



Shared Cultural Heritage Programme 2021-2024: Report on the live video discussions on 23, 25, 26 June 2020

In the first week of June, a four-day online brainstorming session took place to provide input for the [Shared Cultural Heritage Programme](#) of the Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE) for the policy period 2021-2024. Colleagues from current and future partner countries shared their insights and suggestions via a digital forum on Societal Challenges, Opportunities and Risks for the programme and lessons learned from our altered working practices in response to the Covid-19 outbreak. [The report can be found here](#). On 23, 25 and 26 June, three themes that surfaced during this round of brainstorming were discussed in greater depth in three live video meetings, each involving a different group of participants and covering a specific theme: Heritage and Sustainable Development Goals, Heritage and the Political-Historical Dimension, and Finding Common Ground. This report provides a brief summary of the outcomes of each session.

Session 1: Heritage and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This session centred on three topics: sustainable development, sustainable knowledge and sustainable networks.

1) Sustainable development: what common challenges do we face?

The perception of what heritage is differs according to time and place. The contexts of challenges also differ, but we can learn from each other by sharing strategies. Greater priority should be given to the social, economic and environmental aspects of SDGs in relation to heritage by developing and sharing strategies and exploring how heritage management can be instrumental to achieve SDGs. In terms of the economic aspect, for example, this may entail finding new functions for heritage, facilitating private-sector investment and redefining the relationship between tourism and heritage.

2) Sustainable knowledge: how can we obtain the necessary knowledge and expertise?

Unconventional approaches to dealing with heritage should be explored. To find the relevant knowledge, which is not always easy to access or collect, it is essential to connect with local communities. In addition to collecting, sharing and connecting knowledge, we also need to find ways of putting it to good use. In response to the Covid-19 outbreak, we have embraced online knowledge exchange. It is important to investigate how we can sustain this type of exchange in the long term.

3) Sustainable networks: how can we build the necessary connections?

We need to tap into existing networks that currently operate in parallel and find ways to connect them. This will make it easier to share and exchange knowledge and to sustain connections. Informal and social connections are just as valuable when it comes to creating a solid foundation of friendship and trust. For fruitful collaboration, we should invest in a network, maintain connections regularly over an extended period while also finding multilateral ways to interact. An online platform will help make networks more visible, facilitate connections, share best practices and encourage interaction with multiple partners so that communication is not limited to bilateral exchanges between the Netherlands and a single partner country. Networks need to welcome the younger generation if they are to be sustainable. Long-term projects need regular follow-up, reviewing outcomes to retrieve new insights.

Session 2: Heritage and the Political-Historical Dimension

In this session, the participants discussed the role and responsibility of RCE's Shared Cultural Heritage Programme in relation to the political-historical dimension of heritage.

As a national heritage institute, RCE collaborates with governmental bodies in its partner countries, but working with local communities is also essential. The participants in the discussion group emphasized that RCE is a knowledge institute and should make the most of its leadership role, for instance by creating platforms to discuss political-historical issues in relation to heritage. By doing so, it can facilitate insights into new perspectives and different approaches. Some participants encouraged RCE to be more activist and to address cultural and historical tensions in society, but others warned that RCE is an implementing body and should be wary of pursuing a political agenda. Rather than taking a stand, it should instead provide a platform for discussion and dialogue.

Another suggestion made was to step up involvement in local and grassroots initiatives, with an emphasis on including and promoting multiperspectivity in practice. To start with, however, RCE should take a critical look at itself: how inclusive and diverse is the agency's own organization? Instead of bringing in diversity on a project-related or temporary basis, RCE should consider diversifying its contract-ed staff and broadening its network of partners.

Reciprocity within the SCH programme could be taken further. At present, it seems that Dutch experts mostly supply knowledge to the partner countries, while little expertise is invited or brought back. This is a missed opportunity, given that expert input from the partner countries has the potential to enrich heritage practice and relevant discussions in the Netherlands.

The participants arrived at the following recommendations:

- Reassess why the government of the Netherlands wishes to preserve Dutch heritage in some countries and what that heritage means to local communities; invite input from local infrastructure and grass roots initiatives.
- Invest in networks, broaden them and make them more inclusive; make use of embassies and the networks created by multilateral training programmes.
- Introspection should be taken as a starting point: RCE staff need to be more diverse and inclusive.
- Overarching themes such as sustainable development can spark new opportunities for cooperation.
- Put a strong emphasis on listening and creating spaces in which local stakeholders and experts can express and share their expertise.
- Don't be afraid to get involved in the current historical and political debate around heritage but positioning should relate to RCE's role and responsibility.

Session 3: Finding Common Ground

This session focused on the following question: if the exchange of expertise is the driving goal of the Shared Cultural Heritage Programme, how can we ensure that collaboration is equal and reciprocal?

The participants agreed that common ground in relation to international heritage collaboration starts with two parties sharing the same challenges even though their perspectives and motivations may differ. Common ground can only be achieved by discussing these issues on an equal basis, meaning that the parties involved should be committed to listening and opening up to new perspectives.

When engaging in long-term commitments, it is important to monitor project developments, invest in networks to sustain contact and facilitate exchange of expertise. An online network could broaden the SCH network, while an online environment could facilitate a level playing field as regards communication. In addition to working with the same experts, try to involve local communities and private experts outside of governmental institutes. RCE has the potential to facilitate cooperation between local partners.

Share best practices with NGOs, universities and research institutes which also deal with issues around contested heritage. RCE should educate itself, as it does not have a great deal of expertise in multiperspectivity across the organization. The network of the Shared Cultural Heritage Programme could be a valuable resource in this respect. It is important to include diaspora communities in the debate about shared heritage. Recognizing different agendas and multiple perspectives helps us understand the current challenges for cultural heritage and the wellbeing of society.

Invest in sustainable community engagement by establishing semi-structured forums beyond the scope of individual projects to address shared challenges. A forum can provide a platform for partners to connect, build new friendships and share ideas. If partners can find each other on such forums as they engage in projects, this could lead to a bigger, more sustainable network and new initiatives or triangular forms of cooperation.

Conclusion

Overall, we look back on three productive live video discussions that, together with the prior four-day online brainstorming session, provide valuable input for determining the direction of the Cultural Heritage Agency's Shared Cultural Heritage Programme for the coming policy period. Even though different participants took part in each video session, it is significant that a number of suggestions reoccurred in every video discussion. In short, RCE was encouraged to invest in its network and explore more ways to connect with local communities. Providing a digital platform would facilitate international heritage collaboration in general, not only for RCE. The agency should not shy away from fulfilling a role in societal debates, but it should also be critical of its own organization. Collaboration starts with listening and identifying shared challenges.

The RCE's Shared Cultural Heritage team would like to thank all those who took the time to engage in this process, contribute ideas and share their insights. Their suggestions will be of great value to us as we set about designing our Shared Cultural Heritage Programme for the coming years. Last but not least, we would like to thank the [ErfgoedAcademie](#) for facilitating this digital process. For updates on the latest developments in our Shared Cultural Heritage Programme, we invite you to [subscribe to our newsletter](#).