The REACH Project Contribution to Protecting, Preserving and Valuing Tangible and Intangible Heritage Through Participation

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Abstract. This paper aims to demonstrate how social participation in culture contributes fostering the resilience of tangible and intangible heritage, and to enhance its preservation and conservation. The REACH Social Platform brings together a wide community of relevant heritage stakeholders' representatives. They include research communities, heritage practitioners from public and private cultural institutions and organisations as well as policy-makers at European, national, regional and local levels. Based on a focused, critical mapping of existing research and practice, the objective of the Social Platform is to develop a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities for research and innovation in the participatory preservation, (re-)use and management of cultural heritage. The project identifies theoretical participatory models and tests them in practice through four thematic pilots. Final aim of the Social Platform is to propose the adoption of an integrated model of resilient European cultural heritage milieux.

Keywords: Participatory approaches · Cultural heritage · Social innovation · Resilience · Minority heritage · Small towns heritage · Institutional heritage · Rural heritage

1 Introduction

In the context of radical social changes taking place at global levels, Europe faces the need for its citizens to live together in peace and mutual respect and to value and enjoy the diversities, which they bring to their respective societies. In this light, protecting, preserving and valuing tangible and intangible cultural heritage plays an important role in contributing to social integration in Europe. Identifying and assessing participatory methodologies for enhancing and unlocking the potential of cultural heritage for social good is discussed in this paper.

The ability to link participatory approaches with capacity of resilience is the focus of the REACH Social Platform. The Social Platform is developed by the REACH project, 'RE-designing Access to Cultural Heritage for a wider participation in preservation,

(re-)use and management of European culture' [1]. REACH is a Coordination and Support Action funded by the Horizon 2020 programme of the European Commission in the frame of its call about participatory approaches and social innovation in culture, as part of the Societal Challenge 6 'Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies' [2].

The scope of the REACH Social Platform is to identify good practices of participation based on a bottom-up approach and demonstrate how this approach is the most suitable for facilitating the resilience of communities as well as the resilience of heritage (tangible and intangible) as it takes into account the needs of local populations and it alerts to the complex interactions between people and places.

The largest number of participants has been a priority along the whole process of establishment of the Social Platform and the pre-condition for its sustainability on a longer period, well beyond the conclusion of the project funded by the European Union.

2 The REACH Project Proposal for a Resilient Cultural Heritage

From a wider point of view, resilience is the capacity of a system to renew and reorganize itself after disturbance, offering strategies for the management of change and for social and economic development. Resilience is investigated in the REACH project from the perspective of the capacity of the cultural heritage system (including tangible and intangible heritage) to survive and readapt to political, social, historical and economical changes.

In this respect, REACH has designed a rich programme of activities to support and coordinate pilot initiatives in the area of participation in cultural heritage. These initiatives include online and on site activities that contribute to develop a sustainable Social Platform. The Social Platform is a community space that aims to offers a forum for debate, a network of research and cultural organizations, a collection of innovation projects, a database of good practices and a range of hand-on experiences of collaboration between institutions and local interest groups. Through these experiences, a large number of research and cultural heritage partners, from all over Europe has worked to broaden citizen engagement in the cultural sector and to strengthen the consciousness and awareness of the importance of culture and cultural heritage for communities and societies.

The project carried out two complementary objectives.

The first objective is to support the research on cultural heritage from the point of view of the adoption of participatory approaches. The work of four leading edge European Universities and of the Institut für Museumsforschung of Prussian Cultural Foundation (Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, SPK) was to map and to provide analysis of research results achieved in previous programmes. With a particular focus on the research and innovation programmes of the European Union, Coventry University (the Coordinator of the REACH Project), Granada University, ELTE University in Budapest, Charles University in Prague and SPK identified current and emerging research trends to offer authoritative new knowledge of the cultural heritage field of investigations to European, national and regional policy makers.

The second objective is coordination and communication about the research and innovation initiatives in the domain of cultural heritage, carried out by European organisations. The efforts of the REACH Social Platform aim to offer benefits to its participants, expanding knowledge of complementary research domains and of new research methodologies, generating opportunities for cooperation, offering pathways to wider user engagement with research outputs. This objective was achieved through the communication and dissemination work carried out by Promoter S.r.l., leader of the Communication and Dissemination work-package of the REACH project, in collaboration with all the project's partners and with very appreciated voluntary contributions from associate partners and in particular Gogate S.r.l..

All inputs received by the REACH Social Platform from its various contributors – institutions, academies, civic interest groups, business and public administrations, etc. - have been addressed to give culture and cultural heritage a greater, more relevant and even transformative role in the economy, communities and territories.

In this respect, REACH has worked on the development of an integrated model of resilient European cultural heritage milieux based on a two-step process: while the first step is the construction of participatory models based on the theoretical understanding of resilient European cultural heritage, the second step consists in testing and applying this model in a series of participatory pilots. The two steps are proceeding in parallel. Preliminary milestones have been achieved and are documented in the public deliverables published on the project's website [10], while final results are expected by the end of 2020.

3 Participatory Models

In times of growing xenophobia and extremist nationalism the involvement and participation of local communities throughout Europe seems more important than ever and the need for an effective model of participatory heritage practices seems crucial [3].

Starting by the assessment of the work carried out by current and completed projects, the REACH Social Platform aimed to gather understanding and lessons about the reasons of their successes and failures.

This analysis leaded to discover and evaluate a wealth of information that the REACH project used for a twofold scope. On one hand, it allowed a critical consideration on how participatory work is able to deliver effective results in terms of research investigation and innovation implementation. On the other hand, it created the basis for the elaboration and definition of a set of theoretical models for management, preservation and (re-)use of cultural heritage. In addition, the analysis presented options of the formation of practical participatory models, consisting of a flexible protocol that can be adapted to different cultural heritage contexts.

The proposed models were tested into four participatory pilots of a diverse nature, working with different types of communities and stakeholders, in different situations and political climates. In this way, the models have been assessed in varied circumstance to establish a level of robustness, ahead of being finalised and presented by the project.

The REACH participatory models aim to provide indications to the cultural heritage actors to develop participatory activities, being them researchers, cultural managers,

curators, civic interest groups, administrators and policy makers. These models should be dynamic and resilient, to become easily adaptable to social, cultural and economic changes. On the basis of the concept of 'extended epistemology' elaborated by Heron and further developed in collaboration with Reason [4], two underlying methodologies were identified by the REACH project and adapted for the definition of its models, namely: 'Participatory Action Research' (PAR) and 'Plan-Do-Check-Act Management' cycle (PDCA).

The scope of the definition of the REACH participatory models has been to draw a level of legitimacy to research approaches that, integrating theory and action, explore practical ways able to generate new knowledge. Adopting the REACH models, different actors are engaged in the investigation on cultural heritage, including the targets of the research, i.e., in the case of the REACH pilots, visitors and curators of museums, minority or rural communities and small towns heritage managers.

The work conducted in the REACH project for the definition of its proposition of participatory models included an emphasis on social assessment and ethics, with a particular regard to the themes of gender, age and identity, offering a theoretical and practical basis for starting, conducting, adjusting and evaluating participatory project.

The REACH project noted that, often, participatory cultural heritage activities, despite their intrinsic, economic and societal benefits, are considered as add-on activities, receiving short-term funding. It is a lesson learnt that for a participatory project to be successful, it is essential to incorporate also long-term strategies that involve planning and decision-making processes, as they are needed to maximise the advantages of public engagement.

4 Participatory Pilots

The REACH project carried out for experimental pilots to assess the models for participatory research in cultural heritage.

Each pilot assessed and validated the models in different thematic and geographic areas. The pilots focused on strengths and challenges, discussing opportunities and threads, and how these occur throughout different regions in Europe. They considered participatory approaches within their respective communities, even if sharing areas of commonality, interacting with stakeholders to test ideas through a series of local encounters.

With the aim to advocate the socio-economic value of civic participation in preservation, (re-)use and management of cultural heritage, the pilots gathered and discussed best practices in the development of resilient policies in community building, education, data management and protection of intellectual rights. Furthermore, the pilots demonstrated successful cases in cultural tourism and provided examples of improved public services for cultural heritage management.

The REACH pilots covered four thematic areas of the European heritage: (1) minority heritage in collaboration with Roma community in Hungary, (2) institutional heritage in collaboration with museums of different size in Germany, (3) rural heritage in collaboration with local associations in Andalusia and Italy, (4) small towns heritage in collaboration with local interest groups in Czech Republic, Poland and Italy.

A special focus is deserved in the REACH pilots to the case of intangible cultural heritage and its preservation through participatory practices. As said in the UNESCO website: "*The term 'heritage' has evolved considerably over time. Initially referring exclusively to the monumental remains of cultures, the concept of heritage has gradually been expanded to embrace living culture and contemporary expressions. As a source of identity, heritage is a valuable factor for empowering local communities and enabling vulnerable groups to participate fully in social and cultural life.*" [6] These are the concepts adopted by the REACH partners in a kind of 'circular' investigation triggered through the pilots. An initial research (mostly desk research, supported by daily practices of the participating cultural heritage institutions) highlighted how intangible heritage is at the basis of all the four thematic areas. Further, in the pilots, intangible heritage demonstrated its fundamental role in valuing and preserving cultural heritage, such as for the cases of: the Roma heritage in Hungary, the historical irrigation system on Sierra Nevada (Spain), the various stories connected with collections, including personal stories, as a mean to engage visitors with the museums, and last but not least witnesses of people living in the small towns and the memories from their ancestors. Eventually, evidences gathered within the pilots went back to the researchers of REACH as an enriched basis to plan new investigations and to advocate new policies and innovation programmes for preservation, (re-)use and management of cultural heritage.

4.1 Participatory Pilot on Minority Heritage

The Minority Heritage pilot, coordinated by ELTE University in Budapest, focused on marginalized minorities and, in particular, on Roma communities mostly based in Hungary but also in other European Countries [7].

It studied heritage practices aiming at establishing a Roma minority heritage. The analysis of case studies, mostly based on empirical work have shown the importance of social aspects of the cultural activities in this particular context, focusing on social cohesion that Roma heritage-related institutions, organisations or individual actors maintain. In most cases, this aspect is realised in the form of education, even if are other options were also found in the pilot. Cultural rights were investigated, examining participatory methods and community-involvement from the perspective of gaining equal rights in cultural recognition.

The experience demonstrated how the institutionalisation of Roma (re-)appropriated cultural heritage has resulted in economic and social revival and has reinforced social inclusion, contributing to create more tolerant societies in Central Europe (Fig. 1).

4.2 Participatory Pilot on Institutional Heritage

The Institutional Heritage pilot, coordinated by SPK (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) in Berlin, compared the effects of participatory approaches in the case of large cultural heritage institutions with international audiences as opposed to the case of smaller institutions targeting local users [8].

The pilot carried out a comparison of three museums of different types, describing their concepts of participatory engagement, areas of activities, approaches, methodologies, gaps and impacts. The three museums are: the Industrie- und Filmmuseum

Fig. 1. Pictures from a local encounter of the Roma heritage pilot, Pécs, May 2019

(Industry- and Film Museum) in Wolfen, the Haus der Geschichte (House of History) in Wittenberg and the Museum für Islamische Kunst (Museum for Islamic Art) in Berlin. Using these three case studies, it has been possible to examine their options for participatory work, highlighting needs, difficulties, limits and gaps of this type of activity.

The activities of the pilot aimed at evaluating the complexity of involvement, inclusion and engagement of citizens in institutional cultural heritage, exploring possibilities and limitations of participation. It concluded that collaborative and participatory activities can only be implemented and consolidated if all parties involved (museums, politicians, wider society) work together. The pilot mapped common requirements for these collaborative activities in order to identify successful approaches and lessons learnt while fostering a constructive dialogue and building mutual awareness between people, museums and their cultural heritage (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. "Bilderschau", March 2019 (Photography by Friederike Berlekamp)

4.3   Participatory Pilot on Rural Heritage

The Rural Heritage pilot, coordinated by the University of Granada, promoted participation in cultural and environmental protected natural areas as a way to solve conflicts between preservation of historical sites and exploitation of touristic and economic activities.

The case study focused on the preservation of rural areas of Sierra Nevada (Spain) by the engagement of local communities in the restoration and recovery of historical irrigation systems (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Cleanliness of Fuente de los Caños, Sorbas, Almería, February 2020 (Photography by E. Aramburu and R. Corselli)

The result of this pilot is the implementation of a co-governance initiative for the territorial safe-keeping as the best way to protect agrarian landscapes and promote a more resilient rural heritage (tangible and intangible).

A second focus of the pilot, carried out by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development in collaboration with Politecnico of Milan, concerned the case study of the *marcita* meadow and highway project at Ticino Park [9], in the North of Italy, an area recognised - as for Sierra Nevada - as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (Fig. 4).

The *marcita* meadows is an ancient practice based on a thin layer of underground and surface water flowing over the meadows; this flow avoids the grass freezing in wintertime enabling the creation of a fertile and varied landscape. However, this is now endangered and is at risk of disappearing, due to over-industrialisation and to the construction of new infrastructure, such as the expansion of the highway. The establishment of the Ticino Park is defending, protecting and enhancing the quality of the agrarian

Fig. 4. The landscape of the *marcita* meadows: heritage at risk (Photography by Fabio Casale)

landscape, but also contributing to the preservation of the intangible heritage connected with this old practice. A series of active participatory tools have been established, for use in primary schools, with university students (digging workshops) and with farmers (participating in water management courses). Encounters, walking tours, a travelling exhibition, brochures and videos are used to raise public awareness and share cultural knowledge.

These initiatives have highlighted issues of resilience, tangible and intangible heritage, by connecting people, at local level, and promoting an alternate economic model.

4.4 Participatory Pilot on Small Towns Heritage

The Small Towns Heritage pilot, coordinated by Charles University Prague, carried out in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Economic Development and Politecnico of Milan, analysed the representations and (re-)valuing of the heritage owned by villages and small towns in the Czech Republic, in Poland and in central Italy. Focusing on a variety of European regions, considerations were made about the liaisons among heritage objects, local history, natural and social landscapes, including how they are displayed by museums, through pageants and festivals, in heritage trails and urban spaces. The pilot identified major frameworks of identities and values to which this heritage is associated, highlighting how this understanding can help the development of more effective and innovative cultural policies (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Picture from 'Small towns in promotion of their cultural heritage' workshop, Prague, February 2018

5   Collection of Good Practices

During the first year of the project's life, an internal working group (composed by one representative from each project partner) was established to carry out the specific task of collecting good practices in social participation for cultural heritage research [5].

Carried out with the contribution of project partners, the resulting repository comprises currently 110 records of European and extra European participatory activities in the field of cultural heritage, with an emphasis on small-scale, localised interventions, but also including examples of larger collaborative projects and global or distributed online initiatives (Fig. 6).
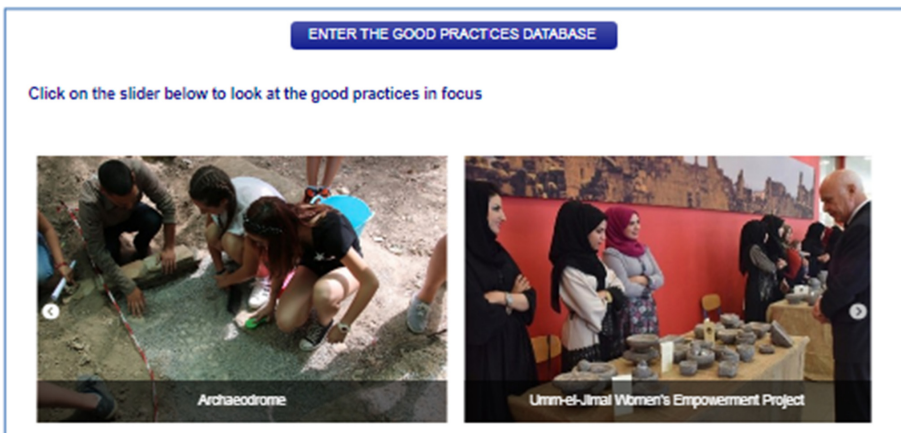

Fig. 6. REACH good practice database

The database demonstrates successful cases of job creation and economic growth based on cultural heritage use and re-use, innovation in cultural tourism, and examples of improved public services for cultural heritage management.

The dataset of good practices is published as an Open Data collection on the open-heritage.eu website, under the Free Culture Creative Commons License 'Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International', as a browsable catalogue of resources that can support and stimulate other people's work.

The best practice collection represents a fundamental component of the Social Platform established by the REACH project, it will continue to grow, hopefully with the addition of new entries over the coming periods.

6   Online Services

The REACH Social Platform combines a physical dimension with online services.

In addition to the traditional website [10] that normally is 'frozen' with the conclusion of the EU funding period, two online services were designed to support the continuation of the platform in the digital sphere. They are the open-heritage.eu platform and the Digital Gallery.

A network of common interest was established among the project's partners and its associates. The network was enlarged with the participation of the key stakeholders who met in Brussels in March 2019 in the occasion of the 'Horizon for Heritage Research' Symposium, organised by the REACH project under the aegis of the European Commission to discuss the establishment of a permanent coordination structure.

The open-heritage.eu digital platform and the Digital Gallery of posters and videos represent the spaces to continue the coordination efforts and the collaboration among the participants in the REACH network, within a longer perspective.

6.1   Open-Heritage.eu Digital Platform

The dataset of the best practices and the resources produced by the REACH project as well as by its associate partners are hosted on open-heritage.eu (Fig. 7).
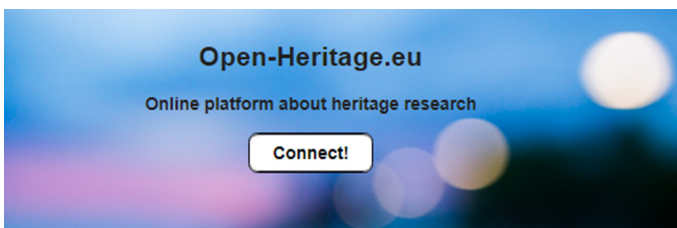

Fig. 7.   The Open-heritage.eu digital platform

Open-heritage.eu is an independent online digital platform. Even if naturally connected to the REACH project's website, the digital platform has the ambition to become

a long term product, surviving to the project life-time and representing a valuable instrument to support a permanent coordination of the cultural heritage research.

The online platform provides in turn links to various services that are offered to the community of research to share knowledge and information. In addition to the thematic organisation of participatory experiences and good practices, the platform provides a rich repository of data and resources, comprising policy documents, publications, updated information on events and activities promoted by a multitude of projects and institutions.

The platform is conceived as a 'multi-actor platform', opened to contributions from its users (partners, associate partners and general visitors). It aims to attract the interest of the different stakeholders who play a relevant part in sustaining the scope initiated by the REACH Social Platform, to advance understanding and to contribute to unlocking the potential of participatory approaches and social innovation in culture.

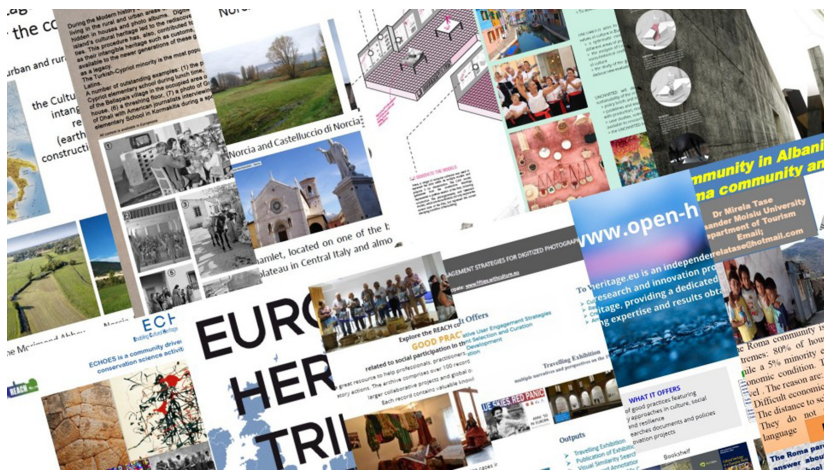## 6.2   Digital Gallery of Posters and Videos About Cultural Heritage Research

Fig. 8. The REACH digital gallery

The Social Platform launched in spring 2020 a call for posters and videos entitled 'Designing Participation for Cultural Heritage', as a contingency plan for the cancelation of the conference that was planned to take place in Pisa in June 2020, due to the pandemic. Originally thought as an instrument to accompany the conference, the Digital Gallery became an extraordinary opportunity of participation for researchers and cultural heritage institutions, to present projects' results, initiatives, innovation activities, with a particular focus on the adoption of participatory approaches (Fig. 8).

The Digital Gallery offers a rich exhibition of posters and videos tackling different themes that include: societal cohesion, sustainability and environmental/ecological responsibility, rapid societal change, narratives, place/place-making and identity.

The initiative was successfully accepted by the REACH community of stakeholders and in few months the collection has been populated by tens of multidisciplinary contributions showing the progresses of projects and new activities implemented by cultural heritage organizations and research centres in collaboration with civic participation.

The gallery is hosted by the website of the REACH project website and will remain accessible via the open-heritage.eu platform, in the coming years, when more submissions will contribute to gather and to share innovative ideas and results.

Thanks to its diversity and heterogeneity, the Digital Gallery is an excellent example of resilience and participation that can inspire actors of the cultural heritage community to adopt and develop more participatory practices.

7 Conclusion

The REACH project highlighted the role of participatory approaches in the preservation, (re-)use and management of cultural heritage and demonstrated how social participation and civil engagement stoke the vital and dynamic dimension of heritage fostering its resilience.

The results of pilot experiences together with the development of participatory models helped to define the features of a resilient European cultural heritage, able to innovate and to survive to social changes and cultural transformations. The COVID-19 crisis represented a concrete case where resilience of cultural heritage was experimented and participatory approaches demonstrated their value.

By analysing several institutional proposals and initiatives, the REACH project produced a selection of participatory models and concrete experiences that demonstrate a strong capacity of the European cultural field to foster positive reactions by the society and an active participation of citizen into the promotion and preservation of the European heritage. The collection of good practices produced a wide and multidisciplinary database that is accessible to the whole community of cultural heritage institutions and open to further and future contributions. The open-heritage.eu digital platform provides access to a wide and varied range of papers, data and links that document experiences and practices produced by the work of a multi-disciplinary community of researchers. The REACH Digital Gallery is a live witness of the richness and diversity of approaches taken by European researchers to valuing cultural heritage.

During its time life, REACH produced, gathered and documented participatory practices in culture and cultural heritage using both the experiences produced in the framework of its pilots and the knowledge and investigations developed by other projects and professionals who collaborated with REACH and joined its network.

All together, the results of the REACH Social Platform are offered to the cultural heritage community to continue the construction of a permanent coordination of their research. Such coordination will be able to deliver stronger impact and wider benefits to the European society, contributing to the transition towards the ambitions of the new Horizon Europe programme.

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