge, but traditionally not all voices may have been taken into consideration. Almost inevitably this leads to a tension between the need for cultural sensitivity and respect for the local norms, and on the other hand the need for inclusiveness and equity.

A related question is the problem of conservation of monuments which belong to the communities that are no longer present. In our experience, the notion of disconnect between local people and the local monuments of cultures and religions different than their own is rarely true, at least where it is not hijacked by political agendas. It is the local people who most often protect the monuments and often, the monuments constitute an anchor for the formation of local identity. For example, since 2020 ALIPH supports the efforts of a local Afghani NGO, ACHCO, to preserve Shewaki Stupa outside Kabul. This Buddhist monument is indisputably of great historical value, but one of the striking aspects of this work, has been its connection with the local village which almost entirely consists of re-settled former Afghani refugees from Pakistan. The stupa is a local landmark and a tangible sign of a connection of the people from the village, many of whom were born in Pakistan, with the deep history of their country. The success is no doubt due to the sensitive work of the NGO carrying out this project, but more broadly, we, as a field, may be placing too much emphasis on religious and ethnic identities as the only factors in relationship between people and the history of their countries, regions, or villages, an approach which is not without impact on the recognition of heritage rights.

The last point I would like to raise, though it may seem odd to put in these terms is the right for the local people, local experts, and local institutions to be recognised as the custodians of heritage. For ethical and practical reasons, we need to move away from overreliance on expertise from the global

north. This is not to suggest excluding the international experts, but rather redressing the balance and casting them in a supporting role. Arguably, if we seek to embed cultural heritage protection in development work, supporting local institution may be a better angle than seeing cultural heritage not as a right and value, but merely a means of development.