

Preserving Cuenca's cultural heritage

“You have to acknowledge the value of cultural heritage and take care of it... before it disappears”

Compared to healthcare, food provision and conflict resolution, cultural heritage might seem a low priority in development cooperation. Yet, in recent years, research increasingly shows the significance of conserving cultural heritage for a country's economy and its people. On top of the more obvious economic benefits, such as increased tourism and local jobs, access to historical sites and museums also enhances the inhabitants' sense of identity and a feeling of connection. According to *Koenraad Van Balen* from the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven): “Cultural heritage improves people's well-being. This insight often comes too late, though.”

Although Van Balen formally graduated as an Architectural Engineer, it was not long before he got into monument conservation. “I started from a technical perspective,” he recalls. “But along the way, I ran into the limitations of this technical aspect. Cultural heritage is about more than bricks and buildings. It's about the knowledge of various stakeholders,

conservationists' expertise and society's appreciation of this knowledge and expertise.” When trying to put cultural heritage higher on the agenda of development cooperation, Van Balen has faced a fair amount of scepticism, for example, during an ABOS (editor's note: precursor to the current Directorate-General Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid) project that he carried out from 1989 to 1994 in the Ecuadorian capital

Quito. “When I talked to people about cultural heritage during that period, they would say: ‘That is really the thing people least care about. First, there has to be good healthcare, food and electricity.’” Still, experience within VLIR-UOS projects in Ecuador and Cuba has proven the sceptics wrong: there is room for the preservation of cultural heritage in development cooperation — what's more, it is key to local and sustainable development.

From an improved economy to greater well-being

Nowadays, culture is often referred to as the ‘fourth pillar of sustainable development’, particularly in the context of developing countries, as the benefits are numerous. The 2013 Hangzhou Declaration, agreed at the international congress ‘Culture: Key to Sustainable Development’ in Hangzhou (China), declared culture to be “at the very heart of sustainable development policies” and heritage “a critical asset for our well-being and that of future generations”. According to research from Stanford University, investing in one's cultural heritage in particular may be one of the best economic investments



Cuenca is brimming with cultural heritage, and was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1999.



that a developing country can make. It estimates that, by 2025, global heritage could provide about 89 billion euros per year for developing countries. Investing in cultural heritage conservation also creates local jobs and provides people with income: labour often makes up 60 to 70% of the conservation cost. These jobs can be occupied by various vulnerable groups in society, women amongst others. They also spread income throughout the country's economy. Thirdly, investing in cultural heritage conservation increases tourism, which is often also considered key to development in developing countries. One condition is that this tourism should be sustainable in order to prevent any negative impact on cultural heritage sites. Sustainable tourism helps to reduce poverty and empowers women, youth and migrant workers as it provides employment opportunities as well. Besides providing economic gain, cultural heritage preservation protects local and national identity and pride, and reminds people of their common history and progress. Moreover, it increases well-being: people report 'higher levels of well-being and life

satisfaction' when there is a specific place that they feel deeply connected to. There is a link between historical sites and museums on the one hand, and indicators of well-being on the other. People are happier in both natural and built-up scenic locations.

Cuenca as a UNESCO World Heritage site

With its strong cultural tradition and background, the city of Cuenca, also known as the 'Ecuadorian Athens', is home to many creative and intellectual minds – writers, scientists, poets, musicians, philosophers and politicians. In 1982, the Ecuadorian State declared the historic city of *Santa Ana de los Rios de Cuenca* as a national cultural heritage site. Sixteen years later, in 1999, UNESCO officially included the culturally vibrant city in the UNESCO World Heritage List. "People thought Cuenca's nomination was crazy because they underestimated its heritage," says **Fausto Cardoso Martínez**, researcher at the University of Cuenca (UCuenca). Although a true badge of honour, this acknowledgement also brought challenges to Cuenca's inhabitants and government. In Ecuador, cultural heritage management and inventory lies mainly with the cities and municipalities themselves. Cuenca had no inventory that was up to date. Furthermore, there was no

Fausto Cardoso Martínez (on the left) with a couple that has taught him a lot about cultural heritage.



Top photo: La Iglesia de Santo Domingo, part of Cuenca's cultural heritage

Middle and bottom photo: "Cultural heritage is about more than bricks and buildings," says Koenraad Van Balen from Catholic University of Leuven. (Middle photo © Ksenia Ragozina / Shutterstock.com)

Bottom right photo: Cuenca, Ecuador-December 24, 2018: Group of dancers in typical dress of Azuay Province dancing in the streets during a parade Paseo del Niño Viajero, heritage of UNESCO.

planning and management in place for the historic centre, and there was a shortage of professionals who had in-depth knowledge or expertise in cultural heritage conservation. Additionally, the country's national heritage institute, the *Instituto Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural* – a public institution coordinating all administrative levels of cultural heritage in Ecuador – was lacking expertise in city preservation management.

Tackling Cuenca's challenges

In 2006, Van Balen formally got in touch with UCuenca. The professor from KU Leuven, who had expertise on preventive conservation – preventing or delaying the degeneration of cultural heritage – joined forces with his Ecuadorian counterpart, Cardoso Martínez. "The university had decided to add cultural heritage as a project theme to the IUC programme, as Cuenca is on the UNESCO World Heritage List and they saw the potential of using their cultural heritage for local sustainable development," says Van Balen. Both UCuenca and KU Leuven were interested in doing research on the link between cultural heritage and sustainable development, so five professors working at UCuenca's Faculty of Architecture wrote a project proposal built on existing links between the Ecuadorian university and KU Leuven.

At the start of the project, a UNESCO Chair on Preventive Conservation, Monitoring and Maintenance of Monuments and Sites was initiated at KU Leuven, creating the opportunity to develop joint research projects between both universities on city preservation as an instrument for development.

The team set out to support Cuenca conserve its cultural wealth under a VLIR-UOS IUC project, and to have a plan and team in place to keep doing this over the long term as well. Since the cooperation between KU Leuven and UCuenca started in 2007, the Architecture Department at UCuenca is now home to an important research group on cultural heritage that aims to generate the scientific knowledge that is still missing. The group's researchers, PhDs and research assistants among others, contribute to the Ecuadorian Southern region's need for more people with expertise and knowledge of preventive conservation and local development. Two VLIR-UOS scholarship students of the Master in Conservation of Monuments and Sites at KU Leuven are part of this group as well, working on a VLIR-UOS TEAM project at the university. "It was a challenging start," recalls Cardoso Martínez, local project leader. UCuenca had no previous experience in this kind of research. "The fact that there were colleagues from Belgium and other European countries was fundamental."

“ Cultural heritage is about more than bricks and buildings.

Veronica Heras, one of the PhD students who has finished the Master in Conservation of Monuments and Sites in Belgium, developed the much-needed preventive conservation plan for the city with a local team. On top of that, the research group managed to propose a methodology to finish the long-awaited inventory of the city's cultural heritage and developed preventive conservation manuals and other tools for professionals and managers of heritage properties. The acquired knowledge was also summarised in flyers with information about how to care for the features of heritage buildings, why they are damaged, and how this damage can be treated.

International recognition

As a result of the cooperation, UCuenca now has a professional Master programme in

city preservation management. "Some of our alumni are currently part of the teams managing Cuenca's and other regions' cultural heritage, both within the municipality and the national heritage institute. Some are working for other municipalities in the region," says Cardoso Martínez. What is more, these institutes now stimulate their employees to follow the Master programme. Currently, UCuenca is also internationally recognised for its expertise in preventive conservation methods and techniques and is the only university in the country with research in the field of city preservation management. Additionally, the research group has been able to attract national research funds and plays a proactive role in several international research groups, such as the International Council of Monuments and Sites.

Sustainable development

Van Balen emphasises the importance of including cultural heritage management in the structure of development projects. "When you connect the economy, the environment, social development and culture from the beginning, the entire development will be more sustainable." In this case, the conservation of the cultural heritage in Cuenca has contributed to the inhabitants' quality of life, it supports sustainable tourism and

involves diverse stakeholders from within society. One message comes up repeatedly during our conversation with Van Balen: people underestimate the importance of cultural heritage. "Historical places are places that have importance, contribute to people's well-being. Sometimes we see this too late, though." He adds: "People do not always see the true value of cultural heritage. Look at the massive reaction following the fire at *Notre Dame* in Paris — you have to acknowledge the value of cultural heritage and take care of it... before it disappears."





From music to shipwrecks

“Cultural heritage defines who we are”

Luis Enrique Bello Caballero was a joint PhD student in the first phase and now local subproject leader for the cultural heritage project within the IUC programme with Universidad de Oriente and talks about the importance of cultural heritage for people in Santiago de Cuba.

“Cultural heritage is expressed in different forms: music, dance, shipwrecks resulting from naval wars, significant historical events, national heroes, and, of course architecture, the latter ranging from vernacular indigenous construction techniques and monumental modern buildings to the colonial spatial structure of the historic centre and 20th century urban districts. In my opinion, this cultural heritage defines who we are and where we come from. It represents our most authentic individuality, our identity; preserving it, therefore, means protecting ourselves. It means keeping our memory safe to be able to leave a legacy to future generations. If we do not preserve our cultural heritage we are threatening ourselves; we are weakening our cohesion as a society, because losing cultural heritage means jeopardising the local identity and eroding a sense of place attachment and social memory.”



Development cooperation and VLIR-UOS are the result of a strong social commitment. A commitment that is very important today and that is also shared by our students, not just with the students we are educating here, but also the students we train in the South. The questions they raise about the world they live in, that will be their children’s and grandchildren’s world, should be a challenge to all of us.

(VLIR-UOS corporate film 2018)

Herman Van Goethem
Rector of the University of Antwerp

Cultural heritage in Santiago de Cuba

Philippe Meers is professor at the University of Antwerp (UAntwerpen) and specialises in cinema history, audio-visual heritage and the role of movies in European and Latin American societies. He works on cultural heritage conservation and local development within the IUC programme with *Universidad de Oriente* (UO) in Cuba, which has been running for six years now.

“The eastern region and the city of Santiago de Cuba contains more than half of all the cultural heritage in Cuba, parts of which are in very poor condition due to lack of funding, high temperatures and humidity. Awareness among inhabitants was there to some extent, but there was an obvious need to stimulate this awareness and to recognise the cultural heritage’s value. On the institutional level, there was work to be done when it came to implementing preservation measures and valorising cultural heritage.

In practice, decision-makers and stakeholders often did not have



the latest scientific knowledge on preventive conservation, documentation and sustainable management, proper management tools and relevant information for planning, which sometimes resulted in interventions that didn’t really improve the situation. The potential of cultural heritage for local development was therefore underused. The IUC project wanted to promote training and acquisition of new knowledge and skills on both tangible and intangible heritage and movable and built heritage, such as local historical archives, audio-visual archives, popular music practices and local buildings. It also wanted to increase the skills of technicians, researchers and specialists from UO, the Provincial Heritage Centre, and the Ministry of Tourism. Valorising

cultural heritage in society was another goal of the project.

In the first phase, the built heritage team mainly did research on districts and buildings to fill this information gap. There was, for example, a joint PhD (editor’s note: two (or more) different institutions awarding a doctoral degree and taking on shared responsibility for supervision) on managing the urban architectural heritage in Santiago de Cuba taking sustainable development into account. Another joint PhD focused on locally produced documentaries as archives of rural eastern culture.

During the first phase, for a small part, the project focused on passing on the knowledge gained to society.



Researchers from the UO Department of Architecture and Urbanism studied the beautiful district *Vista Alegre*, which is one of the city’s wealthiest areas in terms of built heritage. The Cuban colleagues then presented historical information on specific buildings and their inhabitants in the district’s primary school and tried to show these children the true value of the houses and district that they live in.

Currently, following this first phase, we are focusing on disseminating the acquired knowledge to other Cuban academic circles, but also to a broader audience. We are creating a platform on which you can find a wide range of cultural heritage information and data, by publishing the results of the research from the first phase. In the long run, there will be apps working with the platform. For example, in the *Vista Alegre* district, you will be able to walk around and at the same time get information, photos and maps on your smartphone about buildings and how people used to live in these buildings. The second goal is a publicly accessible toolbox with best practices when dealing with cultural heritage for use by a wide range of stakeholders such as community leaders of the eastern provinces, the tourism sector and other towns and cities.”