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EUROPEAN HERITAGE DAYS
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The Future of the European Heritage Days

REPORT

by

Susan Williamson

1. Introduction

This paper explains the basis of the Council of Europe's support for heritage. It goes on to summarise the role of heritage as a force for good in contemporary democratic Europe. It then notes the background for the European Heritage Days, reviews its performance to date, and makes recommendations for the future of the programme.

2. Background

Since 1949, with the signing of the Statute of the Council of Europe (CoE) by 10 countries, the CoE has acted as a focus for all the countries of Europe, with their different histories, languages and cultures, towards common goals; the **promotion and defence of human rights, democracy** and the **rule of law**. These three values remain at the core of the work of the CoE.

Cultural and natural heritage are tangible: they comprise the physical evidence of cultural values, and include historic buildings, archaeological remains and historic landscapes, evident across Europe. This rich resource is intrinsic to the quality of life and can deliver a range of economic and social benefits. For example, religious buildings or cultural landscapes exist in every country in Europe and are a product of interchange between people over the centuries. These treasures can be a way to 'read' the culture and values of a place. The understanding of diverse heritage values is the basis of intercultural dialogue, which build links between different people. For this to be possible the heritage must be managed sustainably and be readily available to the population so that they can enjoy, understand and thence reap the benefits. Heritage underpins the CoE's work in support of its core values.

3. Heritage: Council of Europe and the EU

Responsibility for heritage remains with national authorities and thus there is no basis for direct EU action. The CoE's remit has always included culture and heritage. It works through cooperation between member countries and has achieved a number of important cultural heritage conventions which guide heritage management across the signatory countries.

The increased dialogue between the CoE and the Commission recognizes the importance of heritage. The EU is now co-funding heritage projects where social or economic benefits can be demonstrated in line with their basic objectives: to bring citizens together in harmony even though there are differences in cultures and languages. It is beneficial to both organisations that they should be associated with a high profile programme such as European Heritage Days (EHDs).

4. Democratisation of Heritage

Heritage is no longer the preserve of the landowners and elite. In defining it more broadly, heritage has been opened up to a much wider audience. There is now a better understanding of why heritage is important and the contribution it can make to a cohesive society. In line with this, the CoE's Faro Convention promotes the idea that heritage, and the social and economic benefits it offers, should be available to all. This innovative Framework Convention sets human beings at the heart of heritage – heritage's value lies in what it can do for society.

EHDs have played an important role in making the heritage much more accessible to the general population. It has just celebrated 25 years of what has been a resoundingly successful European-wide programme comprising national events which are visited by several millions of people each year, and is communicated to an even larger audience through the media.

5. History and aims of the EHDs

EHDs are based on the premise that celebrating the heritage can:

- a. raise the awareness of European citizens to the richness and cultural diversity of Europe and the need to protect it both from decay and from new threats;
- b. create a climate in which the appreciation of the rich mosaic of European cultures encourages greater tolerance of other communities in Europe, within each country and beyond national borders;

The principle of exchange of ideas has been fundamental from the beginning. In 1991, the Council of Europe officially launched the European Heritage Days. In 1999, it became a joint action of the Council of Europe and the European Commission, and 50 countries now take part.

Throughout Europe, in September, national events under the umbrella of the EHDs open the doors of numerous buildings, monuments and sites, normally closed to the public, allowing Europe's citizens to enjoy and learn about the heritage of their own country and their heritage shared with other parts of Europe and beyond. Through increasing understanding and appreciation, the idea is to encourage them to become actively involved in the heritage, safeguarding it for present and future generations.

Each participating country is free to organise the event as they see fit and they are all different. Usually the Government agency responsible for heritage is involved as well as a local government and voluntary organisations. The network of national EHDs coordinators plays a key role. All national events are supposed to follow the guiding principles, including flying the EHDs flag at venues and displaying the logos of the CoE, EHDs and EU on promotional material.

Since 1999, the EHDs have a permanent slogan: "Europe, a common heritage". This carries the message of enhancing the value of European cultural and natural heritage whilst respecting its cultural diversity.

6. Secretariat

There is no direct Council of Europe funding for national events, instead support from the Secretariat is focused on advice to the coordinators aimed at promoting the success of the EHDs. Facilitating the interchange of ideas, and encouraging the inclusion of the European dimension in local material, is the main thrust of their effort. Each year the Secretariat encourages national and regional events to be organised around a special theme, such as: specific forms of heritage, periods in history or society's approaches to heritage, such as heritage and youth. There has never been uniform implementation of these themes, rather each country decides its theme.

The main mechanisms for support are the website, which includes information on all the participating national events, the annual coordinators meeting, and an interactive Chat/Forum for the coordinators to use. The Secretariat used to organise a 2 day training meeting for coordinators, held in Strasbourg in November after each year's event. It was then held in June in Strasbourg, and latterly it has followed the annual Heritage Forum meeting. The coordinators' travel expenses are met by the CoE.

In 2008 the Secretariat of the Council of Europe prepared a new strategy with the European Commission to increase the visibility and success of the EHDs. It restructured the format for the annual training meetings to reinvigorate the EHDs and strengthen the added value of the event's European element. The strategy put into action:

- an annual press conference to provide focus point for professionals and associations to meet and discuss the ways and means of improving dissemination strategies.
- an annual Forum, with a broad intellectual base focusing on interpretation methods and communication. The participants include a wide range of heritage professionals, senior administrators and others and also the national EHD coordinators.
- an annual much shorter coordinators meeting to follow immediately after the Forum.

7. Press Conference

The strategy seeks to strengthen the profile of EHD with the media. A series of activities including press briefings, a magazine pilot and meetings with TV and cinema producers have taken place. By aligning the Heritage Forum meeting with the other high profile events, such as the European Capital of Culture, it has met with success, especially in the country hosting the meeting. However it is not clear that the profile of EHDs has been raised in the participating countries.

8. Heritage Forum

Since 2008 the Heritage Forum, which is followed by the coordinators training meeting, is attended by a range of senior professionals and officials as well as the coordinators. The topic of the 2008 Forum, in Belgium, was dialogue. The 2009 Forum, in Slovenia, focused on creativity and innovation, exploring the potential of new technologies, and the 2010 Istanbul Forum explored participation and prosperity.

The feedback from the Forum shows:

- The themes are wide enough to be of interest to civil servants and professionals alike.
- The Forum is well-structured so as to provide the opportunity for debate, reflection and creative thinking and for all attendants to participate.
- The opportunity to meet a range of professionals from different disciplines to share ideas and experience is very welcome.
- The EHD coordinators themselves enjoy both the Forum and the Coordinators meeting and appreciate the ideas and support they get from both the Secretariat and each other.
- The moderator and facilitators at all three Forum meetings did not have specialist knowledge of heritage and so were unable to stimulate discussion, either at table level or in plenary, at key moments in the debate.
- Different levels of expertise and experience limit the level of discussion so the conclusions are not innovative.
- The summary of the discussion is interesting but not in great depth: the conclusions are quite general in nature so quite difficult to take forward.

9. Coordinators' meeting

The coordinators' meeting now comprises a morning discussion and a half day visit to a local heritage site. While this is enjoyable and appreciated by the coordinators, enabling them to meet and share their own ideas and experiences, I question how much value the morning session is in terms of training and in achieving the CoE's and the Commission's aims.

While there is benefit for coordinators attending the Forum meeting, see above, this arrangement is not offering the effective training or guidance needed by these key players in delivery of EHDs, and in particular in delivery of the European context.

If the aim of the sponsor organisations is to bring the citizens of Europe together in harmony through understanding their cultural heritage, then this group should be key. The coordinator is the main person running the national event within EHDs, based in the member States and in direct contact with the Secretariat.

10. Online Chat/Forum – restricted access [<https://jep-forum.cws.coe.int>]

While 587 hits were received in the Chat/Forum, only 11 correspondents from nine Member States were actively engaged in commenting, although 30 coordinators had actually posted information on the site. Some felt that the site was time consuming to use, and not easy to find, though the link is provided by the Secretariat. However, many felt it had the potential to host discussion of themes initiated by the Secretariat and by the coordinators themselves.

This initiative should help to share ideas between coordinators, and from the Secretariat, to improve the delivery of EHDs. However it has to be easy to access, so I question why the site must be restricted access since this is likely to be a barrier to its use.

11. European visibility

The CoE and the European Commission jointly support EHDs in order that the European dimension is promulgated. Analysis of the 2009 evaluation suggests that the European involvement is important; in most Member States the European Logo and spirit of 'Common European Heritage' are of unquestionable value, elevating the event from merely local to national and European level.

National coordinators think the European aspect is important. Their comments include:

- it makes them appreciate the international links their country has always had.
- adds educational interest, especially for young people.
- without the EHDs initiative the platform would not exist to promote education and awareness of heritage and its contribution to our lives.
- with EHDs we have the feeling of doing something together, as part of "a big family" .
- the European dimension brings our own event to a bigger scale. It has more impact and raises the profile for media interest.
- while difficult to measure whether it has resulted in increasing tolerance and reducing xenophobia, anecdotal evidence suggests; "people have visited buildings representing a range of cultures and religions and have developed a positive impression of the communities represented because of that experience".
- it helps to secure funding.

However, despite the success of the national 'Open Doors' events, this is not accompanied by more evidence of the European dimension: in the main the events are local in nature. Concern remains that the European elements and the CoE's broader political and social objectives continue to be absent, or very low profile, in many of the 50 participating countries.

12. Conclusions

Success of the EHDs

EHDs, are now well established and continues to operate throughout the member states, involving thousands of citizens across Europe, with relatively little financial support from the CoE and the Commission. The national Open Doors events are very successful: they go from strength to strength with more free sites and monuments opened up to the public; more local government authorities, schools and civil society organisations are becoming involved and visitor numbers increase each year.

At a national level, the events do reflect the principals of sustainable heritage management and very much encourage the involvement of all communities in the heritage through visiting sites and participating in conservation or other projects. The grass roots nature of the event is inevitable and welcome. The majority of visitors go to local sites and attend local events, so they find out about a their own village, region and country's heritage.

National events celebrating national heritage would continue to thrive without the CoE's support, but without its input, the European aspects and the sharing and understanding of cultures across borders would diminish. The national events alone do not focus on raising awareness of European citizens of their cultural wealth. If the European dimension of the programme is considered to be important, the CoE, with the support of the Commission, should continue with EHDs. This programme is successful in the 50 member states and has the potential to carry the messages of Europe throughout the continent.

The coordinators, implementing their national programmes within the EHD umbrella, could promote the European dimension more effectively. They are the main link between the Secretariat and the member states and there is potential for strengthening links for the purpose of promoting the European dimension. For this reason, further support in the form of training and practical guidance should be provided to the coordinators.

Recommendations for the Future of European Heritage Days

The success of the Forum is clear. In particular, the participatory nature of the event is excellent. It would be improved if facilitators with experience/knowledge of heritage issues were used both for plenary sessions and table discussions.

Members of the European Heritage Heads should be encouraged to take part in the Forum or other key events celebrating the EHDs as this is an influential group of people.

Coordinators need the opportunity to share expertise and experience 'best practice', with each other and with the CoE, face to face. It is essential that a meeting should continue to be hosted for this purpose.

While the coordinators undoubtedly benefit from taking part in the Forum discussions, there is an issue with the timing of this meeting. Ideally the coordinators' training should take place in time for the results to be implemented during the September events.

The annual meeting of coordinators should provide the opportunity for more practical training. This meeting needs to be more than a half day. To allow substantive issues to be covered, papers should be provided in advance, with an agenda, so that participants have time to prepare and have a more productive discussion.

Practical training should include how to access media for promoting the values of the CoE, the European dimension of the heritage and the benefits it offers, as well as the local programme of events.

Discussion of the European dimension at coordinators' meetings could be supplemented by written material. The Secretariat should provide draft press releases or articles on this aspect for the coordinators to use in press releases, and other media coverage.

More knowledge of the social impact of heritage work across Europe, such as the work on places of worship in Kosovo, would be useful for coordinators. This reinforces the importance of the message. Perhaps short updates could be covered at coordinators' meetings or by email, or the Chat/Forum.

Practical tools are needed for measuring the social and economic benefits, including the European aspect. These are difficult to measure but it has been done in some countries. Examples of good practice as well as practical guidance, is desirable so that all coordinators can measure the performance of the EHDs. This topic could be included in the coordinators' meetings.

Practical tools are also needed for measuring the success of national events, for example, the range and number of visitors to sites. A standard tool is desirable, so that comparisons can be made. HEREIN may in due course provide this.

As the role of the coordinator is key to the delivery of EHDs, and is different in every country, it would be helpful for the Secretariat to set out the key elements of the role.

National coordinators and their CDPATEP member should ensure they keep in touch over policy development on the heritage issues in the context of the European dimension.

The Secretariat should initiate innovative projects highlighting the European dimension of the national events even if these are then hosted by member states. These could include educational initiatives encouraging a better knowledge of our common history and raising awareness of quality of life issues. Where possible such programmes should involve young people. The International Heritage Photographic Experience was very successful, though the CoE is no longer directly involved. The coordinators should also be encouraged to propose projects, and to take them forward.

Common themes are unlikely to be funded or implemented across the board but can encourage cooperation between groups of countries working together to hold joint launches, and promulgating complementary information. Themes should be suggested by both Secretariat and by coordinators well in advance, so that countries have time to plan.

Secretariat and the Commission should explore whether themes linked to other activities could be developed, such as the European Cultural Routes programme.

Although online discussion is not a sufficient alternative to face to face meeting, it can be a useful addition. In order to encourage usage, the online Chat/Forum should not be a restricted site. Given the need to consider costs carefully, the CoE may also wish to consider whether the Chat/Forum is a cost effective addition to the EHDs own website.