

Engagement of Local Communities in Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Depopulated Rural Areas in Latvia

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Abstract: Many areas currently suffer from depopulation which directly threatens tangible cultural heritage by weakening the ability of culture to strengthen local communities and forge a sense of identity. This study gives a deeper insight into the problems of cultural heritage in depopulated rural areas of Latvia and looks for ways how to engage local community in heritage conservation. Results claim, so far, collective expertise and the creativity of local communities have been poorly used in heritage conservation activities. Municipalities would gain if they invested more effort into creating a system to intensify community engagement instead of isolated project-based activities. Identifying cultural heritage and discussions on new functions for heritage sites are seen as significant engagement modes.

Key-Words: - conservation, depopulation; engagement; cultural heritage; local community

1 Introduction

In European countries, rural areas often suffer from both urbanization and negative population growth. Some areas face dramatic depopulation, which leads to loss of services, economic activity and investment. This trend accelerates the process of deterioration and threatens cultural heritage as it can only remain living for long-term when it is functionally used. The sustainable conservation of cultural heritage both in urban and rural areas has become a widespread problem in European countries; however, cultural heritage identification, conservation and evaluation give rise to art and creative industries, innovative activities in science, technology, administration and economic development processes. Not only do maintenance and improvement works of heritage and settlement propose economic activity – they also create an attractive living environment [18].

Council of Europe (2001) recognises the importance of participation by individuals and communities in defining and managing their heritage and community engagement, is currently a widely discussed issue in cultural heritage studies in general [20,14,15,8,11,12] and in sub-sectors like museum studies in particular [5,13]. According to Crooke (2010) the connection between community and heritage is so natural that it does not need justification.

The aim of the study is to explore how the engagement of local communities can contribute the tangible cultural heritage conservation through actual use of the heritage in rural areas of Latvia and especially in three Latvian counties - Kandava, Krāslava and Mazsalaca. The study focuses focus on diverse local community engagement from the perspective of municipalities.

Latvia, one of the Baltic States regained independence after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Negative population growth and negative migration balance have been a problem for Latvia since then, specifically during global economic crisis. Although shrinking population and the threat it poses to cultural heritage is a problem in many places in Europe, each case is unique, as depopulation is a dynamic process. The purposes and methods of historical heritage governance should be adapted to the economic and social environment [16]. Latvia has plenty of factors that make the adaptation of historical heritage to new functions challenging: financial constraints, the status of cultural monuments which does not facilitate entrepreneurs' interest in objects, bureaucracy, lack of knowledge, and understanding of values, ownership issues etc. Additionally, during the Soviet period from 1940 until 1991, Latvian cultural landscape was substantially degraded [17] and several generations of residents grew up with a neglectful attitude to cultural heritage. Decreasing rural population and the subsequent loss of services have also had a direct impact on conservation of cultural heritage.

Research data were obtained through site visits and observations in the given areas, by interviews with local municipalities, staff members of tourist information centres, museums, culture centres and workshops with secondary school pupils. To avoid a too generalized approach, the article analyses community engagement in heritage conservation specifically in relation to municipality work – in public, municipality-owned heritage sites and private dwelling houses in old towns or other central privately owned heritage sites, which shape the image of a destination and as such are responsibility of municipality.

2 Problem: Use of cultural heritage areas for sustainable development

UN resolutions 66/208 on Culture and Development and 68/223 on Culture and Sustainable Development recognizes culture as a vehicle for economic development in the following ways: cultural industries; cultural tourism; traditional livelihood; opportunities for economic growth through micro-enterprises; cultural infrastructure and institutions. Culture is also a significant vehicle

for social cohesion and stability, environmental sustainability and resilient communities.

Referring to cultural heritage, Loulanski [14] differentiates “alive functional heritage” and “objectified, glass-covered, and frozen heritage of the past”. In nowadays more emphasis is put on the functional use of cultural heritage as “the roles of heritage, seen before in the narrow meaning of symbols of national unity and pride, have expanded to include much broader phenomena” [15]. The heritage as the component of plays a part into strengthening social ties in communities and defining a belonging to a community, a place identity [3,4]. Considering the new roles of the heritage, its` interaction with surroundings in a variety of ways, some shifts have taken place: 1) from monuments to people; 2) from objects to functions; and 3) from preservation *per se* to purposeful conservation, sustainable use, and development [14]. This coincides with the research author's position: heritage can only remain living for long-term successful use when it is necessary to the local community or to someone else and is functionally used.

Council of Europe (2001) stresses the significance to create tools empowering communities to understand and conserve their heritage. When engaging the local community and other stakeholders in the heritage governance process one should explore an understanding of the cultural values of distinctive parties as they may differ. For instance, Trosby (2002) focuses on aesthetic; spiritual; symbolic; historical and social values. For Smith (2006) heritage management is not just a technical process because it is all about the distinction between heritage and other resources on the one hand and businesses, individuals, social organizations etc. on the other. *Klimaszewski* et al. (2010; 2012) continue the discussion and argue that conservation efforts are related to larger socio-economic agendas and selection of one history over the others is related to the issues of power - needs and tastes of few define what is valuable and should be conserved. Authors reproach stakeholders not questioning “the ways in which Western ideas about tradition and culture shape the way they assign significance to those aspects of cultural heritage they are working to preserve” [12] thus claiming that not all heritage is considered to be significant enough to be preserved as it used to be “local” elites and experts who decided whose history is to be remembered and whose forgotten.

2.1 The context of Latvia

The Latvian cultural heritage is protected in accordance with international conventions related to heritage protection. The sphere is regulated by a series of documents of national importance, including the Law on the Protection of Cultural Monuments. The institution responsible for cultural monuments is the State Inspection for Heritage.

Latvia has a dual experience with the protection of cultural heritage – on the one hand, there are cases with restored heritage sites that were previously in a critical state [10]; on the other hand, the existing system allows for situations when cultural objects, originally in satisfactory condition, are gradually degraded. The main problems in the sector of cultural heritage are: (1) lack of understanding of the importance of the sphere of culture and cultural heritage for the long-term development of Latvia; (2) insufficient financial support to the protection of monuments and monument owners; (3) bureaucratic processes of heritage conservation; (4) unfriendly tax policies; (5) inefficient land and property encumbrance system in the country. [21]

Current issues in Latvian heritage protection to some extent can be related to Soviet past as the Soviet regime substantially degraded urban and rural landscape in Latvia [17]. A significant number of the country's inhabitants have spent part of their lives in Soviet Latvia and possibly inherited a Soviet-type attitude towards cultural heritage. For 50 years, the communist ideology-inspired taste of few defined what should be safeguarded, neglected, transformed or destroyed. Many churches were turned into sports halls, storage houses or exhibition halls. Manors also represented an ideology criticized by the communist party although there were positive examples of manors' preservation. We can conclude state *protected cultural monuments* not receive full protection always and conservation of the heritage sites in practice depends on the good will of the owners. Cultural monument managers also pointed to the inefficiencies of the system due to lack adequate information and support from local authorities regarding heritage conservation [10]. However, recent developments show overall positive trends and a change of attitude of authorities (e.g. municipal grants for heritage conservation).

Some years ago it was found that the prestige of cultural monuments in economically developed countries is much higher than in Latvia where the status of a cultural heritage object seems rather daunting [10]. The insufficient exploitation of cultural heritage potential is one of the problems identified in the research areas. Even though Latvian cultural heritage has a high reputation, residents' interest in it is low; therefore it has been considered vital to promote people's interest in heritage and the possibilities of its utilization [1], major improvements of interest have not been observed in later study [2]; In nowadays situation might be improving due to more and more municipalities and regional organizations considers creative industries, culture and cultural heritage as significant source of identity construction, economics and tourism promotion, improving quality of living [6]. Still, recently UNESCO Latvian National Commission (2015) defined communication and reinforcing cultural heritage in local community as one of the greatest challenges.

3 Problem Solution

3.1. Methods

This publication reflects the results obtained from the Latvian national research programme EKOSOC-LV, Project 5.2.8. The programme was designed to create a versatile scientific research base of knowledge about the state and society for sustainable development processes. For an in-depth study four research areas were selected – Mazsalaca County, Krāslava County, Kandava County and Ķemeri National Park – by the following criteria: (1) nationally significant areas (Natura 2000, national park or nature park); (2) presence of biological diversity; (3) presence of functioning SMEs; (4) willingness of municipality to cooperate with researchers; (5) areas should be from different Latvian cultural historical regions. Additionally, at least one area must have: (1) towns/no townships; (2) renovated cultural heritage objects and infrastructure/no such activities; (3) different geographic conditions (a primeval river valley, coastal etc.); (4) external border of the European Union. This publication focuses on three areas with towns as the highest concentration of cultural heritage is there – Mazsalaca County, Krāslava County, Kandava County.

The authors have used qualitative methods for the research – site visits, semi-structured interviews from March to August 2015. Each area was visited in a multi-day expedition and a team of researchers

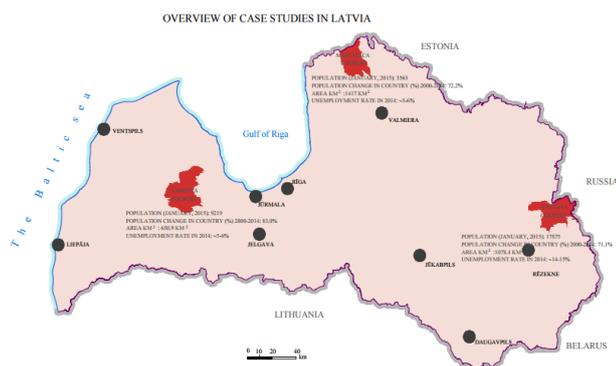
surveyed nature areas and cultural heritage sites, nature businesses and cultural heritage resources. Local government officials were interviewed – management, public relations professionals, development specialists, tourist information centre employees, culture centre and museum managers (Table 1). Overall, 13 individual and group interviews were conducted (N=29).

Interviews reflect the perspective of local authorities to community engagement in heritage conservation. Interview questions depended on informants` expertise, and the main goal was to collect information about informants` attitude towards heritage and community engagement, usage of heritage, and factors impacting heritage conservation.

3.2. Characteristics of research areas

The research areas are located in different cultural historical regions of Latvia. Krāslava County is located in Latgale Region, it borders on Belarus, thus being the external border of the European Union. Kandava County is located in Kurzeme Region. Mazsalaca County is located in the northern part of Latvia, Vidzeme, and its administrative centre Mazsalaca Town is located only 20 km from the Estonian border.

Picture 1. The location and overall indicators of counties



Data source: The Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (2016), State Employment Agency (2016). Designed by authors

The three counties share a declining number of residents which is caused by negative natural growth as well as domestic and cross-border migration resulting from limited employment possibilities. Consequently, the age structure of the

population is unfavourable and services have suffered, which has affected life quality from economical point of view in the community.

3.3. The description of cultural heritage in research areas

The list of State protected cultural monuments partially illustrates the richness of heritage in the research areas (Table 2).

Table 1. Number of cultural monuments

Type	Krāslava County	Kandava County	Mazsalaca County
Archaeological monuments			
National importance	69	14	7
Local importance	12	7	12
Architectural monuments			
National importance	10	9	6
Local importance	2	2	2
Urban building monuments			
National importance	1	1	-

Source: Register of State Inspection for Heritage Protection, Republic of Latvia (2015)

The multicultural borderland Krāslava, located next to the river Daugava, has many archaeological, architectural, historical and art monuments listed on the Latvian National Commission plan for UNESCO. The development of the town is linked with the Counts Platers family activities 200 years ago when they tried to make Krāslava a spiritual and economic centre of Latgale: today the Krāslava Manor area with a park, the library building, Krāslava Roman Catholic St.Ludwig Church and other objects are recognized as protected cultural monuments. The Krāslava Manor complex is being restored and it houses Krāslava Art and History Museum, Tourist Information Centre, and the House of Crafts. The external walls of the Palace are

preserved, but the interior is closed to public due to the bad physical state. Previous attempts to find cooperation partners for management of the manor in the private sector have failed as the status of a cultural monument restricts the owner's right of free transformation of the building for business purposes. However, in general, the manor complex and the park have been turned into a well-kept object providing cultural and recreation possibilities to the local community and visitors. The local municipality still has the challenge to find re-use for all the premises of the manor house as cooperation with private sector so far has not been successful because large expenses of cultural monument reconstruction for maintaining the original authentic exterior is a major factor hindering entrepreneurs from engagement in cultural monument management businesses.

Kandava County Council's (2010) development plan stresses the significance of an "educated, socially protected, healthy and active community", and a scenic natural environment is seen as an essential instrument for minimizing depopulation in the county. Thanks to the beautiful landscape, the neighbourhood of the Abava River is a favourite relaxation place; however, Kandava Town can also offer culture heritage resources. Yet, the natural and cultural resources do not attract as many visitors as the municipality would like; consequently, its aim is to increase the economic potential of heritage in tourism. Kandava County boasts Kandava County Museum, Bruņinieku and Kuršu Castle mounds and the Powder Tower, all popular recreation places and a tourism resource at the same time. The Powder Tower from the 17th century is located in the town centre and is currently in a critical state. The town has failed to obtain financing for its restoration. In the future, the local municipality sees the historical building as a gallery centre with a viewing platform.

The location of Mazsalaca County close to the border with Estonia, away from large industrial centres, with transit traffic, its attractive terrain, a large proportion of forests, and an abundance of surface and ground waters, has created preconditions for a high quality environment which is defined as a strategic priority in the county development plan. The county area has been populated for thousands of years; and today intangible cultural heritage is prized. The county is a good example of organizing cultural life from versatile informal education to culture event organization. In Mazsalaca County, tourism offer is mainly based upon traditional values: the Skaņais

kalns Nature Park with wooden sculptures and a collection of wood-carver Valters Hirte's collection of wooden sculptures in a local museum. The Valtenbergi Manor complex with a surrounding park is a significant national cultural monument that dates back to 18th and 19th centuries. The manor house was used as secondary school premises until recently, but after the school was moved to other premises, it was left to decay. The Palace is partially renovated by local municipality and since 2015 houses the local museum—tourism offer now is concentrated together: the museum, the manor house and Skaņais kalns Park. Yet, the manor house premises are not utilized to full extent due to the lack of functional application.

Overall, all three towns have valuable old towns with historical building layouts, specific for each region. However, some of the owners of the buildings have emigrated to economically more active centres; many houses have been alienated by banks, and so on. Deteriorating objects degrade the environment; they are also dangerous and become a burden for municipalities both financially and legally. Observations in old towns have proved the financial constraints of the historical house owners or their lack of understanding of the fact that the authenticity of the centre is diminished by careless attitude, like plastic frames instead of wooden window frames. This is particularly typical of Krāslava Town historical centre, but the Kandava development plan also states that the majority of architectural monuments are in a poor technical condition and not managed according to the regulations of cultural monument conservation.

3.4. The role of cultural heritage in local development

This section of the article discusses the role county councils ascribe to the local cultural heritage in their development documents. Regarding the tangible cultural heritage, documents mostly concerns the most significant architectural and urban building monuments.

The goal of Kandava municipality is the conservation of the typical low-rise building style. The municipality has implemented a financial support programme to owners of historical buildings; yet there are cases when it is difficult to have a constructive dialogue between the owners and the municipality regarding the management of the buildings. The Krāslava Town development plan envisages conservation of Krāslava's cultural historical heritage, including conservation of the

historical centre and the urban landscape. Krāslava County Council has made a plan of development of the south-eastern part of the town's historical centre. It is exploring the buildings of the historical centre to assess the technical condition of the heritage sites. Yet, the municipality does not communicate systematically with the community and the cultural monument owners to convey the value and importance of protection of the town's historical centre. Neither has Mazsalaca any particular support programmes for the protection of the town's historical centre. The Old Town is not an urban building cultural monument, yet the County Council has invested legal resources in settling property right issues in a bid to make the degraded buildings available to potential investors.

Both Kandava and Krāslava municipalities indicate in their planning documents that conditions for the conservation and adaption of cultural historical heritage to the needs of development of the county's socioeconomic life are cumbersome. In Kandava difficulties are linked to research and the identification of cultural historical and architectural values: there are no scientifically justified spatial planning and building regulations, or cultural monument preservation and further application plans. Krāslava County Council (2012) points out the loss of heritage authenticity and technical deterioration, caused by belated maintenance and repair works, insufficient funding and human neglect.

Overall, development planning documents in all counties recognize the potential of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Due to the rich cultural and natural heritage, all counties share the interest into tourism development. Each county has its own peculiar features, but the conservation of cultural historical heritage is a common problem for all of them.

4 Results and discussion

In the context of engagement heritage preservers should take into account overall Latvian civic activity. Part of Latvian society also has faced an interruption in meaningful society engagement (e.g. voluntary work) during Soviet times and they do not have this kind of experiences. Other explanations for low engagement post-soviet countries such as Latvia can be related to peoples' dissatisfaction with the new political and economic system: disappointment and mistrust of organizations have

caused them to withdraw further from public activities. Moreover, in conditions when a vast majority of people are struggling to make a living, civil activities to conserve heritage might simply not be priority. The inability to establish a link between universal societal interests and people's own benefit makes the engagement of population in conservation of cultural heritage more difficult. It reflects in number of people practicing voluntary activities and working in NGO sector.

Regarding community activity, EKOSOC 5.2.8. project team experience proves that members of the community who are rich in initiative already occasionally play a key role for culture development in the country. Therefore we argue there are active individuals in community rather than active community in general and municipality should: 1) to provide utmost support for active members without bureaucratic procedures; 2) to work on increasing active numbers of active people by creating creative environment. Unfortunately, culture, including cultural heritage sectors, has not received adequate financial support on national level and it does not stimulate the development of creative environment. For instance, out of more than 500 culture centres in Latvia, only a few centre managers are active members in the Culture Centre Association [9], which prevents the association from being a key player in discussions with politicians. Intensifying cooperation would promote exchanges of experience; make professional culture more accessible and rural culture organizations more influential. However, unless culture is defined as a priority, the sector will suffer from the lack of creative initiative of people. Unattractive salaries in culture sector in Latvia is one of the reasons why many culture professionals has lost motivation to work on professional improvements and networking. Local community initiatives may not substitute financial support from the state in the long term as a unique solution to the problems. One of the research territories – Mazsalaca municipality has set up culture as priority and generously funds different amateur culture groups with increasing number of participants, which is followed by intense cultural event schedule. Mazsalacas's experience confirms volunteers and initiators of creative ideas are mainly the people who are already engaged in cultural activities through education (in folk dance groups, choirs, etc.). In order to use participation to full extent, some other preconditions are necessary, such as setting the volunteer work sphere in order; granting formal certificates to volunteers of local government institutions to increase interest in public

activities; intensifying communication activities. Research data confirm that for rural territories using personal ties and face-to-face communication to stimulate engagement activity are beneficial.

The reorientation of consciousness is a continuous process that cannot be completed during one generation, and Jākobsone (2011) argues that the most efficient educational work is with the younger generation. Youngsters should be engaged in the care for cultural heritage objects and the delivery of messages of heritage conservation. However, this is also an issue of policy changes in national education.

Alongside specific stakeholder groups (e.g. cultural monument owners and NGOs), seniors are another target group to intensify cooperation with. Free time is an important factor influencing co-participation possibilities. Seniors have free time, and the proportion of seniors in rural areas is high. Unfortunately, not always Latvian seniors devote their time to public activities due to financial and medical reasons or shortage of civic work practice and limited experience of civil engagement.

To engage community in the heritage conservation processes, one should understand how residents use heritage: different generations and individuals use particular heritage objects differently. The community may be engaged in the identification of heritage and development planning in different ways – for instance, in cultural heritage mapping from the perspective of the community using the storytelling method. Engagement becomes a means to extract the knowledge that local community already possesses and residents can share stories of unique cultural heritage (storytelling) online or in various conversations [8]. To raise overall awareness of the value of cultural heritage and map heritage, librarians are significant community members to cooperate with, e.g. in storytelling evenings. Currently, story-telling is occasionally used in rural regions, but this process should be strategically managed and continues, while in practise these activities are occasionally short term and project based.

The increase in the number of unused buildings because of depopulation defines the re-use of historic buildings as an urgent topic in rural development. Engagement of the community in finding new functions is one way to seek creative solutions that are beneficial for the whole community. Small rural areas with a limited tourist

flow frequently exclude the most common ways of cultural heritage re-use, such as cafes, small hotels, and dwelling houses. In all researched areas there are central objects requiring new functional application. In Kandava, it is the Powder Tower, for which the municipality has found a new multifunctional application. In Krāslava, the municipality has no clear future vision for the palace. In Mazsalaca, it is the Valtenbergi Manor complex housing a museum and leaving the rest of the building unoccupied. So far, it is not a widespread practise to use collective expertise in multilateral discussions. However, the Estonian study “Schools in Manor Houses” recommends that heritage sites should be multifunctional; even more, the project stresses the importance of community opinion.

Culture revitalization in rural areas would create a more attractive living environment for the people already living there and for potential newcomers from towns. It would also positively affect demand for culture and strengthen local identity. Local residents’ participation in shaping the cultural environment would make it more attractive for various professional art activities, such as *plein air* events, festivals and concerts, which would at the same time promote tourism and the economic potential of heritage.

There are no absolute or universal answers to how to engage local communities in the conservation of cultural heritage. This process is impacted by national institutions, legislation and funding, the activity of the community as well as resources of municipalities. Some municipalities can define the culture as its` priority but as long as it is not supported by funding in national level and matching partners to cooperate with, the cultural revitalization and strengthening community engagement is limited.

Meaningful engagement of local inhabitants in heritage conservation demands additional efforts, especially personal communication that is the most effective way to engage people in the rural territories. A positive outcome is a result of an uninterrupted long-term input into communication to community about cultural heritage conservation. Therefore, community engagement, the role of collective expertise, education and communication about heritage issues should receive higher priority in municipalities. Isolated initiatives that do not have a decisive impact on people’s awareness of

values of cultural heritage in the community should be strategically steered and expanded.

Conclusions

As a reorientation of consciousness towards heritage conservation requires years of work, it is crucial to start work at school and increase knowledge of heritage in school education content. Also, engaging youngsters in projects for heritage conservation and urban landscape development in different forms as summer schools, plein aires etc. is recommendable – it helps foster a culture of voluntary work in the long term and gives youngsters new leisure time opportunities in the short term.

Each municipality has a different attitude to solving heritage problems on the basis of available finances, understanding of priorities, and the influence of legislation to improve the processes of heritage management and cooperation with irresponsible monument owners.

Engaging communities effectively will help alleviate the need for resources to restore heritage sites. Moreover, it will make sure that the restored site is needed by the community and improves the quality of life in the area.

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