

# ROLE OF HERITAGE IN SHAPING PERCEPTIONS ABOUT LOCALS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN IRELAND AND ITALY

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*empirical investigations conducted in Ireland and Italy with the same methodology.*

## KEYWORDS

*Italian Heritage; Local community; Cultural policies; Locals' Heritage perception.*

## ABSTRACT

*Cultural heritage is increasingly becoming a competitive resource to strengthen the local identity of a territory, to improve the visibility of a site and develop a cultural tourism of quality. Italy is one of the most interesting countries in the world thanks to its cultural resources and is becoming fundamental the preservation of this cultural heritage and the promotion of it also among the Italian residents. Is, in fact, increased in the years the knowledge that cultural heritage must not be directed only to tourist, but it can also bring important benefits to resident, a very important target to make aware about heritage and to make loyal.*

*Starting from these considerations, the paper examines how the cultural policies are increasingly taking interest in the residents and the local community and considers the most significant results of*

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage is increasingly becoming a competitive resource to strengthen the local identity of a territory, to improve the visibility of a site and develop a cultural tourism of quality.

The policies and actions supported by the European Community in the field of Cultural Heritage are promoting a greater awareness of the value of heritage for the citizens and a territorial integrated approach to movable and immovable cultural assets. The directives and supported initiatives emphasize the importance of policies for the heritage protection and enhancement: the benefits of these policies promote economic development and social cohesion.

It is, however, important to consider whether these public policies are actually making residents aware about the value of cultural heritage and if this value is recognized, protected and enjoyed by residents, which should be the main visitors of the cultural heritage of their area.

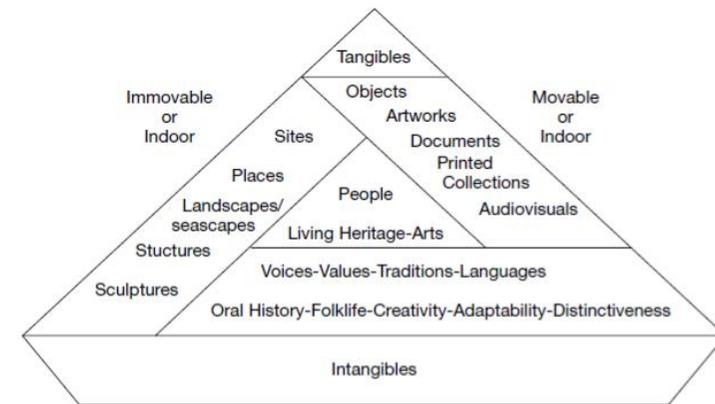
Starting from these considerations, the purpose of this paper is to examine the value of cultural heritage in the residents mind comparing two empirical surveys conducted in Ireland and in Italy to verify if the perception of locals is consistent with the new European policies.

### 1. Value of cultural heritage and European policies

In 1974, the EU has recognized the need to define common actions for the protection of cultural heritage.

Since 1984, the EU has economically supported actions about the protection, conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage, in particular the built heritage but in a second moment these funds have also affected the movable and immovable heritage - natural heritage, landscapes, language heritage, gastronomic heritage, traditional crafts (Figure 1).

Figure 1.  
**Movable and immovable heritage**



Source: Amareswar Galla (AA.VV., 2005)

The gradual extension of the quantitative concept of cultural heritage has also led to a qualitative change that considers the cultural resources of a territory in logic of integration, giving importance to relations with the social communities. In recent years public policies, even at local level, are promoting the enhancement of intangible assets and the integration between resources, considering the features of each territory (local heritage) as a competitive factor.

These objectives are also promoted at EU level, as reflected in the Convention on Intangible Heritage, in the Declaration on Cultural Diversity and in the Program 'The Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO. Also the 2007-2013 European Planning and the organizations engaged in programs of protection, preservation and enhancement of the Heritage (ICOMOS, ICCROM, IUCN, etc.) encourage the same goals.

In recent times is also growing the importance that the actions of protection and enhancement of heritage can have in terms of economic and social benefits.

As regard the economic benefits, the European Community is developing operational programs that encourage economic development activities starting from the territorial cultural resources.

These initiatives, however, give particular attention to the impact in the tourism sector, ignoring the positive effects of cultural development of residents, such as production of design or the increase in creative capital, crafts and gastronomy. In the 80's and 90's, in fact, tourism has been regarded as the appropriate solution to the decline in industrial activities and has been promoted in many cultural programs.

Only recently the cultural heritage has been recognized as a strategic tool to create new culture and improve the visibility of the area, providing the local community the means to pursue models of cultural production and dissemination of ideas and creative thinking (Sacco, Pedrini, 2003).

As regard the social benefits, cultural heritage can strengthen the local identity of a community through initiatives that stimulate pride and sense of belonging and approach the resident to the culture of the area. These activities also attract flows of cultural tourism because they preserve the identity of the destination and foster relationships between tourists and local community based on the history and local culture. The social function is increasingly considering the citizen as the main reference for the communication and promotion of artistic and cultural heritage, both as a subject of rights (enjoyment of cultural heritage) and as subjects of obligations (individual and collective respect of laws for protection and preservation of heritage). Cultural institutes may be a good learning environment<sup>1</sup> to near the residents to their history and traditions: the social function of cultural heritage generates a common and shared consciousness in the citizens, allows the residents to participate actively and encourages them to protect their heritage.

The local development policies that consider the cultural capital a strategic lever, then, consent to obtain advantages in terms of *visibility* and well coordinated image of the area (Sinatra, Alberti, Bernardi, De Vita, Doni, Moro, 2004), economic development (Landry, 2000), urban renovation (Bianchini, Parkinson, 1993) and social inclusion (Belfiore, 2002). The success of these initiatives determines

<sup>1</sup> *Vademecum per educare al patrimonio culturale*, available on [www.pubblica.istruzione.it](http://www.pubblica.istruzione.it).

further processes of development, sustainable in the long term (Sacco, Tavano Blessi, Vergani, 2006).

## 2. Perception of cultural heritage by the residents: a comparison between empirical investigations conducted in Ireland and in Italy

EU policies and initiatives by individual states and local governments thus highlight the need to support and disseminate in the citizens:

- a. An extended concept of cultural heritage that includes tangible and intangible heritage;
- b. A greater knowledge of the value of heritage and the importance of protecting it;
- c. The awareness of the benefits that the cultural heritage create from the economic and social points of view.

The second part of the paper verifies the correspondence between the key concepts identified in the policies and the perception of the value of assets by residents, analyzing the results of two empirical studies that have used the same methodology and were conducted in Ireland and Italy.

The analysis has concerned:

- a. The behaviour of visit of the residents and the items that residents associate with cultural heritage;
- b. The opinions of residents about the protection and enhancement of heritage and their level of responsibility;
- c. The benefits perceived by the community.

### 2.1 *The empirical investigations conducted in Ireland*

In 1999, 2004, 2005 and 2006 the Ireland Heritage Council - the public institution that from 1995 identifies, protects and enhances the cultural heritage of Ireland - has repeated an empirical investigation to analyze the interest of the Irish residents regarding

the cultural heritage. Research results of 1999 were compared with those of 2006. The methodology was the same: in 1999 10 focus groups have allowed the identification of several questions that were presented to a sample of 1400 Irish people over the age of 15; in 2006 8 focus groups have hallowed the identification of several key questions to present to a sample of 1008 adults aged over 15 years. The 2006 survey is the most complete and delineates the emerging trends of the resident's behaviour.

As regard the investigation, the results are:

a. *The behaviour of visit of the residents and the items that residents associate with cultural heritage*

Most of the interviewers consider important the Irish cultural heritage; despite that, citizens don't know with certainty which organizations have to protect and enhance the heritage. Furthermore, few respondents devote time and financial resources to visit the cultural resources: in 2006, 21% of the sample has not visited any cultural resource and 24% had made one or two visits.

The main visitors are people with a high socio-economic level and aged between 25 and 44 years or 55 and 64. The most common reason of the low frequency of visit is the perception that there are few cultural resources in the area. This statement is in part influenced by the perception of the concept of cultural heritage of the Irish. In 1999, in fact, the gap between the official definition of Cultural Heritage – by Heritage Act, 1995 - and the common perception was very evident.

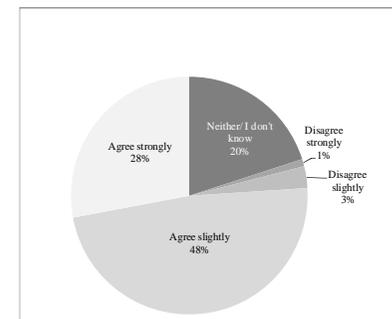
For Irish people the concept of Heritage is mainly tied to the history and traditions; they do not consider the landscape, the nature or the contemporary resources - contemporary art museums or similar institutions - as Heritage. In 2006, the results show a change of this perception: the respondents have a broader view of cultural heritage and take into account also contemporary issues. The analysis, in fact, shows that while young people continue to associate the cultural heritage almost exclusively to the past, adults consider also the landscape, environment, and above all the elements representative of the local identity and of Ireland.

b. *The opinions of residents about the protection and enhancement of heritage and their level of responsibility*

The change in the perception of cultural heritage has also influenced the importance given to the protection and preservation of cultural resources. In previous surveys the Irish attributed these functions almost exclusively to the central government; in the investigation of 2006, however, people want to take direct action to protect their cultural heritage. In this survey the citizens propose also two mechanisms: establish an institution responsible for national cultural resources; raise the public awareness.

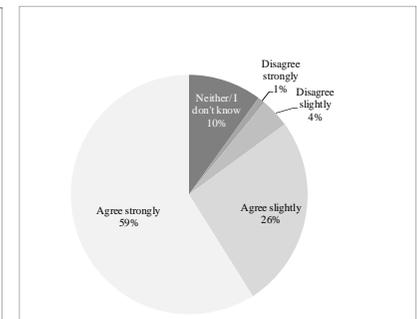
More and more citizens feel personally responsible for the protection of cultural heritage (Figure 2): 76% of the sample is in agreement with the statement that “the protection of heritage is a responsibility of all”, 4% is in disagreement, and this percentage was reduced again in 2006, reaching 1% (Figure 3).

Fig. 2.: *The protection of heritage is a responsibility of all, 1999 (%)*



Source: Ireland Heritage Council, 1999

Fig. 3.: *The protection of heritage is a responsibility of all, 2006 (%)*



Source: Ireland Heritage Council, 2007

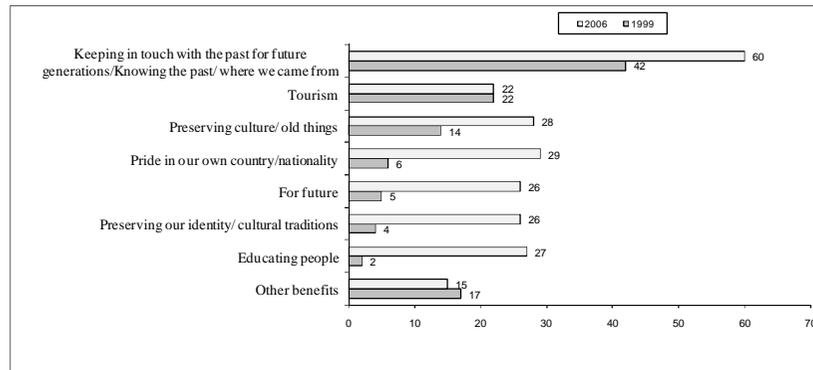
c. *The benefits perceived by the community*

The Irish survey has also analyzed the benefits relating the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage (Figure 4). In 1999, the highest perceived benefit, quoted in 42% of cases, is *to stay in touch with the past for future generations / to know the past / know where we come from*. Many believe, therefore, important to preserve the

culture to reinforce the national identity; this benefit has gained importance over the years, coming to be named by 60% of the Irish in 2006.

Figure 4.

### Perceived benefits concerning the protection and enhancement of cultural resources, 1999 and 2006 (%)



Source: Ireland Heritage Council, 1999 & 2007

22% of the respondents also mentioned the *tourism* as a benefit of heritage, and the percentage has remained unchanged since 1999, but while in the first survey it occupied a very important role (it was in second place) in 2006 has been exceeded from the benefits *Preserving the culture and protect the antiquities* and *Pride in our country / nationality*, which in 1999 were the third and fourth.

## 2.2 The empirical investigations conducted in Italy

The survey conducted in 2006 by Ires Piemonte (Maggi, Don-dona, 2006), has considered the interview to 757 visitors of the cultural system “Museums, Fortresses and Savoy residences”, and a telephone survey to a sample of 1200 residents.

As regard the investigation, the results are:

### a. The behaviour of visit of the residents and the items that residents associate with cultural heritage

Nearly 70% of respondents have visited one or more cultural goods over the past 12 months and nearly 90% said would like to visit other cultural resources during the year.

The survey has also revealed that more than half of visitors are women and below 40 years of age: a predominantly young audience, therefore, reflecting the growing attention of this target to the cultural heritage. Subsequently, the study has analyzed the concept of cultural heritage in the perception of residents. The interviewers have indicated the *Historic Centre* as the primary resource associated with the cultural heritage, followed by individual and more traditional cultural goods such as churches, historical palaces and monuments. The importance that residents give to *Historic Centres* can be explained by the proper coordination between public and private institutions that allow defining an *integrated system*, positively perceived and appreciated by residents (Maggi, Don-dona, 2006). The *Historic Centres* are perceived as a positive cultural resource also because permanent elements of the cultural landscape and source of daily benefits for the community.

### b. The opinions of residents about the protection and enhancement of heritage and their level of responsibility

Half of the sample is aware about the Regional policies for heritage preservation and conservation, but only 6.8% of respondents know in detail these policies.

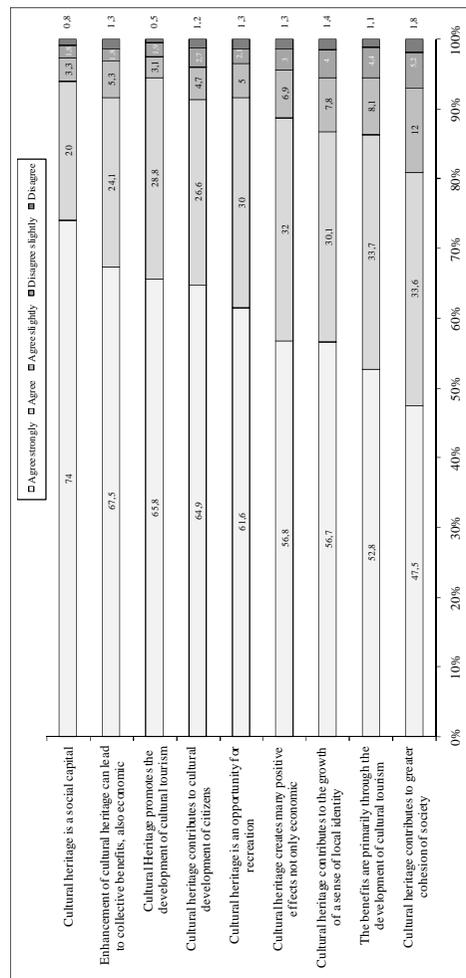
It is important to consider that these results, compared with those of the Irish surveys – in 2006 84% of residents feel personally responsible for the protection of cultural heritage – highlight that the Italian policies have to strengthen these feelings in Italian citizens.

c. *The benefits perceived by the community*

Respondents also had shown to know well the benefits of public policies (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

**Perceived benefits concerning the protection and enhancement of cultural resources, 2006 (%)**



Source: Maggi M. and Dondona, C.A. (2006). *Op. Cit.*

The main benefit the residents associate to the cultural heritage is its social function (74%); the heritage enhancement brings also to economic benefits (67,5%).

## CONCLUSION

The results of the surveys on the perception of the cultural heritage by residents, confirms the effectiveness of the EU and local policies underlining that:

- The concept of cultural heritage is expanding: it is now associated with factors related to both the traditional definition (monuments or archaeological findings, etc..), and the everyday life (churches, palaces, *Historic Centres*, landscape);
- The belief that cultural heritage must be protected and enhanced so that everyone can enjoy it is spreading;
- The knowledge that the assets can generate significant economic and social benefits for the local community is growing.

There are, however, some differences between the results of investigations in Ireland and Italy, due to the cultural contexts of the two Countries.

The Irish associate the concept of cultural heritage to elements of the *past* - the history and the memory of the Country – while in Italy the cultural resources are associated with *everyday life*: culture is considered as some to live every day. In addition, Irish consider that the major benefits associated with cultural heritage are related to memory and identity: *to know the past, know where we come from, or protect the resources to pass them to next generations*. Italians, however, confirm a vision most dynamic, productive and aimed to present of the Heritage: *the cultural heritage is a capital and the enhancement of it determines collective benefits, also economic*.

The few investigations have focused the future researches into new empirical studies to assess whether the residents awareness about the value of cultural heritage is spreading and to verify if this knowledge is contributing to the territorial development and competitiveness.

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