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Original article

The unbearable sustainability of cultural heritage: An attempt to create an index of cultural heritage sustainability in conflict and war regions

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ABSTRACT

The present article aims to shed light and encourage reflection on the implications of wars and conflicts for cultural heritage in the Middle East. It does so by developing a cultural heritage sustainability index for regions threatened by conflicts, with a particular focus on active war zones. The index is constructed using data from UNESCO for 207 countries from all continents. Due to the limitations of existing cultural statistics, it was only possible to present the index for one year (2008). To construct this index, we have used the method of multiple indicators and multiple causes (MIMIC) deriving from structural equation modelling. This method allows us to model the concept of cultural heritage sustainability due to conflict as a latent construct, influencing and being influenced by several general and specific indicators.

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1. Introduction

The protection of cultural heritage in the Southern Mediterranean region is challenged by extreme socio-political conditions. This region's cultural heritage is at risk and in some instances, it has already been lost. Cultural heritage is an irreplaceable repository of knowledge, and a valuable resource for economic growth, employment and social cohesion. This repository is formed of tangible and intangible aspects, with the latter only garnering attention of the international community in the last two decades [1]. Next to the inevitable loss from decay, natural hazards such as earthquakes and floods often devastate our cultural legacy [2,3]. In addition, theft, war, civil disorder, terrorism, neglect and vandalism are human factors in the accidental or wilful destruction of our heritage [4]. He later writes that of these threats, armed conflict remains particularly intractable and disturbing [5], and it is this threat that this article concentrates on. In recent times, the most shocking acts of heritage destruction in recent times are by the Taliban dating back to March 2001, with an attack on the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of pieces left in the National Museum of Afghanistan

and the vandalism of the Ministry's storerooms. Among the motivations for these attacks was the aim to eradicate cultural heritage and historical memory.

Although there is a decrease in (general) terrorist attacks compared to previous years and to the peak of 2012 (the total number of terrorist attacks and deaths in 2015 decreased by 13% and 14% respectively, compared to 2014), international terrorism is still a highly problematic issue. Although a global concern, terrorist attacks are geographically heavily concentrated, often affecting the poorest countries the most [6–8]. As reported by several authors [9–12], repeated terror attacks result in a lasting decline in tourist demand or have the potential to wipe it out entirely.

Heritage in the Mediterranean Basin has suffered a significant level of damage in recent centuries as a result of various developments, like illegal excavation and mass tourism. The latter led to the introduction of the International Cultural Tourism Charter in 1999 [13]. The risk resulting from increased exposure to tourism is of course not without great advantage, as it can offer a degree of economic stability for local communities [14,15]. The risks facing cultural heritage today are formidable yet fluid, making them difficult to prevent completely, if at all. Procedures are being put in place to ensure that mass tourism, though it may increase, does not have the same detrimental impact upon culture in the region. However, attacks designed to damage cultural heritage have impact on

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the whole society. A significant difficulty faced by any conservation action is that any concern for culture is dwarfed by the magnitude of human suffering and civil disruption and concerns for our global political and economic environment. State actors are struggling to contain multi-faceted attacks on society, making the conservation of cultural heritage a matter of comparably less importance. Cultural heritage is a non-renewable resource that belongs to all of humanity and protecting it is often viewed as part of our responsibility towards future generations [16].

2. Aim

The present article wants to shed light and enhance a reflection on the implications and impacts of wars and conflicts on cultural heritage's sustainability in the Middle East, focussing on the development of a cultural heritage sustainability index for regions threatened by conflicts, with a particular focus on active war zones.

The concept of sustainable development dates back to the 1970s, when an awareness began to spread of the risk of environmental collapse as a consequence of development associated with economic growth. Other dimensions (such as the social) have since become more prevalent considerations. The Brundtland Report (1987) contains the most widely recognised definition of sustainable development: 'Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (see e.g. [17,18]). Clearly this definition links the fundamental dimensions of development: environmental, economic and social dimensions for the sake of present and future generations [19,20]. Furthermore, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (also known as Rio 2012) tried to provide concrete measures to implement sustainable development and reconcile the economic and environmental goals of the global community. Despite the attention paid to cultural heritage in the different Habitat agendas¹, it plays a marginal role in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. There is only a direct reference in Goal 11 which states that cities should become 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable', through 'inclusive and sustainable urbanization, planning and management' (Target 11.3) and more 'efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage' (Target 11.4). This mention has been considered weak [21] as it does not specifically refer just to cultural heritage but also environmental protection. Moreover, this specific target is limited to the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage, as there is no reference to its valorisation or regeneration.

In recent years, many discussions have occurred over the role of culture as a fourth dimension of sustainable development (e.g. [17,18,22–26]).

This article addresses two main research questions:

- which dimensions of a cultural heritage site's sustainability are most affected due to war conflicts?
- to what extent does the ranking of countries with the lowest sustainability of cultural heritage sites due to conflicts follow the general ranking of conflict-affected countries?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: in the next two sections, we present the literature review and the data and methods used, respectively. Then, the results of the analysis are discussed. Finally, the last section presents the findings, a short reflection, the implications of the article and its conclusions.

3. Literature review

The literature on cultural indexes is growing in size. Endeavours such as the US National Arts Index, Arts Index Netherlands, European Cultural Vitality Index, Indicator Framework on Culture and Democracy, several efforts to construct a European Cultural Index, British NCA Arts Index, ARC Creative City Index, Creative Community Index, Florida's Creative Cities Index, Euro-Creativity Index, Cultural Life Index, Creative Vitality Index, Intercultural Cities Index, Slovenian Asociacija's Cultural Index, and research and reviews such as Srakar et al. [27], Srakar and Vecco [28] and Kregzdaite et al. [29] show the intense efforts behind the construction of an appropriate composite indicator to measure the condition of culture. A comprehensive literature review has identified a limited number of articles dealing specifically with the development of a sustainability index of cultural heritage (see for example, [21,30–32]), where the main attention is paid to the relationship between sustainability and cultural heritage tourism [33]. Therefore, we decided to refer to the literature of tourism sustainability to define our theoretical framework. Sustainable tourism indicators are often used to evaluate tourism sustainability. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) have defined these indicators as 'the set of measures that provide the necessary information to better understand the links between the impact of tourism on the cultural and natural setting in which this takes place and on which it is strongly dependent' ([34]: 21). In the last decades, the issue of sustainability indicators has gained increasing attention (for example, see the comprehensive literature reviews by Butler [35] and Hashemkhani Zolfani et al. [36]). As some authors have stated, sustainability indicators have become an industry all of their own [37–39].

In the literature on sustainable tourism we can identify several attempts to define systems of indicators involving different perspectives [40–50]. Due to the variety of indicator frameworks, Tanguay et al. [41] identified 768 different indicators that may be used to assess tourism sustainability [51]. This variety and diversity of indicators may imply that there is a challenge in selecting the right indicators and using them correctly and according to the research purpose.

To this end, the WTO has created guidelines for the development of a group of indicators suitable for cultural tourism. They are grouped by the three dimensions of sustainable development: the social, economic and environmental [51]. This is the most frequently used classification in the literature of sustainable tourism [39,52–57]. Other studies include culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability [28,58]. In the existing literature on sustainability indices, a vast number of indicators are used (e.g. [39,59,60]). Given that our objective is to propose a new and more flexible index of sustainability for Cultural World Heritage Status, and based on the problems (particularly in finding data and variables) of cultural statistics (as noted in e.g. Bina et al. [61]), we decided to take a different approach. Based on our empirical approach (using structural equation MIMIC models), the number of indicators has been drastically reduced to have a clearer and more direct overview on cultural heritage sustainability.

The theoretical justification for the selection of indicators is based on two main streams of indicators. Firstly, we refer to the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) adopted in 2001 and renewed in 2006. The EU SDS uses a set of sustainable development indicators (SDIs) grouped into ten thematic areas (socioeconomic development; sustainable consumption and production; social inclusion; demographic changes; public health; climate change and energy; sustainable transport; natural resources; global partnership; and good governance) which collectively refer to more than 100 indicators.

¹ For a detailed and comprehensive overview see Nocca [21].

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