Local Development Policies for Heritage Tourism

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Abstract: The central purpose of this paper is to question to which extent local heritage may function as a facilitator for local tourism development. In other words, the often unremarkable nature of heritage components within the boundaries of a municipality is a common deterrent for successful commodification and marketization, yet they are always present in any local tourism plan. Two case studies, namely Oliveira de Azeméis in Portugal and Al Ain in the UAE, are used to substantiate this discussion, and to advocate for feasible, well-dimensioned approaches, both from a top-down and a community-based perspective.

Keywords: Cultural tourism; local development; heritage economics.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to address the heritage-based tourism potential of a mid-sized city in a challenged territory and to question the usefulness of the associated development strategies. The approach taken was providing a context, and then a descriptive, critical analysis of two case studies. Key conclusions indicate that interest in heritage may go hand in hand with rather modest levels of community awareness of that same heritage. Another point relates to the difficulties in creating heritage-based distinctiveness. Originality stems from the uniqueness of the examples, their potential comparativeness with other regions, and the discussion on the limits of heritage as a generator for local development, namely through tourism. The use of local heritage elements in the enhancement of economic clusters is a longstanding practice, one that is commonly assumed to both fuel induced effects and retain a glimpse of authenticity, hence of perceived quality. Tweaking these ambitions to gain leverage understandably includes studying direct tourism indicators, yet also reflecting on outputs that are less readily available. By its very nature, local heritage is a chief but elusive variable in the construction of an economic development policy, as it exists fundamentally as a dynamic intangible, produced by social circumstances, hence subject to change, even when some of its components are tangibles such as sites, monuments, or landscapes.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

A wealth of recent publications deals with the intersections between heritage, tourism, economic development, and marketing. Despite earlier production on all these subjects, especially the late 1990s saw an increase in their combined systematization, which unsurprisingly coincided with a boost in regional funding programs. Probably more than was the case elsewhere, the EU did provide a large number of case studies with measurable inputs, at least the financial ones, and some qualitative outputs, a situation that stimulated the first comprehensive syntheses on heritage-based community building. Some consisted of handbooks that were classically econometric or managerial in nature, whilst other, often collective publications explored cultural, political, and sociological dimensions as well (e.g. Prentice, 1993; Hall & Jenkins 1995; Lanfant, Allcock & Briner, 1995; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Richards & Hall, 2000). The last two decades have built on these subjects from sometimes hyperspecialized angles and on specific geographies. The insistence on intercultural encounters and authenticity (Cohen, 2010; Tomaselli, 2012; Rickly, 2018) is very noticeable, as is the academic focus on the full vertical relationships between tourism and cultural heritage, from the core concepts to sustainability, commodification, and marketing (Lyon & Welch 2012, McKercher & du Cros, 2012; Kour & Vasavada, 2016). The economic impacts of local heritage commodification have been studied at the micro and regional levels, in very diverse territories (e.g McGrath, Primm & Lafe, 2016; Su, Wall & Xu, 2016; Rogerson & van der Merwe, 2016; Su, Bramwell & Whalley, 2018; Tafel & Szolnoki, 2020), and predictably conclude that endogenous products are beneficial to the distinctiveness of a tourism mix.

The assumption of local heritage potentiating economic development through tourism has become the backbone of national cohesion plans (Aykin & Yildiz, 2012; Estol & Font, 2016; Aytug & Mikaeili, 2017). Globally, UNWTO considerations and correlated studies in fact insist on the rise of a growing cultural heritage social longing (Jelinčić & Senkić, 2017). One needs to bear in mind, though, that tourism development and economic growth are not necessarily symmetrical. An empirical study (Antonakakis et al. 2019) suggests this is indeed not always the case, and that economic performance depends on a combination of tourism production factors in the different national realities. A tourism-growth cor-

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relation has however become a dogmatic policy-making principle. For small cities and towns, this frequently means a balance between a more or less passive free-riding on larger, regional strategies, on the one hand, and setting up inter-municipal plans, on the other. It is in most cases politically and technically unfeasible to cultivate a strongly distinctive local brand that is attractive at a supra-regional level. Still, integration between cultural heritage marketing and place branding (Vasavada & Kour, 2016; Napolitano & De Nisco, 2017; Seraphin, Yallop & Capatina, 2018) requires further critical density. But despite this need for additional refinement, the general theoretical components of a cultural development tool kit are academically well-defined, and known to municipalities worldwide, for a long time now (e.g. Boniface & Fowler, 1993; Swarbrooke, 1994; Silberberg, 1995, and see also the plethora of definitions and references in Poria, Butler & Airey, 2003). In the case of the United Arab Emirates, heritage components have been incorporated in all main development strategies, at emirate (Hilal, Kennet & Humble, 2015; Wakefield, 2021) and federal (Stephens et al., 2019) levels, and specifically dimensioned for inclusion in the education and the tourism sectors (Seraphim & Haq, 2019), and the same occurs in Portugal (De Man 2016).

In too acritical a way perhaps, heritage has been taken as the remedy par excellence for cumulatively strengthening local identity, then its economy, and provided regions with bottom-up, entrepreneurial-based cohesion within distinctiveness. Results of such plans have been mixed when comparing even within national realities, and taking into account differences in product enhancement and communication (De Man, 2016; McCamley & Gilmore, 2018; Adie, 2019; Bec et al. 2019). The most recent publications on the matter do still not agree on the virtuousness of the induced and indirect outcomes (Dragouni & Fouseki, 2018; Elche, García-Villaverde & Martínez-Pérez, 2018; Chong & Balasingam, 2019); multiple recent case studies signal local factors as decisive, even from a global outlook (Ratten, 2023; Worku Tadesse, 2023, Zhang et al., 2023). It is however a challenge to maintain the complexity of uniqueness as an operational concept, and for communicational convenience, heritage may become oversimplified, or even abstract (Groth, 2023), in which case its tourism potential is much reduced.

Notwithstanding the points made above, one of the key challenges in the cultural industry, and in heritage-based tourism in particular, remains to provide a useful representation of value (Wang, 2017; Noonan & Rizzo, 2017), as confirmed by the authors at a recent governmental meeting on the Maghrebi tourism economy, held in Algiers, where this was much debated, reinforcing some of the arguments outlined below. The very lack of a comprehensive understanding of the nature and boundaries of heritage appeals to the senses, and may therefore simultaneously be used as a strength in terms of the commodification process, as an accelerator for a tourism product. The fact is that consumers and providers do not think of heritage as a controlled production unit but rather as an unregulated asset. An initial concern here is that the production process itself is not well understood. Heritage is taken for granted, both as a concept and as an economic multiplier, warranting a sequence of truisms on its economic value. Many studies do demonstrate the successful integration of cultural tangibles and intangibles in the tourism prod-

uct. A museum, archaeological site, culinary festival, or historical city center naturally enriches the leisure experience. This is an intuitive conclusion, empirically verifiable to a certain extent (Mansour & Arrifin, 2017; Chen & Rahman, 2018; Little et al. 2020), and has generated the idea of massive contributions to national GDP.

For decades, this has led to the injection of public monies into heritage in virtually all regions with coherent development plans. The subjacent principle is that financially stimulating forms of local identity lead to community engagement, then to grassroots entrepreneurship, and ultimately to a better distribution of heritage-based wealth production. This sort of fisherman's cane makes sense and has proven useful in product enhancement, but the metaphor is disturbed by the fact that such ecosystems become self-sufficient only with great difficulty, and usually create operational heritage structures that remain deeply dependent on public subsidies. An illustrative situation is the EU regional policy offering training and development opportunities for the constitution of (trans-) regional initiatives that quickly acquire formal structures with fixed costs, for which there is no clear return on investment. One might even argue that, in practice, a risk of para-municipal overlapping or interference does emerge, for instance in the transfer of what would normally be public obligations in heritage management to the responsibility of non-elected, non-official bodies such as cultural associations set up for this purpose.

Apart from the abstract and ethical dimension, the practical justifications may be challenged as well, given that measuring indirect and induced impacts is problematic, especially in the development of well-being for local populations. The main challenge is addressing consumer expectations, as both residents and visitors integrate heritage products into their behavioral patterns, namely in connection with loyalty and satisfaction (Alrawadieh et al. 2019). The fundamental competitive factor is not simply the empirical, measurable number of heritage elements in a given location. If this were true, most small towns would simply be unable to become successful. What matters is the integration of a limited, manageable, and of course unique set of assets, in a coherent arrangement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All this becomes apparent through two examples. A first case study is that of Oliveira de Azeméis, a municipality in the Porto metropolitan area, in northern Portugal. Heritage conservation has been at the center of successive municipal directives, viz. in the fields of archaeological registering and excavation. Forty-seven specific sites are listed amongst one hundred and twenty-two areas of archaeological interest. This follows the average when compared with adjacent territories (Tavares & De Man, 2020), as they all integrate archaeology as a potential factor for tourism attraction, either as stand-alone features or as parts of hiking trails. Oliveira de Azeméis does count on its own heritage tourism offer, in particular, the La Salette park the Ferreira de Castro museum, and the mill park at Ul (De Man & Tavares, 2021). The latter has been marketized, based on a number of restored watermills that epitomize traditional milling activity, especially the one connected to the region's ubiquitous hydro-

graphic network, and the related local bread produce. This gastronomy specialty can be tasted and bought and is presented as a unique local product. La Salette, in turn, associates a religious and leisure dimension to a hilltop park, a natural setting for a neo-gothic chapel, and a religious festival that has created steady dynamics of tourism attraction. The figure of the writer Ferreira de Castro is a third branded element, currently the least attractive in terms of tourism results, although theoretically his museum and literary work may be transformed into a niche product. As for the archaeological heritage, it has not been commodified, although some sites are visitable, given they are accessible by public road. The most well-known of these is Ul, adjacent to the mill park, which confers an interesting potential for a day trip. At this site and at Ossela, a sequence of archaeological excavations and surveys have taken place for decades now -- indeed since 1908 (Marques, 1989; Silva, 1995; De Man, Tavares & Carvalho, 2017). The subsequent research project promoted by the municipality envisaged two key outcomes: one, improving the historical knowledge, and two, integrating the results, together with some additional sites, into the tourism product (Tavares, 2008).

Briefly, the present and prospective elements of heritage attraction are authentic and relevant but yield only moderate rates of return. To assess the effectiveness of the full branded image through the lens of potential international visitors, a group of sixty-two respondents, having visited European destinations but not Portugal before, provided their feedback. Two videos on Oliveira de Azeméis were shown, followed by a Likert-scale questionnaire, and a structured interview. The majority either strongly agreed or agreed on statements about this destination offering distinctive cultural experiences, comparatively less expensive cultural experiences, being a safe and comfortable cultural destination, and the expectation of heritage attractions being a major part of the tourism experience. Looking at the results, there seems to be a favorable yet undefined perception of Oliveira de Azeméis as a tourism product. In other words, there is no fundamentally negative opinion, and also no specific remarkableness or another sort of pull factor. A fine-tuning of these responses was done qualitatively, through short interviews, and confirmed two main impressions. On the one hand, that local cultural heritage is a reason for international tourism appetite, and that smaller destinations lack distinctiveness for those same tourists to build expectations on.

The primary tourism focus for Oliveira de Azeméis is not international, and it is the domestic market that remains central, as one infers from most markers. Tripadvisor feedback, for instance, reveals an almost complete domestic nature of visitors. Some reviews written in English come from Portuguese, and even residents, the latter presumably attempting to encourage and stimulate their city's tourism. They mainly insist on the intangible (bread baking, religious festivities) and tangible (mills, church, river, lake) heritage, with a pervasive reference to the impression of tranquility, and the family-oriented nature of the experience (Tripadvisor, 2020). Although there is an increase in nights spent in Oliveira de Azeméis (from just over 30,000 in the mid-2010s to 40,168 in 2019; PORDATA, 2020), the typical visitor is a day tripper that has a fairly well-defined preconception of the

cultural product. Indeed, the heritage tourism supply of Oliveira de Azeméis (Paiva, 2013), heavily based on community initiative structures (Alves, 2011), integrates a pattern of what is essentially a regional tourism demand, as one infers from similar studies on neighboring municipalities (Valente & Figueiredo, 2003; Teixeira, 2013; Lino, 2015).

A third data-based but qualitative indicator is the result of a questionnaire to residents, carried out to mature the municipal cultural plan. The outcome may cast further light on the correct positioning of destinations facing challenges similar to those of Oliveira de Azeméis. The questionnaire also included a section that asked what one would primarily associate with heritage. Unsurprisingly, the most chosen options were history, monuments, and traditions. What stood out was the significant abstention, as 39% of these residents did not provide any answer to this conceptual topic, indicating hesitation or unfamiliarity with local cultural resources. Further questions did confirm a lack of awareness of specific heritage components, despite the majority stating heritage is important to their local community, namely in terms of tourism. This however seems to remain an abstract principle, more than a clear take on how such importance would materialize.

Located in a very dissimilar environment, Al Ain is an inland city in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, offers completely different heritage resources, and faces other geographical development challenges in terms of Cultural Heritage development strategies (Al Dhaheri & Ahmad, 2019), as do comparable locations in the UAE (De Man 2022). Its cultural sites, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, include a combination of oases and archaeological elements. Both the UNESCO classification and the criteria for the FAO Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System have a considerable impact on the development of territories such as that of Al Ain (Yotsumoto & Vafadari, 2021). In fact, investment in this local heritage from the perspective of sustainable integrations has been deemed important (Caratelli, Misui & EL Amrousi, 2019), and immediately recognizable, from the consumer side, through a handful of distinctive, iconic resources: forts, gardens, a mountain (Jebel Hafeet), and oases. The desert scenario provides an enveloping uniqueness for heritage tourism development (De Man, 2020), which includes a zoo with increasing satisfaction levels (Khaleeli, Jawabri & AlKhmeiri, 2020). The Perceived City Image of Al Ain is a construct that includes tourist attractions as an immediate cognitive reality, but also as an emotional one, interlaced with local quality of life, or residential infrastructures, for instance. From this angle, investing in positive heritage experiences around attractive areas (Al Ain National Museum, with the adjacent central oasis, or the Green Mubazzara, with Jebel Hafeet's geological and archaeological features) is understood as a definite factor for sociocultural development (Eid & Elbanna, 2017). The Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism includes a number of Al Ain heritage attractions in its strategic vision; the Al Jahli fort, for instance, is viewed as both a historical structure and a venue for cultural activity. Substantial investment has been made in the local World Heritage components, with more than 140,000 visitors to the sites, and the creation of a desert park combining heritage with outdoor activities (DCT 2019).

A straightforward but unprocessed way to tap into some level of visitor experience is the feedback on sites such as Tripadvisor. Despite all the caveats regarding online comments, whether or not they are representative, the main idea is that the park has tipped more towards family leisure activities, and is less appealing an asset to the occasional international visitor, with a predefined idea of what an archaeological park means. This is an issue unrelated to the quality of scientific research, or to the World Heritage criteria. Tripadvisor feedback ranges considerably, within very large brackets and for different reasons. The least encouraging ones have to do mainly with preconceptions and projections by first-time visitors, on what an archaeological park is expected to look like, as opposed to consumer patterns evidenced by returning visitors, who seek a leisure setting, containing elements not unlike standard ancillary services, such as cafeterias and gift shops, in the museum industry.

4. CONCLUSION

Strategic options for heritage-based differentiation are limited and should be stimulated through collaborative communication. The operational dimension for a small administrative unit, and the ensuing success, is limited to the supra-regional level. Micro-scale analyses, based on car travel within a few dozen of square kilometers, fail to correctly identify preferences related to extended family dispersion, hospitality specifics, and place of residence of regional visitors. In the Portuguese case, consistent communication campaigns are mainly generated by Turismo do Norte, the regional tourism board, in an attempt to provide coherence to an essentially very dispersed heritage supply. Oliveira de Azeméis is geographically as close to Aveiro, which is considered central Portugal, as it is to Porto, the nearest major city, administratively located in the north. A visitor of Oliveira de Azeméis might more easily start and/or end their day in Aveiro, with which the landscape has more affinity and continuity, than in Porto. Similarly, Al Ain is a city in Abu Dhabi but is slightly closer to Dubai than to the capital city. In addition, it is also a border city with the sultanate of Oman. The distance to the Omani coastal city of Sohar, on the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula, is in fact even more reduced than to Dubai, but the administrative and geographical discontinuities represent interruptions in the coherence of an experience, which is not measured in physical distance but in perceived unity. This is one, perhaps self-adapting yet real indicator of how administrative superstructures may hinder an optimization of authenticity, hence of local distinctiveness through heritage.

Equating distinctiveness with opportunities for tourism and economic development, a multiplicity of options can be considered, based on features as diverse as gastrotourism, museums, architecture, and even myths, legends, and literature (Coşkun et al. 2020), all providing uniqueness to forms of heritage place attachment. When planned at the municipal level, such distinctiveness can only be achieved by traditional approaches such as segmenting the tourists and identifying the competitive advantages of a destination. In addition, heritage allows for robust emotional components (Truong, Lenglet & Mothe, 2018), the sort of reactions that need to be psychological and emotional in order to overcome heritage as a geographical landmark and to become an element of place identity (Ginting & Wahid, 2017).

Correctly dimensioning cultural supply also calls for appropriate data and, more upstream even, the factors producing them. The latter are less volatile than one might presume and relate to longstanding social structures, leisure habits, education, and other demographics that generate parameters hard to alter, and configure the community dynamics needed precisely for the existence of heritage. On the other hand, all national development strategies rely to some extent on heritage as a crucial component of tourism communication. To which level of complexity this makes sense is uncertain, though, first at the conceptual level, then at that of the emanating strategic and operational choices. The need for fittingly structuring expectations on what cultural heritage is or not, and what it can and cannot be used for remains a difficult task. Some degree of international distinctiveness would depend on a very specific niche experience that, in a best-case scenario, may result in a numerically marginal demand. It is not impossible to build such a product and to create a supporting brand for it, yet the return on investment needs to be considered, and the present strategy remains that of regional market integration for supra-local heritage tourism promotion. In the end, the significance of this case-based analysis may be twofold; first, the conceivable extrapolations and comparisons with other mid-sized cities, and second, a forced return to the basics of heritage distinctiveness in local decision-making, by questioning its primary usefulness as an economic driver.

Despite large differences between theory and practical applications in a specific municipality, some common principles can be identified.

- cultural heritage generates indirect and induced effects on the local economy, and part of the revenue can be reinjected in the heritage sector (e.g. through private initiatives in the Tourism industry, the conservation of natural and built heritage, or social well-being and local pride that ultimately enhances the quality of intangible heritage.);

- municipal heritage promotes a uniqueness that however depends on a supra-municipal framework, such as road or airport infrastructures, the success of national tourism agency campaigns, and competing attractions (both heritage and non-heritage in nature). Many of the production factors are not controllable by local ambition only;

- the heritage resources that function as building blocks for development need to be valued by local communities in the first place, before any marketing investment may generate a quality return. If such a primal connection does not exist, the very concept of heritage becomes perverted, even if archaeological sites or historical performances are commodified. Heritage always requires a social articulation with local dynamics, which is why outreach and education need to focus on locals, more even than on prospective tourists.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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