

**Challenges and opportunities for cultural heritage:
The role of Member States, European institutions and international organisations
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The notion and importance of cultural heritage

“Europe’s cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, is our common wealth”. It is not limited to a few outstanding works and is not only of interest for the happy few or specialists. Cultural heritage is not about isolated ‘objects’: it is the daily life environment of the citizens. It offers a link between their past, present and future, and needs to be contextualised. Taking into account that it is the daily life environment of the citizens and that people deeply care about their heritage, decisions on cultural heritage and even those that have an indirect impact on cultural heritage concern all citizens.

Challenges and opportunities

Being part of the daily life of the citizens, cultural heritage is ‘living heritage’ and not ‘static’ nor ‘frozen’. And because ‘we have not inherited cultural heritage from our fathers, but are borrowing it from our children’, one of the challenges is to make the best use of cultural heritage whilst ensuring its transmission to the next generation. This is particularly challenging since cultural heritage is non-renewable: once lost, it is lost forever.

A number of challenges are intrinsic to cultural heritage conservation itself or its transmission, but external factors play a role as well because of their impact: legislation and regulation in other domains impact on cultural heritage, lifestyles are changing; climate change, natural disasters, armed conflicts, globalisation and (uncontrolled) development are additional examples.

Support for cultural heritage in Europe and elsewhere has only increased since the ‘60s and ‘70s. Cultural heritage activities have always offered and business opportunities and ways to address economic, social and environmental issues, but these have not always been well understood outside the sector itself. This is now changing: cultural heritage is increasingly perceived as a resource, a cultural capital. Whilst this brings many opportunities, it brings some additional challenges, one of them being the different time frames used by business and cultural heritage (return on investments in a few years, in comparison to working for eternity)

Stakeholders

The number of stakeholders has increased over the years to include not only the national authorities, owners and professionals, but also international organisations and European institutions, local and regional authorities, and last but not least civil society, citizens and communities. Each of these stakeholders has specific interests and responsibilities. Clarifying their roles, organising the dialogue and exchange of information between them in order to avoid duplication, ensuring that the action of some does not annihilate the efforts of the others, developing a holistic approach and creating synergies are main challenges for the years to come.

The European institutions

With its 1974 resolution, the European Parliament has been among the first to advocate in favour of involvement of the European institutions in cultural heritage work. The social and economic impact of heritage activities has been demonstrated in Europe since the ‘70s and ‘80 under the impulse of the sector, the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Europe has also an important corpus of standard setting instruments on cultural heritage developed by the Council of Europe; the programmes to reach out to citizens include the very successful European Heritage Days and the new European Heritage Label.

For the European institutions, however, the major challenges are economic development, social inclusion and sustainable development. The task ahead is thus to convince the decision makers that these major challenges cannot be tackled in a sustainable way with benefits for all citizens without using the cultural capital of our heritage wisely, by mainstreaming culture and cultural heritage in their strategic plans for Europe, and therefore by ensuring that these plans themselves are not just investment plans but innovative and tailored to the needs.