

Community Participation in Cultural Heritage Conservation
Case Study: The Landscape Zone of the Bisotun World Heritage Site
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Abstract:

Public participation in cultural heritage, with particular regard to conservation, has been a concern ever since the Venice Charter (1964) and it still is to this day. This approach has also been highlighted in the ratified world heritage documents. The Faro Convention adopted a shift in focus from the conservation of cultural heritage values to the value of cultural heritage for the society. In this case, it is necessary to engage public and local people in all stages of cultural heritage conservation and management. According to this convention, cultural heritage institutions inevitably have to apply a public participatory approach. Moreover, a number of papers have focused on the importance of public participation in heritage conservation and tourism management by implementing different tools. This paper presents iCommunity, a prototyped application that will be aimed at finding a method for achieving maximum inclusion in the decision-making processes for cultural heritage management. iCommunity is being designed as a mobile application to facilitate public participation. The main idea is to give all people, who are affected by a decision, the equal opportunity to be involved in the decision-making process. Any cultural heritage institution will be able to publish its activities on the application so as to evaluate users' feedback before the implementation of the activity itself. Based on the user's location, the application displays ongoing activities to the user himself. As a part of a participatory approach, users share each other's experience or data related to the posted activity. They also can show their agreement or disagreement to the activities by voting. The comments, votes and user's activities will be analyzed real time for helping authorities to consider the consequences of their activities for more transparent and effective decision-making.

Keywords: iCommunity, Cultural heritage, Mobile application, Community Participation

Introduction:

Local participation in cultural heritage conservation has always been a concern since the Venice Charter so far (1964). In addition, the Faro Convention (2005) shifted focus from cultural heritage values to the values of cultural heritage for society. In this case, it is necessary to achieve the maximum engagement of stakeholders in all stages of management¹. Nowadays, the concept of community engagement in all stages of cultural heritage management is accepted for almost everyone. But “the idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you”². If we accept that community engagement is good for us, the problem is how to let people participate? Not only communities are not very aware of their rights on their cultural heritage, but also cultural heritage authorities are unwilling to involve people in their decision-making process.

Suppose, in an ideal society of course, people know that the cultural heritage is their properties and they would like to manage their assets by themselves, and authorities have realized that they are not omni-knowledge and omni-potent, there is still an unsolved problem, no one knows “how” to implement a people-centered approach. This “how” is referring to two main issues related to community engagement; lack of recognized method, and determining an appropriate tool.

Social media and community engagement:

According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) report, it estimated that 4.1 billion people (more than 53%) have connected to the internet by the end of 2019³ and the

COVID-19 situation in early 2020 has increased the number of users during the block out time. In order to avoid Coronavirus spread, more than 85,000 cultural heritage institutions worldwide (around 90%) closed their doors and nearly 13% of museums may never reopen their doors. Besides the economic impact of these closures, it has particularly affected social life. The museums are playing a vital role in promoting education, inspirations and dialogue. They also enhance social cohesion, foster creativity and are conveyors of collective memory. In addition, they are a key driver of sustainable economic development⁴.

During the quarantine, mostly between February and July 2020, the cultural heritage institutions have inevitably brought their life into the internet. The main “real” activities of the museums have had to transform into the “virtual”; online collections, 360° tours, virtual museums, online publications, digital exhibitions, remote participation, etc. Consequently, the museums have increased their activity on the internet in order to keep interacting with their users.

In Canada for instance, according to the Ontario Museums Associations’ website⁵, there are more than 650 cultural heritage organizations in Ontario itself. Among them, 642 organizations are accessible via the internet and a bit more than 80% are utilizing social media platforms, according to their websites. Based on this online survey, the most favorable platforms for those organizations are Facebook, Tweeter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Flickr, consecutively. A bit less than four out of five have institutional pages on Facebook, 64% on Tweeter and half of them are available via Instagram. The proportion of YouTube and LinkedIn are approximately 35 and 10 percent, respectively. The ratio of other social media platforms like Pinterest, TripAdvisor and Flickr rare just 5%. While around one-fifth of cultural heritage organizations do not appear on the internet, 82% have more than one profile in social media and again Facebook is on the top. The majority of the organizations have more than three links to their social networks.

Despite the growing use of online tools to engage the public, in many cases, the number of participants is too low, most participants engage infrequently and the connection between participation and authorities is unclear. There are also important concerns regarding the level of participation, unequal power among participants and between participants and authorities and lack of online civic engagement skills⁶.

Moreover, these so-called social media are not originally designed for community engagement purposes⁷. So, they are not able to be used as a comprehensive tool in different steps of community engagement. These steps mostly are informing the community, exploring and explaining the projects or issues, opening a discussion room, obtaining feedback, collecting data, building capacity, developing collaboration and making decision. Internet-based engagement enhances the techniques utilized to engage the community, it is not a replacement⁸.

Principles:

In order to achieve successful participation, there are several-fundamental basic essentials that must be followed. Lack of any of these requirements may lead to reduce or delay the level of success that may be different from place to place. The first most critical requirement for implementation of people’s participation is democracy which does not have any consensus on a precise definition⁹. Simply, democracy means “rules by the people”, “power of the people” and/or “a way of governing which depends on the will of the people.” Since the integral part of democracy is people, “there are as many different forms of democracy as there are democratic nations in the world”¹⁰ and as one might expected, the higher level of democracy exists in a given society, the upper level of people’s participation will achieve.

Another aspect of the people’s participation approach is volunteering which means done or brought about of one’s own will. There are different methods to persuade people to be involved in participation (e.g., advertisements, various incentives, pay money, etc.), but the most effective way of participation is to opt to be involved. In this case, capacity building programs

help communities to improve their skills, abilities and instincts for better understanding and choosing.

Trust building does also reform the quality of participation which requires transparency, honesty and clarity in all people's participation processes, especially while the topic of participation is cultural heritage. During past decades, the authorities have always looked at the people from above, thought and made decisions on behalf of them. In addition, the people's participation must be accessible for everyone to achieve the goals.

Accessibility in participation means that it is possible and easy for everyone to be involved. All people in the target society whom are affected by a decision with different cultures, religions, languages, ages, genders, etc. must have an equal opportunity to access the participation as wide as possible. Most often, intentionally or inadvertently, a part of a community is excluded for their various abilities, disabilities or even different points of view. The whole process must be easily available for everyone, in terms of physical¹¹ and/or virtual. Thus, it leads to an accountable process.

All kinds of people's participation approach also need to be accountable for everyone who involves the processes, including the engaged authorities and organizations, by "good record-keeping and reporting of both processes and outcomes"¹².

On the other hand, there must exist a group of appropriate participants in a proper scale. For applying people's participation in cultural heritage management, the scale must not exceed the local level. People who are living within a core zone and buffer zone are the main target group in iCommunity prototyped application.

iCommunity mobile application:

Now, in order to find a way and a tool, we are working on designing an application called iCommunity which could facilitate the public's participation in cultural heritage management. The main idea is that all people who are somehow affected by a decision have the right to be involved in the decision-making process. Any cultural heritage institution will be able to publish activities on the application as a means to evaluate the users' feedback before the implementation of any activity (figure 1).

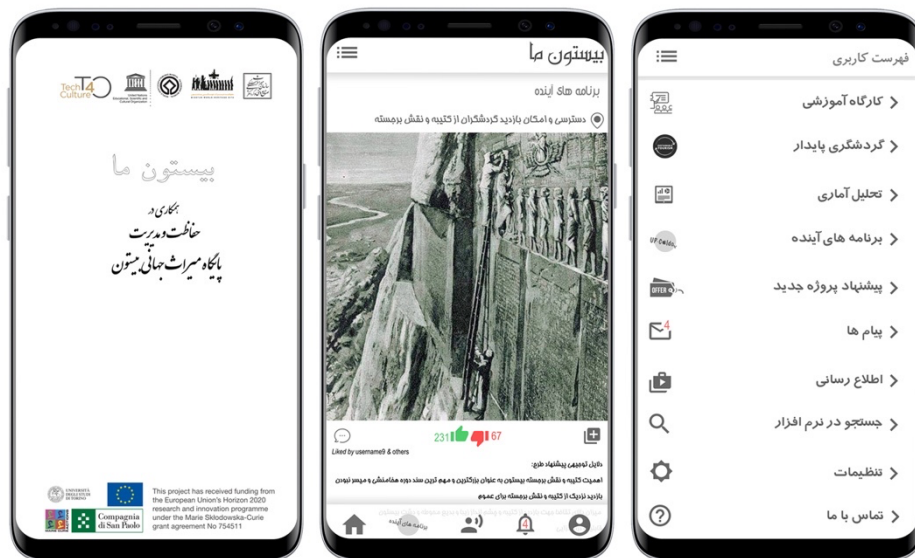


FIGURE 1 (iCommunity interface, welcome page, home page and menu page-left to right)

Based on the user's location, the application displays ongoing and future activities and, as a part of the participatory approach, the users share their experience or data related to the posted activity with other users. They can also show their agreement or disagreement about the scheduled activities by voting. In addition, iCommunity will be able to extract and show the

activities posted on related websites such as ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property), UNESCO World Heritage Centre and related social networks (e.g., Facebook and Instagram). The analyzed data will be shown in real time for volunteer users helping authorities to consider the impact of their activities for transparent and effective decision-making.

The main goal of this project is to find a method to achieve maximum inclusion in decision-making processes in the cultural heritage management. The idea is to encourage different stakeholders, such as local people living in or around the Bisotun World heritage Site, to take active roles in decision-making processes related to management and conservation. Furthermore, this mobile application will provide sufficient information and clear data in order to organize specific workshops for direct and indirect education. Data shown in the application will also help people to understand the reasons behind the implementation of planned activities by taking part in comments and talking with experts or professionals. In addition, it also aims to make the decision-making process clearer and more transparent by presenting voting functions and showing all comments for users. Finally, the application outcomes (which include analyzed data collected by feedback, voting, communication, etc.) will help to understand the real needs and interests of different stakeholders in the Bisotun landscape zone area (figure 2).

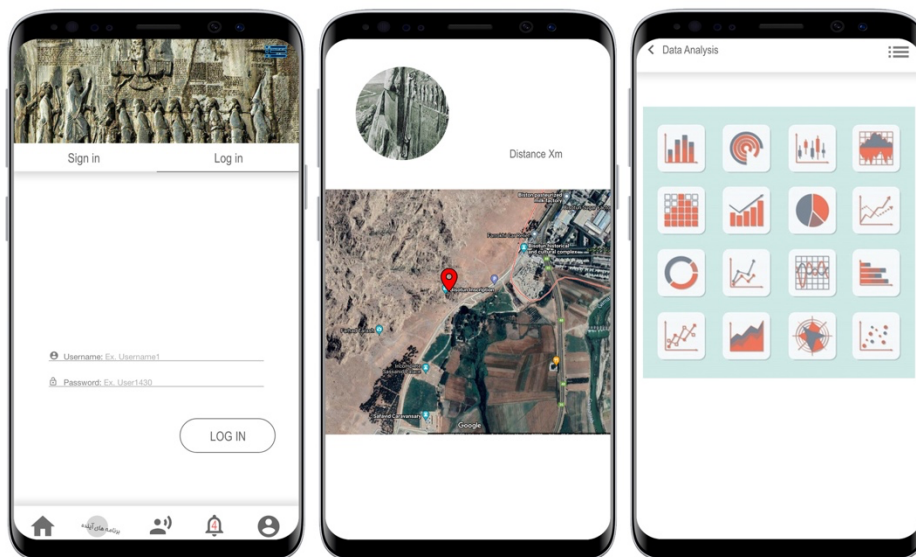


FIGURE 2 (entry page, location of activity and data analysis functions-left to right)

New activities will be posted by institutions on the home page and user's feedback as likes, comments and check-ins, will be immediately shown. Based on the user's location, the application will suggest the users to join the closest institutions for joining. Most often, a number of museums and cultural heritage sites exist in a city with disparate activities and workshops, thus the users can join in each of them depending on their interests. Besides location, each user will be able to search topics for joining their favourite activities among different institutions. In addition, the users involve the posted activities by directly writing comments. Each user will be able to vote and post a comment to the activity and reply to other comments.

The most important part of the application is the voting functionality. Since the group age and other user's specifications will be shown in the user profile if users decide to allow it, collected data will be very important for decision-makers. All collected users' data (such as socio-demographic data, actions, and comments) will be analysed and classified in background by a machine learning component, and inferred needs and interests will be classified and used for

making the best decision. After voting to each project, a bonus will be added to the user's account as an incentive for encouraging participants to vote (ex. visiting the site or museum for free), and also other gamification strategies will be added in order to increase user's participation in the decisions.

Ongoing works:

iCommunity will be an application for facilitating interactions among different users involved in cultural heritage sites and museums activities. It will help authorities easily include people in decision-making processes by informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering via iCommunity application. Furthermore, the application will provide a strong network between cultural heritage institutions for more collaboration. The project is currently in a prototyping phase as a part of a PhD study aimed at using new technology for public participation in cultural heritage management.

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