

KEEP ON: Effective policies for durable and self-sustainable projects in the cultural heritage sector



How to ensure durability and sustainability of cultural heritage? Although the largest share of cultural budgets in the majority of states is spent on heritage and despite the fact that there exists a number of European Union programmes tackling heritage thus ensuring substantial investments, they do not necessarily ensure sustainability of heritage assets. Many cultural institutions still have difficulties to cover even basic maintenance costs. This issue is of great importance to the whole EU area, where recent economic downturn and COVID-19 pandemic crisis put cultural heritage lower on the priority list.

The concept of sustainability is comprehensive and does not necessarily relate to funding, nor funding indispensably ensures sustainability. It is largely dependent on the modality of heritage assets management, involvement of the local community, environmental issues, safeguarding of heritage values, etc. KEEP ON is the Interreg Europe, ERDF funded project which, in the period 2018-2023 tries to improve public policies in the cultural heritage sector in terms of delivering high quality projects that allow results to remain sustainable with reasonable public funding. It should have a long-lasting impact on regional development. These improved policies, which the project addresses, should bring to an end the shameful but usual approach to heritage sustainability: "when the project is over, everything is over". Surprisingly, few cultural institutions are yet thinking explicitly about sustainability. Sustainability planning needs to begin long before the project implementation and should be carefully tackled by the funding authorities in their policy documents. On the other side, it is also important to activate private resources apart from public sources of financing, especially against the backdrop of a sharp decline in public and private investments in many Member States and the implications of globalisation. The main questions addressed by the project are the following: When the public funding is over, how do institutions sustain their work for the future? How do they get funds for their future operational costs? What impact sustainable heritage projects have on wider aspects of society (economy, urban planning, community, etc.) and how can public policies support beneficiaries in the self-sustainability of their projects? An EU-wide, interregional perspective is taken to find answers.

Partners from seven countries (Croatia, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Spain) work on the project addressing six policy instruments (3 ERDF instruments and 3 regional/local strategies) through concrete action plans to be prepared. Countries involved are extremely rich in cultural heritage, but most of them are also the most vulnerable economies (ES, PT, IT, GR). They are accompanied by Poland as the largest EU cohesion policy beneficiary, the Netherlands having a cultural policy model with high involvement of local communities which may have a strong impact on sustainability, and an advisory partner from Croatia. So far, experience gained within the partnership shows that there are substantial differences between country approaches to heritage sustainability. For most countries, still greatest challenge lies in the sustainability of

cultural heritage financing as well as in insufficiently innovative knowledge of cultural management. Some countries, on the other hand, have overcome those challenges and one of them is the Netherlands. Sustainability of heritage financing, for example, is sought in adaptive re-use of cultural heritage assets in the Netherlands, often aimed at wide markets. One of the challenges frequently addressed in the Netherlands is specifically related to religious heritage; due to the decreasing number of religious people, churches find a new use as concert halls, hotels and restaurants, educational centres or student housing (Figure 1). In this way, not only steady funding is ensured; it also impacts durability of the building since it is in a regular use. This, further on enhances moisture control in the building as well as all other natural phenomena which may affect its longevity. Examples of such adaptive re-use of heritage assets may be inspirational for other countries but are sometimes very context-dependent. In countries whose population is closely tied to their religion, such practices, however, may seem inappropriate.

Figure 1

Apart from concrete practices, the Dutch experience may also be inspirational for other countries in terms of policy planning: heritage policies are usually long-term policies (20-30 years) reflecting sustainability and are independent of the political influence even when the ruling parties change. On the other hand, the Dutch greatest challenge is environmental and ecologic sustainability. The rising carbon emissions in the air greatly influence the water levels in many Dutch cities. This further presents direct threat to heritage and is a serious challenge in the long-term. This is why public policies often focus on the decrease of carbon emissions and energy consumption, use of resistant materials and insulation in heritage restoration as well as on the use of renewable energy sources. These issues are not only addressed by the cultural policy but rather involve a holistic approach from the point of view of urban planning, education, industry, science, etc. A special attention is also on the public awareness raising. This, however, requires a long-term approach.

Examples from other countries also prove interesting approaches. The Polish case of the Royal Castle in Chęciny is a good example of cultural tourism boost while the Portuguese eco-museum of flax in Ribeira de Pena (Figure 2) can be commended for its participatory approach to museum planning and management. As in the Dutch case, re-use of the religious buildings, especially in rural areas is also one of the urgent topics in Spain. The project of restoration and re-use of the old monastery in the Ribeira Sacra region (Figure 3) was an answer to the problem of creating a new use of this historic space. By restoring the historic building of the monastery for a hospitality function, turning it into hotel, a safeguarding of a built heritage is ensured, the monastery kept its architectural value, and it also became a new driving force for the tourism development of the whole area. There are several main stakeholders involved: Paradores de Turismo de España, a public, state owned chain of Spanish luxury hotels, which run hotels in adapted castles, palaces, fortresses, convents, monasteries and other historic buildings. This company invested funds in the conservation of the monastery while additional funding is provided by the corresponding Ministry and General Directorate of Cultural Heritage.

Figure 2

Figure 3

The interregional learning process approach adopted within the partnership of the KEEP ON project may benefit the preparation of action plans, which are considered as interventions in policy instruments addressing previously detected gaps in ensuring heritage sustainability. Once introduced, they should ensure that future projects funded under these instruments would justify the investments and result in durable and sustainable heritage projects.

The whole process is participatory in nature and involves stakeholders in each country who contribute with their knowledge and expertise. It started with a comprehensive summary of the policy instrument which served as a basis for the policy instruments and experiences benchmark exercise. Analysis of policy instruments of the six countries showed that cultural heritage is not always clearly identified as a priority but there is an awareness of its developmental potential. This is why it is integrated in the respective development plans through some wider topics. Policy improvements, however, are needed in the sense of setting up clear and specific indicators which will show the impact of funded projects on the local communities as well as on regional development. If policy instruments fail to measure their impacts according to previously set indicators, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the success of the intervention and to plan future developments accordingly.

After defining good practices, surveys with cultural heritage managers have been done as to detect good practices in heritage sustainability. Additionally, good practices already funded within the existing policy instruments were analysed and collected. The latest produced deliverable of the project is a practical guide on durability and sustainability of cultural heritage, which first detects challenges and threats to cultural heritage sustainability and then responds with “how-tos” in order to respond and provide solutions to those challenges. The greatest challenges are seen in economic, environmental, socio-cultural and political pressures but also concern heritage values and heritage standardisation. Heritage management challenges are specifically addressed since good governance is a key factor in ensuring sustainability and durability of heritage projects and it justifies the investments.

The work so far performed serves as a basis for the preparation of the mentioned action plans in each country. Four last semesters of the project are reserved for implementation and monitoring of action plans and in this way, important feedback on the project results will be provided. The project should thus ensure better understanding of the importance of self-sustainability as a smart tool to ensure a long-lasting effect of investments. Public policies can serve as catalysts in achieving improved durability and self-sustainability of heritage assets while striving for excellence. Since good practices are spread among policy makers, beneficiaries and stakeholders, this should have impact on their increased capacities. In the end, better understanding and activation of private funding in cultural heritage projects could be ensured.

The KEEP ON project intends to provide a valuable input to all EU stakeholders with a special focus on the forthcoming post-2020 Cohesion policy. The new EU Cohesion policy 2021-2027 sees the key role of cultural heritage in addressing social and economic challenges, and has a strong focus on results as to facilitate monitoring and measurement of project outcomes and to introduce changes. The plan is to ensure substantial budget increase for culture (17%) while heritage is set as one of the priorities. Also, synergies between culture and education are advocated, which is an opportunity for insufficient knowledge of cultural heritage management. Thus, the plan is to double the Erasmus+ budget. Economic dimension is again in the focus alongside social and identity aspects which, again, sets new opportunities for heritage. One of the reasons for poor sustainability of heritage projects was so far their poor evaluation and

inadequate success indicators. New Cohesion policy cherishes setting up concise and appropriate indicators, thus sustainability of heritage might finally be achieved. Strategic planning, therefore, should not be a buzzword only, but an instrument for enhancing and sustaining heritage values for present and future generations. Post-COVID-19 crisis might, however, set up new priorities and give birth to new challenges for heritage. This may require even greater creativity and innovation for ensuring heritage durability and sustainability where the role of action plans preparation within the KEEP ON project may be evermore important and challenging.

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Project information and sources

Project homepage: <https://www.interregeurope.eu/keepon/>