

# Defying the Odds

Research on the Social Value and Impact  
of Projects Aiming to Protect Syrian  
Intangible Cultural Heritage

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# Executive Summary

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This research paper presents an exploratory study on the social value of all projects aiming to protect intangible heritage in Syria, specifically those launched after 2011. It also explores the impact these projects have been able to achieve, while highlighting the most important challenges they have faced, most of which are related to the peculiarities of working in Syria. The paper explains how these challenges have been tackled and, by doing so, provides a baseline for other heritage protection projects, whether in Syria or abroad.

Many cultural actors, both inside and outside Syria, had been drawn to protecting Syria's rich and diverse heritage years before the conflict broke out. However, these efforts have intensified significantly with the increase in severity and frequency of the risks facing various elements of heritage as a result of the conflict and war. Many of these efforts have been able to make a tangible impact and to protect certain elements of Syria's heritage in one way or another, while others have been less impactful. This is due to several reasons related to working conditions, the place of work and the projects' nature, structure and team members.

The starting point of this paper was the desire to learn about the value and impact that the various projects and initiatives to protect Syrian intangible heritage have been able to achieve. As such, the paper presents a series of findings, practices and recommendations that will help develop these projects in the future. It will also contribute to the planning and implementation of any similar projects and the formulation of policies to protect Syrian intangible heritage.

While working on the paper, our team asked a select group of project organizers a series of questions about their methodologies for protecting Syrian intangible heritage, the impact they had achieved and what could be done to enhance this impact going forward. These projects are diverse in terms of their modus operandi, their size and the geographical area

in which they operate. The questions were sent through an e-questionnaire to seven projects and initiatives operating inside Syria. In addition, we conducted four in-depth interviews with stakeholders in charge of projects supported by the Cultural Protection Fund, which has been managed by the British Council since 2016 in support of efforts to protect endangered cultural heritage.

The research paper offers a set of findings, the most important of which is the clear diversity of efforts to protect Syrian intangible heritage and their increased pace over the years. Actors in this field have grown increasingly aware of the importance of their work, despite their varying degrees of impact. In reality, their impact depends on local factors and conditions in the regions in which they operate and on the capacities of their teams. These actors also came to realize that it is of utmost importance for them to pursue and even expand their efforts, which should be more inclusive, both in terms of the areas of work and the methodologies adopted. It is also necessary to sustain the support provided to these projects and adapt it according to their working conditions, which can be very difficult in some respects.

In light of the above, this research paper proposes a set of recommendations for organizations and actors active in the field of protecting Syrian intangible heritage, as well as for donor organizations that support these efforts. These recommendations include:

- Link heritage protection projects to a variety of economic, cultural and social objectives to enhance their reach and continuity;
- Foster cooperation between these projects, continue to support and expand them and ensure their resilience to cope with the evolving needs and conditions under which they operate;
- Support small and newly established entities; and
- Help to market traditional and handicraft products to ensure their protection and continuity.



## Introduction

Nearly twelve years have passed since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, which erupted in the wake of a historic movement of peaceful protest. For twelve long years we have been counting our losses, with no end in sight. People's attention is generally drawn to tangible losses at the human, economic and social levels, and most efforts seek to restore, remedy and reduce these losses in particular. There are, however, intangible losses that receive much less attention but are by no means less important. These include elements of Syria's rich heritages such as oral traditions, social practices, knowledge of traditional crafts, performing arts, traditional celebrations and rites, music, songs and dances, traditional clothing and rituals of making traditional foods, among many others.

These elements are of great value, and they are key to preserving the collective memory of Syrians and consolidating their sense of identity. However, year after year, the extent of the damage these elements have endured and the risk of losing them become clearer. In fact, these elements are at risk of being lost and forgotten due to several factors related to the conflict. These mainly displacement and dispersal, the loss of social ties and links to the environment that gave rise to these elements and the lack of expertise necessary to preserve this heritage. In addition, more urgent needs have taken center stage, particularly with the deterioration of living conditions for Syrians in their country and abroad and the emergence of many urgent social, economic and psychological difficulties. These various elements of heritage are also at risk of theft, loss and exploitation, to name a few.

Based on the above, many initiatives have aimed to preserve various aspects of Syrian heritage, both tangible and

intangible, as the violent conflict intensified. These initiatives have worked at several different levels simultaneously to protect and revive certain elements of heritage that face a serious risk of extinction, by:

- Supporting workers in heritage crafts or teaching them to new groups of people, specifically the youth;
- Transferring elements of heritage to new generations, particularly those living in countries of asylum far from their original environments, thereby enhancing their sense of identity and belonging; and
- Linking the protection of heritage to other goals, such as the possibility of generating a sustainable economic return, among others.

Given the importance of these efforts, it is necessary to pause at times and reflect on the path they have taken and the impact they have achieved. We must constantly ask ourselves whether they have reached their objectives and what can be done to strengthen and propel them forward. It is important to find ways to overcome the challenges they have faced, in order to develop more effective and sustainable methods to protect Syrian intangible heritage. It is also necessary to think of ways to enhance the role of heritage as a key factor in Syrian identity and memory and to shed further light on these experiences in all their intricate details. This would offer a baseline for actors in the field to replicate these projects in similar contexts.

This research process started with a basic question about “the social value of the projects aiming to safeguard intangible heritage in Syria.” Its objectives were to monitor the largest possible sample of projects, analyze a select few in depth and reach a set of conclusions and recommendations that could later lead to a more extensive discussion about various aspects of heritage protection.

Our approach was twofold. First, we sought to develop a list of the intangible heritage projects currently operating in Syria and even those that have been suspended due to certain circumstances. The list includes these projects' geographical and programmatic scope, which we have been able to monitor through comprehensive desk research, with the use of available online resources and social media platforms. We have selected a number of these projects and initiatives to take part in an e-questionnaire, in order to learn more about their work methodologies, their impact and value, as well as the challenges they have faced. This questionnaire also informs recommendations that could contribute to the development of heritage protection efforts in Syria.

The second approach included an in-depth study of several projects supported by the Cultural Protection Fund, managed by the British Council, with the aim of supporting efforts to protect endangered cultural heritage. Since 2016, the Fund has supported nine projects seeking to protect Syrian heritage,<sup>1</sup> from which we have selected three diverse projects. Each of these is different in terms of its format and the geographical area in which it operates. These projects are:

- “Douroub” by Ettijahat – Independent Culture, which is dedicated to the protection of Syrian intangible heritage;
- Masonry training project in Jordan and Lebanon by the World Monuments Fund; and
- Action for Hope Music Schools for Refugees, which focuses on music education for refugees in Lebanon and Jordan.

The in-depth study was carried out through extensive interviews with the organizers of these projects to determine their impact from various aspects, the challenges they faced, how they dealt with them and their recommendations for developing heritage protection projects.

This research paper constitutes an exploratory study to assist projects and initiatives aiming to protect Syrian intangible

heritage. We have adopted qualitative research techniques, given the lack of any concrete and reliable numbers or statistics related to our topic of research and the inability of organizations and initiatives working in this field to provide any statistical data that can be used for quantitative research purposes.

Our paper is one of the very few that examine, in great detail, a wide range of intangible heritage protection projects in Syria. It seeks to understand and document their methods and strategies, with special focus on their impact, value and challenges. It also examines the approaches that have proven their success in the context of Syria and that can be replicated in similar contexts. The paper also presents the recommendations proposed by the organizers of these projects to enhance the protection of intangible heritage and to serve as a reference for future work in Syria or in other similar contexts.

Our work has led to a series of findings on the impact achieved by the projects and initiatives aiming to protect intangible heritage in Syria. This includes the direct protection of heritage from extinction by documenting its various elements and transmitting them to new generations. The impact also extends to the beneficiaries, who were offered job opportunities and whose perceptions of and relationships with heritage changed noticeably. The communities in which these projects were implemented also witnessed several changes in terms of people's relationships with their heritage and with themselves. The projects also revealed the importance of continuing to protect intangible heritage and to develop and expand support for organizations working in this field. This is especially true given the threats to the survival of this heritage and to its transmission across generations due to the conflict. These persisting conditions include displacement, dispersal and the difficulties experienced by all Syrians, which shift their focus towards more urgent priorities, despite the importance of heritage.

<sup>1</sup> More details about the Fund's work can be found via this link: <https://bit.ly/3vNU2Zk>.

This paper also offers a set of recommendations (made by the organizers of the projects under examination) which could enhance the protection of Syrian intangible heritage and help the owners of heritage projects and initiatives overcome many of the challenges they face on a daily basis at various levels. These challenges include working in Syria amid the deterioration of services and economic conditions, the continuous emigration of skilled workers, the sustainability of projects and programs in the field of heritage protection and their ability to develop their work mechanisms and achieve more significant impact. These recommendations are addressed to various actors in the field, including the organizations themselves, donors and government agencies.

## Context of the Research Paper

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UNESCO defines intangible heritage as “the practices, traditions, knowledge and skills – and associated instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces – which communities, groups and sometimes individuals consider as part of their cultural heritage.”<sup>1</sup> UNESCO also indicates that this heritage engenders a sense of identity and continuity in the communities that pass it down through generations. Heritage also promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. Thus, we can say that intangible heritage has great social value, as it endows each group of people with distinguished attributes, in addition to its economic value.

Intangible heritage has a set of characteristics,<sup>2</sup> including continuity in practice and transmission, which mostly occurs orally, forming a link between the past, present and future. Any community that practises a particular cultural element or component often recognizes it as part of its intangible heritage. Time is an important dimension in this type of heritage, which is long-lasting but at the same time evolves, changes and does not remain static. Intangible heritage continues to be practised and reproduced as long as the group of people with whom it is associated continues to exist, regardless of geographical location. It is flexible and able to survive and to be transmitted for long periods of time, so long as there are people who practise it.

Intangible heritage becomes much more important during crises and conflicts for multiple reasons. On the one hand, conflicts and the ensuing displacement, dispersal and loss of life and physical spaces undermine the ability to practise, preserve and transmit elements of intangible heritage through generations, given the “fragile” nature of this heritage and the fact that most of its elements are transmitted orally. It needs “people” to live on. However, under such circumstances, other, more urgent needs often take precedence. On the other hand, the value of heritage as a bearer of identity and a catalyst for one’s sense of belonging becomes more important when societal disruption occurs, as it enhances social cohesion and peacebuilding, while its absence severely undermines social cohesion.

Therefore, UNESCO stresses the importance of safeguarding intangible heritage, especially during periods of conflict, when it faces serious dangers that threaten its preservation and transmission. This intensifies the need to shed light on

elements of heritage, raise awareness of their importance and encourage dialogue about them. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was developed with this specific purpose in mind. It aims to encourage countries to protect their heritage through policies, laws, practices and cooperation with other countries, and by raising awareness of the importance and value of intangible heritage and the need to preserve it.<sup>3</sup>

Syria, which has been home to numerous civilizations over thousands of years, is characterized by its rich intangible heritage. This has enriched the country with highly diverse rituals, customs, social traditions, music, clothing, cuisine and other elements. In this context, UNESCO indicates that “Syria has a wealth of cultural expressions that reflect the multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian character of Syrian society.” This diverse heritage includes dozens of elements that vary among the country’s many regions and communities. It comprises music, songs, dance, clothing, cuisine, rituals for celebrations of all kinds and knowledge related to handicrafts.

After the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, UNESCO acknowledged that “intangible heritage, including cultural practices and live performances, has been severely damaged due to social fragmentation, displacement and migration [...], artisans have seen a considerable number of their workshops, tools and materials destroyed. Training in these skills has been suspended.”<sup>4</sup> UNESCO has also included several elements of Syrian intangible heritage on its list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent preservation, including Al-Qudoud al-Halabiya traditional songs and the Shadow Play.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Intangible Cultural Heritage along the Silk Roads, UNESCO website, <https://bit.ly/3DLyA9s>, last accessed on April 12, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Aisyah Abu Baker et al, “Intangible Cultural Heritage: Understanding and Manifestation”, Research Gate, <https://bit.ly/3v9RqU5>, published in November 2011, last accessed on 12 April 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The full text of the agreement can be found via this link: [https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/IOS-EVS-PI-129\\_REV-AR.pdf](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/IOS-EVS-PI-129_REV-AR.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> “UNESCO to create an Observatory for the Safeguarding of Syria’s Cultural Heritage,” United Nations News website, available via this link: <https://bit.ly/3uw4Ni9>, published on May 29, 2014, last accessed on April 12, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> These elements can be found on the UNESCO website via this link: <https://bit.ly/3O5ccNg>.

# Matrix of Initiatives Aiming to Protect Syrian Intangible Heritage

In the first stage of this paper, we carried out a desk research with the aim of reaching as many actors as possible working to protect Syrian intangible heritage. This included a review of relevant reports published on Syrian media outlets, search engines and various social media platforms and communication with many actors in this field in Syria and abroad.

We have monitored nearly forty projects and initiatives working to protect Syrian intangible heritage and which are not supported by the Cultural Protection Fund managed by the British Council. These projects have been listed in the following matrix. They are arranged according

to the year in which they were established and classified according to their type and place of work: Civil initiatives and NGOs working in Syria; government initiatives and projects in Syria; initiatives and projects run by government organizations, international organizations, religious institutions or educational institutions in Syria; and initiatives and projects outside Syria. This list is not exhaustive, and we do not claim that these are all the projects working in the field of intangible heritage protection in Syria. The matrix includes the projects and initiatives that we have been able to document within the timeframe of the research paper.

Name	Date of Establishment	Description and Scope of Work	Geographical Scope	Form
<b>Civil Initiatives / NGOs in Syria</b>				
<b>Aladeyat – The Archaeological Society of Aleppo</b>	1924	Various activities for the protection of tangible and intangible heritage	Aleppo	Project within another entity
<b>Circassian Charity Association</b>	1948	Various efforts to preserve Circassian intangible heritage	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>ANAT Design and Marketing Center</b>	1988	Reviving and documenting all aspects of Syrian embroidery	Syria	Project
<b>Folk Literature and Heritage Association</b>	2010 / last activity in 2021	Preserving literature and folklore	As-Suwayda	Project
<b>Khoyout al-Amal (Threads of Hope)</b>	2012	An initiative to preserve the Aghabani textile craft	Damascus / Damascus countryside	Project
<b>Syrian Society for Culture and Knowledge</b>	2012 / last activity in 2020	Conducting research, increasing community participation and launching projects to inventory and document intangible heritage	Syria	Project within another entity
<b>Al-Sham Cultural Club</b>	2013	Seminars on intangible heritage	Damascus	Activity within another entity
<b>Al-Arifi Culture and Heritage Arcade</b>	2013 / last activity in 2021	Intangible heritage awareness and revival activities	Damascus	Activity within another entity

<b>Syrian Bees Quilt</b>	2014	Teaching women to recycle used fabrics and with links to related heritage techniques	Syria	Project
<b>Gardenia Choir</b>	2015	Women's choir working on documenting Syrian heritage songs in some of its projects	Syria	Project within another entity
<b>The Day After Heritage Protection Initiative</b>	2015	An initiative to protect tangible and intangible heritage by documenting and spreading awareness	Northern Syria	Initiative within another entity
<b>Humans of Damascus</b>	2016	A Facebook group documenting various aspects of Syrian intangible heritage, with special focus on Damascus	Syria, with special focus on Damascus	Initiative
<b>Oral History Project by from Wathiqat Wattan</b>	2016	Documenting several aspects of Syrian intangible heritage	Syria	Project within another entity
<b>Ein Alfunoon Association</b>	2016 / last activity in 2021	Seminars on intangible heritage	Damascus	Activity within another entity
<b>Fajjet Khuraq Atelier</b>	2017	A project from the city of As-Suwayda to revive the craft of recycling fabrics and making rag rugs using wooden looms	As-Suwayda	Project
<b>See My Raqqa</b>	2017	Documenting elements of intangible heritage in Raqqa	Raqqa	Project
<b>Bashtan by Radio SouriaLi</b>	2017 / last activity in 2018	Documenting different stories from Syrian heritage through storytelling	Syria	Project within another entity
<b>Taht Saqf al-Matbakh (Under the Kitchen Roof)</b>	2018 (project launch date)	An initiative by the "Nation Building Movement" in Damascus to document and present recipes for ancient Syrian cuisine	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Vision Organization</b>	2018	Reviving tangible, intangible and cultural heritage	Raqqa	Project
<b>Samowar Project</b>	2019	Documenting elements of intangible heritage of Aleppo	Aleppo	Activity within another entity
<b>Deirghraph</b>	2019	Digital album of Deir Ezzor Governorate	Deir Ezzor	Project
<b>Luna Choirs</b>	2019 (project launch date)	Reviving and documenting Aramaic songs	Damascus and Damascus Countryside	Project within another entity
<b>Wellf from Line and Thread</b>	2020	An initiative to revive textile printing using wooden molds in the city of Hama	Hama	Project
<b>Syrian Silk Group</b>	2020	An initiative to document and revive silk production in Syria	The whole of Syria / in particular Hama	Initiative by the association

<b>Turathuna Association (Our Heritage)</b>	2020	Raising awareness of the importance of heritage and striving to preserve it	Homs	Institution
<b>Khatun Cultural Heritage Association</b>	2020	Documenting elements of intangible heritage	Qalamoun / Damascus Countryside	Activity within another entity
<b>Turath al-Furat</b>	2021	Documenting elements of intangible heritage	Euphrates	Project
<b>Barkin Center for Preserving Kurdish Heritage</b>	2021	Protecting intangible resources, particularly Kurdish resources	Northeast Syria	Project
<b>Syrian Design / Media / Type / Print / Stamp Archive</b>		A group of interconnected pages on social media which document various elements of Syrian heritage and culture	All of Syria	Project
<b>Local Pages Examples (Qalamoun)</b>		Pages and groups on social media sites that archive and document specific elements of Syrian intangible heritage within a specific region	Syria / work within a specific area	Project
<b>Government Initiatives and Projects in Syria</b>				
<b>Al-Turath Magazine</b> Paper copy		A periodical magazine published by the Ministry of Culture	Syria	Project
<b>Efforts by the Ministry of Culture / Union of Artisans / Ministry of Tourism / Local Councils</b>		Carrying out various activities periodically: events / seminars / celebrations, etc.	Syria	Activities by government entities
<b>Initiatives and Projects by Government Organizations, International Organizations, Religious Institutions and Educational Institutions in Syria</b>				
<b>UNDP Syria</b>		Various projects to document elements of Syrian intangible heritage	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Syria Trust for Development</b>	2001	Various projects to document elements of Syrian intangible heritage	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Department of Ecumenical Relations – GOPA</b>	2012	Organizing events and initiatives to preserve heritage and raise awareness of its importance	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Caritas</b>	2019 (project launch date)	Courses to learn traditional handicrafts	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Center of Saint Ephrem the Syrian in Damascus</b>	2019	Lectures and seminars to introduce and raise awareness of elements of Syrian intangible heritage	Damascus	Activity within another entity

<b>Shebtun Project by Al-Hawash University</b>	2020	Teaching crafts and documenting elements of intangible heritage	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>JCI Damascus (Syria Dylan Project)</b>	2021 (project launch date)	A project to document Syrian crafts	Syria	Activity within another entity
<b>Initiatives and Projects outside Syria</b>				
<b>Syrian Heritage Archive / Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin</b>	2013	A project to document elements of intangible heritage in Arabic and English	Syria	Project
<b>Heritage protection activities by PÊL-Civil Waves</b>	2013	Organization established in Berlin, which implements activities to strengthen social cohesion and activate the role of the youth and women in peacebuilding, including heritage protection activities	Raqqa – Qamishli – Hasakah – certain camps in northern Syria	Activities within a project
<b>Matbakh Gherba (Diaspora Cuisine)</b>	2014	A Facebook group to document and share Syrian food recipes, particularly among Syrian expatriates	Syria	Project
<b>Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra – SEPO</b>	2015	An orchestra bringing together Syrian expatriate musicians, particularly those in Europe, and aiming to contribute to the preservation of Syrian musical culture during waves of immigration from the country	Syria	Project
<b>Heritage for Peace</b>	2015	An international group founded in Spain that works to protect aspects of tangible and intangible heritage	Syria	Project
<b>Syrians for Heritage</b>	2018	A project in Berlin aiming to document tangible and intangible heritage through various projects in Syria	Syria	Project
<b>Heritage protection activities by Mari Development</b>	2018	Organization established in Canada, which implements peacebuilding activities, including heritage protection activities	Northeast Syria	Activities within a project
<b>We the Souk</b>	Latest activity in 2019	Helping and empowering Syrian artisans	Syria	Project
<b>Damascus Heritage website</b>	2021	A project established in Canada to document the tangible and intangible heritage of Damascus	Damascus	Project
<b>Cafés and cultural initiatives outside Syria</b> Examples: <a href="https://bit.ly/3xh9DRS">https://bit.ly/3xh9DRS</a> <a href="https://bit.ly/3zjhfEX">https://bit.ly/3zjhfEX</a>	1924	Projects that seek to revive and archive elements of Syrian intangible heritage in the countries of the diaspora	Different countries   The projects cover all of Syria	Projects or activities

As the table above shows, there are numerous and diverse projects and initiatives that aim to protect intangible heritage in Syria, whose work spans documentation, archiving, awareness, education and the revival of elements of heritage, especially traditional crafts and professions. The majority of these projects and initiatives were launched after 2011 by diverse people and entities, whether in terms of age group, scope of work or geographical location. This shows that many public actors and civil and cultural entities are aware of the importance of Syrian heritage and the need to protect it following the aggravation of the conflict.

The table also shows that most of these projects focus on the documentation of heritage in general or of a specific element thereof using various methodologies, including websites and social media platforms, seminars and events. This could be due to the fact that documentation is relatively simple and can be carried out intermittently, although it is highly important given the great diversity of Syrian intangible heritage. By contrast, there are fewer projects that focus on education and the revival of certain elements of heritage, specifically crafts and handicrafts. This is due to the fact that this type of work is more demanding, particularly amid the challenges in Syria, such as lack of raw materials, emigration of skilled workers and challenges related to sales inside and outside the country.

Of course, not all of these projects and initiatives have had the same impact, either on intangible heritage or on the target groups. Their impact varies depending on their type of activity, their geographical area and the sustainability of their material and human resources. In fact, some of these projects have been implemented for years with the same momentum and are still able to achieve their objectives, reach their target population and even expand their activities to achieve a new set of objectives as circumstances change and as the project matures over time. Meanwhile, other projects only operate on a seasonal basis or have completely suspended their activities, as indicated by their websites and social media pages.



Photo 2 Fajjet Khuraq Atelier

As part of this research paper, we have conducted a survey with seven of the aforementioned projects, with the aim of better informing our recommendations. These projects were selected based on a set of criteria, particularly diversity in their areas of implementation across different Syrian governorates and regions; their objectives (documentation, reviving specific crafts, transferring knowledge or awareness); and the methodologies employed (training, economic empowerment, disseminating and gathering information). A common feature amongst the selected projects is that they work with local groups concerned with culture and heritage and that their activities have a clear impact on the protection of intangible heritage. These projects are listed below and are arranged chronologically according to the date of their establishment/implementation:

1. **Cultural Heritage Protection Initiative by The Day After Organization:**<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2015, it aims to protect tangible and intangible heritage in areas outside the control of the Syrian government. It communicates with a network of heritage and antiquities specialists and civil activists. It also provides the training and equipment necessary to offer support and document the damage that has afflicted cultural heritage, raise awareness of the importance of heritage and issue reports that reveal the true extent of the damage.
2. **Fajjet Khuraq Atelier:**<sup>2</sup> Launched in 2017 in the city of As-Suwayda, it aims to revive the profession of weaving rag rugs made from the remains of fabrics on traditional looms, by offering products with new designs, encouraging

people to buy them and documenting several historical aspects related to the profession.

3. **See My Raqqa:**<sup>3</sup> Launched in 2017, the project seeks to preserve the cultural heritage of the city of Raqqa after its destruction and to revive its cultural and natural resources, the customs of its people and its rich cuisine, in contrast to the images of destruction and darkness inflicted on the city in recent years. The project mainly uses social media to spread knowledge, protect the city's heritage and introduce people to it. It portrays life in Raqqa in vivid detail and provides documented information on all aspects of the city, which, according to the project's organizers, is in danger due to the widespread destruction and the change in people's way of life after the war.
4. **"Zagharid Syria" Album by Gardenia Women's Choir:**<sup>4</sup> A project by Gardenia Choir, which was established in Damascus in early 2016. The project was launched in 2018 in an effort to document the intangible musical heritage of weddings in all Syrian regions and cultures. It has rearranged and compiled traditional songs in a musical album presented to the Syrian public.
5. **Samowar:**<sup>5</sup> A social media digital platform launched in Aleppo in 2019, as part of the "Warsha" (Workshop) project, which promotes cultural production by organizing musical sessions, documentaries and programs with the purpose of raising awareness of elements of intangible heritage through artistic expression. The Samowar platform disseminates cultural productions and offers a space for dialogue. Its name is derived from the old tea Samowars and cafes where people gathered to produce ideas through dialogue.
6. **Wellf from Line and Thread:**<sup>6</sup> An initiative launched in 2020 with the aim of preserving and reviving the craft of printing on cloth with wooden blocks, which is a traditional craft indigenous to the city of Hama. The craft has become endangered, as only one artisan in the city continues to

practise it. The initiative has focused on manufacturing new textile products with modern designs in order to motivate people to buy them and thus restore demand. It has also documented all aspects related to the craft through a study on its history and its current reality.

7. **Syrian Silk:**<sup>7</sup> An initiative launched in 2020 that aims to revive the silk industry in Syria and shed light on its history and significance by supporting practitioners, stimulating demand for products and documenting the craft's various aspects.

The questionnaire<sup>8</sup> included several axes and sought to identify the impact of the aforementioned projects on the participants, the areas where they were implemented and on heritage overall. The questionnaire also sought to identify the challenges that project organizers faced and how they addressed them. The respondents were asked to propose recommendations to support future efforts aiming to protect heritage.

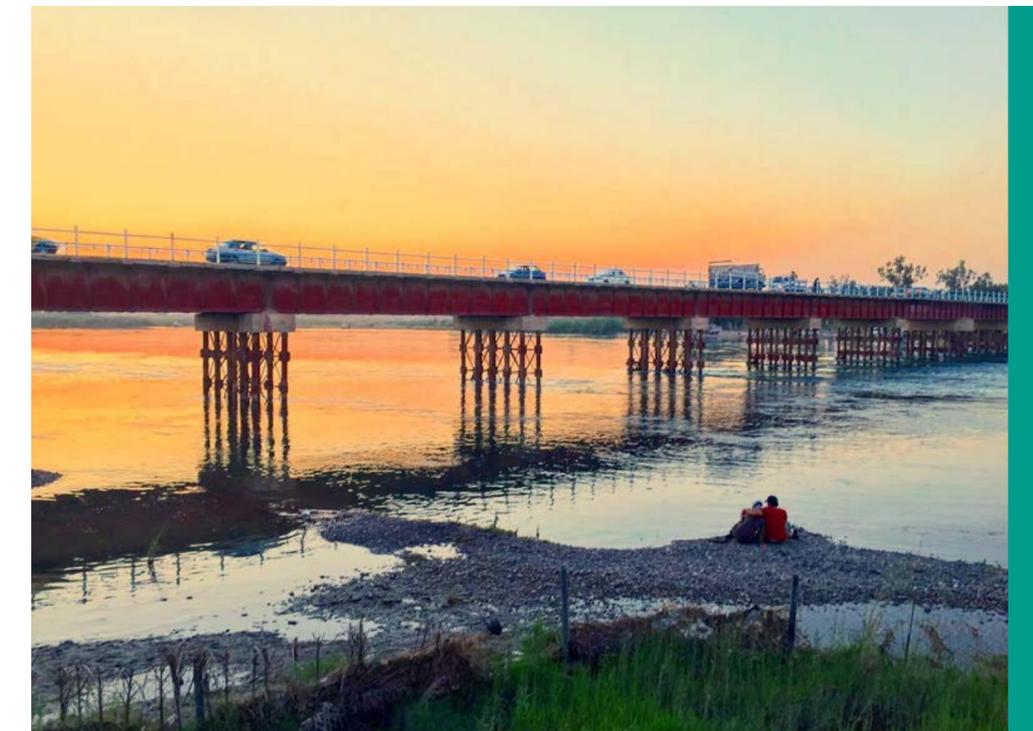


Photo 3 Old Raqqa Bridge - Raqqa Project - Photography by Fares Al-Zakhira

<sup>1</sup> Initiative website: <https://bit.ly/3GV64Ux>.

<sup>2</sup> Project page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3qJiWX5>.

<sup>3</sup> Project page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/36WNNR>.

<sup>4</sup> Album is available via this link: <https://bit.ly/3tgfZyg>.

<sup>5</sup> Project page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3LqnJV3>.

<sup>6</sup> Initiative page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/36zEnDe>.

<sup>7</sup> Initiative page on Facebook: <https://bit.ly/3uJc0KA>.

<sup>8</sup> The questionnaire is enclosed with this research paper.

## Objectives

Intangible heritage protection initiatives have numerous and diverse objectives in different regions of Syria, with many sub-objectives under the primary and broad title of “heritage protection.” Some of these objectives may be common to multiple initiatives, while others tend to be rather exclusive.

Below are some of these objectives:

- **Reviving traditional and heritage crafts at risk** of extinction due to several factors, including:
  - ✧ Lower demand for handmade and heritage products due to the economic conditions in Syria, the near-total absence of tourism and the prevalence of low-cost (and, therefore, low-priced) consumer products.
  - ✧ The difficulty of marketing handmade products abroad due to the sanctions imposed on Syria, travel restrictions, high shipping costs, lack of support and the fact that marketing is limited to individual efforts.
  - ✧ Loss of interest in learning and practicing these crafts, particularly among younger generations. This is due to many reasons, including, most notably: low financial returns, difficulty of learning and practicing handicrafts as they require significant time, effort and continuity, the lack of funding for training activities to ensure that these professions are passed on from one generation to the next. As a result, these practices have become limited to older generations and skilled craftspeople.
  - ✧ General lack of awareness of the importance of these crafts and the need to preserve them, as they constitute part of national identity and memory. Nowadays, people tend to focus exclusively on income-generating activities, regardless of whether they have any heritage or social value. Projects including “Wellf”, “Fajjet Khuraq” (or “rag

rugs”) and “Syrian Silk” are working towards this objective.

- **Documenting** several aspects related to elements of intangible heritage. Most of the aforementioned initiatives are working on this as a primary or secondary objective. Their interest in achieving this objective stems from several factors, including:
  - ✧ Awareness of the importance of documentation, particularly critical at present given the ongoing repercussions of war and displacement on the oral transmission of intangible heritage, which has become mostly limited to older generations.
  - ✧ Prevalence of other, more urgent priorities such as daily economic, social and psychological necessities.
  - ✧ Desire to show different aspects of Syria and Syrian identity, in contrast to the stereotyped images of war and destruction, which have recently become the norm, and to remind people of Syria's valuable heritage and diverse cultural elements.
  - ✧ The impact that this documentation can have on peace, stability and reconciliation efforts, as well as on strengthening the sense of belonging and collective identity in Syrians and their positive outlook towards their country, which has undoubtedly been affected over the past ten years.
- Linking the protection of intangible heritage to the possibility of **generating economic return** for workers in projects and initiatives. The economic aspect plays an important role in ensuring the survival of intangible heritage, especially traditional crafts. The harsh economic reality engendered by the years of conflict has caused people to lose interest in all aspects of heritage, unless they are capable of generating a sustainable economic income. Some projects have focused specifically on this issue in their work with displaced populations, who have

suffered the worst economic impact due to the years of war. Most heritage protection projects have managed to achieve this objective, either because it is essential, or because the projects have generated income automatically during their implementation through complementary activities.

- **Raising awareness** of the importance of intangible heritage among various segments of society, in Syria and abroad, especially among young groups that did not have the opportunity to be adequately familiarized with concepts related to heritage and culture due to the war and general lack of interest. All projects and initiatives seeking to protect heritage have achieved this objective, whether with small communities or on a larger scale.
- **Integrating new groups** into projects to protect heritage and culture, namely young people and women, bearing in mind that these groups are largely marginalized in the cultural sector. Among the projects that have achieved this objective are “Samowar” and “Zagharid Syria.”
- **Redirecting focus towards Syrian intangible heritage** at the local and international levels, which helps intensify efforts to protect heritage. While most heritage protection projects have managed to achieve their objective, their ability to do so and the level of their success depend on their workers' ability to communicate and promote the project, both physically and digitally.
- **Effecting social change** by reinventing the relationship between different segments of society, using heritage and cultural identity as a main entry point. Most projects have been able to achieve this to a certain degree, depending on the nature of their cultural product and their area of operation.



Photo 4 Products of Wellf Initiative

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, initiatives seeking to protect intangible heritage in Syria have adopted a set of different methodologies that may sometimes overlap and intersect within the same initiative or project. They have mainly focused on interacting with local stakeholders in their areas of operation, based on their belief in the long-term importance and effectiveness of such efforts. Below are the main methodologies used:

- Collecting and disseminating information: Several initiatives and projects have documented various aspects of intangible heritage using a set of different tools. Some have decided to hold events to highlight and document specific heritage practices, while others have used websites and social media as their primary mode of documentation through texts, images, videos and other media. Moreover, some initiatives have used in-depth research to explore and document these elements. It is worth noting that some initiatives and projects have set documentation as their primary objective, whether for specific aspects of heritage or within specific areas.
- Training and knowledge transfer: Given the risk of the extinction of intangible heritage in Syria due to war and displacement and the lack of necessary expertise to transfer heritage, some initiatives and projects, such as “Wellf” and “Fajjet Khuraq,” are working on the transfer of knowledge related to certain traditional practices or handicrafts and on conveying these practices to younger generations in particular in an attempt to avert these risks.
- Reinvigorating economic aspects related to intangible heritage, by linking heritage to projects with economic returns, creating new job opportunities, marketing these products in Syria and abroad and trying to innovate and introduce new elements to heritage industries in a way that contributes to their preservation and marketing. Among the projects that have directly used this methodology are “Wellf” and “Fajjet Khuraq.” Many

other heritage protection projects have also been able to achieve a certain financial return. This is of particular importance given the difficult economic situation in Syria, which discourages people from prioritizing cultural work.

- Moreover, many initiatives and projects have been keen to network with each other and with other initiatives working in the cultural field in order to expand their scope of work and to share experiences. For example, “Wellf” and “Fajjet Khuraq” participated in a cultural event in Damascus in March 2022, which was of great importance for them in terms of networking, introducing themselves and exchanging knowledge.

## Impact<sup>1</sup>

It might be difficult to accurately measure the impact that intangible heritage protection projects have achieved and are still achieving in Syria. This would require long-term studies to collect the feedback and opinions of large segments of the population, particularly with regard to intangible impacts, such as the evolution of people’s relationship with heritage and their awareness of its importance. However, there are some noticeable impacts achieved by many projects and initiatives, which of course vary according to the project’s objectives, continuity and the challenges it has faced. We will discuss these impacts from multiple perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes mentioned in this section are extracted from the responses of project and initiative organizers to the abovementioned questionnaire.

## First: Protecting Elements of Intangible Heritage

Projects of all kinds working in the field of intangible heritage have a clear impact in protecting elements of intangible heritage from extinction, by reviving and documenting these practices and transferring the knowledge associated with them across different generations.

In the case of “Fajjet Khuraq,” this has been manifested in the revival of an almost extinct industry that provides an aesthetic and usable product which for decades was very important, as it reflected the needs of the local environment. The project clearly had contributed to reviving and transferring this craft. According to its organizers: “Due to the limited number of women able to work on the loom, it was necessary to teach the craft to others. We have worked with them to develop products and invent new designs while preserving the spirit of heritage. We produce pieces woven with a crochet hook, not just with looms. Through our project, we have ventured towards other extinct industries such as the production of pottery and straw products, with a focus on reusing the natural elements that most manufacturers are abandoning in favor of consumer products, such as replacing natural straw with nylon and natural dyes with industrial ones. We are also working on expanding the younger generation’s knowledge of various heritage topics and their importance in preserving identity. This is important not just for touristic purposes, but also as a mechanism that encourages the youth to think, act and grow more attached to their roots.”

As for “Wellf,” it seeks to “preserve the craft of traditional printing, which survives through one last remaining practitioner in Hama Governorate, who sees it as a hobby rather than a main source of income. The project aims to increase the demand for these products, so that this last practitioner can pursue his work, and to highlight its importance as an old local craft from an artistic and aesthetic perspective. It also encourages young people to adopt it as a profession, particularly the sons of the remaining craftsman.” The project has produced traditionally printed clothes, bedspreads and other products made with purely raw plant materials, while creating an aesthetic formula in clothing designs that combines heritage and modernity. This is an innovative and unprecedented idea in Hama, and it has aroused significant interest in this nearly forgotten popular craft which was present in every home in the past. The project's organizers stated that “with the launch of the “Wellf” initiative, there has been increased demand for such products, and the craftsman has trained his son to help him meet this demand. The son was pleased to do so after he saw people’s great interest, especially on social media. Therefore, we consider that the “Wellf” initiative has achieved one of its most important objectives in preserving this craft.” They added that the project “has been able to draw attention to other endangered crafts in Hama, such as shoemaking, silk dyeing, towel knitting on looms, local embroidery and other crafts that had not enjoyed the same level of interest as those practised in the capital, Damascus, and in Aleppo.”

The “Syrian Silk” project focuses on renewing interest in natural silk in Syria and working on sericulture and silk production, by reviving a number of looms in certain villages, introducing modern products that respond to new fashion trends and expanding demand for silk products through in-person marketing, social media and regular bazaars. The project’s organizers stated that, “The effort to preserve and expand sericulture is in itself a transfer of knowledge to future generations, because this work is done at home and in a family context. There are certainly new generations

watching the procedure and engraving it in their memory, which contributes to its preservation.” In fact, there are families who are once again interested in sericulture and who are especially concerned with increasing demand for silk products and finding markets to sell them.

In addition, most projects have sought to document elements of intangible heritage, whether as a primary or secondary objective. This has redirected attention to these sectors and shielded them from the risk of being forgotten and lost.

This aspect is clearly evident in projects whose primary purpose is to document intangible heritage. For example, “See My Raqqa” has been able, over the course of more than four years, to spread knowledge about Raqqa, particularly among expatriates, and to shed light on its various customs and traditions. The project has also managed to alter the stereotype about the governorate, even if only partially. The “Samowar” project is also working on documenting intangible heritage in Aleppo and publishing articles about the topic on its digital platforms, in an effort to protect against its extinction and to make it more widely known, especially among the younger generation.

The Gardenia Choir's “Zagharid Syria” has managed to document several old wedding songs from different regions in Syria, through the team’s dedicated efforts and through communication with key people in these regions. The project presented these heritage materials in an elegant and unique artistic manner, with the purpose of highlighting wedding celebration in every Syrian region. This has been particularly important in light of the conditions affecting most Syrians today, in terms of dispersal, displacement and the increasing difficulty of preserving many elements of their intangible heritage. As a result, the choir team is thinking about replicating “Zagharid Syria,” by documenting other forms of heritage music content, such as lullabies for babies and songs and chants for the harvest season, funerals or other social events across Syrian regions and cultures.

Most other projects also include aspects related to documenting elements of intangible heritage. For example, the founders of “Wellf” seek to “protect the craft of printing by documenting it, conducting research on its history and current reality, offering a large collection of images and videos, promoting it and reviving public interest in it.” The initiative has managed to document and showcase important aspects of printing, whether through social media or through cultural events aiming to introduce people to these elements and disseminate them on a larger scale. It has also contributed to the revival of this craft by making it a subject of discussion, leading over the last year to many articles and television reports on the craft.

The same applies to “Fajjet Khuraq,” whose organizers have not only preserved the craft of making rag rugs from recycled fabrics, but have also worked on documenting every detail of the craft and presenting their work to the public through social media, seminars and cultural events.

Similarly, the organizers of “Syrian Silk” have worked on documenting various aspects of the traditional silk industry in Syria, disseminating them through social media and reintroducing interested groups to the craft, especially the younger generations who might be unfamiliar with it. The “Samowar” project has also utilized musical or documentary sessions to transfer knowledge from the previous generations of producers to newer generations in an attempt to bridge the gap between them.

In light of the above, it is clear that most intangible heritage projects operating in Syria have had an undeniable impact on the protection of certain elements of this heritage, whether this is their primary objective or a parallel area of focus. With time, these projects' organizers are realizing the scale of their impact and are seeking to expand their work in this area.



Photo 5 Coral Gardenia - Photography by Ghayath Haboub

## **Second: Reshaping People's Relationship with their Identity**

There is no doubt that all the efforts made by intangible heritage protection projects have contributed in some way to reshaping individuals' relationships with their identity and heritage, particularly local populations in certain regions. Some of these contributions were expected and planned, while others have achieved a greater impact than expected and have highlighted the importance of heritage in enhancing people's identities and their sense of belonging during periods of conflict, even if that was not something of which they were fully aware.

The organizers of "Fajjet Khuraq" believe that "the revival of this almost extinct industry restores workers' connection with their identity, as the memories of an entire generation are rich with specific details on this industry, and the attempts to revive it make the organizers feel that they are protecting their heritage."

As for "See My Raqqa" project, "its first and greatest impact is on the identity of the city's residents and their perception of everything in it. The project's high-quality content makes the city's local and expatriate residents reconsider how they perceive its details and their relationship with their city. This impact can be felt through people's interaction with the project, as there has been a slight impact on the city's residents, specifically the young generation in the region and the Syrian youth in general. The project has introduced the Syrian public to a new Syrian city that is ultimately part of the country's heritage, and this has helped to change the stereotype using the energy and capabilities of the local youth."

The "Wellf" project has also contributed to redirecting interest towards the craft of printing, which is part of Hama's heritage and identity. The project's organizers explain that "Hama's woodblock printing is a very important way of expressing the

local identity, because all of its elements depend on elements from the local environment: Colors are extracted from local plants, molds are made from the wood of local trees and the cotton cloth is local. As for the drawings, they reflect the symbols of the civilizations that have passed through Hama throughout the ages, including Assyrian, Christian Byzantine and Ottoman Islamic civilizations, all stamped with Persian and Pharaonic influences. In this sense, Hama's prints reflect Syria's diversity and richness. Therefore, the "Wellf" initiative has been welcomed by the local population and perceived as a distinct expression of the culture of the people of Hama in particular and Syrians in general. We are often told that our products are similar to items found at the homes of people's grandmothers and grandfathers, and we have found it remarkable how expatriates from Hama consider our products to be an aesthetic expression that reminds them of their city. They exchange them as gifts and introduce their children to them. Our project has reintroduced traditional printing as a topic of discussion. This has refreshed the memory of former printers and brought back their stories and tales, which have reappeared in social media posts. Moreover, a cultural support group has emerged around the initiative, consisting of visual artists who have enriched it with their artistic ideas, media professionals who have contributed to the promotion of products, in addition to writers and publishers whose cultural projects have intersected with the initiative's cultural and intellectual orientation."

In addition to its work documenting elements of Syria's tangible heritage that have been destroyed and damaged, "The Day After" organization believes in the importance of preserving Syrian cultural heritage as a way of strengthening Syrian national identity. It is working on a series of artistic and educational workshops aiming to raise awareness and collect archaeological and historical information from the residents of the areas in which it operates in northwestern Syria. It also organizes lectures and publishes scientific and practical materials to raise awareness of cultural heritage,

focusing on the idea that heritage can unite Syrians from all sects, create a ripe environment for dialogue and strengthen national identity, especially for younger generations and children. This would contribute to building a new relationship between people in those areas and their heritage and identity.

Within this framework, the organizers of "Syrian Silk" also said: "It is certain that our interest in silk has fostered the region's cultural identity as the historical home of the silk industry in Syria, and it has strengthened the sense of national belonging, whereby interest in silk and its protection and development has become a common feature at the national level."

This impact is evident through the work of the "Samowar" project, as most people in charge of the project are between 16 and 30 years old and had been distanced from the city's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, due to the war. The project's organizers said: "Working in the old city and interacting with elements of intangible cultural heritage have had a significant impact on the team and have led to increased interaction between Syrians outside and inside Aleppo. Our project has also shed light on people who had been far from the public scene."

As for "Zagharid Syria," the Gardenia Choir team discussed its impact on three levels: The first level concerns the key people who were contacted to provide the team with original materials. After the album was produced, they felt that they had a role in preserving their region's musical heritage. The second level is related to the singers and musicians who participated by performing works that have strengthened their connection to the musical heritage of their own regions or of other Syrian regions and cultures. In fact, these artists have managed to expand their knowledge of cultural heritage by publishing these works and partaking in the research process and the collection of materials. The third and final level is related to the audience, who has received the final artistic product and observed a wide and diverse spectrum of heritage music related to the idea of celebrating popular weddings across

all Syrian regions and cultures. The audience felt that this content reflected the culture of their region and introduced them to the musical heritage of other Syrian regions, which has, in one way or another, reinforced their connection to Syrian heritage as a whole. This has been especially true for young people.

### Third: Creating Job Opportunities

Many of the intangible heritage protection projects in Syria have economic objectives associated with the broader goal of protecting heritage. These economic objectives are of utmost importance under the current circumstances, given that most people suffer from harsh economic conditions and it is difficult to engage them in less urgent activities if they cannot also generate an income.

For example, “Fajjet Khuraq” has employed eight women, providing them with a reasonable income from selling products. While this income may not be sufficient to support them fully, it is a step in the right direction. The project also includes workshops to empower women professionally, economically and legally in parallel with their professional work, which may increase their professional prospects.

As for the “Wellf” project, in its first year, three families benefited from the initiative. At the beginning of the second year, the beneficiaries included around seven families of seamstresses and female workers, two sewing workshops (one of which was dedicated to people with disabilities), a carpenter and a professional technician, in addition to a man who dedicated his entire time to the craft of printing and who started teaching his children to help him.

The “Syrian Silk” project has also contributed to the re-employment of several workers in the field of sericulture and the manufacturing of silk products, which has provided them with an economic return that partially met their needs.

“Samowar” has achieved economic benefits at several levels. The owners of many filming locations and of the venues where project-related cultural activities were held have benefitted financially, as those places have been revitalized and highlighted as cultural areas. Some workshops, including an oud making workshop, have once again become profitable, following the release of a documentary about them after years of financial losses. The project has also encouraged renewed investment in the city’s industrial or tourism sectors in one way or another.

“Zagharid Syria” has also provided temporary job opportunities for artists and musicians through repeated performances of the album's songs.

These examples are proof of the economic return that can be generated from various intangible heritage protection projects, by focusing on the economic aspects that can be



Photo 6 Samowar Project

linked to the cultural and heritage products generated by those projects in an adequate and innovative way inspired by the current reality.

#### **Fourth: Effecting Social Change**

Many intangible heritage protection projects have contributed to noticeable social changes in their areas of operation. This is an almost inevitable result of all projects that address the topic of culture and heritage protection and which do not limit their goal to achieving short-term and temporary outcomes.

The organizers of “Fajjet Khuraq” say that “the project has played an effective role in ensuring social cohesion, because one the reasons for its creation was the need to respond to the arrival of displaced people from various Syrian cities to As-Suwayda. It was necessary to establish an equal relationship between the displaced women and those from the local community, by developing projects that strengthen equality. Our project has managed, over several years, to achieve successful results in that regard.”

There have also been other changes instigated by projects promoting the cultural heritage of areas that do not usually receive sufficient media coverage, such as the “Wellf” and “See My Raqqa” projects. By highlighting the richness and unique character of the intangible heritage of these regions, the projects have contributed to changing certain stereotypes and forming new social relationships with these regions on the longer term.

The same applies to the “Samowar” project implemented in Aleppo, where cultural production has been on the decline in recent decades despite the city’s diverse population and identity inspired by numerous influences, including its cuisine, music and Sufi heritage. By shedding light on these details through the eyes of its people and the new generation, the team is seeking to build bridges between the youth and

the older generations, to encourage people to reconsider working in the city and to reach marginalized areas in the countryside, whose cultural and heritage output is often neglected despite their rich music, rituals and other heritage elements. The project organizers believe that: “Aleppo has a rich and diverse heritage, as it is home to numerous groups, ethnicities, schools of thought and sects. We have sought to illuminate every part of it through our productions and our team’s composition. We believe that one of the main problems in Syria and Aleppo is the fact that the different segments of society remain distant from one another, and each group seeks to monopolize the suffering and sense of belonging. There may be many differences between these groups, but we believe that music, food and rituals are the key to building bridges of dialogue between them.”

#### **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

The intangible heritage protection projects operating in Syria today suffer from a wide range of challenges imposed by the exceptional and difficult circumstances in which they operate. Nevertheless, they have been able to overcome many of these challenges, circumvent some of them and postpone the need to address others until the circumstances change.

The organizers of “Fajjet Khuraq” mention challenges related to the ability to promote products due to the deteriorating economic situation, individuals’ weak purchasing power, the lack of tourism, the high cost of transporting or shipping products outside Syria, the prevalence of consumer products, the difficulty of convincing young people to value the heritage and aesthetic importance of the product, low wages due to poor support for these types of projects, which may cause workers to abandon their jobs to search for more profitable opportunities, in addition to the difficulty of finding existing looms or making new ones. The team has dealt with these challenges by developing alternative plans when needed,

such as trying to establish innovative markets and focusing on creative designs to gain more popularity.

A major challenge for “See My Raqqa” is the security situation, which limits the possibility of expanding the project to include on-site activities so as not to be limited to social media activities. As a result, the team is forced to work within the available capabilities and to focus on its primary goal of spreading knowledge, protecting cultural heritage and introducing people to it, even if the project only reaches a limited audience.



**Photo 7** The Syrian Silk Project - Photo by Bilal Al-Masry

The “Wellf” initiative is still characterized by individuality and limited production, due to people’s lack of awareness of the importance of heritage and eco-friendly products. This is also due to the difficult working conditions in Syria caused by the protracted conflict and the difficult economic situation. The organizers of the initiative say: “We are suffering greatly from the scarcity of raw materials, the continuous rise in production costs and difficult working conditions, such as the lack of electricity and fuel. Over the past two years, we have been working under harsh conditions, such as extreme cold,



with temperatures close to freezing and a lack of heating, and extreme heat during summer, with temperatures reaching 40 degrees Celsius and no cooling. We have also been suffering from delays in the production of clothes due to the lack of electricity, which has slowed down our work significantly, in addition to the high cost of internal and external shipping, with the latter sometimes reaching twice the value of the product.”

In an attempt to address these difficulties, “Wellf” has been trying to identify an aesthetic formula for clothing designs that combines heritage and modernity and to encourage local youth elites, arts enthusiasts and intellectuals to wear the designs as clothes that express their identity while remaining comfortable. The project's organizers state: “We believe that “Wellf” has succeeded in introducing heritage to the cultural and touristic sectors, whether through home decor or clothing at reasonable prices that suit local buyers, or by participating in exhibitions and bazaars. Although working in post-war conditions is extremely difficult, it is psychologically much more important and rewarding than it is economically. Reviving heritage gives a certain feeling of safety. It assures us that no matter how harsh conditions are, our heritage has a wealth of solutions, and despite the massive destruction that the country has endured, it still has abundant history and cultural and intellectual heritage.”

The “Syrian Silk” project faces challenges such as the difficulty of attracting new generations to learn sericulture and silk production, mainly because they are not convinced of its relevance. Challenges also include the difficulty of marketing these products within Syria, due to the harsh economic conditions, and also outside of Syria, due to major logistical challenges, which is why marketing is limited to individual efforts. Lack of expertise in manufacturing high-quality products also undermines the marketing potential, in addition to the inability to organize the work of silk producers and the lack of proper communication between producers and manufacturers. The project's team is working on encouraging

new breeders to raise silkworms and to develop modern silk products that can be more popular on the market.

As for the “Samowar” project, the main challenge it faces, according to its organizers, “is at the level of individuals and their capabilities in a city that lacks professional training centers, as the expertise we need is largely unavailable or is very expensive. Most skilled artisans need to put great efforts in order to build their capacities. Moreover, the general feeling of futility among young people, poor financial abilities and immigration are all factors that directly or indirectly affect our work. Therefore, we are counting on slow expansion, and we are targeting university youth who are eager to learn about other people’s experiences. We are also counting on older people who have extensive experience in various technical fields.”

Moreover, inside Syria, the team is working under very difficult conditions, including a lack of fundamental resources such as electricity and fuel, the difficulty in accessing required equipment due to the embargo on Syria and the inability to purchase high-quality equipment at a reasonable price. For example, the price of a camera in Aleppo is twice that of a camera in Germany. The embargo also has other implications, including the inability to use financing platforms or websites or content marketing sites inside Syria. Even when certain companies do have access to such platforms, the costs are very high due to excessive commissions.

The team also mentioned other complications that hinder their work, including the high degree of centralization in Syria and the need for any initiative or project operating outside the capital to obtain approvals from central departments, which requires substantial time and effort. Moreover, the laws regulating the work of entities or teams in the field of entrepreneurship and cultural production in Syria are still absent, rigid or unhelpful. This situation forces these entities or teams to adopt organizational arrangements that are in line with the laws in force, although these may not serve their goals.

Gardenia Choir faced several challenges during the implementation of “Zagharid Syria.” For example, they encountered obstacles in collecting musical materials from certain regions due to difficult access. They also faced a lack of resources related to wedding songs due to war, displacement and people’s different priorities, particularly in the areas of northeastern Syria. The team managed to overcome this challenge through in-depth research on key people and through a review of previous studies and experiences related to the collection of heritage materials. The team also found it

difficult to reach large audiences and to market their album. Although the album’s reach was relatively good, it is by no means commensurate with the artistic and cultural value of its content.

These challenges shed light on the importance of projects seeking to protect intangible heritage in Syria today and stress the need to sustain their work in this field to avoid the loss of additional aspects of this heritage. They also reveal the need for promotion by independent media and cultural entities to achieve the largest possible reach.

## In-depth Analysis of Initiatives Supported by the Cultural Protection Fund<sup>1</sup>

Since 2016, the Cultural Protection Fund, managed by the British Council, has been supporting projects and initiatives active within and without Syria<sup>2</sup> which seek to protect Syrian tangible and intangible heritage, each in their own way. This is part of the support provided by the Fund in several countries to projects that combat the increasing impact of conflicts on cultural heritage, with the aim of minimizing risk and preserving heritage, while recognizing its great importance to the culture and identity of different countries.

For the purposes of this paper, three intangible heritage protection projects supported by the Fund were selected for in-depth interviews. The projects were chosen based on their diversity in terms of 1) their areas of work, as they operate within Syria (Damascus/Qamishli) and in Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon and Jordan; 2) the intangible heritage elements on which the projects focus (music/tales/handicrafts); and 3) the methodologies they adopt (education/empowerment/knowledge transfer/documentation/heritage revival).



Photo 8 The Day After Project

<sup>1</sup> All quotes mentioned in this section are extracts from interviews conducted for the research paper:

Online interview with one of the organizers of the masonry project, March 23, 2022.

Online interview with one of the organizers of the "Malva" project, March 30, 2022.

Online interview with one of the organizers at the Action for Hope Music Schools, April 7, 2022.

Interview with one of the organizers of "Sandouk Alhakaya" in Damascus, May 8, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> To learn about all the projects supported by the Cultural Protection Fund in Syria, please visit the following website: <https://bit.ly/3DVht5u>.

These projects include:

1. Ettijahat's "**Douroub**," which is dedicated to the protection of Syrian intangible heritage<sup>1</sup> and whose main focus is the support of projects inside Syria. This paper examines two of Douroub's projects: the first aims to document and revive folk tales in cooperation with the "**Sandouk Alhakaya**" workshop in Damascus, while the second is related to training, documenting and reviving several elements of intangible heritage in Qamishli, in partnership with the "Malva" arts center.
2. The World Monuments Fund's training project on **masonry techniques** in Jordan and Lebanon, which focuses on teaching stone restoration, building and sculpting skills and their transfer across generations, creating job opportunities and at the same time contributing to the future restoration of destroyed Syrian monuments and buildings.<sup>2</sup>
3. The Action for Hope **Music Schools**, which focuses on music education for refugees in Lebanon and Jordan and the preservation of Syrian musical heritage in refugee communities.<sup>3</sup>

The interview questions were divided into four themes: The first theme included general questions about the project's description, objectives and methodologies; the second theme focused on the value of the project's work and its impact on the region, its residents and its heritage, as well as on the participants and the project's team; the third theme focused on the challenges and lessons learned; and, finally, the fourth theme focused on the recommendations proposed by the project's organizers to develop this type of work in the future.

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about "Douroub," please visit the following website: <https://bit.ly/38g3gEx>.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about the masonry techniques project, please visit the following website: <https://bit.ly/3jn2h7m>.

<sup>3</sup> To learn more about the Action for Hope Music Schools project, please visit the following website: <https://bit.ly/3DTW101>.



Photo 9 Sandouk Al Hakaya Workshop



Photo 10 Dourou Series Promoting Syrian Intangible Cultural Resources  
Ettijahat - Independent Cultu (3)

Despite their different fields of work, all of the projects are founded on the need to protect intangible heritage in Syria. However, each project focuses on specific elements of this heritage according to their own vision.

Among its various activities, “Douroub” offers support to training programs in several Syrian cities.

One of these programs offers training in embroidery and lyrical storytelling, in partnership with the “Malva” (مالفا) arts center in Qamishli. The idea dates back to 2018, when the center’s organizers noticed that “knowledge of the value of tangible and intangible Syrian heritage in the region is very basic and limited, and it is not given sufficient attention. Heritage elements are consumed, defined and exported inappropriately, which affects social life in this multicultural region. As a result, we thought of intervening in two ways: The first is lyrical storytelling and oral literature, which constitutes a heritage element that the region is characterized by and which is strongly linked to its residents' memory, despite their differences, but faces the threat of extinction; the second is the revival of traditional local crafts, such as embroidery, cotton stitching and basket weaving in three regions: Amuda, Rmelan and Qamishli.” The project was launched at the end of 2019, and 18 people have been trained in performing arts, story writing and lyrical storytelling, before performing several shows in the region. Nineteen women have also been trained in the abovementioned handicrafts. After the workshop, these women produced more than two hundred handmade products. They have also received training on marketing and on how to establish profitable projects, before becoming trainers for other women themselves.

The second program, supported by “Douroub” in cooperation with the “Sandouk Alhakaya” workshop in Damascus, is the folk tales project, which includes the production of the “Kan Ya Ma Kan” (Once Upon a Time) game. The game can be played by any group of people and uses elements of traditional folklore to create new stories. This project also includes the design

and production of a book of folk tales celebrating traditional hand-printing techniques. The project's organizers state that, “Since the establishment of “Sandouk Alhakaya” in 2014, we have worked on the compilation of tales, and we have noticed that many Syrians have forgotten about the idea of folk tales due to the war, displacement and psychological and economic pressures. Children, in particular, are unfamiliar with most of our folk tales and their related vocabulary, since they no longer hear their parents narrating them. In 2018, we began collecting folk tales from different Syrian regions, mainly from older people who have memorized them. We then began thinking of developing a product from these tales, bearing in mind that it should be compatible with the second aspect we are working on, which is design and printing. As a result, we decided to turn the tales into an artistic product that can reach the largest number of people. We designed a game consisting of cards that contain different elements of folk tales, which can stimulate the players’ imagination to invent new tales, but within the same popular context. We also decided to transform a number of the stories we collected into an art book that includes graphics and techniques inspired by our workshop's productions.” With the support of Douroub in 2021, the game was assessed, and a second version was developed and finalized, after dozens of sessions and questionnaires to test the game with about 570 people across Syria. A book containing twelve folk tales was also produced, designed and printed. This stems from the project’s organizers’ belief in “the importance of folk tales in our time. Important parts of our memory are being erased. We feel that our identity has been lost and that we need something that can unite us and remind us of our identity. Art is the optimal way to achieve this. We want to build on our existing heritage to develop it and add new elements to it as needed.”

As for the training project on masonry techniques, according to its organizers, the idea emerged in 2017 and is based on the “previous experience of people working at the World Monuments Fund, who believe that one of the most

important things that is lost after conflicts is the traditional skills, in addition, of course, to the material destruction of many landmarks, including archaeological sites. There were also large numbers of refugees in countries around Syria, especially Jordan and Lebanon, waiting in cities and camps to see what will become of them. Therefore, we decided to train these refugees on the skills needed to work with stones. That way, we can teach them a craft that can help restore the destroyed heritage in their country. Our main concern was not to reach a time when people qualified to restore buildings and monuments in Syria are only foreign experts who are present for a limited period of time, but rather the people of the country itself. This benefits everyone: the people, the country and its heritage.” The project was launched from Mafraq, Jordan, with a group of foreign and local trainers. It targeted around 50 Syrians and members of the host community, through nearly thirty beginner and advanced workshops. The project was replicated in 2020 in Tripoli, Lebanon, with forty Syrian and Lebanese trainees at the beginner level. In addition to training in restoration techniques and working with stone, the project included training in the principles of business and marketing management, visits to archaeological sites within the host country and cultural awareness programs in schools for the youth and children on the importance of heritage and the need to preserve it. One hundred students participated in Jordan and 120 in Lebanon.

The first Action for Hope Music School was launched in Lebanon in 2015, and the second one was launched at a later stage in Jordan. The project’s objective is to teach music to children between the ages of ten and eighteen. The organizers say that it has several intersecting goals, including “the protection of Syrian intangible heritage, specifically music and songs, which have been seriously affected by the war and the accompanying displacement. When people, who are the main carriers of this heritage, become scattered and displaced, music is no longer a priority as more urgent needs emerge. One of the project’s goals is to provide opportunities to study music

for talented children living in marginalized environments that usually lack this type of support. This does not only include Syrians, but also members of host communities. This type of support could help these people find job opportunities later on and secure an income, in addition to building a space that provides higher integration chances between refugees and host communities.” Around 140 children have graduated from the schools in Lebanon and Jordan, after having learned to play various musical instruments.



Photo 11 Malva For Art \_ Culture - Basket Weaving Training

Below are some of the objectives of the projects seeking to protect intangible heritage in Syria:

1. Reviving nearly extinct intangible heritage elements
2. Documenting intangible heritage elements
3. Education and knowledge transfer on intangible heritage elements
4. Enhancing cultural identity, especially among younger generations
5. Enhancing the understanding of heritage and its elements
6. Developing heritage and infusing its older elements with modern influences
7. Raising awareness on the importance of heritage and the need to preserve it
8. Empowerment and capacity building
9. Job creation
10. Inclusion and community cohesion
11. Contributing to psychological support

## Impact

The projects under examination, with their various sub-objectives and methodologies, have had a clear impact, whether directly on intangible heritage or on related aspects. In this section, we will discuss this impact from multiple angles.

## First: Impact on Aspects Related to Intangible Heritage

### Impact on People's Relationship with Heritage

The relationship of most project beneficiaries, project team members and even society itself with heritage has clearly changed during and after the implementation of these projects.

During the training project with the “Malva” arts center, it was clear that people were affected by the outcomes of the lyrical storytelling rehearsals which deeply touched their memory. This was evident in the intense feelings they experienced when attending events in which tales were sung by old and young singers (who underwent training during the workshops), which conveyed to them elements of their heritage and identity.

The concepts of heritage and cultural identity have evolved among team members, trainees and society as a whole. People are increasingly appreciating the value of their heritage and learning that it can be an entry point for building peace in the region. They have also realized that any profession or aspect related to heritage is of great importance and value and even transcends any material benefit, as it is directly related to people's identity. The project's organizers stated that: “Many people who bought products made by the women who took part in embroidery workshops, each of whom has a story to tell, said that they appreciated its value because it made them reflect on themselves and their identity. They also expressed their joy for having these products in their homes and their special occasions. This strengthens our resolve to pursue our work, which we have come to consider as part of the peace-building efforts in the region, especially with the dispersal and displacement of large segments of our population.”

The project has also contributed significantly to the increased visibility of popular singers on the public scene and in society,

after this traditional craft had nearly disappeared before it could be discovered by the new generation. This was achieved either by involving these singers in the training program or by asking them to perform at various occasions and events.

The project has also had an impact on the organization itself and its workers, as its organizers state that: “We have seen a significant change at the institutional level. We now have a clearer vision about our direction and the goals we want to achieve, and we have gained a better understanding of the idea of heritage. We have also become more aware of the importance of heritage to people, to the region and to their cultural identity, as it can be a source of psychological support that promotes cohesion and solidarity. This motivates us to work on expanding our activities related to intangible heritage, both quantitatively and qualitatively.”

According to the organizers of “Sandouk Alhakaya,” it is clear that “the evaluation and play sessions have had a direct impact on the participants, especially the younger generation. Although we assumed that many of them will not be interested by a game based on elements from folk tales, the complete opposite happened, as the sessions stimulated their memory and pushed them to recall their ancient heritage. Even those who did not initially pay much attention to the subject seemed to be engaged. It seemed as if someone removed the blindfold off their eyes and put them in touch with their memory, which reinforced their sense of belonging to their city, village or region through its unique stories. Moreover, many people expressed their interest in collecting popular folk tales by contacting older family members and asking them about the stories they'd memorized. Others asked us to repeat the sessions more than once because they enjoyed them and learned about untold stories. In fact, most of the sessions took twice the time allocated for them because the participants told lengthy stories and enjoyed the process. They did not see it as an obligation or inconvenience.”

As for the masonry project, “it strengthened people’s appreciation of heritage and developed a real sense that it was part of their identity. It also reshaped their relationship with heritage, which can be seen in the evolution of the participants’ understanding of heritage since the beginning of the project. At first, many people were motivated by the economic prospects, especially since participants were promised a financial reward. However, by the end of the training, many had expressed their clear desire to return to Syria and to specialize in the preservation and protection of heritage. Others said that, after the training, they began noticing the shape and architectural style of buildings and how they relate to heritage and history, which is something they had not paid attention to before.” Furthermore, “the participants realized that they could, in one way or another, help rebuild some of what has been destroyed in Syria, even though they knew that they might not return soon. While they will not be able to directly participate in the restoration of the ruins of Palmyra for example, they can certainly rebuild houses in Aleppo or Homs, as they have acquired the skills to do so.”

The awareness-raising sessions that targeted school students as part this project have also raised their awareness of heritage, including its importance and the need to preserve it among the younger generation. According to the project’s organizers, this is something that should be taught from a young age, as it requires many years of awareness and training.

The organizers of the Action for Hope Music Schools noted the evolution in the trainees’ understanding of many historical and heritage themes related to music and songs. Prior to joining the school, the trainees had not had such understanding, given the displacement, homelessness and dispersion of their families and communities, not to mention the lack of cultural projects targeting their communities. The organizers stated that: “The students gradually acquired knowledge on the origins of each song. We are not only talking about Syrian

songs here, as we sought to diversify the trainers and the geographical areas they came from, which included Lebanon, Egypt and even Europe. The students gained the ability to analyze what they hear and link it to history and heritage, and thus to recognize its value and uniqueness. Based on our conversations with students over time, we have noticed that those who had previously been ashamed of their heritage and cultural identity now see them as a source of pride and believe that their efforts contribute to preserving heritage.”

Each of these examples shows the significant impact that the projects under examination have been able to achieve in terms of developing or even rebuilding the relationship of the target Syrian communities with their heritage. In many cases, participants did not have enough interest in or awareness of the importance of their heritage, while others were driven by financial or nostalgic motives. However, they all came to realize that the projects were a learning experience for them. Their perception of heritage shifted along with, sometimes, their perception of significant aspects of their lives.

### **Impact on the Transmission of Heritage Knowledge**

The projects under examination contributed to the transfer of a wide range of knowledge related to intangible heritage, whether among trainers and trainees or across generations. This is the primary objective of the projects, which pay special attention to the knowledge at risk of extinction as a result of the conflict.

In the Malva project, the impact of lyrical storytelling training was key. The organizers stated that: “Before the training, we searched the entire region and found only four or five singers who master the art of lyrical storytelling. After the training, we saw new folk singers playing their instruments and telling their stories at weddings and parties; people listened carefully, interacted with them and felt proud of this part of their heritage. This is a dynamic form of memory related to the folk tales that we were able to transmit, preserve and revive, after having been at risk of extinction. We succeeded in transforming these tales into a bridge that links generations together, by sharing



**Photo 12** Masonry Techniques Project

stories and moments and by putting trainers and trainees in direct interaction with each other. This prompted many to recall old celebrations where people gathered around the singers in villages and small towns. Some stated that this heritage craft is reemerging and spreading once again in the region for the first time in decades. This can also be noticed in the video clips spreading across social media and the local radio stations that are dedicating part of their programming to this type of artistic heritage. The transmission of heritage has become a burgeoning area of focus, which can be seen even in people's social behavior.”

This also applies to the embroidery training, as the knowledge of this heritage profession was transferred to new groups of women, some of whom have become trainers. Certain types of products have also been revived after demand had almost disappeared from the market. Those who recently gained knowledge of the profession have connected with the older generation of craftswomen to discuss relevant details, creating an atmosphere of familiarity. Furthermore, this interest in heritage products was highlighted on social media and in the periodic events held in the region. Heritage has become the compass and the link that brings people and generations together, unlike other social behaviors which may be divisive.

In “Sandouk Alhakaya,” this impact was manifested in the transfer of the project's ideas to other people who, after participating in the sessions and games, decided to establish their own similar projects in multiple Syrian governorates, with a desire to apply the same ideas in their own individual way, by continuing to collect, compose and communicate stories.

This objective can clearly be seen in the masonry training project. The organizers stated that their goal is "not to only bring people together and conduct trainings, but also to build a group of people that can practise this type of work in the future. We believe that we have succeeded in doing so and transferring knowledge to the trainees. We are also considering replicating this experience in other countries.” This is illustrated by the comments of several participants

after the training and the quality of knowledge they have acquired. For instance, they are now able to analyze previous restoration and construction works and delve into their details, strengths and weaknesses.

In the Action for Hope Music Schools, the transfer of heritage knowledge is manifested at multiple levels, as this is the main outcome that the organizers wish to deliver. The project seeks to provide younger generations with knowledge related to their musical and lyrical heritage, which helps preserve and protect it from extinction. This could lead to the emergence of a new relationship with their country, their families and older generations, which can in turn be used to ensure continuity in the process of passing knowledge to new generations. In fact, some graduates have become assistant teachers at the school, ensuring the project's continuity. This part of heritage can also be transferred to other regions in Lebanon, to enrich the cultural scene by leveraging the curriculum developed by the school's organizers and circulating it among cultural actors in the country.

## **Second: Economic Impact**

In terms of direct economic outcomes, the projects under examination have provided employment opportunities to at least some of their beneficiaries, in addition to developing their skills. For example, many participants in the lyrical storytelling workshops with the Malva project have been able to find job opportunities at cultural and heritage events and festivals held in the region. Others continued working in the theatrical performance and writing fields. Their specific interest in all matters related to heritage and social cohesion was clearly noticeable. According to the participants in the handicraft workshops with Malva, this craftwork has become a source of income for them, by selling products on local markets and taking part in periodic events and activities held across the region.

As for “Sandouk Alhakaya,” many of those who participated in the games and evaluation sessions have become qualified to join the workshop’s team, as the latter continues to develop and expand the idea, which could lead to future income-generating opportunities for the participants.

Six of the masonry training workshop attendees found jobs in the construction and decor sectors, and another trainee became a trainer within the same project at a later stage.

Many of the trainees and graduates of the Action for Hope Music Schools found job opportunities in the fields of singing and music, as most of them have been eager to develop their skills and use social media to promote their art. However, this has not yet become a main source of income for them, especially since the majority are still under the age of eighteen. Meanwhile, the schools have provided job opportunities for many musicians and forcibly displaced Syrians, offering them much-needed financial protection amid their new reality.

### **Third: Impact on Target Groups and Areas of Work**

In addition to the aforementioned key points, we will discuss the impacts and results achieved by the intangible heritage protection projects under examination, whether on the target groups or the communities in which these projects were implemented.

#### **Social Integration**

While this impact may not be a direct or primary objective of the intangible heritage protection projects, it did come as a result of their implementation, especially outside Syria. The projects were mostly implemented in areas already facing exclusion, marginalization and tensions, which had rarely been targeted by such projects.

According to the organizers of “Sandouk Alhakaya,” “the games and evaluation sessions, namely those that were conducted inside homes and within the scope of the same family, contributed to the reintegration of family members, many of whom were separated by the war. The game and, most importantly, the stories and the memories helped reunite families. On the other hand, people engaging in telling folk tales, which have many common elements, within an atmosphere of familiarity and comfort, have reinforced their sense of sharing a similar intangible heritage despite belonging to different regions. This has led to a sense of belonging to the same heritage, despite some small differences.”

In another context, the organizers of the masonry training project in Jordan and Lebanon said: “We received a clear assessment from the host community, who saw a social dimension to our project. Although we did expect the project to achieve its goals, we had not anticipated this level of success. Many talked about the fact that the project, the teamwork and the building of friendships helped break preconceived stereotypes regarding refugees. The trainees now have a strong sense of social cohesion, which has relieved some concerns that they had before training.”

The Action for Hope Music Schools organizers also stated that: “The schools contributed to achieving social integration at two levels: the students and the parents, especially since we targeted Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians without any distinction. The only criterion for acceptance was talent. We often saw barriers between parents break, for example, when attending their children’s shows. As such, music and talent took center stage, rather than the perceived differences. At the same time, the schools have somehow rebalanced people's relations, as they have created new, much-needed strengths for some. Perhaps the best proof of the success of this project is the increased number of applicants every year, with parents becoming key actors that help us spread the word, after having gained their trust and earned substantial

credibility. The schools have also achieved integration at yet another level, as they have focused on the musical value of heritage songs that can be similar between multiple countries and shed light on the similarities, rather than differences, between countries and their heritage.”

#### **Building New Spaces**

In light of the evident impact of the war on spaces in people’s hometowns, which had constituted safe places for them to meet, discuss and practise different types of activities, the projects under examination contributed to the reconstruction of similar spaces. For the participants and even members of the community, these spaces have become a safe haven for practising certain activities, engaging in conversation and sharing experiences, mainly as regards Syria and its heritage.

In this context, the Malva project has clearly contributed to building new spaces in its areas of operation, which has allowed trainees to establish new relationships and friendships. The same applies to “Sandouk Alhakaya,” whose games and evaluation sessions have created a safe space for participants to tell stories while expressing their reality with ease.

In the masonry training project, the safe spaces were the training locations and even the buses transporting the trainees to and from those locations. The organizers stated that: “The project provided people with spaces where important discussions could be held, mainly about Syria and its heritage, and helped build several networks. The social interactions within these groups were very essential.”

The same applies to the Action for Hope Music Schools, whose headquarters were transformed into a place where students and graduates gathered to train, play instruments, share experiences and even experiment and launch new projects with ease.



Photo 13 Music School Action for Hope

## Societal Changes

Not all communities in which heritage protection projects were implemented have been accepting of everything the projects have to offer. Nevertheless, these projects have eventually been able to effect significant changes. These changes include, for instance, “breaking the gender stereotype that workers in the construction and masonry field are mostly men, while involving a group of women in the masonry training project to reduce men’s dominance,” and “providing participants with a sense of self-confidence and agency in the masonry training project, particularly women, some of whom came from somewhat conservative communities.” The percentage of women who took part in masonry training amounted to 20-30% of the total number of participants in different locations. After the training, many women stated that it was “the first training of its kind targeting women, aside from the stereotypical trainings on activities such as cooking, knitting and other professions that are usually exclusively associated with women.” They also stated that the project has had a positive impact on women’s mental health.

These changes manifested themselves more clearly in the Action for Hope Music Schools project. At first, many parents did not allow their children to join the school for several reasons, including their belief that it was not a priority compared to more urgent needs, or due to the prevalent social perception of arts in general. However, this perception completely changed among the majority of participants, as parents realized how the Music Schools fostered their children’s interests and hobbies, and even their behavior, which in many cases became less violent. The parents now feel proud of their children's achievements and are glad to watch them perform heritage songs that evoke memories and nostalgia, thereby strengthening the relationship between the two generations. As a result, singing and playing instruments began to spread simultaneously among parents and children, and initiatives in the field of music have begun to sprout spontaneously, requiring no external intervention.

Moreover, the project’s organizers have noticed that many families whose children participated in the project have become less socially conservative; some of their habits have changed, and so did their perception of arts and music and related taboos.

## Psychological Changes

There is no doubt that all the abovementioned factors have offered some degree of support and have improved the mental health of participants or practitioners, and in some cases even members of their community. These are all people living in dire circumstances, hence why the opportunity to participate in such projects has a positive impact on their mental health, mood and self-perception, due to their provision of moral and socioeconomic support.

Perhaps the best way to describe this impact is to draw on some quotations and cases of direct beneficiaries. Many participants in the training projects with Malva expressed that they were “happy with the expansion of their social networks and with the new opportunities to improve their economic situation. All of this ultimately had a positive impact on their psychological and moral status.”

This is also the case for “Sandouk Alhakaya,” whose participants highlighted its positive impact, as the evaluation and games sessions turned into sessions for psychological support and provided the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings in an environment of entertainment and familiarity.

A participant in the masonry training project in Lebanon said: “I was lost before the training and I felt worthless. Now, I have my life back.”

As for the Action for Hope Music Schools project, most students highlighted “the sense of confidence,” “the desire to showcase their talent before others,” and “the decreased sense of introversion.” Furthermore, the project’s organizers

outlined the significant decrease in cases of violence among students and their increased confidence, sense of hope and optimism regarding their ability to achieve, give and engage with society, rather than simply waiting for assistance.

## **Challenges and Lessons Learned**

All the projects faced a set of challenges and obstacles across different stages and levels. Most of these challenges inspired the organizers to develop their projects and change some of their methodologies to adapt to the context, especially when they considered replicating their projects in other regions. These projects were an opportunity for many organizations to draw conclusions and lessons for future endeavors.

The organizers of the Malva project believe that there are essential, underlying factors for the success of the project and the achievement of the desired impact, which sometimes exceeded the expected results. These factors include the fact that most of the team members are artists and cultural actors in the region, which means they are directly involved in the project and its objectives and are constantly searching for solutions to enhance it and ensure its success. The second factor is the in-depth study conducted by the team and the good planning in cooperation with Ettijahat prior to the project’s implementation. The study contributed to properly identifying the project’s resources and objectives and society's actual needs. It also enhanced the team's understanding of the importance of their work. Furthermore, the study focused on the importance and sustainability of building groups that continue to work and communicate with each other and that have an attachment to what they have learned, the work they carry out and the region’s heritage and identity.

Meanwhile, the challenges faced by the project included the limited material resources needed to implement multiple activities. For instance, the team was unable to portray some of the visual outputs as planned, since these depend on environmental elements such as cotton fields, whose area has decreased drastically with time due to drought. The quantities of straw available for implementing basketry education workshops were also insufficient, as over recent years they have decreased in the region. This reveals the need to implement these projects without delay, in parallel with projects concerned with tangible heritage.

Another challenge that Malva faced was the incomplete the organizational structure and the shortage of staff across all disciplines, which prompted the center to apply for new grants related to institutional capacity building so as to avoid the problem in future projects.

As for “Sandouk Alhakaya,” it has achieved major success through the support provided by Douroub, as it has managed to produce a new version of the game, promote the topic of folk tales and encourage many participants, especially young people, to reconnect with this part of their heritage. It has also offered a safe space for young people to use storytelling as a gateway for building social relationships and to some extent for venting and expressing their concerns. However, the project encountered a series of challenges given the need to work under dire circumstances within Syria, including the lack of basic needs such as fuel and electricity, in addition to the lack of resources such as affordable and high-quality printing.

According to the project’s organizers, other challenges include “the lack of time allocated to evaluating the game and producing its new version. Furthermore, some aspects took longer than expected, especially with the difficulty in holding and managing evaluation sessions in several places outside Damascus, since the idea was somewhat new and unfamiliar.”

According to the organizers, the main challenge was the availability of manpower, given the ongoing migration of Syrians, especially young people. Like many projects in Syria today, the project must train and qualify its staff, most of whom work for a limited time. The constant need to search for new staff members caused additional stress and pressure for the organizers, who considered training larger numbers of people to act as substitutes when needed.

With regard to the masonry training project, its main objective at the outset was for trainees to return to Syria as professionals to apply what they had learned. However, it eventually became clear that this is not an easy task, so the focus shifted to more realistic objectives appropriate for the context and circumstances of the region. The project organizers stated that: “It has become more important to teach people the craft regardless of their place of residence. We no longer exclusively focus on technical skills, but on how to build and manage an integrated project with a proper business model, which would later on benefit trainees wherever they may be.”

Furthermore, the masonry training project organizers highlighted the importance of focusing on sustainability. The objective is not only to conduct temporary training, after which the relationship with the trainees ends, but rather to build on that training and establish a social framework in which the relationship would last on the long term. That would allow participants to benefit from the existing space and to maintain the relationships and discussions among themselves and with the project team.

The organizers of the Action for Hope Music Schools project mentioned a set of challenges and difficulties they have faced, including social ones. Some families refused to enroll their children in the school, either for social or religious reasons, and others forced their children to leave the school after registration. However, these cases remained limited. The social change that the project has gradually achieved, by building trust with the parents, who in turn saw the positive

results of the music program, further limited those cases. Moreover, by addressing this challenge, the project provided equal opportunities for all the talented children in target areas to prove their musical talent and the added value they can provide on the cultural and heritage protection scene. The organizers added that: “When we give children equal opportunities, based on our belief in their right to education, we discover their talents, enrich the cultural scene and support efforts to protect this heritage.”

A further dimension of this challenge lies in the fact that none of the school's graduates has yet pursued music education at university level as the project's team had hoped. This is due to social factors related to the way individuals who specialize in music and art are perceived, in addition to economic reasons, as it is difficult to generate a stable income in those professions.

Another challenge is related to funding, as it is difficult to obtain sustainable funding for projects which repeat the same activities every year. This was one of the reasons why the team decided not to accept new students this year, in addition to their desire to focus on working with the graduates, as part of the team's belief in the importance of long-term activities rather than temporary courses. In fact, the team sought to dedicate the entire center to graduates as a space for new and creative activities, until new cohorts of talented children are accepted.

Other challenges included the general circumstances of work in Lebanon, such as the general lockdowns to limit the spread of COVID-19, which impacted the ability to have in-person gatherings, arrange lessons and play concerts. Some students and graduates worked around these restrictions, using the internet and social media to meet, broadcast music and interact with their audience. The economic collapse in Lebanon also had major impacts on this project specifically, as most other projects in the country. For instance, there came to be a lack of interest in music as more pressing issues were given priority, in addition to the migration of practitioners,

students and graduates. This has placed an additional burden on the project's team, which invests in training people only to lose them due to the state of affairs in the country. However, the team constantly communicates with most of those who have migrated, stemming from its belief in the importance of keeping music and heritage a part of their lives. It is also necessary to shed light on the requirement for refugees in Lebanon to obtain valid official papers and the difficulties faced by many in this regard. While the lack of valid documentation does not affect their studies at the Music School, it can be an obstacle for them in terms of work opportunities and their future stability.

These challenges inspired the Music School's team to generate new ideas in order to address them, including, on the long term, the creation of a framework similar to a trade union to defend the rights of independent artists who do not have any form of social and health insurance, whereby any unexpected circumstances could create immense burdens, as they are unable to cope with such sudden changes. This is a concern not only in Lebanon, but in all Arab countries.

## Recommendations

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Based on the questionnaire and the aforementioned in-depth interviews, and in light of the desk research carried out while developing this paper and our communication with relevant authorities, we have developed a set of recommendations that we believe are useful and essential for enhancing current efforts to protect intangible heritage in Syria. These recommendations are addressed to the organizations, initiatives and projects operating in this field, sponsors interested in supporting these efforts, as well as Syrian government bodies, as per the request of some project organizers. It should be noted, however, that communication with the aforementioned parties does not fall within the framework of this paper. Below are the recommendations:

## First: Recommendations to Organizations Active in the Field of Protecting Intangible Heritage

1. Link the protection of heritage to other objectives, such as acquiring specific skills needed to obtain job opportunities while leveraging local expertise and labor and building capacities through heritage, which is important in order to ensure sustainability, develop local communities and make valuable use of the projects' funds.
2. Plan for the implementation of intangible heritage protection projects through new approaches, including focusing documentation efforts on marginalized areas, as they face the highest risk of losing their cultural heritage; carefully assessing all aspects of these projects while avoiding negligent or arbitrary attitudes; focusing on heritage-related topics, not only for tourism purposes, but also as an integrated way of thinking and working, along with the need to adopt a critical perspective towards heritage, thereby enabling it to thrive and ensuring its sustainability; building networks for accessing information in order to document the largest amount of endangered material; involving young people in the process of heritage documentation and finding innovative ways to engage them, while empowering the youth via digital means such as e-marketing; and developing heritage products taking into consideration the economic situation and contemporary needs and tastes.
3. Activate channels of communication with the media and link people with important stories to these channels. It is critical to give those people an opportunity to tell their stories. At the same time, the media should be encouraged to adopt a broader definition of heritage issues and to shed further light on them. The centralization of media and the fact that media coverage is limited to major Syrian cities should also be resolved, in addition to addressing stereotypes prevalent in the coverage of other regions, which negatively affects the perception of their history and heritage.
4. Lobby to establish entities similar to trade unions to defend the rights of independent artists and cultural actors.
5. Leverage existing projects that have proven to be successful in order to replicate their mechanisms and models. For instance, the Action for Hope Music Schools project makes all its previous curricula openly available to those who wish to replicate their experience, benefit new segments of society and promote the protection of intangible heritage. There should also be more cooperation between organizations, whether those working in the cultural field or elsewhere, to implement projects and campaigns related to the protection and dissemination of heritage, avoid overlapping efforts and promote positive competition that enhances everyone's work. This recommendation also applies to projects inside Syria, but which take place in areas far from the capital, as openness to other experiences would benefit those projects to develop their work and empower their staff.
6. Adopt various tools for developing skills, marketing handicrafts through exhibitions, seminars and workshops and creating interactive spaces across organizations and between the organizations and the public.

## Second: Recommendations to Sponsors

### Immediate and Short-Term Recommendations

1. Among the common recommendations for projects supported by “Sandouk Alhakaya” is their **continued support** and follow-up throughout their later stages, whether within the same or new regions, or the support of new but similar projects, due to their significant impact on heritage, beneficiaries, practitioners or the region in general.

In this context, the Malva team recommends "continuing Sandouk Alhakaya's work in northeastern Syria, whether with the same team or with other independent artists. Many of our projects' beneficiaries constantly ask us about the possibility of re-implementing the projects or continuing the support, for example, in order for them to sell their products through exhibitions and events. Other regions are also eager for this kind of projects, such as Raqqa and Hasakah, which are both rich in terms of their heritage and people. It is also important for “Sandouk Alhakaya” to launch, in partnership with Ettijahat, a program to support, diversify and protect cultural rights in our region. When people recognize the importance of these rights and their exercise, they become keen on protecting them, as was the case after we implemented our projects."

The masonry training project team recommends “continuing to conduct advanced level courses in Lebanon and re-implementing the project in Iraq for example, as there is a need for training and for talented and qualified people. Moreover, the team has gained sufficient experience to re-implement the project by leveraging everything it has learned in previous stages.”

2. **Finance the same program for a longer period of time**, which would better allow institutions to plan and implement it, to build on previous experiences and to procure new funds without the need for continuous and periodic efforts. This also ensures more sustainable projects and work of higher value, especially in terms of the efforts to protect intangible heritage.
3. **Support the operational costs of organizations and institutions** and allocate part of this support to activities that are not predetermined and that can be decided by the institution based on the ever-changing context and circumstances. There is also a need to support capacity building and training, which are particularly needed by many local organizations in Syria.
4. Donor organizations should be more **flexible** in selecting the topics to fund. They should also not pressure organizations to implement duplicated projects without considering the actual needs of the community, in addition to being flexible with regard to projects' timeframes, taking into account difficult work conditions, especially in Syria. Moreover, they should facilitate the procedures of applying for grants and offer funding to individuals, small and non-institutionalized initiatives and local entities; funding should not be limited to large organizations. This recommendation was made by the majority of project organizers we interviewed as part of this research paper.
5. Assist in **marketing** and finding new markets for handicrafts, especially those produced in Syria. This recommendation has a significant and growing importance at the moment, due to the great difficulties workers face in trying to market their products. These include the numerous complications relating to shipping, money transfer and other procedures for shipping outside Syria, the deteriorating economic situation in the country and the near-total lack of touristic activity. This means that internal markets are stagnant, seriously jeopardizing the ability of workers to remain in

this industry, as they are unable to secure a sustainable income.

### Long-Term Recommendations

6. **Support existing cultural entities and help establish new ones** capable of protecting intangible heritage in an adequate and sustainable manner. Most institutions operating in Syria do not focus on cultural work or the protection of heritage. The purpose is to make this issue a priority in order to preserve and protect heritage on the one hand, and, on the other, to provide people with safe spaces directly linked to their cultural identities.
7. Provide **sustainable support** for actors and entrepreneurs in the fields of art, culture and heritage through training, programs and projects and secure minimum livelihood rights to help them develop their work mechanisms and learn how to use new tools. Acquiring such knowledge and tools may be a turning point in their personal and professional lives, and it could help them feel important, useful and safe.
8. Reconsider the mechanisms, methods and objectives of financing projects and initiatives, as the majority of projects that are initially important and robust quickly collapse in the face of the resiliency challenge – that is, once the financing ends. That is because these projects are not based on adequate economic feasibility studies that take into account market requirements and production costs. Therefore, attention must be given to the sustainability of any project and to its ability to **finance itself and create job opportunities** after a certain period of time.
9. **Encourage** efforts to **research**, study and document all aspects related to heritage, especially endangered heritage. The “Wellf” project organizers highlight that “the Arabic literature lacks in-depth studies and research examining

the intangible heritage of the Arab region in general and Syria more specifically. Social media has contributed to restoring interest in heritage through individual initiatives and activities. But it has also contributed to an abundant flow of inaccurate and even false information, consolidated by commercial TV productions. This requires extensive efforts to train TV presenters and young people on the methods of information verification and documentation and to encourage researchers to produce reliable Arabic literature in this regard." Relevant organizations should also be trained in the mechanisms of **collecting information and documenting** elements of intangible heritage, in addition to helping them explore new and innovative tools that can contribute to the preservation of heritage.

10. Communicate with the organizations operating in Syria by holding **quarterly meetings** to discuss ideas, projects and the problems they are facing. Furthermore, conferences bringing together all organizations working in the field of heritage protection may be held, which would give these entities the opportunity to learn about each other's work.

### Third: Recommendations to Government Agencies

1. Develop integrated plans for the **marketing** of heritage products in and outside Syria, which in most cases are currently limited to individual efforts.
2. **Increasing interest** in heritage products and raising awareness of the importance of heritage and its preservation. One potential area of work is the introduction of heritage and cultural material into the teaching and training curricula in schools and in technical and vocational institutes. It is also possible to establish a special institute for heritage industries.





## Conclusion

When discussing projects seeking to protect intangible heritage in Syria and their impact, many issues come to mind. Several projects have achieved objectives that go far beyond preserving, documenting and raising awareness of the importance of this heritage. This includes educating the new generation to cherish Syrian heritage, which is highly important after the years of violent conflict that have ravaged the country. Some projects have also targeted marginalized areas and groups that most heritage protection projects had previously neglected. It should also be noted that many projects have turned heritage protection into an income-generating activity, which ensures the sustainability of these efforts amid Syria's current context.

Among the positive aspects noted during the elaboration of the paper is the significant impact these projects have had on the workers and beneficiaries. Their eagerness to discuss the projects demonstrates the importance of giving local people a sense of ownership to carry out their own efforts to protect their heritage, without these efforts being imposed by external parties or limited to certain segments and areas. Furthermore, the positive relationships that were built during the implementation of these projects and the safe spaces they provided highlight their considerable psychological impact. We now have an integrated system comprising the preservation of heritage, development of skills and provision of economic and psychological support.

In order for these projects to survive and achieve greater impact and effectiveness, several aspects should be considered and developed to face the numerous challenges that lie ahead. These include continuity, employing a local workforce, innovation and the need to adapt this heritage to modern requirements where possible, to ensure the projects' sustainability. These development efforts should not be limited to organizations; relevant parties should be involved, including donors, government agencies and the community itself.

# Annex: Questionnaire

## Social Value of Intangible Heritage Protection Projects – Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a participatory research effort to examine the social value and impact of protecting Syrian intangible cultural heritage. After more than ten years of troubles in Syria and the establishment of dozens of projects and initiatives to protect its intangible heritage, both inside and outside the country, we must pause and question their feasibility, their actual impact and their social value. We must also ask ourselves whether these projects have achieved their intended goals and what can be done to strengthen and advance them, in order to avoid previous mistakes and develop more effective and sustainable models capable of truly protecting Syrian intangible heritage and strengthening its role as a fundamental part of Syria’s identity and memory.

This questionnaire includes general questions about the initiatives and projects, their objectives and their methodologies, with special focus on the value they bring. It also includes questions about the recommendations which could help develop work in this field in the future.

The questionnaire should take approximately 30 minutes to fill out. Thank you for your cooperation.

### Axis 1: General Questions about the Initiative/Project

The purpose of these questions is to collect general information about the project which would help us better understand it and learn about its different aspects

Initiative/Project Name

Date of establishment of the initiative/project

Description of the project, its heritage protection objectives and the methodologies it adopts to achieve these objectives

### Axis 2: Questions about the Project's Value and Impact

The purpose of these questions is to determine the impact of the project on the region and its residents, on the project team and on the efforts to protect heritage in Syria in general

Can you describe the project’s impact on people's relationship with heritage in the region? This could include broadening people’s understanding and awareness of concepts related to heritage and identity, reinforcing their sense of belonging and pride in their identity or enhancing their participation and the feeling that they can impact heritage protection efforts.

Has the project had an economic impact on the region? How so?

Has the project had any impact on education and the transfer of knowledge among the region’s residents and across generations? How so?

Has the project had any impact on the region itself, whether in terms of strengthening its identity and cultural components; highlighting its unique character, diversity and richness; recognizing the region’s identity and special character; or the efforts made to enhance social cohesion and peacebuilding? How so?

### Axis 3: Questions about the Challenges and Lessons Learned

The purpose of these questions is to determine the challenges that the project has faced and how they have been addressed in order to derive lessons for similar initiatives

What have been the most successful aspects of your project? Please elaborate.

What have been the least successful aspects of your project? Please elaborate.

What challenges has your project faced? How have they been addressed? Are these challenges specific to Syria or the project's area of implementation?

What are the lessons learned from addressing these challenges?

### Axis 4: Recommendations: We would like to hear any recommendations you may have which could improve the work of heritage protection projects in general

The purpose of our study is to formulate recommendations in order to develop the efforts to protect intangible heritage in Syria. The following questions serve to complement these recommendations.

In your opinion, how can you develop your work at the level of the project itself? This may include recommendations related to the project's work mechanism, its relationship with the region and its residents, with its team, with the media, with technology, etc.

In your opinion, how can organizations and projects concerned with heritage advance their work? This may include recommendations regarding the relationship of these organizations and projects with culture in general, with the region and with each other.

In your opinion, how can donor organizations enhance the work of Syrian projects and organizations in terms of protecting intangible heritage?

### Conclusion

Would you like to add anything else? Please elaborate.

Thank you for your time!



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