

“The Faro Convention approach and democratic socio-economic models for community engagement”

Concluding memorandum

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Preamble

As part of the second Faro Convention Action Plan (2016-2017), Faro Labs were held to promote and implement the Faro Convention at European, national (host country) and local level. A “Faro Lab” was held in Georgia in October 2017, following on from the one in Spain in May 2017. This second Faro Lab, like the first one, took place in a rural setting, this time under the title “The Faro Convention approach and democratic socio-economic models for community engagement”.

Under the Faro Convention Action Plan, thematic concluding memoranda are drawn up after each Faro Lab so as to keep a record of the discussions and share them with the Faro Convention network members who were not present. This memorandum is accordingly the “concluding memorandum” for the second Faro Lab.

Background

The second Faro Lab was held in liaison with the *Community-led Urban Strategies in Historic Towns* (COMUS) project aimed at fostering social and economic development by building on the cultural heritage of nine historic towns in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Poland and Lithuania were also represented. With the exception of Belarus, these eastern European countries have ratified the Faro Convention or are considering signing it (Poland, Lithuania).

The COMUS project that started in January 2015 and ended in June 2017, resulted notably in networking initiatives with their interest in the Faro Convention. A “Reference Plan” was produced by each of the nine towns of the COMUS project, including a SWOT analysis to identify possible strategic options (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and a shared vision of the future of the town.

Findings

Some of the actions implemented by some towns of the COMUS network illustrate that even though global tourism is growing, competition to become a “destination” is fierce and involves significant uncertainty.

The joint work in the village of Machkhaani which hosted the Faro Lab repeatedly highlighted the wide gap between its cultural and tourist potential and the reality of the village’s infrastructure, its residents’ daily lives (no running water, etc.) and its accessibility.

In general terms, this is compounded by a political, economic and regulatory environment that is still unstable and entails the risk of uncontrolled development of tourism to the detriment of the people who live there. The success of the village of Viscri shows how difficult it is for a process driven by villagers themselves to co-exist with outside visitors, entrepreneurs and investors.

“Betting on tourism” is not bound to pay off for local communities and, even if it does, it offers no guarantee of improvement in their quality of life or living environment.

Community engagement in tourism for the development of a new economic model was not really called into question, given that “tourism” seems to be the only option possible, whereas the potential of heritage as a resource for local residents, institutions, entrepreneurs, investors and consumers was hardly mentioned, if at all. Once again, the critical question “does the invisible have to be made visible?” comes to mind, trying to better understand what cultural heritage values for society there are, and what roles and interests the heritage communities could have.

Making the socio-economic issues more visible therefore means having to identify them and go into them in greater depth with the local communities, in particular through their narratives.

In addition, there are several obstacles to community engagement in heritage processes in former Soviet states: the only recent emergence of civil society; negative perceptions of collective forms of engagement such as co-operatives; lack of understanding of the principles and rules of co-operatives, or weak legal recognition of the latter.

Proposals

Look beyond tourism alone

The Faro Convention Action Plan could seek to highlight possible uses of the cultural and natural heritage as a resource for boosting local economies (input of skills, know-how, attractiveness, classification or status, provision of spaces, etc.).

The Faro processes lead to the emergence of endogenous types of development that strengthen what already exists and are not geared solely to tourism. Several locations in the Faro Convention network have developed innovative socio-economic models for community engagement:

- Hospitality and public and private undertakings: development of hospitality services for local businesses and institutions (hospital) in Marseilles;
- Trades and entrepreneurship: use of the skills of the Roma community in the restoration of houses in Viscri;
- Hospitality and handicrafts: provision of premises in heritage buildings for young couples of craftspeople in Fontecchio and for creative workers in Forli;
- Classification and entrepreneurship: capitalising on olive oil in Taola Del Sénia thanks to the millennium olive trees and recognition of protected designation of origin for Marseilles soap on account of its heritage dimension.

Heritage can help boost attractiveness, status and prominence and the means of action available to local communities. To that end, it is necessary to highlight the resources represented by “people, places and stories”, along with the related challenges, needs and potential regarding local development. The Faro Convention Action Plan could develop activities to foster:

- Use of the heritage as a multi-faceted resource through “Faro action research” and the identification of new good practices to be disseminated;
- The definition of a shared vision of why the community wants to conserve, share and build on its heritage, drawing on the methodologies developed by the Council of Europe, in particular through COMUS.

Boosting willingness for community engagement

In particular because it belies the preconceptions about citizens' capacity for engagement in east European countries, the Machkhaani process is a model of how to develop a heritage community and could become a "Faro good practice":

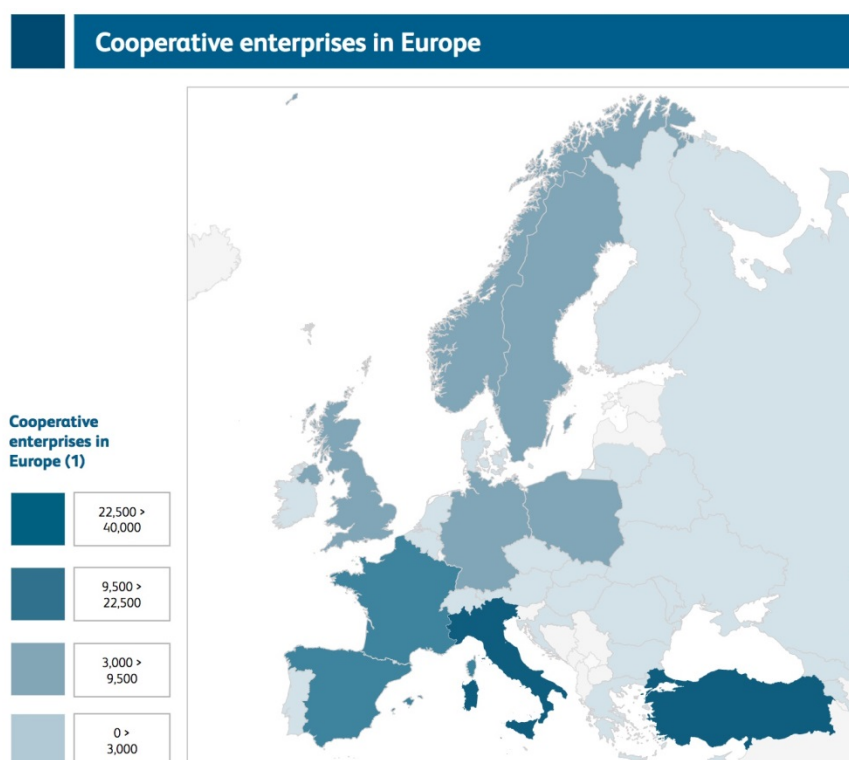
- Updating of the citizen engagement narrative in connection with the Machkhaani local theatre to rekindle interest in doing things together;
- Development via the social media of a Georgian "virtual community" capable of becoming involved in the process in financial and human terms;
- Creation of a physical space, the "knowledge café", as a reference point for the community formed.
- Organisation of an annual ritual of a meeting of the community during the festival.

In a way, this brings to mind the surprise of the mayor of Pilsen in 2014 at the success of the call for citizen participation under the Hidden City process. A Faro assessment visit could serve to establish it as a "Faro good practice".

Review regulations governing co-operative action

The participation of residents as a whole in the heritage process would benefit from the adoption of the principles of co-operatives so as to ensure a minimum degree of independence and democratic processes in an unstable political and economic environment.

In cases where there is a lack of awareness, and mistrust, of the principles and rules of co-operatives, or weak legal recognition of the latter, a review of the regulations that exist here and their possible use by local communities could be conducted with the support of the member states for submission to the heritage communities and sharing within the Faro community network.



Source: *The power of Co-operation – Co-operatives Europe Key Figures 2015*