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FOCUS GROUP CULTURAL HERITAGE
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
5 April 2006

Final Report

The Focus Group Syria was organized by the Regional Management Support Unit (RMSU) of the Euromed Heritage Programme in the EC Delegation premises on the 5 April 2006. 31 participants belonging to governmental organizations (GOs), non governmental organizations (NGOs), universities and civil society organizations met together and discussed country needs in the cultural heritage sector. In order to discuss more in detail some of the issues raised at the Focus Group, a bilateral meeting with the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) of the Ministry of Culture (MoC) and the RMSU was held on the following day.

The debate was structured in three levels: human resources, legislative and institutional framework. The exercise was fruitful and enriching for all participants, many of them meeting for the first time and having the occasion to exchange views on such an important issue. The Head of the EC Delegation in Damascus, Ambassador Frank Hesske opened the working session.

Programmatic documents drafted by the local DGAM were studied beforehand by the RMSU in order to understand the sector needs in the country. It is worth mentioning that Syria, according to the 2005 2006 National Indicative Programme is the only Mediterranean Partner Country (MPC) with a bilateral allocation in the area of cultural heritage of €10M.

1. HUMAN RESOURCES

The training should have a practical and hands-on approach against only theoretical seminars aimed at studies and not towards implementation. In this respect, training is important but cannot absorb the majority of EU Aid in this sector. This statement is even more important when it is taken into consideration that the first EC funded training programme¹ was concluded in 2004 (€2M).

The importance of implementing pilot projects (sites, urban areas, intangible heritage) against mere studies has been underlined.

1.1 Training

There is a need for the development of a “Master Plan for human resources” needs analysis. This comprehensive document is important as international donors and agencies have already implemented many training courses in the country for a long time.

To date, 50 DGAM officials have been trained since the year 2000 at different levels through UNESCO, ICCROM, Ecole de Chaillot and the EC (CHTP) in the following sectors: site conservation and management, museum management. The estimated number of future

¹ Cultural Heritage Training Programme (CHTP)

people to be trained and to be included in a process of continuous training in the next 5 years is 500. However, this estimate is restricted to DGAM needs and has to take into account also GOs staff needs dealing with cultural heritage in other Ministries (e.g. Tourism, Local Authorities) and the due to-be developed private sector.

Training target composition foresees: public staff (DGAM, Ministry of Tourism - MoT, Local Authorities) as well as private sector participants. The reinforcement of the private sector is necessary since performances of local sub-contractors are weak and below international standards: DGAM underlined the difficulty in selecting qualified implementing sub-contractors in the area of restoration and conservation.

Syrian training offer is weak at the university as well at vocational levels and could be reinforced through the creation of a national research training centre or curricula development in the existing 4 universities (Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia, Homs). A recommendation in this sense should be addressed to the Syrian government (e.g. Ministry of Higher Education). For the reason mentioned above, the DGAM had to rely so far on training offered by international organizations.

In addition to that, other faculties (e.g. Law Schools) should take into account the importance of introducing cultural heritage among the academic subjects.

The implementation of training sessions in Syria appears to be more effective against training located in Europe, unless it is necessary to take advantage of technological equipment not available at local level. In both cases, training should not be limited to the staff in the central administrations in Damascus but it should rather be available to all concerned professionals all over the country.

An increase in offered training has to be accompanied by an increase in the demand, combining together public and private sectors (See also Legislative Framework, Chapter 2). Since government salaries are so low and are not likely to increase in the near future, non-financial incentives (growth in responsibilities, flexible timing, etc.) are necessary to maintain trained people in their positions. Therefore, these incentives are needed or else an outsourcing to the private sector should be encouraged.

The benefits of "indirect" training through the involvement of Syrian professionals in the activities of foreign archaeological missions or in EC regional projects such as Euromed Heritage has been pointed out. The potential of creating networks of experts both at the national and international levels has also been raised on a recurrent basis.

1.1.1 University level

Target groups:

- Middle and high level GOs staff in different sectors (DGAM, Tourism, etc), such as museum conservators, site managers, architects, engineers, etc.
- Managers of private companies dealing with the implementation of conservation and restoration related activities.

- Young and mid-career professionals (architects, engineers, archaeologists, lawyers, tourism consultants, etc.).

Training subjects:

- Site management of archaeological sites (jointly with MoC and MoT)
- Site / monument conservation (including surroundings and tourist facilities)
- Architectural / historical analysis of monuments
- Conservation technology
- Documentation of archaeological sites
- Museum management / preventive conservation
- Structural consolidation of buildings
- Regional planning (zoning) taking into account all the local resources (cultural heritage, agriculture, tourism, industry, etc.)
- Cultural tourism (taking into account the existing experience of other EC projects in the area)
- Tourism planning (development of information centres, cultural itineraries, etc.)

Training courses should be complemented by the creation of or the enhancement of the work of equipped conservation laboratories. So far, existing laboratories are undersized and ill-equipped both at the university and at the DGAM levels.

Tempus and Erasmus Mundus EC-funded programmes should be reinforced in terms of participation from the Syrian side.

1.1.2 Vocational training

Target groups:

- GOs employees in different sectors, such as guides, museum personnel, wards, etc.
- Craftsmen / technicians (fine art restorers, artisans, stone cutters, carpenters, etc.)
- Tourist guides.

Training subjects:

- Event management in archaeological sites and museums communication and presentation
- Exhibitions
- Lighting of heritage sites
- Professional upgrading for tourist guides (in several languages)
- New and upgraded handicraft production
- Fine arts restoration and traditional heritage handicrafts linked to architectural conservation (fresco / mural painting, ceramic, mosaic, stone, mud bricks, etc.)

1.2 Awareness of local communities and local authorities

The importance of informing and engaging local communities in the development of a site and in sharing economic and financial benefits has been highlighted at different stages.

As a matter of fact, local communities do not welcome cultural heritage events nor are aware of the possible benefits deriving from investments taking place in areas where they are to be found. Therefore they need to be consulted in advance and to be adequately involved in the

site planning and management process. Awareness should be increased concerning needs, projects and sustainability.

Local authorities and local communities should be made aware of the importance of a sound and compatible development of the areas surrounding cultural heritage sites so as to prevent further mistakes (i.e. the need to define and develop a “common language”).

In operational terms, the following steps have been raised as important: primary school curricula should consider cultural heritage awareness; involvement of local communities at the earliest stage of project design has to be encouraged; local communities have to be involved in project management and should share economic and financial benefits.

It is not rare that local authorities do not yet share the “culture” and the economic benefits of cultural heritage initiatives. Sometimes, the interests of real estate developers (the 5 stars hotel in front of the roman theatre) are stronger than the importance to safeguard cultural heritage and to combine development with cultural heritage.

1.3 Awareness of decision makers / senior officials

Government officials should be made more aware of the importance of cultural heritage for the country and of the need of developing the areas around historical sites in a sustainable manner.

Sharing experience at the senior level (directors and directors generals of antiquities and from other concerned ministries, e.g. tourism, infrastructures) is needed at a regional scale (e.g. in the field of the legally binding geographical identification of archaeological sites by means of GIS² technology, successfully implemented in Egypt; good practices of Public Private Partnership in Morocco; coordination role of the Direction of Antiquities with other authorities on planning for historical zones). As a matter of fact, insisting on technical issues (conservation, restoration, etc.) without unblocking the senior level will not produce the expected benefits.

2. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The approach of the existing Syrian law for the protection of cultural heritage is more inspired by a constraining approach rather than by that of giving directives with a development oriented philosophy. The existing legislation should rather identify a balance between preservation and local development. In many cases, it seems that Development and Cultural Heritage policies are confrontational and can not co-exist.

² Geographic Information Systems

The existing antiquities law is generic and lacks the regulations for implementation. This implies also a need for the supervision in the correct application of the law. The possibility of outsourcing the implementation (not the control) of some DGAM responsibilities to the private sectors and NGOs was mentioned during the debate even if, to date, concrete prospects are still premature.

2.1 Human resources valorisation

Present level of remuneration and salaries in the cultural heritage public sector is low and it is not likely to increase in the near future. Therefore, the development of an outsourcing mechanism to the private sector could offer new perspectives in terms of creating new jobs and working opportunities. In this framework, new law projects need to be drafted.

2.2 Legal framework for increasing cultural heritage awareness

The current antiquities law needs to be upgraded and disseminated to the involved stakeholders so as to increase awareness. Many FG participants expressed a lack of knowledge on the regulation for implementation of some laws. Therefore a more transparent access to information has been mentioned several times. So far, proposals from the private sector for Public / Private use of cultural heritage are at an embryonic stage.

2.3 Legal framework for a better management of cultural heritage

The need for a legally binding geographical identification of heritage sites in the country has been highlighted. Land property rights. Survey.

Current legislation is silent on public-private partnership (PPP). A draft bill of law is currently under consideration for heritage sites. According to this document, for example, the foreseen revenues produced by the private use of a museum for an exhibition, will be shared as follows: 50% DGAM, 25% site, 25% promoter.

There are no fiscal incentives for the owner in restoration activities. There is still some confusion in the law among the concepts of restoration, renovation and rehabilitation.

In order to overcome the contradiction of the DGAM laws and those of the tourism sector (e.g. in the case of expropriation), coordination appears necessary to improve the legislative framework.

The buffer zone around cultural heritage sites should be enlarged and a sustainable development of the areas surrounding them should be encouraged.

3. INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The DGAM should play a pivotal role in the coordination and planning of activities with respect to other governmental institutions. So far, the DGAM does not have for example a clear power on the coordination of local authorities and local authorities (governorates) have the last say on land planning issues. This implies that they do not always show the necessary cultural heritage awareness. As already mentioned in the human resources section, this implies a

process of growing awareness for local governances which could effectively empower the action of the DGAM at local levels.

Universities and training centres in the different themes of cultural heritage have to be reinforced by offering local courses and by facilitating an acknowledgement of titles earned.

3.1 Institutional framework for a better coordination between ministries and local authorities

A coordination mechanism among the different stakeholders involved in CH management is needed. Notably among MoC, MoT, Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Higher Education, - local authorities and local communities - as well as between the Ministry of culture and the universities. This coordination is even more necessary when local cultural development plans are being designed. In this respect, previous experiences in other domains has shown that the involvement of different GOs not yet accustomed to working together is a time-consuming and demanding mechanism.

3.2 Institutional framework for sharing information

Improvement of central information offices in cultural heritage.

Establishing, formally, a regional network of specialized experts and institutions.

Providing translations into Arabic of the archaeological reports drafted by the foreign excavation missions by means of a specific *ad hoc* budget through the DGAM.