

Building back better (#BBB) Local urban heritage in Tunisia's cities
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1. Context and UN-Habitat Mandate

Municipal authorities have become key actors of culture-based urban governance. The decentralization processes over the last decades facilitated the integration of cultural assets into urban development strategies due to an enhanced awareness of local issues by local authorities and increased participation of local communities, in both developed and developing cities. In Tunisia, the damage of cultural heritage (sites, traditions, art and crafts) has increasingly become a consequence of acts of human deterioration and rapid urbanisation during the last 20 years. The increasingly urban expansion represents indeed an existential threat for the historical and intangible Heritage.

Since 2010, the UN General Assembly has repeatedly acknowledged the role of culture for sustainable development through several resolutions and, milestone reports related to the Post-2015 Development Agenda, including the Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which encompasses a Target dedicated to culture under the SDG on “sustainable cities”, culture is now firmly recognized by the international community as a key component of strategic urban planning and a key innovation for the definition of a New Urban Agenda. Good practices of urban heritage conservation can inspire inclusive and holistic approaches to urban development and lay the foundations for “fit-for-purpose” planning tools and legal frameworks. Historic centres offer living laboratories of dense urban areas, with mixed functions and quality public spaces, where innovative urban approaches are experimented (including soft transportation or mixed tenure) with a view to combine the requirements of conservation and the improvement of quality of life¹.

UN Habitat is present in 90 countries in the world and in 19 countries in the Arab world. In Tunisia, the Organisation works to support local authorities (Executives and municipal councils elected in May 2018) in enhancing their planning and territorial development and the implementation of SDG 11, specifically on the following thematic : *Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage*, within the Indicator 11.4.1: Total expenditure (public and private) per capita spent on the preservation, protection and conservation of all cultural and natural heritage, by type of heritage (cultural, natural, mixed, World Heritage Centre designation), level of government (national, regional, and local/municipal), type of expenditure (operating expenditure/investment) and type of private funding (donations in kind, private non-profit sector, sponsorship). This indicator illustrates how financial efforts/actions made by public authorities, both at the local, national and international levels, alone or in partnership with civil society organizations (CSO) and the private sector, to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage has a direct impact in making cities and human settlements more sustainable.

¹ *New Urban Agenda, Urban Culture and Heritage, 2016*

UN-Habitat in Tunisia' role is to make sure that cultural and Heritage resources and assets are safeguarded to keep attracting people (inhabitants, workers, tourists, etc.) and financial investments, to ultimately enhance the total amount of expenditures; support the valorization of diversity and local cultures as well as the most vulnerable communities, through its urban heritage as a vector and catalyst for a better sustainable urban organization. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, The UN-habitat Tunisia office seeks to build back better with specific projects that strengthen the local tangible and intangible Heritage of the country.

2. Current projects developed by UN-Habitat

Several projects are under development during 2021 in Tunisia by UN-Habitat. The following ones have a direct or indirect link with the tangible and intangible Heritage and with a better way to support the national and local authorities in Tunisia to safeguard it. They are the following :

The Living villages project will work with 10 endangered villages in Tunisia, in order to support the valorization of diversity and local cultures as well as the most vulnerable communities, through its urban heritage. The characteristics and history of certain cities imply the need to cross the economic, ecological, urbanistic and social dimensions with that of the local urban heritage. This imperative of conciliation between these fields, constitutive of the urban form and of local lifestyles, calls for the implementation of methods of training and awareness-raising in planning, and for the enhancement of the existing. The latter, i.e., the urban object with heritage value, would become an essential source for planning cities according to a clear urban strategy that takes into consideration present and future issues.

The project will develop cultural and economic activities in 10 municipalities that have a local intangible and fragile Heritage, such as Slouguia, Kesra, Chenini, Tahent, Sened, Taourt, etc. and will take stock of the important Heritage that these villages have. The need to improve or develop new methods of urban governance is being demonstrated every day in the rapidly evolving context of Tunisia. The new methods expected will be holistic, taking into consideration the economic, social and environmental fields in order to strengthen the collective control of urban development among the main actors and specialists.

UN-Habitat intends to bring its expertise in participatory approach and capacity building of municipalities. The latter will receive the necessary expertise to take into consideration the urban heritage issue as a constitutive and organizational element of the urban fabric. The latter will be taken into consideration in all its social, economic and environmental components. Thus, within the framework of a holistic approach and a qualitative participative process, the urban heritage will be a source of planning for the local urban development

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strategy. Solutions will be identified in order to respond adequately and sustainably to local issues and primarily to the needs of the inhabitants. The approach will be transversal and developed through a citizen and institutional involvement in the perspective of four objectives which are:

- The economic link ;
- The social link ;
- Sustainable and strategic planning;
- Valuation and appropriation of local identity.

- ***Zoumetna.tn*** project will allow the municipality of Ariana 's residents to live and participate in an experience, called a mission.

These missions, both physical and virtual, will allow the inhabitants of Ariana to better appropriate their city, their Heritage, to engage more easily in the daily life of their neighborhoods and to initiate a different way of learning more about the services and public spaces proposed by the municipality of Ariana. These missions are developed on a basis of a common goodwill, empathy, better living together and will seek to promote opportunities to build trust between citizens and institutions. *Zoumetna.tn* will allow initially the municipality to create these missions to eventually leave the possibility to the citizens themselves to suggest / create these activities. Each mission will go through 4 steps:

- Add the mission on the municipality Digital map (daily or once a week) representing the municipality for a limited time and explaining to the citizens what to do, where to go and when;
- Communicate around each mission on digital and physical channels to engage the maximum number of citizens;
- Conduct the mission-related activity;
- Evaluate the aspects related to each mission to learn from them and have better leads for future missions;

These missions will be presented in different formats : common convivial meetings, Heritage sites visits, sports competitions, charity campaigns or operations to boost the local economy.

- ***The Nexthood project*** aims to put in place a participatory systemic process using a mixture of future thinking, system-thinking and design-thinking methodologies to enable all stakeholders and residents in a defined territory to: Provide human-centred feedback on the current urban plans, Heritage Sites, maps and territorial divisions, therefore, initiating a culture of feedback loops; understand the present and future challenges of their territories, Co-design their vision of the territory in 10 years alongside the municipality and relevant stakeholders using future thinking; Create an AR version of the desired future vision.

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-The **Open Maarifa project** Initiative helps preserve and share disappearing cultural assets, including those related to language, religion, music, and art in Tamaghza village in the south of Tunisia; The objective of the "Open Maarefa" (معرفة, Maarefa means knowledge in arabic) Initiative is to help preserve and share disappearing cultural assets, including those related to language, religion, music, and art in Tamaghza an amazigh village in the south of Tunisia. Local knowledge generally refers to the long-standing traditions and practices of certain regional or local communities. Due to the fast-changing development in IT, local knowledge is becoming unavailable to the young generation due to its state of scarcity. There is a need to preserve the local knowledge, its content, and indigenous practices. The Open Maarifa project will allow :

- 1- A reserved digital presence of girls and women : a small participation of girls and women on social media platforms especially in the village and far from the CapitalTunis ;
- 2 - Preserving the local knowledge and the indigenous practices : Local knowledge generally refers to the long-standing traditions and practices of certain regional or local communities. Due to the fast-changing development in IT, local knowledge is becoming unavailable to the young generation due to its state of scarcity. With this, there is a need to preserve the local knowledge, its content, and indigenous practices.

The Project will allow also to train girls and women to acquire digital skills and to develop a crowdsourcing platform that showcases at least 20 ancestral practices from Tamaghza that celebrate the indigenous knowledge and the amazigh practices.

3. Conclusion

Culture-based urban strategies can open new paths for job creation and locally-owned economic development, especially in the context of world crisis such as the Covid-19 Pandemic. Cultural and creative industries, the performing arts and heritage conservation activities can be a reservoir of qualified jobs for urban poor, in both the formal and informal sectors. The cultural industries and the creative economy can play a growing role in cities' development and transformation processes and increasingly contribute to local economy and employment and need to be taken into account in urban development frameworks. Safeguarding and promoting culture at the local level is a way to develop endogenous resources and create conditions for sustainable revenue generation.

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