South Lebanon Between Marginalization and Valorization: Heritage as a Pathway to Community Empowerment

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Abstract

The heritagization process involves identifying, protecting, and transmitting tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage to future generations. Beyond preservation, it fosters sustainable local development by promoting tourism, creating economic opportunities, and reinforcing community identity. However, in Lebanon, especially in underserved areas like the Jezzine region in the South, this process remains overlooked due to prolonged political instability, economic collapse, and the effects of war and displacement.

This research aims to assess whether Jezzini citizens can be mobilized to participate in heritage-led development and to explore how a bottom-up approach can foster both community engagement and sustainable planning. To do so, we applied a mixed methodology: a regional survey (n=392), 16 interviews with politicians and experts, and 10 participatory focus groups with the residents.

Findings reveal that while heritage is often associated with cultural or built elements, community dialogue has expanded this view to include natural heritage. There is strong symbolic attachment to local assets, and nearly 80% of participants expressed willingness or potential willingness to contribute to the heritagization

process, particularly in awareness-raising and planning stages. However, financial involvement and property-sharing remain limited, reflecting broader economic hardship.

The study concludes that bottom-up heritagization is feasible when participation is inclusive, adapted to local realities, and supported by institutional frameworks. This case offers a replicable model for marginalized regions in Lebanon and beyond, where heritage can serve as a platform for resilience, identity, and development.

Keywords: Community empowerment, bottom-up heritagization, cultural heritage, South Lebanon, Jezzine, local participation

* INTRODUCTION

Lebanon, located in the heart of the eastern Mediterranean, spans 10,452 Km^2. Its strategic position at the crossroads of East and West has made it a historical corridor for civilizations over millennia, many of which left visible traces. This explains why several archaeological sites in Lebanon – such as Aanjar, Baalkbeck, Byblos and Tyr – were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List as early as 1984. More recently, the Rachid Karameh International Fair was added as a site in danger in 2023 (UNESCO-WHC, n.d.). On the national Level, sites like Al-Mseilha Fort and Beiteddine Palace, are protected under decree 166/1933 (Règlement pour les antiquités au Liban et en Syrie, 1933).

In parallel, Lebanon's mountains lie at the core of the Mediterranean biodiversity hotspot (Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, 2010). The country hosts one natural world Heritage site: the Becharri cedar forest and the holy Valley of Qadisha (1998) (UNESCO-WHC, n.d.) along with three UNESCO Biosphere reserves: Shouf (2005), Jabal el-Rihane (2007), and Jabal Moussa (2009) (UNESCO, n.d.). Since the 1990s, national efforts have aimed to protect biodiversity through the designation of nature reserves (e.g., Horch Ehden, Bentael), protected forests (e.g., Quammoua, Tannourine), and other regulatory tools. However, these protections remain insufficient considering the country's ecological richness (Bou Dagher-Kharrat et al., 2018).

While legal frameworks have addressed biodiversity and built heritage, Lebanese legislation still largely ignores intangible cultural heritage. Nonetheless, progress has been made, and elements have been inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible

Heritage List: "Zajal" (traditional oral poetry, 2014), the Lebanese "Man'ouche" (gastronomy, 2023), and Arabic calligraphy (2021, recognized regionally) (UNESCO-WHC, n.d.).

Our study focuses on the Jezzine region, a mountainous area of 130 Km^2 in southern Lebanon, comprising 45 villages, governed by the Union of Jezzine Municipalities (UJM) since 2005 (مرسوم انشاء "اتحاد بلديات منطقة جزين" قضاء جزين - محافظة لبنان الجنوبي, 2005). With roughly 20,000 residents, the area is rich in cultural and natural heritage assets: archaeological remains, traditional crafts, notable figures, the Middle East's largest pine forest, and the iconic Jezzine waterfall (40 meters high). Yet, the region has been largely sidelined from Lebanon's touristic circuits, primarily due to the Israeli occupation (1982 – 1999) and mass displacement. Since the liberation in 2000, only scattered local initiatives have emerged, with minimal private or governmental investment. Today, the region suffers from continued state neglect, economic collapse, and recurring conflict – leaving its heritage undervalued and under-protected.

* **Research Problem**

Despite recent efforts—such as the 2012 Strategic Development Plan and a 2022 partnership with a Destination Management Organization—to valorize Jezzine's rich heritage, most initiatives have remained top-down, disconnected from community realities, and largely ineffective. In rural areas impacted by war, displacement, and prolonged state neglect, traditional approaches to heritage development often fail to build trust or ensure sustainability. The lack of citizen engagement, particularly in planning and decision-making, has limited the scope and impact of heritage valorization efforts in the Jezzine region.

This raises a central question: How can Jezzini citizens be effectively mobilized to participate in heritage preservation and planning?

The objective of this study is to examine how local populations perceive heritage, evaluate their willingness to engage in the heritagization process, and assess the extent to which participatory approaches are socially and politically acceptable in a post-conflict rural setting. By doing so, the research aims to offer actionable insights for more inclusive and sustainable heritage governance in marginalized regions.

What Makes This Study Unique?

This research stands out in three keyways.

First, it applies a bottom-up participatory methodology in a marginalized, post-conflict region—rare in Lebanese heritage planning literature.

Second, it incorporates the concept of social acceptability (traditionally used in environmental studies) into the heritagization process, offering an innovative analytical framework for community engagement.

Third, it provides a real-world application involving surveys, interviews, and focus groups, where citizens not only expressed their perceptions but co-designed potential heritage projects, revealing a grassroots capacity for sustainable territorial development.

* THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

* The Heritagization Process

Heritage has always been of interest to the population, dating from the Hellenistic period, when they used to conserve beauty. Its definition has evolved with time, to become now "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration" ("World Heritage," n.d.). Several conventions divided it into categories.

As per the World Heritage Convention (1972), Cultural heritage is composed of monuments, groups of buildings and sites that have an exceptional value. Natural heritage is natural features, formations and sites that have high ecological and biodiversity values. In this research paper, we are only taking into consideration the natural heritage, the built heritage and the living heritage. The heritagization process refers to the transformation of places, practices, or objects into recognized heritage through collective valorization. According to Gravari-Barbas et al. (2014), this process grants new cultural significance to local assets, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging. This process goes through several stages which are the identification, protection, conservation, presentation, and passing it on to future generations (Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972).

The intangible cultural heritage, also called the living heritage, envelops "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith –

that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage". For the living heritage, the "Heritagization Process" is called "Safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage". The process goes through identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, and transmission (through education) (Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003, 2003). To simplify things, in this paper, we will refer to the safeguarding and the heritagization processes as the heritagization process.

Our research in Jezzine highlights a bottom-up variant of heritagization, where recognition and value are co-constructed by the local community. Here, heritage is not simply defined by authorities or laws but negotiated through everyday use, memory, and affective ties. This approach aligns more closely with Faro Convention principles, which center human experience and democratic participation in defining heritage.

The heritagization process initiates sustainable local development in the region. On the one hand, the protection of cultural and natural heritage is target 11.4 of the 11th Sustainable Development Goal ("The 17 Goals," n.d.). Thanks to the renovation of sites, tourist services, trade, etc., it is a job creator. It will thus make it possible to improve the living conditions of the region's inhabitants while stimulating an economic dynamic. This approach must be accompanied by education about heritage and environmental conservation among the population of all ages. This process ensures benefits on well-being and physical health through the gradual reduction of pollution emissions (Labadi et al., 2021). Nonetheless, initiating the heritagization process in the Jezzine region can lead to positive outcomes, such as boosting the region's economy through sustainable tourism and related services, heritage preservation, promoting the environment, and strengthening the population's fabric, etc. This means that the process goes well with the strategic development plan designed for the region.

* Social Acceptability

Heritage is delicate and raises concerns, it must be addressed through social acceptability. The latter comes upstream a project. It is when the stakeholders and the population dialogue to build together the conditions to be put in place in a

project according to their common preferences. (Caron-Malenfant and Conraud, 2009; Coll, 2018). It depends on multiple dimensions — environmental, social, political, economic, and technological — and it evolves through ongoing dialogue between stakeholders (Service des relations de travail, 2016).

Acceptability has many phases: -

1- Preliminary Consultation: here, we identify stakeholders, we assess local historical context, economic, environmental, and political conditions, we select a spokesperson, and we initiate community dialogue to adapt the project.

2- Information and Assessment: in this phase, we evaluate project impacts with local, regional, and academic partners, we inform and consult the community transparently, we demonstrate flexibility, we collaborate with credible third parties, and we ensure fair distribution of project benefits.

3- Implementation: it is important in this phase to maintain stakeholder dialogue, transparently communicate unforeseen changes, and develop solutions collaboratively.

4- Operation: here, we should set up long-term communication and monitoring and continuously assess community impacts.

5- Closure and Follow-up: at this stage, we must plan closure and site rehabilitation from project inception, allocate resources, involve stakeholders actively, and remain adaptable to unforeseen challenges (Conseil patronal de l'environnement du Québec, 2012).

Social acceptability involves three interacting dimensions (Conseil patronal de l'environnement du Québec, 2012): -

1- Socio-political acceptability: Acceptance by politicians, decision-makers, the public, and stakeholders of technologies, policies, and regulatory frameworks. Opposition usually arises from broader public concerns (e.g., shale gas controversies).

2- Community acceptability: Acceptance by residents and local authorities of projects and investors. Opposition typically occurs due to private interests (property value concerns, personal inconvenience—commonly referred to as NIMBY) or lack of adequate information.

3- Market acceptability: Acceptance by consumers, investors, and authorities of financial investments, risks, prices, or taxes related to a project. Opposition arises when groups refuse to bear these economic burdens.

While these frameworks were developed in contexts with strong regulatory structures and civic education, applying them in Lebanon requires adaptation. In the Jezzine region, weak state presence and limited heritage legislation mean that informal negotiation, local trust, and emotional investment play a greater role in the heritagization process project legitimacy. We trust that early involvement of residents — particularly through consultation and co-planning — builds trust and reduces resistance. This grassroots alignment is crucial in post-conflict rural regions, where formal channels are often mistrusted or dysfunctional.

* The Citizen Participation

The Faro Convention (2005) emphasizes the centrality of people and human values in defining and managing cultural heritage, advocating a participatory approach that empowers local communities. This vision is echoed in S. Arnstein's seminal "Ladder of citizen Participation" (1969), which categorizes forms of public involvement from symbolic gestures to full citizen control.
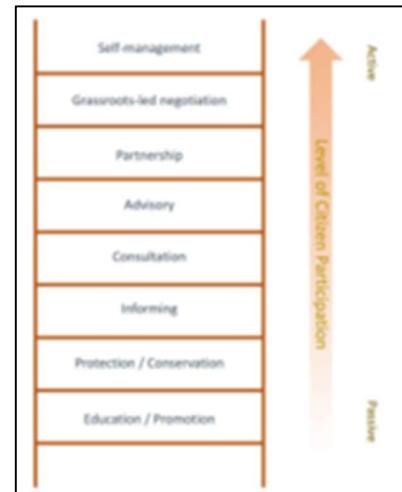
Figure 1. P.Y. Chan's Ladder of Citizen Participation in heritage Management (2016)

Building on this, P.Y. Chan (2016) developed a heritage-specific ladder with eight levels, ranging from passive promotion to community self-management (Figure 1). The first 3 levels are still considered top-down, while the last 3 levels are the bottom-up approach. Consultation and advisory are in the middle.

In Jezzine region, participation fluctuates between "consultation" and "advisory" stages, far from full decision-making power, yet meaningful in a context where locals were historically excluded from heritage planning. This shift suggests the beginning of an emerging participatory culture in heritage governance, an encouraging development that aligns with the middle levels of Chan's ladder (2016), and signals the potential to

move toward more collaborative forms of decision-making.

* METHODOLOGY

In this research, we aim to assess the socio-political acceptability of the heritagization process in the Jezzine region, while gradually applying the principles of social acceptability steps. To do so, we first conducted a preliminary study of the region's heritage assets and existing development projects. This included document analysis, site visits, and the creation of a detailed inventory of natural, cultural, and intangible heritage.

For the consultation phase, a community-based bottom-up methodology was adopted, combining three main tools: surveys among local population, interviews with various stakeholders, and focus groups.

The survey was conducted between January 2022 and March 2022. According to the UJM's population statistics (2022), the region has approximately 20,000 residents. Based on a Confidence Level = 95% and a Margin of Error = ±5%, the required sample size was calculated to be 392 individuals (Israel, 2013). Quota sampling ensured representation across the region's 45 villages, gender balance, and various age groups. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS (v26). The questionnaire explored themes such as local definitions of heritage, perceived advantages and disadvantages of heritagization, identification of stakeholders, and citizens' willingness to participate.

Interviews were conducted with 10 politicians, including 6 mayors (including the Jezzine mayor and the president of the UJM) and 4 deputies. Also, interviews with 6 researchers and NGO members working in the region were conducted, spanning the years 2022 to 2023. These interviews mirrored the survey structure but also explored site-specific priorities and strategic perspectives on heritage valorization.

Additionally, in 2023, 10 focus groups were organized in 10 of the region's villages, where heritage is mostly frequent. Aged between 14 and 75, males and females, from different backgrounds and points of view, the participants total number was of 130. Their aim was to better target the choice of heritage assets to be retained, to raise awareness among the population about the role they can play, particularly in planning the process, and to think together about the stages and application of the heritagization process in the region. After clarifying the concepts misunderstood by the locals,

discussions centered on the role of the local population in the heritagization process. Then, they were divided into groups, where each group was invited to select one significant heritage asset, and collectively design the steps of its heritagization process. These exercises stimulated discussion on feasibility, financing, and long-term management. At the end, details were shared with the other participants, and discussions were open.

This mixed methodology enabled a comprehensive understanding of local perceptions, stakeholder dynamics, and the extent of social and political acceptability. It also provided valuable insight into the population's readiness to shift from passive observation to active participation in heritage-led development.

The following section presents the key results of this process, highlighting how local perceptions of heritage, levels of engagement, and stakeholder perspectives evolved throughout the study.

* RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
* The Heritage Definition

The first step to social acceptability and citizen participation is to understand how locals perceive heritage. So, we asked the region's residents to define heritage. The answers were mainly "heritage is an ancient good inherited from the past. This good has an important historical, territorial and identity value. We must conserve it and transmit it to future generations.". This heritage definition is very similar to the UNESCO's definition: "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations." ("World Heritage," n.d.). This means that Jezzine Region's residents know theoretically what heritage is.

When asked to give examples of Lebanese heritage, most residents cited elements of intangible cultural heritage (45%), or built heritage (41%), with only 8% referencing natural sites. A minority (4%) mentioned notable Lebanese figures. These results reflect a perception of heritage as predominantly man-made and cultural, rather than environmental – a pattern linked to limited exposure to nature-focused heritage education. Interestingly, respondents who had lived abroad were more likely to include natural elements, suggesting a gap in local awareness regarding Lebanon's ecological heritage.

Interestingly, in a separate survey question where the term "heritage" was deliberately avoided, respondents were asked to list

important sites in the region. The results revealed that natural assets such as the Jezzine waterfall and the Bkassine pine forest ranked among the top five most frequently mentioned places. This contrast suggests that while nature is emotionally and symbolically significant to locals, it is often not consciously categorized as "heritage." The terminology used thus plays a key role in shaping what is perceived as worthy of protection. This finding underscores the importance of awareness-raising in heritage education, particularly in communities where the concept of natural heritage remains underarticulated.

* The Impacts of the Heritagization Process

Figure 2 compiles the advantages of the heritagization process according to the locals consulted in the survey, focus groups and interviews.
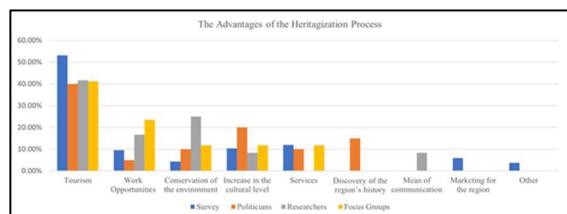

Figure 2. Community-Identified Advantages of the Heritagization Process

Source: The summary of our survey, interviews and focus groups results grouped on Excel (2024)

We can visualize the diversity of advantages associated with the process (>8 advantages). Tourism is the major advantage of the process, whether religious, cultural, gastronomic, natural, ecotourism, ...; all other frequencies are by far more minimal compared to the tourism sector. Here, tourism, work opportunities, and services are economic advantages, while heritage conservation, and the discovery of the region's history are environmental advantages. The increase in the cultural level, the means of communication and the marketing of the region are cultural benefits. Therefore, stakeholders are aware of the sustainability of the heritagization process (due to the diversity of its economic, cultural, and environmental advantages). This sustainable development resulting from applying the heritagization process is confirmed by ICOMOS, where they state that the protection of cultural and natural heritage is target 11.4 of the 11th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Also, through the protection of biodiversity and traditional buildings, places of worship, crafts and ancient traditional practices, as well as the renovation of sites, the process becomes a job creator in various fields including tourism services, while maintaining

the know-how and ancient trades that it revitalizes. It ensures benefits for the well-being and health of the population by gradually reducing the nuisances of emissions and pollution and the development of new living spaces. This means that the process goes with all the SDG (Labadi et al., 2021).

Now concerning the disadvantages of the process: the local population in the survey and in Focus Groups didn't see any major disadvantages, a sign of the beginning of social acceptability. That's why we will only include the interviews' results, where the main concern among stakeholders is mass tourism's negative impacts on the environment and on the heritage conservation in the region: pollution, demolition, etc. While tourism development is recognized as beneficial, stakeholders are aware of its drawbacks, highlighted by the ongoing DMO project in Jezzine. Researchers caution against indiscriminate conservation efforts, advocating for prioritization based on cultural significance. Politicians fear changes in local lifestyle due to tourism, potential conflicts between tourists and the locals or between locals, and the burden on municipalities to manage heritage protection. Here, we can see that the

disadvantages are social and environmental, which is an indicator of the cultural and environmental awareness among the politicians and the experts/researchers. This helps us progress through the implementation and the good management of the heritage in the region.

In conclusion, the heritagization process has many impacts, the most important is tourism. It can be both a blessing and a curse, depending on the management, and the stakeholders.
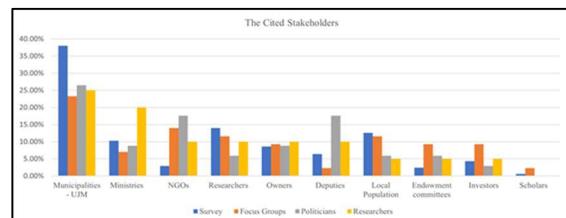

Figure 3. Community-Identified Stakeholders of the Process

Source: The summary of our survey, interviews and focus groups results grouped on Excel (2024)

* The Stakeholders of the Process

In the different consultation frameworks, we asked who the stakeholders in the heritagization process are. We then grouped the responses in the Figure 3.

The consultation identified about ten main stakeholder groups, with municipalities cited most frequently due to their role as local authorities. While ministries, NGOs, researchers, and political figures were also acknowledged, an

important insight emerged: citizens consistently emphasized their own role in the process, unlike politicians and researchers, who rarely mentioned community involvement. This discrepancy highlights a disconnect between institutional planning and local expectations, revealing that while residents are ready to co-create, formal actors remain anchored in top-down paradigms.

The other stakeholders have very near frequencies and are to be consulted in the process: authorization from the ministries, planning and propositions from the NGOs, researchers and local population; Also, political and maybe financial support from the deputies is needed, as well as financial support from the investors. Here, what is interesting is that the local population is cited as a stakeholder in the survey and the focus groups, but not much among politicians and researchers. This means that the residents know that they have a role to play in the heritagization process and want to participate in it, following a bottom-up approach. However, this is not the perspective of politicians and researchers who are used to being the sole decision-makers and planners using only top-down approaches. They are used to include the population only in the first 3 levels of the ladder of citizen participation: education, conservation and information (Chan, 2016). This must be worked on in the future, by organizing meetings in the UJM with the mayors and the researchers, in addition to awareness campaigns in schools and in the villages.

* The Citizens Will of Participation

We asked our population in the survey and interviews (politicians and researchers) if they were ready to participate in the heritagization process. There were 3 answers: Yes, No, and Maybe. Based on their answers, we calculated the will of participation rates (R):

$$R_{(participants)} = \left(\frac{F(participan_{\ survey})}{Total(survey)} + \frac{F(participant_{\ politicians})}{Total(politicians)} + \frac{F(participants_{researchers})}{Total(researchers)} \right) / 3 = \left(\frac{55}{392} + \frac{4}{10} + \frac{3}{6} \right) / 3 = \frac{1.0403}{3} = 0.3468 =$$

34.68% of sure participants.

$$R_{(potential\text{-}participants)} = \left(\frac{F(potential_{survey})}{Tot\ (survey)} + \frac{F(potentia_{\ politicians})}{Total(politicians)} + \frac{F(potential_{researchers})}{Total(researchers)} \right) / 3 = \left(\frac{232}{392} + \frac{6}{10} + \frac{1}{6} \right) / 3 = \frac{1.3585}{3} = 0.4528 =$$

45.28% of potential participants.

$R_{(non\text{-}participants)} = 100\% - [R_{(participants)} + R_{(potential\text{-}participants)}] = 100\% - (34.68\%$

+ 45.28%) = 20.04% of non-participants.

These equations show that 34.68% of the population in the survey is willing to participate in the heritagization process, 45.28% aren't sure of their participation, and 20.04% aren't willing to participate.

In a developing country like lebanon, in the middle of many crises, where there is no common history book or civic raising targeting the culture, but only politics, 34.68% of citizens willing to participate in the process is a very good result. The different crises are shifting people's priorities to only ensure primary needs. Also, in rural areas, the economy consists mostly of agriculture not of tourism and culture, that are considered luxuries. As for the 45.28% of potential participants, they can be subject to awareness campaigns or negotiations. Or, when the process is implemented, where other participating people are gaining profits, they might be more engaged and interested in taking part in the process. This was the case in the Shouf Biosphere Reserve (direct neighbors of the Jezzine region), where most of the locals refused at first to participate in the development projects done by the reserve. Hence, when they saw the positive impacts on the participants (economically and socially) and on the environment, they began to be engaged and integrated in the activities, in decision-making, in opening businesses and guesthouses in conformity with the standards required by the reserve, in using bio agriculture, etc. (as per the Shouf Biosphere Reserve's management committee, 2024).

Returning to the Jezzine region, the willingness to participate in the process and the potential participation are positive signs of social acceptability in the process, especially the socio-political acceptability. Their total rate is 34.68% + 45.28% = 79.96% of positive answers, which means that the heritagization process might be implemented in the region because there's a socio-political acceptability. We're not far from accomplishing a big participation in the planning of the process, and in the future steps and businesses.
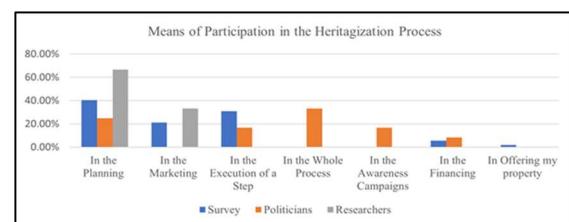

Figure 4. Community-Identified Means of participation in the heritagization process

Source: The summary of our survey, interviews and focus groups results grouped on Excel (2024)

Those 79.96% of potential participants in the process were asked how they would participate in it. The answers are grouped in Figure 4.

The survey and focus groups revealed that citizens are most willing to engage in the planning and promotional stages of the heritagization process, particularly through idea-sharing and grassroots marketing. These stages require minimal financial resources but offer meaningful ways to contribute — especially through social media and word-of-mouth. While fewer respondents expressed willingness to finance projects or offer private property, the strong interest in non-material participation reflects a pragmatic engagement shaped by Lebanon's economic realities and a growing sense of civic responsibility.

The same goes for the marketing approach, especially in the presence of social media and ear-to-ear marketing. No politician is willing to participate in the marketing (even though they can influence a lot of citizens), however, some said they will participate in the awareness campaigns (mayors) and in the whole process (the president of the UJM and some deputies). Awareness campaigns are to be held in schools, municipalities, etc. that don't necessarily require money, but only a local.

The execution of a step is mainly chosen by engineers, masons, hotel industry, etc. for whom the process offers work opportunities, in addition to some politicians. A minority is willing to help finance. This not only highlights another time the economic impact the stakeholders see in the heritagization process, but the effect of the economic crisis and the inflation. Note that due to the economic crisis, few Lebanese now can spend vacations abroad; this situation has strengthened domestic tourism and now weekend excursions have developed considerably, which also explains the proliferation of guest houses across all territories: Thus, in Jezzine, since 2019, there have been the opening of more than 10 guesthouses, and many investments in Food and Beverage.

Some locals and some politicians can help in financing the process, because they have the means. As for offering their property, only a little number of locals are willing. This is because almost everyone operates under the NIMBY principle because of fear of destruction of the property and potential negative impacts. This means what we don't have a community acceptability yet. We

must collaborate later with the landlords.

* The Planning of the Heritagization Process

During the focus groups, we explained the details of the heritagization process, its advantages, disadvantages, the different stakeholders, and their different roles, the importance of including the locals in the planning and the execution, etc. During the focus groups, the local population understood that the bottom-up approach can have an impact on decision-making. That led to the shift in the population's opinion towards the process and their gradual growing interest in its planning and implementation. At this stage, participants selected what they considered the region's most important heritage assets.

Notably, the Jezzine waterfall and the Bkassine pine forest emerged as top choices. This shift in perception – from a limited understanding of heritage to a broader one that include natural heritage elements – demonstrates the impact of community dialogue. Interestingly, selection patterns were influenced not only by ecological or historical value but also by popularity and visibility, suggesting that locally meaningful heritage is often shaped

by public recognition rather than objective criteria.

Now for the built heritage, they chose 10 different built heritage assets (like the region's different sarcophagi, Farid Serhal's palace, our Lady of Bisri church, etc.) but didn't choose any asset twice. So, we can see that according to the locals, no built asset has a particular importance. The choice of these 10 assets was because of the proximity of its location, or because of a sole personal experience in it.

As for the intangible cultural heritage elements in the region, the traditional know-how of the traditional cutlery in Jezzine, dating from the year 1770 emerged, in addition to the famous Bkassine Festivals. Another time, the popularity of the element plays a big role in its selection.

After selecting each asset, the citizens planned the steps of its heritagization process, according to their vision and their needs. Some of them suggested potential donors to finance and facilitate the implementation of the process. Our focus groups marked a critical shift: residents began to see themselves not only as custodians of heritage, but also as legitimate actors in its future. While top-down governance remains the norm in Lebanon, these

participatory steps signal an emerging bottom-up culture of heritage co-management, one that may evolve with institutional support and continued civic engagement.

To complete this participatory approach, the bottom-up plans were highly considered by us and refined. We then planned the final heritagization process for the region and showed it to the local authority and the landowners. The majority were ok with implementing it, with minor considerations and suggestions for changes. So, if we can find true investors in the project, we can implement the heritagization process in the Jezzine region, according to the locals' perception of the heritage management.

* CONCLUSION

The case of Jezzine reveals the untapped potential of bottom-up heritagization in rural regions that have long been marginalized by centralized planning, economic fragility, and post-conflict fatigue. Despite its rich tapestry of natural and cultural assets, Jezzine has remained largely absent from Lebanon's touristic and heritage strategies. However, the findings of this research highlight a quiet shift in local dynamics: communities that were previously excluded are now beginning to reclaim their role as co-authors of their own development narratives.

Through a multi-layered methodology involving surveys, interviews, and focus groups, this study documented how local citizens perceive heritage, their openness to participate in its management, and the challenges they face in doing so. While the concept of heritage was often associated with built or intangible culture, focus groups revealed an expanding view that now includes nature, a sign of conceptual evolution driven by dialogue and collective reflection. Most importantly, the research uncovered a high rate of willingness and potential participation in heritage-related projects, offering a powerful indicator of social and political acceptability.

These findings carry implications far beyond Jezzine. They question the dominant reliance on top-down strategies, where authorities plan without local insight, and instead promote a shift toward inclusive governance. Heritage, when viewed not only as an aesthetic or symbolic object but as a living, shared resource, becomes a vehicle for empowerment, economic renewal, and territorial cohesion. This redefinition of heritage, not as nostalgia, but as a participatory tool

for resilience, aligns with broader global goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 11.4), and the human-centered principles of the Faro Convention.

Moreover, the role of the Union of Jezzine Municipalities in supporting this process is crucial. Their openness to citizen engagement, despite structural limitations, shows that local governance can play a transformative role in shifting the heritage paradigm. The synergy between community-driven vision and institutional support offers a model that could be replicated in other neglected regions of Lebanon, and more broadly, in post-crisis contexts across the Global South.

Still, challenges remain. The legal framework in Lebanon does not yet fully support participatory heritage governance. Financial resources are scarce, and community engagement beyond the planning phase, especially in implementation and property sharing, remains limited. Furthermore, the region's ongoing exposure to political uncertainty and war risks redirecting attention away from heritage.

Yet, this research provides a clear answer to our central question: Jezzini citizens can be effectively mobilized when participation is made meaningful, accessible, and locally relevant. Awareness campaigns, inclusive consultations, and practical planning workshops fostered a sense of ownership and demonstrated the benefits of engagement. Participation increased when residents saw how heritage could serve not just memory, but livelihoods, identity, and social cohesion. This confirms that bottom-up mobilization is not only possible, but also already underway and must be nurtured further.

Nevertheless, the momentum generated in Jezzine is promising. This research has shown that when people are invited to speak, to plan, and to imagine together, heritage becomes more than a legacy, it becomes a future. The heritagization process in Jezzine is not just a preservation effort; it is a call for inclusive development rooted in identity, memory, and agency. It is, in short, an invitation to reconnect the past with the possibility of a shared tomorrow.

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