



HeritageCluster

Cultural Heritage Cluster Conference

7 - 9 May 2018

Short Report

From May 7th to 9th, the Cairo office of the DAAD held a three-day COSIMENA Heritage Cluster conference where dozens of leading experts from the fields of archaeology, history, museology, and geology coalesced.

The Middle East and North Africa region's cultural heritage wealth, in terms of both physical structures or objects and human customs and traditions, is immense. But ongoing geopolitical tensions across the region make the preservation and safeguarding of this heritage delicate at best.

From Morocco to Egypt, from Sudan to Yemen all the way to Iraq, the region is home to countless historical monuments of global significance, from Roman, Ancient Egyptian archaeological sites to Nabatean valleys and Semitic cities. These constitute tangible cultural heritage, which encompasses all physical structures and objects from the past. In terms of traditions, the variety of local dances, oral traditions, craftsmanship, gastronomy is also plentiful, and constitute the region's intangible cultural heritage.

In order to discuss the ever-shifting definition of what cultural heritage means for and in the Middle East, the DAAD brought together dozens of leading experts in archaeology, history, museology, as well as researchers from universities in Germany, Sudan, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan.

The three-day conference sought to answer a number of key questions: What is cultural heritage? How can we protect it in times of armed conflict? How can technology help identify, analyse, document and safe keep elements of cultural heritage for the future generations? How can museology adapt to changing viewers' expectations and demands? What can States do to ensure the conservation of their heritage? Why is collaboration a key plank to reviving cultural heritage?

To answer those, the Cluster kicked-off on May 7th with an evening panel aimed at answering the first question: What does Cultural Heritage stand for? The impressive panel, moderated by Dr. Monica Hanna who heads the Archaeology and Cultural Heritage Unit at the Arab Academy of Sciences, was composed of Prof. Dr. Moawiyah Ibrahim Yousef, the Jordan representative to the World Heritage Committee at UNESCO, Prof. Dr. Friederike Seyfried, the Director of the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus collection in Berlin, Dr. Tarek Tawfik, the Director General of the Grand Egyptian Museum Project, Prof. Dr. Birgit Schäbler, the Director of the Orient-Institut in Beirut and of Prof. Dr. Stephan Seidlmayer, Director of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo.

For Dr. Seyfried, there has definitely been a shift in the definition of what cultural heritage is and what it stands for. "It now includes oral traditions, media, photography, and our nearest past becomes our heritage, not just archaeological remains," she said. This approach to





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cultural heritage is hence much more inclusive than a century ago, which poses problems of conservation and archiving given the sheer mass of information that's available. All the panellists agreed that the process of identifying, documenting, and disseminating cultural heritage, either tangible or not, need to be community-inclusive. "We have to involve local communities and take into account their relationship and understanding of cultural heritage," said Dr. Yousef.

The second day of the Heritage Cluster, which took place in the auditorium of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) in Fustat, focused on providing an overview of the Arab-German collaborations in the field of cultural heritage. Major international and transnational organisations involved in preserving this heritage were either introduced or reintroduced-in the case of UNESCO-as well as joint study programmes between German and Egyptian universities. The initiatives of the DAAD, the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and UNESCO to foster collaborative work and research endeavours were highlighted, as well as the joint Master's established by Cairo University and Helwan University with BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg, University of Cologne and University of Würzburg.

During the last day of the conference, which took place at the DAAD premises in Zamalek, regional experts from various fields delved into tangible and intangible heritage by exposing their research work and calling for collaboration. The expert's fields of study varied considerably, in terms of locations and historical periods, which made that day particularly compelling. Dr. Gafar A.F. Ibrahim from Nyala University in Darfur spoke about the survival of Pharaonic cultural heritage in Western Sudan, a young Egyptian architect presented his ongoing research on mass-housing settlements in post-war Germany and a Lebanese professor from Université St. Joseph in Beirut gave more details on the UNESCO's Convention dedicated to preserving intangible cultural heritage. She explained that intangible heritage faces multiple threats, including forced migration of communities fleeing wars, or when an element from a community is taken out of its context and becomes an object of folklore.

The animated discussions that followed each groups of presentations, way into the coffee break times, show that bringing together experts from various fields to discuss one core issue is the best way to trigger long-lasting scientific collaborations, and to maintain a momentum on cultural heritage protection. The regional scope of this Cluster, which includes most MENA countries and not just Egypt, allowed for professors, archaeologists, historians, and scientists to compare and enrich their work, while finding new avenues of cooperation and funding. February 21st marked the official launch of the Agriculture Cluster, the latest addition to COSIMENA's issue-driven clusters covering water, energy, economy, health, urbanism and cultural heritage, a project run by the Cairo Office of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The idea behind the establishment of these knowledge hubs and platforms of cooperation between scientists and innovators is to try and improve the communication between existing projects and foster establishment of new joint project between Germany and the MENA region.

(Report by Ms. Louise Sarant)

