Can heritage conservation improve cities' resilience and promote inclusive communities? Developing a Smartheritage agenda for Indian cities

By
Dr Patrizia Riganti, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, United Kingdom
Prof Michele Clarke, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Rationale
The conservation of tangible and intangible heritage is a prerequisite for urban sustainable development. Most of the world's population (54%) is concentrated in urban areas and this percentage should rise to 66% by 2050, with 90% of such increase concentrated in Asia and Africa and an expected grow by 404 million people forecasted in India between 2014 and 2050 (*UN, World Urbanization Prospects 2014*). This constant upwardly trend in urbanization, in particular when coupled with the uncontrolled growth of cities, brings an excessive pressure on the fragile cultural heritage of cities, and may escalate to irreversible damage and ultimate loss. Historic cities in both developed and developing countries possess assets of both cultural and economic value, with strong potential for sustainable growth. Urban heritage and urban landscape are cultural capital assets, resources for sustainable human development, economic growth and job creation, therefore integrated conservation is not only a need but also a necessary investment to achieve sustainable cities.

In recent years, the international debate has focused around these issues. The declaration of the Council of the European Union (2014) has mandated a holistic approach focusing on the need for mainstreaming cultural heritage in national and European policies in order to achieve the Europe 2020 strategy goals. The UNESCO and ICOMOS debate around the crucial role played by culture and culture heritage on sustainable development has impacted on the UN resolution on the "*New Urban Agenda",* in the context of the **2030 SDGs**. *(Declaration of the Council of the European Union, 2014; UN Resolution for Culture and Sustainable Development, 2014; UNESCO Global Report on Culture and Sustainable Urban Development, 2015; ICOMOS Concept Note for the UN post-2015 Agenda and Habitat III 2015; UN Resolution Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development, 2015*).

Research aims and objectives
The paper reflects on the nexus between heritage conservation and the progress towards inclusive, sustainable cities and communities as highlighted by UN Sustainable Goal 11: *Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*. To this extent, Target 11.3 (by 2030 enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and participatory planning), and Target 11.4: "Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" represent stepping stones towards the improvement of cities' social resilience.

The research aims to explore the role that the conservation of cultural heritage can have in the development of a *smart cities agenda* in developing countries like India. In order to conserve heritage, we have to attribute a value to it. The appreciation of cultural heritage in a community enhances social cohesion, its social capital, making a city more resilient against external attacks, including forms of radicalization or segregation. However, the process is not

necessarily straightforward. Labelling something as heritage represents a value judgment, which distinguishes that particular object from others, adding new meaning to it. Pressing questions on "whose heritage" are often brought to the forefront, especially in the case of *shared, dissonant heritage,* e.g. colonial heritage in India. This is even more striking when considering the increase of informal developments (urban slums), which are usually due to the pressure posed by the local *real estate markets* combined with the various forms *of local corruption* or *strongly politicised agendas* (Doshi and Ranganathan, 2017).

In the case of developing countries like India, it is important to understand how local experts in the field or urban development perceive heritage conservation, and how in their opinion this ranks against issues like water sanitation and extreme poverty.

This paper presents the results of a survey of Indian and UK experts carried out in December 2016 in Mumbai, India. The main objectives of the questionnaire were to understand respondents' perception on the barriers to the conservation of cultural heritage in India and the identification of the elements to consider when developing a ***Smart Heritage Urban Agenda*** for **Indian cities.**

The Internet of Things is changing the way we live and plan our connected world; therefore, it becomes necessary to define a new framework able to support heritage-led policymaking in the face of rapid urbanization and aggressive informal urban development. Information technologies can help develop a novel approach to the integrated conservation of urban heritage in developing countries. There is the need to promote inclusive, participative governance to support heritage centred sustainable urban development and economic growth. This can only be done by developing awareness, pride and ownership of local cultural heritage and by removing the barriers to heritage access for the most marginalised sectors of society (the urban poor, ethnic minorities, elderly and disabled) and by empowering women and youth through the promotion, for example, of creative industries for the production of sustainable wealth for all. Information technologies have the potential to help towards these aims.

The Indian context

The Indian context with its contradictions, challenges and opportunities represents a perfect example of a highly culturally diverse region of the world, with an extraordinary tangible and intangible heritage, both autochthon and colonial. Indian cities face highly complex challenges. India is suffering from significant unplanned urban expansion with 35% of the urban population living in slums, growing twice as fast as other urban areas, also due to internal migration phenomena (UNESCO, 2016). This dramatic increase in urban poor is exacerbated by the lack of access to basic public services, including water, sanitation, education and health.

Social inequalities cause the extreme marginalization of women and ethnic minorities and the lack of inclusion of women and youth in any form of governance. The current core heritage conservation challenges in India are:

1. Lack of urban policies on heritage conservation. Heritage conservation is not perceived as a main development objective, given the overall context of severe urban poverty and lack of basic urban services.
2. Lack of awareness about cultural urban heritage and limited citizens' participation in local governance. This plays an important role in the systematic destruction of urban heritage and has placed pressure on historic areas altering their character, often resulting in gentrification.
3. Unplanned and mismanaged tourism. Tourism, despite being a great economic opportunity, is often insensitive to local resources and the needs of local population. This has been

translated into loss of local memory, sense of place and cultural identity, with commodification of heritage sites.

4. <u>Lack of skills on cultural urban heritage</u>. Urban conservation skills are inadequate and there is the strong need of capacity building in this sector, e.g. traditional building conservation techniques.

The government of India has given great attention to the possible development of smart cities and urban observatories, which should gather real time big data and manage it for the wellbeing of citizens. As part of the smart cities agenda in India, a programme to preserve cultural heritage cities has also been launched, but the correlation between the two programmes has not been eviscerated.

Data and main results

A questionnaire was distributed in December 2016 to experts in the field of urban development gathered in Mumbai for a workshop dedicated to smart cities in India and the creation of urban observatories. The majority of respondents were of Indian nationality, whilst a small number came from the UK. They were either academics or governmental representatives working on urban sustainable development.

The questionnaire was handed out to 80 participants in paper format at the end of 2 days of debate, and after discussion had taken place on the importance that heritage has in achieving SDG 11 (sustainable cities). Respondents were required to fill the 2 pages questionnaire. This was articulated into questions aimed at eliciting the perception that each respondents had about the role that heritage had in the sustainable cities agenda and what the Internet of things could do to promote the conservation of heritage and include citizens in its management.

Most of the respondents acknowledged the role that heritage has in the formation of local pride and identity, and the importance of its preservation, despite other social issues such as poverty and sanitation might be of paramount importance.

Key words: *cultural heritage, smart cities, sustainable cities*