

National Heritage Council and its role, achievements and commitment to promoting cultural diversity museums in South Africa

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Programme Director,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentleman

Let me start off by applauding the organisers of this important international conference for placing museums central to our agenda as a country.

I represent the National Heritage Council of South Africa which, in the main, focuses on the intangible aspects of heritage. Contrary to the perceptions that others may have, the mandate of the national Heritage Council is very clear and distinguished from other institutions. For instance the role of the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) is mainly on the management of tangible heritage resources whereas the NHC focuses on promotion and development of heritage as a strategic resource to nation building and national identity. We thought it prudent to emphasise this important distinction in a public platform like this to avoid possible confusion in the minds of the public and other key stakeholders in the Arts, Culture and Heritage Sector as has been the case in the past.

For some of you who may not know, the National Heritage Council is a public entity under the National Department of Arts and Culture of South charged with, amongst others, the mandate outlined in its Constitutive Act, including, but not limited to, the following: Advise the Minister of Arts and Culture on heritage policies and related matters; Transforming the entire heritage sector; Coordinate activities of institutions involved in heritage Management in South Africa; Protect, preserve and promote heritage for present and future generations; Protect, preserve and promote research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) including, but not limited to, enterprise, industry, social upliftment and liberatory processes; develop and promote heritage awareness and education.

As a public entity charged with a myriad of functions some of which have not been covered here, we are bound to face challenges some of which require policy and legislative interventions if not reengineering. It is important for you to appreciate that the sector is still fragmented with so many duplications of mandates and incoherent policy and legislative frameworks which tend to inhibit the development and advancement of the sector. From 2006 the National Heritage Council of South Africa has engaged the relevant stakeholders nationwide and moved around the country province by province gathering views of ordinary people on the ground, practitioners, civil society formations, traditional leaders and healers, etc asking them to identify challenges peculiar to them and also solicited inputs as to that which they wanted to see changed in the sector.

The views and suggestions gathered assisted us in developing the first blueprint, that is, the draft Heritage Transformation Charter which is ready for submission to the Ministry of Arts and Culture in line with our mandate of advising the Minister of Arts and Culture on heritage policy and related issues. From the consultative processes, we could identify key challenges and/or limitations that have been captured in the Charter which the museums should begin to deal with.

The first most important limitation or challenge relates to the issue of Heritage in Development, better expressed as the need to balance Conservation and Development. This has been a topical issue at the recent 35th Session of the World Heritage Committee under UNESCO held in France, Paris for the last

two weeks which has just ended the day before yesterday. Let me congratulate Ms Alissandra Cummins who is the Vice president of the 35th session of the World Heritage Committee (who presided over discussions in Paris) for her sterling work during the past two weeks. She was exceptionally good and amazing. Focussed on technical detail, persuasive and yet firm on principle. The Committee discussed two sites in South Africa and Tanzania which are in danger of possible delisting from the World Heritage List of World Heritage Property due to mining related developments. In order to accommodate this economically necessary venture Tanzania is requesting the WHC to allow them to modify the boundaries of the current World heritage site. On the part of South Africa, as most of you might be aware, the possibility of mining coal in Mpungubwe is being considered subject to results of heritage impact assessments. All these developments are aimed at addressing national imperatives such as poverty alleviation, job creation and lead to infrastructural development, among many other benefits. Critical to this is that Africa is a developing world where both renewable and non-renewable resources are supposed to contribute to sustainable national development.

But one of the questions that has been asked is whether or not it is possible in Africa to preserve without being rigid on issues of sustainable development. There is growing feeling that the World Heritage Convention and operational guidelines are unfriendly towards development in that they make it impossible for Africa to exploit its resources. Exploitation of resources within the proximity of cultural sites, and even in areas that are not culturally sensitive, is faced with challenges from environmentalists and heritage lobby groups. While poverty levels demand development in Africa, conservation is sceptical of development. The question is how then do we change this paradigm so that heritage is not seen as a stumbling block towards development and at the same time embrace development strategies that bring balance to conservation and development? To this end the 35th session of WHC has approved an international workshop on heritage and sustainable development to be held in Brazil before its next session in Russia. As a country, we must position ourselves with facts to influence discussions in Brazil. It is our hope that national dialogue will take place before Brazil. Distinguished delegates, allow me to make snippets into this proposed national discourse on development by inferring to national and regional examples;

Most of the time, the environmental and conservation interests would never reign supreme over economic ones. All the same, balancing the right to allow development to take place in order to create employment on the one hand and beneficiation of local communities on the other through conservation initiatives is what needs to be struck without compromising the natural environment.

From the South African side, the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape is one of the major sites that attract a significant number of visitors owing to its World Heritage Status. However, of late the site is being threatened by mining development taking place around it. That is the Vele Mining initiative in particular. Tensions between conservationists and developers have reached crisis proportions which may threaten the status of the site in terms of its retention as a World Heritage Site. Understandably, heritage tourism cannot flourish within such an environment.

A similar real threat has been brewing in Zimbabwe where it has been reported in one of the weekend news publications on Sunday, the 14th November 2010 that the Victoria Falls may lose its World Heritage Status because of the development of a hotel and restaurant facility which will destroy its Outstanding Universal value, and integrity as recognised by international instruments like the UNESCO protocols.

What is tragic about this case, as would appear from the newspaper article, is that the proposed development was approved by the Government of Zambia in breach of the UNESCO protocols and in the absence of a trans-boundary management plan as a shared and common property for Zambia and Zimbabwe as required by the operational guidelines.

The Cradle of Human kind also has its own fair share of problems in terms of the tensions between development and land ownership. The least said the better but for this purpose some reflection on the potential harm that these tensions potentially pose to heritage tourism may be necessary. This conference must, therefore, be seized with that.

Central to the issues that are being argued by both parties especially in the Mapungubwe case is 'beneficiation' of the local communities which strategic question is yet to be answered. However, it must be noted that this concept is being subjected to many interpretations which tend to trivialise its importance and thus lead to confusion in the minds of the vulnerable groups in terms of ranking their order of priorities.

It is with premonition and prophetic foresight, we want to believe, that the National Heritage Council of South Africa, informed by its legislative mandate and the policy vacuum identified, conceived a programme aimed at developing a draft position paper (towards influencing policy framework) on heritage in development which has seen a successful national workshop hosted in Cape Town in the first week of May 2010. The development process is still ongoing. Buoyed by this policy framework, our country will be able to engage in a much more informed and focused public discourse on heritage conservation and development.

The second limitation that the conference must reflect on relates to the issue of access to heritage resources or lack thereof which remains a challenge for the greatest number in both peri-urban and rural communities who in the main are closed out from these resources. The previous trends had been that museums were built in cities and towns and mainly to promote colonial and apartheid legacies.

Our concern as the NHC is that as a country we are yet to develop a policy on access to heritage resources to address some of these issues. For the past two years, the NHC has been developing such a policy framework and has consulted widely on it which culminated in the development of what is now called a draft policy framework on access to heritage resources which is being finalised.

The third challenge relates to pricing and lack of beneficiation model for the communities living within the localities around which some of the heritage resources are located. It is well documented that many of our museums and other heritage resources, some of which have attained World Heritage Status such as Robben Island and Mapungubwe, drive tourism in South Africa and attract a lot of tourists thereby immensely contributing to socio-economic development. Pricing remains one of the major limitations restricting communities from accessing heritage resources which is in the main accessible to the few tourists, most of whom come from abroad, precisely because of the uneven economic scales that favour them.

The challenge that we have is, how do we widen access and go a step further towards empowering such people economically from the spoils of their own heritage over which they ought to exercise custodianship and management within the confines of the applicable laws and international protocols?

Let me also touch on the fourth area that our beautiful country prides itself in, that is, Heritage and Tourism and their interconnectedness. As the National Heritage Council, we view heritage as one of the most important resources that can be strategically positioned to advance economic development in South Africa.

Cultural and natural heritage arguably drives tourism in that if it were not for our heritage, especially that which lies within the associated sites, some of which have already attained World Heritage Status, tourism would not be as booming as it is now. Regrettably, the benefits that accrue to tourism through the tourism levy are not routed back to heritage to ensure preservation and sustenance. It is also worse that not even the local communities derive benefits there from.

It is our contention, therefore, that the paradigm has to change and this workshop must push for that. Given our transformation mandate, it is our well considered view that this conference should begin to influence public discourse on the relationship between heritage and tourism to ensure that heritage becomes accessible to the greatest number of our local communities who have limited or no access to it, especially those living within or around the localities in which some of these heritage sites are situated. In this way, the principle of equitable beneficiation and distribution of the proceeds or revenue derived from

our common heritage should apply. Similarly, if heritage drives tourism, then the benefits that accrue from it must be ploughed back into conservation initiatives.

Our view is that price differentiation for foreign tourists may be the solution to ensure that locals pay less compared to those who come with powerful Dollars, Yen, Pounds and Euros. The National Heritage Council has initiated a process towards developing what could be construed as the “heritage levy” which model is premised along the Tourism Levy informed by my submission above that heritage indeed drives tourism and should not lag behind tourism in terms of benefits or revenue that accrues from this inter-dependency reality.

The fifth area that this conference should also reflect on is the role of Museums in the repatriation of heritage resources, mindful that we still do not have a national policy to address this challenge. The National Heritage Council of South Africa is at its final stages towards finalising a policy position paper on repatriation and has been consulting with stakeholders nationwide and still soliciting further inputs to enrich it before we recommend it to the Minister of Arts and Culture for consideration in line with its policy advisory mandate.

The other area of focus for this conference to ponder upon is the role of museums in the National Liberation Heritage Route project which the National Heritage Council of South Africa is implementing on behalf of the national Department of Arts and Culture. This is aimed at identifying and recording different stories, epochs and sites related to the liberation struggle. In this process, stories of the key contributors to the liberation struggle would emerge and be linked to the identified sites which together would form part of the list for nomination for possible declaration as world heritage sites. As museums, the management of the inventory of the national estate, their roles must become more pronounced hence the need for their involvement in this process.

The emergence of the National Liberation Heritage Route follows a shared vision within the heritage sector, a vision of establishing a network of sites which would be linked together to advance the agenda of national heritage preservation and promotion. This is a very important project for the country in terms of recording our own history without any distortions as has been the case in the past. From this project, we intend coming up with a documentary of unsung heroes and heroines who significantly contributed to the liberation struggles.

Liberation heritage is a major attraction to tourists because it tells a story of the country through its changing phases notably from repressive regimes until democracy. It does so through monuments, historic sites, museums, heritage trails and indeed through the names of public entities, such as streets, bridges and airports. These public artefacts, however, go beyond telling a story, but physical presence on a historic site provides one with an opportunity to travel back in time imagining being there at that moment.

Because of the immense economic potential of heritage tourism, it is therefore crucial that initiatives like the National Liberation Heritage Route are incorporated into the plans of the Museums and interpretation centres countrywide. The National Heritage Council undertook to facilitate the forging of inter-governmental, inter-departmental and national relations for the development of the Route. It further focuses on critical linkages with other relevant institutions throughout the country and in other countries. We intend to use this initiative to recognise and indeed validate to the extent possible all the unsung heroes of the liberation struggle, and the history of our own.

Having successfully piloted the Liberation Heritage Route Project in the Eastern Cape, the NHC has consolidated consultations with the provinces, save for Western Cape, with a view to secure positive expressions of support for the Liberation Heritage Project. Stakeholders in the museums sector have also been engaged through this consultative process and would still need to make further inputs.

With time and the support of South Africans like you, we will extend the National Liberation Heritage route to the SADC Region but before that, we would like to start in the country first and mobilise all stakeholders, particularly families of the freedom fighters and all liberation movement and civil society broadly to contribute to the National Liberation Heritage Route through the consultative and participatory processes that we have started embarking on. Upon its completion and possible listing by UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, we want to believe that heritage tourism and investment in heritage would grow substantially thereby increasing input to economic growth and job creation.

Last but not least, the South African Government is developing the New Growth Path. The national Department of Arts and Culture in line therewith is implementing Legacy Projects and also mooted the creation of an agency that would be responsible for implementation and management of such projects. Liberation Heritage Route is another area which is being developed within the same National Growth Path. It, therefore, becomes compelling that museums find expression in this process and also contribute towards National Growth Path as the main custodian and implementers of government policies on tangible heritage.

What becomes critical for us is that the space for dialogue and diverse expressions which this conference has presented us with should help us make museums inclusive and their programmes in tandem with the New Growth Path should proceed beyond this conference.

I thank you.