Assessing the impact of heritage-making: the SoPHIA Model

Mauro BAIONI, Roma TRE University, Italy
Annalisa CICERCHIA, Roma TRE University, Italy
Paola DEMARTINI, Roma TRE University, Italy
Lucia MARCHEGIANI, Roma TRE University, Italy
Michela MARCHIORI, Roma TRE University, Italy
Flavia MARUCCI, Roma TRE University, Italy

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From cultural assets to heritage-making

International conventions consider *heritage* as a *cultural asset* inherited from the past, material and immaterial, that we do not want to lose, and we want to pass on (Unesco convention, 1972, art. 1, Faro Convention, 2005, art. 2). Conventions often use the word "*source*" or "*resource*" referring to objects, places and practices that are recognized as a common heritage (ICOMOS, 2005, par. 4; ICOMOS, 2011, preamble). By rejecting the idea of "sources" as something to exploit, heritage assets should be considered a *common good* that "tells stories about ourselves" and "plays a central role for our sense of identity as individuals and as communities".

Dealing with heritage boosts a *social process* that builds a relationship between individuals and communities. "Heritage is everything we value and want to pass on to the following generations. These things are usually objects, places, and practices that we use to tell stories about ourselves and play a central role in shaping our sense of identity as individuals and as communities" **(**Giaccardi, 2011, p. 17).

We can affirm that there is no heritage without someone engaged in its transmission, by acting with other people in understanding, teaching, and preserving it. Equally, there is no transmission without people reusing, reproducing, and adapting heritage assets for their personal life, work, and enjoyment. Thus, the definition and reconfiguration of heritage is not only "responding to institutional discourses and policies around heritage holdings". Rather, it is also a "lived community practice" whereby different chains of experiences are assembled to generate new valuable affective environments and objects relationally, in the interplay between the global hierarchies of value and the local

contexts" (Gonzalez, 2014, p. 383). In a nutshell, heritage is "always in the process of making" (Van Knippemberg, 2015).

What if we shift the attention to heritage-making, intended as a social process based on the transmission from the past to the future generations, through the present? What if we connect the quality of interventions, plans, and programs to the values deriving from heritage-making?

An innovative approach has been proposed by a recent H2020 European project, called SoPHIA (Marchiori et al., 2021), which aimed to create a Social Platform for a Holistic Impact Assessment model to evaluate investments on cultural heritage (CH).

The SoPHIA model

The model adopts a multi-dimensional approach based on three axes (Fig. 1), that emphasizes:

- the multifaceted aspects of the impacts related to CH interventions (multi-domain);
- the complex interactions among stakeholders that can have different and sometimes conflicting interests on CH (people);
- the balance between current needs and the legacy towards the next generations (time).

Fig. 1. SoPHIA Model

The innovative approach proposed by SoPHIA starts from the analysis of the complex, intersectoral, and multidimensional nature of the impacts. The assessment model encompasses six themes of potential impact that need to be considered: social capital and governance; identity of place; quality of life; education, creativity and innovation; work and prosperity; protection.

Its main innovation lies in detecting interconnections/crosscutting issues and countereffects among themes and sub-themes. In fact, themes and sub-themes are not to be considered as separate entities, since many of them interrelate in more than one way, both positive and negative. Looking at

the whole picture and at the interconnections between sectors allows to identify relevant issues to be tackled. When assessing a CH intervention, it is important to include the analysis of countereffects to be aware of (possible) undesired or harmful impacts to people and the environment. Thus, the model represents a way out of the conventional silos-based approach in the social sciences' field. This does not implies dismantling the silos, but rather creating areas of controlled merge among different perspectives.

People perspective has a central role, ensuring that all relevant voice and concern are detected to ensure a successful holistic assessment. This people-oriented attitude is put into practice by:

- defining a "stakeholder map"
- collecting "people's perspective" in the weighing of the criteria and in choosing the measures to be collected, with reference to the multi- domain framework
- paying a specific attention on communication and engagement methods, avoiding intimidating not-expert / not-educated people (cultural gaps can be significant excluding factors)
- submitting the interpretation/ analysis of the results, to receive feedback and to make explicit the main areas of disagreement.

Lastly, the time axis of the SoPHIA model focuses its attention on three key-moments of the assessment process/of the life cycle of interventions and beyond: ex-ante (definition), on-going (monitoring), ex-post (reflections on achievements and the legacy).[1]

During the testing phase of the model, the centrality of heritage-making arose from the interviews with local networks of people involved in joint activities with cultural institutions (such as cultural associations, teachers, social organizations, members of the local bank foundation, founders of research centres, local committee, students and young activists, crafters). All of the respondents highlighted a wide spectrum of impacts that could not be expressed by using the current terminology based on domains and sectors. Intergenerational transmission, porosity of places, generativity, open citizenship, are some of the aspects that manage to grasp the main features related to heritage-making activities carried on by the people interviewed.

Could SoPHIA be considered an enabling tool for heritage-making?

The SoPHIA model seems suitable for properly considering/analysing the human dimension. On the one side, the point of view of the communities and people are included throughout the whole process of the assessment (a participatory approach, *strictu sensu*, is not mandatory, but people must be actively engaged). On the other side, the description of relevant issues, synergies between different sectors, and the identification of people's perspectives are practical means to describe the values incorporated in the lived practice of heritage-making, moving away from the normative landscape of performance, inherent to assessment.

The domain axis allows to represent the creative cross-sectoral mix of heritage-making. *Cross-cutting aspects* are formally detected by the SoPHIA model, giving the possibility to highlight the positive synergies across the social, economic, cultural and environmental sphere. At the same moment, the

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[1] Paragraph adapted from Baioni et al. (2022)

model does not deny the conflicts. The explicit consideration of *counter-effects* (such as accessibility vs protection, gentrification vs economic development, gratuitousness vs decent employment) highlights the imbalances and offers an opportunity to publicly reflect on them.

Furthermore, the model seems particularly suitable for putting evaluation and reporting at the service of mutual reinforcement between institutions and communities. Giving evidence of the benefits deriving from the joint work made possible by heritage-making is a means to affirm the role of not well-established and financed cultural institutions and organizations, that rely on the commitment and support of the inhabitants and the communities-of-practice.

These last considerations open to future research strains, during the testing phase on the model applicability. SoPHIA is conceived as a conceptual model and not as ready-to-use tool, directly applicable. Therefore, it will be useful to understand if and how, depending on the context, the SoPHIA, model will prove to be an enabling tool for heritage-making.

Funding

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