

## Small but perfectly (in)formed? Sustainable development of small heritage sites in Iran

Khodadadi, Masood; Pezeshki, Fereshteh; O'Donnell, Hugh

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# SMALL BUT PERFECTLY (IN)FORMED? SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL HERITAGE SITES IN IRAN

## ABSTRACT

World Heritage sites have long been popular among tourists and have been widely studied due to their position in attracting tourists. However, while small heritage sites do not match the popularity of World Heritage Sites, they can have many socio-economic benefits for local communities and help to transfer knowledge of the past to the next generation. Despite these potentials, small heritage sites have been relatively overlooked by researchers. This study, therefore, for the first time, conceptualises the notion of small heritage site and examines the barriers to sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites in the historic city of Shiraz in Iran focusing on the views of various stakeholders and analysing their responses to the challenges they face. Using a social constructionist frame and thematic analysis, data from interviews with 15 heritage tourism stakeholders – selected through purposive sampling – were analysed and challenges were categorized into six themes of *policy and planning*, *knowledge*, *resources*, *desire*, *marketing activities* and *awareness*. The results revealed that the themes of policy and planning were the most commonly referred to issues by the participants. Given the scarcity of studies conducted in the area of small heritage sites, the findings of this study provide constructive suggestions for sustainable heritage tourism development in Iran and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage; small heritage sites; sustainable tourism development; stakeholder theory; Iran tourism; thematic analysis

## 1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has increasingly become part of today's human development decisions (Kapera, 2018) and is attracting attention in various business fields, especially in the tourism industry. The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development only mentioned tourism three times, but it has had a profound effect on tourism policy (Hall, 2019). Sustainable tourism development is a diverse, complex and multi-disciplinary concept (Tosun, 2001). According to Butler (1993, p. 29):

sustainable development in the context of tourism could be taken as tourism which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and well-being of other activities and processes.

Sustainable tourism development has been studied by researchers in various fields of tourism, including rural tourism, ecotourism and especially cultural/heritage tourism. The focus of this study is on cultural/heritage tourism which is defined as “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group or institution” (Silberbergs, 1995, p. 361). Cultural/heritage tourism includes both selection and management of collections, of past and continuing cultural practices, knowledge and life experiences as well as landscapes, historical places, heritage sites and built environments (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016). It also requires a sustainable approach to management and planning. As important elements of cultural/heritage tourism, to be successful heritage sites need to be developed on the basis of sustainable tourism where they are integrated into the reinforcement of opportunities for and the comprehensive management of resources with the goal of maximizing the environmental, economic and social benefits of heritage tourism (World Tourism Organization, 1998).

Heritage sites aim to show the culture of the country in which they are located (Li, Wu & Cai, 2008) and play an essential role in the construction of national identity and international perception of communities (Aremu, 2014). In most countries, the national heritage sites that have been registered by UNESCO as World Heritage Site enjoy significant popularity among tourists and are considered special tourist attractions of those countries (Lin, Chen, Lin & Su, 2019). At the same time, however, there are many national sites in different countries that are not considered World Heritage Sites but still have their own histories, narratives and architectural masterpieces (Grimwade & Carter, 2000). Compared to the World Heritage Sites, these small sites are less investigated in heritage tourism research, and the important issue of sustainable tourism development has rarely been considered. The multiplicity of small heritage sites around the world means that there are also a large number of communities who would be deemed as stakeholders (*ibid.*). The stakeholders' perceptions of and attitudes towards tourism development in these sites determine the context of growth or decline of heritage tourism (Olya, Alipour & Gavilyan, 2018; Tang, Zheng & Ng, 2019).

Since the cradle of human civilization is located in the Middle East, there are numerous heritage sites in this region and, due to the high population rates of Middle Eastern countries, a very significant number of people could benefit from tourism development of these sites. Iran is the current location of what was one of the largest empires ever in history, the Achaemenid Empire, which was founded around 550 BCE (Khodadadi & O'Donnell, 2018).

The famous capital of the Achaemenid Empire was Persepolis, which is currently located in Fars province, Iran. This province is among the best-known heritage tourist destinations of Iran, a country which has around 31,000 national heritage sites, some of them in the city of Shiraz (our study area), in the centre of Fars province. Shiraz, with a history of several thousand years and 622 national heritage sites, is known among tourists for just a few well-known sites, while most of the smaller heritage sites are overlooked and have played very little role in the city's tourism development. At the same time, the city of Shiraz rates second in Iran in terms of unemployment. The income levels of its communities, mostly the residents of the historic district of Shiraz, are also low.

Through a comprehensive review of the relevant literature in relation to heritage sites, sustainable tourism development and stakeholder theory, we were able to identify three main gaps in the literature. First, the majority of studies relating to these topics focus primarily on World Heritage Sites (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016; Li et al., 2008; Olya et al., 2018; Zhong, Sun, Law & Zou, 2019; Zhu, Zhang, Yu & Hu, 2019). Second, with the notable exception of a study focusing on Australia (Grimwade, & Carter, 2000), the notion of small heritage sites has been relatively overlooked in the field of cultural/heritage tourism despite the significant number of such sites located across the globe. The review of the relevant literature shows that whilst small heritage sites have been studied as individual sites, past studies have hardly ever conceptualised them as a phenomenon in its own right. Finally, there is a limited number of studies focusing on stakeholder theory and the Iranian cultural tourism market (Olya et al., 2018; Rasoolimanesh, Taheri, Gannon, Vafaei-Zadeh & Hanifah, 2019). This research, therefore, aims to investigate the sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites by focusing on the case of the historic city of Shiraz, one of the main cultural/heritage destinations in Iran and the region. It intends to shed light on some of the challenges facing sustainable tourism development in small heritage sites in the city from the perspective of the main cultural tourism stakeholders.

In doing so, our research makes two main contributions to the field: (1) it focuses on a relatively under-investigated area of sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites, and (2) considering the lack of studies focusing on Iranian cultural/heritage tourism, this study contributes to the further enrichment of the literature.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Sustainable tourism development**

As a multi-disciplinary subject, sustainable tourism development covers a broad range of areas such as environmental issues, economic development policy, social factors and so on (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019; Tosun, 2001). Sustainable tourism development is defined as “all kinds of tourism developments that make a notable contribution to or, at least, do not contradict the maintenance of the principles of development in an indefinite time without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own needs and desires” (Tosun, 1998, p. 596). The concept of sustainable development has been gaining a great deal of attention over the past few years in the tourism literature due to the tourism industry’s complex economic, environmental, social and cultural impacts (Kapera, 2018). The majority of definitions in relation to sustainable tourism development include terms such as ecology, economics and society (MacKenzie & Gannon, 2019). In keeping with this, in the most general terms possible the development of the tourism sector is expected to rely on making linkages to the principles of sustainable development “by respecting the local community both in a social and an ethical sense” (Kapera, 2018, p. 582), considering the permanence of the natural environment and contributing to the local economy (Kapera, 2018). The implementation of sustainable development principles requires therefore the involvement of a wide range of representatives from stakeholder groups (Byrd, 2007).

Stakeholders are defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Clarkson (1995) categorizes them into primary and secondary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders are those without whose participation the organization is unable to survive and include suppliers, investors, employees and customers. The secondary stakeholders encompasses those who “influence or are influenced by the organization but are not engaged in transactions with it and are not necessary for its survival” (Poudel et al., 2016). In tourism, these are “all parties interested in or affected by tourism development and have the opportunity to influence its management” (Poudel, Nyaupane & Budruk, 2016, p. 3). These stakeholders include residents, tourists, tourism-related service personnel, investors, government officials, entrepreneurs etc. (Zhong et al., 2019). Stakeholders’ values, interests and perceptions merit close consideration given their significant roles in shaping a tourism destination’s development (Imran et al., 2014).

### **2.2 Sustainable tourism development in heritage sites**

Heritage sites are among the most important assets of any historic destination and play a key role in tourism development (Aremu, 2014). The term “heritage site” refers to a place which is presented as unique, rare and has developed over a considerable length of time and its (socially constructed) claim to authenticity is one of the main attractions for tourists (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016). These sites are more “than a leisure or aesthetic experience”, rather their presentation foregrounds a still-relevant linkage to the past for visitors and residents and aims at mobilizing and enhancing a “sense of pride and belonging” among local communities (Goulding & Domic, 2009, p. 99). They therefore play an integral role both in the construction of national identity and in the international perception of societies (Aremu, 2014). Heritage sites present a specific vision of the culture of a country and symbolize it internationally. They

are given the social role of “being” treasures available to all people and, in keeping with this narrative, “should” therefore be accessible to the public and tourists as well as being protected for future generations (Li et al., 2008).

Within this frame, heritage tourism requires a sustainable approach to management and planning. Tourism development plans in these sites have two important consequences which combine both material and economic dimensions. The first is the emphasis on “historical settlement or the originality of the site” and the other is the “canalizing of the unique atmosphere of these sites to larger areas and masses” (Gündüz & Erdem, 2010, p. 5). These are therefore contributing factors that will potentially help the development of tourism within a destination. It is important then that planning for development is conducted in a way that mitigates existing problems and prevents any future negative effects that may arise in the historical, cultural and broader ideological environment (*ibid.*).

### **2.3 Small heritage sites**

As Grimwade & Carter (2000, p. 46) put it, while the “grand heritage sites of the world face the problem of being appreciated to obliteration, the smaller archaeological sites of everyday human existence risk decimation through neglect and lack of an appreciation of the heritage story they can tell”. Smaller heritage sites may be “modest in appearance, but they are still worthy of conservation. They may not attract large numbers of visitors like Stonehenge or the Acropolis but they are capable of providing socio-economic advantages for local communities and transferring knowledge of the past to future generations” (*ibid.*). We categorise “small heritage sites” as those sites which (1) are nationally registered and represent the distinctive character and uniqueness of the region (2) enhance local identities, pride and sense of belonging (3) are unknown outside of their region or less well known internationally, and (4) are capable of providing socio-economic advantages for local communities.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have conceptualised this group as “small heritage sites” and simultaneously investigated the two concepts of small heritage sites and tourism development. Among these Rasoolimanesh et al. (2019) examined differences in the perceptions of and attitudes toward tourism development among residents living in the vicinity of such sites and those living further afield. Iniyani (2015) studied the role of small heritage sites in tourist satisfaction and development while Gündüz & Erdem (2010) investigated the perceived effects of tourism development at such sites.

This study, then, focuses on a largely under-investigated area – small heritage sites that have been nationally registered but are less known by both residents and tourists – particularly from a sustainable development perspective. The basis for effective heritage management lies in developing “a sound, practical, achievable conservation plan” (Grimwade & Carter, 2000, p. 48). This plan should focus on creating opportunities for local communities to work in partnership with heritage professionals in order to set clear development and management goals. The primary objective is therefore to “promote and share small heritage sites with others” (*ibid.*).

### **2.4 Background to heritage sites in Shiraz, Iran**

Iran is a “vast and varied country which offers an abundant mixture of culture, history, heritage and natural attractions that is unique in the region” (Khodadadi, 2016, p. 6). It is located in the Middle East and has an area of 1,648,195 square kilometres. Its location at the “intersection of major Asian, Middle Eastern, and European countries and trade routes has shaped its diverse cultures and history” (Heydari Chianeh, Del Chiappa & Ghasemi, 2018, p. 3).

Iran has a total of 24 listed World Heritage Sites and an additional 56 properties have been submitted to the UNESCO Tentative List (UNESCO, 2020). Within Iran, Fars province is located in the southwest of the country and is known for its rich Persian culture and history. Remnants of the powerful Achaemenid Empire can be found in the province, which include the 518 BCE terraced palace complex in Persepolis and the Pasargadae archaeological site, the latter containing the tomb of Cyrus the Great (Aref, 2011). The city of Shiraz is in the centre of this province and has long been a source of fascination for both domestic and international tourists. With its 622 national heritages sites and rich historical, literary and cultural background, the city is considered one of the top tourist destinations in Iran. However, of these 622 registered national heritages sites, only a very limited number are known to and visited by either domestic or international tourists. The less known sites are, however, incredibly varied in nature and include tombs, schools, mosques, churches, caravanserais, historical houses and museums. This study, therefore, intends to shed light on these undervalued and less-known but important national heritage assets by focusing on the notion of sustainable development of these small heritage sites.

**Table 1: Main Small Heritage Sites in Shiraz**

AH in the Historic Period table below is the Islamic equivalent of AD in the Christian calendar. It stands for Anno Hegirae, Latin for "in the year of the Hijra", and refers to the Prophet Mohammed's migration from Mecca to Madinah in A.D. 622

	<b>Site name</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Historical period</b>	<b>Construction period</b>
1	Khan school	School	Safavid	16th century AD
2	Mansourieh school	School	Timurids	14th century AD
3	Sibawayh tomb	Tomb	The first century AH	7th century AD
4	Sheikh Roozbehan tomb	Tomb	Ilkhanate	13th century AD
5	Abdullah Khafif tomb	Tomb	Samanid	10th century AD
6	Darosalam cemetery	Cemetery	The first century AH	7th century AD
7	Armenian church	Church	Safavid	16th century AD
8	Haft tanan	Garden & Mansion	Zand	18th century AD
9	Meshkinfam museum	Art Museum	Pahlavi	20th century AD
10	Manteghi nejad house	House	Qajar	19th century AD



Figure 1: Small Heritage Sites in Shiraz (Source: Authors)

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Interview guide and procedure

As will have become obvious from some of our earlier comments, this study is located within a social constructionist paradigm (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) where cultural heritage is seen as a “social construct built upon the ideas, notions and perceptions inherently subjective to individual members of a cultural group” (Smith, 2006). While historical places and artefacts have an unmistakable material existence, their promotion to the status of “sites” is the result of complex moves by a range of social actors with differing kinds and levels of resources whose goals seldom (if ever) converge neatly. By choosing a constructionist approach for this research, we were able to examine the complexity of the multiple perceptions of heritage (Khodadadi & O’Donnell, 2018) held by a range of stakeholders and understand better how different actors engage with the field in an attempt to steer tourism development in often competing ways.

For this research, data were collected from two main sources: (1) interviews with stakeholders from public, non-profit, non-governmental (NGO) and private tourism providers in the city of Shiraz, and (2) observations conducted during field trips to Shiraz historical areas. By choosing a diverse set of stakeholders, we were able to examine the various uses of heritage tourism from a variety of different perspectives. This approach, therefore, provided a richer picture of Shiraz as a destination and its heritage (see Table 2). A purposive sampling technique was used to select the required participants and included:

- a) Private tourism actors that offer cultural tours to small heritage sites in the historic district of Shiraz;

- b) Public actors that manage small heritage sites; and
- c) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in developing activities for heritage awareness and promotion in local communities.

In total, 15 participants were interviewed between July and October 2019. Interviews were semi-structured in nature offering the participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important. The sample size was determined by the number essential to achieve “theoretical saturation” (Richards & Munsters, 2010), in other words the point at which no new themes emerged as a result of inputting additional data. Analysis indicated that dimensions and themes became stable at the eleventh interviewee, the last four generating no meaningful new categories. We therefore stopped the recruitment of new participants at this point (Jennings, 2005). The sample size for our study therefore fulfils the criteria for “theoretical saturation”, that is when “a sample of twelve will likely be sufficient” (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006, p. 76) following the non-probabilistic sample sizes for in-depth interviews.

**Table 2: Profile of Participants**

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Position (Business/Organization)</b>
<b>Public</b>	Manager at ICHTO
	Manager at ICHTO
	Manager at ICHTO
	Manager at ICHTO
	Clerk at ICHTO
	Clerk at city council
	Clerk at city council
<b>Private</b>	Tour guide
	Tour guide
	Tour guide
	Manager (tourism agency)
	Manager (tourism agency)
<b>NGO</b>	Local business
	Manager (local heritage association)
	Manager (intangible heritage association)

ICHTO: Iran’s Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization

### 3.2 Data analysis

On average, the interviews lasted nearly an hour. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed and translated from Farsi into English. In order to maintain translation reliability and integrity, we forwarded a sample of translated transcripts for verification to an independent and qualified native Farsi speaker with an excellent command of English. The data were then analysed using a thematic analysis approach and sections of each interview were indexed to a specific code (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2012). As in the case of Nowell et al. (2017, p.5) coding enabled us to “simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data”. During coding, we identified important sections of text and attached labels to index them as they related to a theme in the data. This was achieved through conducting a critical analysis of the interview transcripts (Ross & Saxena, 2019). We focused on the frequency of each idea mentioned by participants. Bryman (2012, p. 580), for instance, argues that “an emphasis on repetition is probably one of the most common criteria for establishing that a pattern within the data warrants being considered a theme”. Extracted codes were then categorized into themes and sub-themes enabling us to form a “thematic tree of the data” (Ross & Saxena, 2019). In our analysis, we also focused on the “triangulation of interview data with field notes” (*ibid.*).



#### 4. Findings and discussion

Findings from the interviews with cultural tourism stakeholders in Shiraz regarding the challenges of sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites are categorized into six main themes. Shiraz’s small heritage sites are mostly located in the historic district of the city, and the challenges that have led to the lack of sustainable development of these sites are tied in various ways to the specific problems and issues of that particular environment. The interviewees’ attention was largely focused on the barriers to tourism development at these sites and the codes extracted from the interviews also confirmed this. The most pressing challenges can be categorized into six main themes: (1) Planning & Policy (2) Knowledge (3) Resources (4) Desire (5) Marketing Activities, and (6) Awareness (see fishbone chart in Figure 2 below).

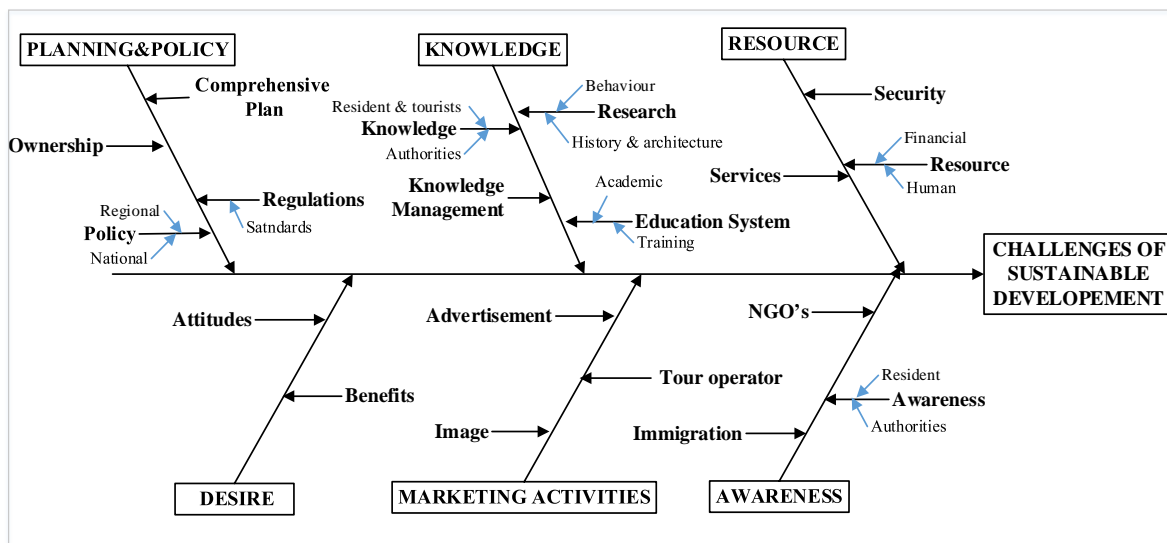


Figure 2: Challenges of Sustainable Tourism Development of Small Heritage Sites (Fishbone analysis)

##### 4.1 Planning & Policy

The theme of planning and policy, which included codes of ownership, policy, comprehensive planning and regulations, counted for almost half of the key research phrases identified. *Ownership* of heritage sites in Shiraz is a complex affair: the most important destination management organization involved is Iran’s Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (henceforth ICHTO) – which has since been replaced by the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage – but several other governmental organizations also have a role to play including the Iranian Organization for Religious Endowments and Charitable Affairs, Shiraz University, the municipality and the Army as well as private ownership. The owners’ disregard for the rules and the lack of coordination between them have led to various obstacles to the sustainable development of tourism in these sites. Based on the analysis of the data, the first and most important obstacle was the lack of coordination between stakeholders and the resulting conflicting views on tourism development (Seyfi, Hall, & Fagnoni, 2019). Successful implementation of the principles of sustainable development requires the participation of a wide range of stakeholders who need to work together and have strong leadership as well as local government support (Kapera, 2018; Byrd, 2007). As Interviewee 7 argued, “spending on the renovation of buildings which don’t belong to ICHTO is a non-refundable expense. It reduces the organization’s motivation to support the maintenance of the heritage sites”. Interviewee 2 also pointed out that “in the religious schools, which are all under the supervision of the Endowments Organization, only the Khan school can be visited, and the rest – despite their many attractions – can’t be visited”.

The *policy* code is another important code included in this theme. The majority of interviewees used terms related to national and regional tourism policies: the scope of national tourism policies; the vagueness of government policy regarding the contribution of tourism (especially international tourism) to the economy; changing tourism policies in line with changing governments (Khodadadi, 2018) and the ambiguous cultural policy of Iranian embassies abroad regarding the introduction of Iran as a new tourist destination were the most important topics raised. Interviewee 7, for example, argued that “We need to define tourism’s share in our economy and plan how to reach that number”. Interviewee 9 similarly argued that “the heritage sites have no relationship with us and our problems. Our problem is the economy, so Persepolis [the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, 550-330 BCE] can bear the burden, but when we [Iran] have oil, why should we care about Persepolis?!”.

There are also a number of issues at the level of regional policy, including failure to adopt policies based on the principles of sustainable development in the historic district of Shiraz, investment policies in this district and failure to adopt appropriate policies to coordinate the organizations affecting the tourism development of small heritage sites. MacKenzie & Gannon (2019) suggested that convergence of the public and private sectors is a requirement for sustainable development. Interviewee 14, for example, mentioned that “the multiplicity of organizations in charge in the area of historical sites has led to the lack of a unified policy”. Interviewee 4 also expressed the view that “at the management level, we often deal with the view that the historic district of Shiraz is problematic in nature and the only solution to its social problems is to eliminate the heritage sites”.

The *planning* code had the greatest importance among the codes constructing the planning and policy theme. The lack of a comprehensive plan for the sustainable development of the historic district, where the majority of small heritage sites are located, was an important issue and its various dimensions were mentioned by different stakeholders. Several dimensions were brought to light by the interviewees: (1) the vision of the historic district and its contribution to each subsystem of the tourism industry (2) how to strengthen the tourism infrastructure (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018) (3) how to preserve the social life of the historic district and how to reinforce the community’s economic and cultural condition (Woo, Kim & Uysal, 2015) (4) how to conserve small heritage sites (Grimwade & Carter, 2000) (5) enhancing the visual appeal (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani, 2016) of the historic district (6) maintaining security (7) increasing the attractiveness of small heritage sites through events-tourism activities, and (8) integrating the sites with the historical/cultural backgrounds of local communities (Dans & González, 2019).

These were the most important dimensions where weaknesses were felt by interviewees. The ICHTO branch in Shiraz, as a representative of the national government, was responsible for formulating this plan. In general, “the two main tasks of the local government are improvement of the living standards of the local community and the management of local resources” (Kapera, 2018, p. 583). Interviewee 15, for instance, argued that “We’re moving daily social life out of the old historic district. What has kept the old historic district going from day one till now was the social life of the people”. Interviewee 6 similarly argued that “too many traditional coffee shops, restaurants and guest houses have been established in the historic district and they will definitely cause problems in the future”. In this regard, Interviewee 3 offered the example of conflict between local vendors and the authorities: “if they’d given some thought to a suitable place for that street vendor and told him to sell the corn there instead of creating this eyesore in front of the tomb of Saadi, his quarrel with the police wouldn’t have happened”.

The code of *regulation* (Ruhanen & Reid, 2014) also belongs to the planning and policy theme. Issues deriving from the lack of comprehensive, clear, appropriate and up-to-date regulations for small heritage sites were the most important ones mentioned by stakeholders. Interviewee 7, for example, argued that “sometimes there’s a complete lack of balance. We’re so strict that investors run away or so lax that the investor damages the site’s structure”. Interviewee 12 similarly told how “here, if someone wants to do so [invest], they become so entangled in administrative bureaucracy and laws that they end up regretting it”. The weakness or lack of standards as part of the regulations was also particularly important for our interviewees. For example, the lack of a standard definition for the use of small heritage sites for residential and catering purposes was considered a significant obstacle. According to Interviewee 4, for instance, “the current standard for the construction of a restaurant states that the kitchen in a restaurant must be 4 meters high. None of the historic houses in Shiraz are that height, so they resort to either lowering the basement or demolishing the roof and making it higher”.

#### **4.2 Knowledge**

*Knowledge* was another important theme. A generalized lack of knowledge, the absence of an effective knowledge management system and the lack of research were the main components of this strand. The interviewees identified the lack of historical, literary and cultural knowledge of the local residents and tourists, and the lack of specialized knowledge of tourism decision makers, as obstacles to tourism development of small heritage sites. Lack of interest among the local communities about their historical and cultural background has limited their knowledge of these important issues over time and, as a result, the value of the heritage assets left by their ancestors is considered very low (Vargas, 2018). There is, therefore, very little effort or interest in conservation or revitalization of these potentially valuable resources. The lack of specialized knowledge among the tourism authorities, particularly in relation to the sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites (Kapera, 2018), has presented significant obstacles to the development of the latter. Interviewee 8, for example, argued that “it’s their history that makes the sites valuable. When we don’t know its value, we don’t protect it. Without teaching the history, the tourist can’t be drawn to a heritage site”. Interviewee 4 similarly argued that “the city’s Tourism Department employs the weakest experts, who can only tell the number of hotels, restaurants, and have very little information about the tourist attractions of Shiraz and how to attract more tourists”.

Over time, a significant amount of largely tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 2009) has been accumulated by those involved in the tourism industry, but due to the lack of an efficient knowledge management system, such valuable knowledge has not become explicit and thereby more widely available. This is especially evident in relation to the knowledge and skills required for the restoration of historical monuments in Shiraz. Interviewee 4, for example, points to this weakness and argued that “we never managed to say to ourselves ‘this year we’ve restored 100 heritage buildings and have organized a workshop educating others about how we did the restoration’”. Cooper defines knowledge management “as a sequential process of capturing, developing, sharing, and leveraging from organisational knowledge” and concludes that knowledge management has not been used much in the context of tourism (Cooper, 2018, p. 511).

Many of the interviewees also identified the lack of scientific *research* on the history and architecture of small heritage sites, as well as on the behaviour of tourists and residents, as major challenges for their sustainable development. Zarei Matin et al. (2012) similarly identified the lack of an effective education and research system as one of the major issues in

Iran's tourism industry. Interviewee 13, for instance, stated that "Shiraz is a city where people are hospitable, but they also have behavioural characteristics that sometimes cause the loss of tourists. However, no scientific study has been done on this so far". Interviewee 6 also expressed the view that "tourists are thirsty for a sense of nostalgia, looking for something new and unique, and these are found in our historical district. But decision makers in our tourism industry are unaware of this motivation and interest among tourists". Interviewee 4, referring to an 18<sup>th</sup> century Persian-language book on the geography and history of Fars province, pointed to the weakness of research on history and argued that "the brochures that are published by Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization are still copies of the contents of the book by Farsnameh Naseri<sup>1</sup>".

### 4.3 Resources

Services, resources and security are the codes which make up the theme of *resources*. This theme includes all the challenges relating to infrastructures, resources and conditions which have led to dissatisfaction among tourists interested in visiting historical sites as well as the lack of development of heritage tourism in the city in general. Weak infrastructures (e.g. sewage disposal systems, electricity distribution systems, waste collection systems, passageways, supermarkets, resting places, restrooms and other amenities) and the lack of adequate street signage are categorized into the code of services. Providing tourism infrastructure/facilities is one of the most important elements in tourism development (Heydari Chianeh et al., 2018; Seyfi et al., 2019). Interviewee 12 argued that "garbage collection is done in a very inappropriate manner and tourists often get lost in the area due to the lack of proper street signage". Interviewee 8 also mentioned that "in historic site neighbourhoods, if tourists need to take a rest, it's difficult to find a bench for them to sit on and if they want to buy a drink or shop, it's difficult to find good quality products".

The theme of resources also includes insufficient and inefficient financial and human resources in the organizations which are in charge of tourism-related activities in the city. The lack of sufficient financial resources has made it almost impossible to routinely maintain and restore the many historical monuments owned by these various organizations. Also, the lack of financial resources of Iran's Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization – as the then most important destination management organization in Shiraz – has led to the lack of sufficient workforce to protect the heritage sites. Similarly, many of the interviewees identified the lack of specialized human resources and efficient management as among the main challenges to the sustainable development of small heritage sites. And yet management knowledge is essential in providing effective planning and organization of all the resources needed to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism development in such sites. Lack of financial and human resources has been identified by various previous studies as one of the main challenges in tourism development (Grimwade & Carter, 2000; Zhong et al., 2019; Khodadadi, 2016). Interviewee 7, for example, argued that "three hundred and sixty hectares of historic district make up one-tenth of the Shiraz Plain and we only have two personnel to protect it!". Interviewee 4 also stated: "I believe that despite our rich historical and natural heritage, we lack leaders who can identify and utilize their potential". Interviewee 1 similarly pointed out that "the entrance fees of the handful of sites that are in the hands of ICHTO are also passed on to the treasury and only a small amount is returned to Fars province".

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<sup>1</sup> The book in question is a Persian-language book on the geography and history of Fars Province in Iran, complete with illustrations and maps, by Hasan Fasā'ī (1821-1898).

*Security* was also identified as an important code, which is not surprising. Hall et al., for instance, argue that “tourism is irrevocably bound up with the concept of security. Tourist behaviour and, consequently, destinations, are deeply affected by perceptions of security and the management of safety, security and risk (Hall et al., 2004, p. 2). Most of the interviewees, especially those from the private sector, identified the lack of a sense of security in the historical district of Shiraz as a major obstacle to attracting tourists to small heritage sites. The safety of tourists is a fundamental issue that is given special attention in all tourist destinations (Woo et al., 2015). Interviewee 3 argued that “the communities who live in the historic district create insecurity for tourists, for example by stealing their belongings or often by behaving inappropriately, such as by mocking tourists”. Interviewee 5 also pointed out how “culturization [meaning the process of adapting to one's cultural environment; the acquisition of values and behaviour compatible with the society of which one is a member] in the historical district of other famous tourist destinations in Iran has made tourists feel more secure in those cities compared to the historical district of Shiraz”, while Interviewee 8 discussed this issue in the context of investment: “one of the deterrents for people to invest in the historical district is that they feel insecure, they’re afraid that the audience [customers] won’t come”.

#### **4.4 Desire**

The desire to further the conservation and utilization of small heritage sites is another theme identified as part of the data analysed. The attitude of government and the benefits to the local communities are the codes that make up this theme. An attitude is an “enduring organization of motivational, emotional, perceptual, and cognitive processes with respect to some aspect of our environment” (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010, p. 393). Since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, the government’s attitude must be viewed through the lens of Islamic ideology. The Islamic revolution moved Iran away from its status as a Monarchy and into the position it still occupies today – that of an Islamic Republic. This recent history, covering the colliding forces of monarchy, religion and government, adds layers of complexity when exploring attitudes towards cultural heritage sites which hark back to previous dynasties. Managing these layers has been either negligent or, at worst, purposefully destructive of the heritage of the past and everything that works to bind people to that past. Heydari et al. (2018) believe that lack of social pluralism and the extension of state ideology are significant obstacles to tourism development in Iran. Seyfi et al. (2019, p. 13) similarly argue that “the differences in values and priorities among stakeholders, a major source of disagreement, may create conflict in heritage conservation and management strategies. Referring to the religious/political divide, Interviewee 7, for example, argued that “there are two different opinions in our country. Our religious leaders and political leaders must come to a unified view of tourism and conservation of heritage sites”. Interviewee 1 stated: “among the stakeholders there are those who are not only ignorant of the destruction of heritage but are also happy about it”. Interviewee 2 also argued that “we shouldn’t take a materialistic view of cultural heritage and simply ignore a small heritage site because it generates less income. These [small heritage sites] are the history and culture of a nation, and if their income is modest, they must be supported”.

Lack of enjoyment of the benefits deriving from tourism development by local communities leads to their unwillingness to conserve small heritage sites and to a lack of motivation for optimal utilization of these sites. The support of local communities for the sustainable development of tourism is a crucial factor (Olya et al., 2018) for all destinations. This support depends on their expectation of economic gain and a positive cost-benefit ratio (Woo et al., 2015). Interviewee 3 similarly argued that “our efforts won’t succeed when the local community disagrees with the presence of tourists and tourism and don’t see any benefits from

tourism”. Interviewee 12 added that “many of these people are unemployed but don’t know that tourism can provide them with a job”.

#### **4.5 Marketing activities**

Another theme derived from the data is *marketing* activities. The poor performance of tour operators, weak advertising and the undesirable image of Shiraz and its historical district make up this code. Hughes & Carlsen (2010), for instance, argue that effective marketing strategies are a critical success factor for cultural tourism development. Tour operators in the capital city (Tehran) mainly determine the travel itinerary of international visitors to Iran (Khodadadi & O’Donnell, 2018). The way in which these itineraries are designed allows very limited time in the city of Shiraz. As a result, tourists are only able to visit very few of the main well-known tourist sites in the city and as a result smaller heritage sites are ignored. Similarly, particular sites are preselected by the tour operators as part of the travel itinerary for each city and, again, the result in relation to smaller heritage sites is the same. Interviewee 5, for example, stated that “the next problem is the amount of time the tourist has. As long as the itinerary is determined by Tehran’s main agencies we won’t achieve anything. Tour guides also don’t introduce tourists to small heritage sites for various reasons such as lack of awareness, lack of emphasis by their agencies and heritage organizations” (this last comment refers in the context of this response to ICHTO). Interviewee 5 stated that “tourist agencies must inform the tourist about small heritage sites before they come to Shiraz”.

The weakness of public sector performance in promoting the city’s heritage attractions is very evident. Every year, very significant sums of money are spent on promoting tourist destinations around the world. This has led to the efficient positioning of specific destinations in the minds of tourists which will ultimately determine travel decisions (Eshetu, 2019). Introducing Shiraz as a cultural, historical and literary destination for international visitors has rarely happened. Lack of sufficient promotional efforts is also seen as one of the key factors in the failure of cultural tourism development (Ho & Mc Kercher, 2004; Hughes & Carlsen, 2010). Interviewee 6, for instance, argued that “our research in 2011-2012 showed that there wasn’t even a single sentence about or picture of the city on any of the prestigious tourism websites in the world”. Interviewee 1 similarly stated that “no organization has a plan for lesser-known heritage sites in Shiraz. Instead of developing a proper branding strategy, we’re just generating brand logos”.

Finally, the *image* of the city that has been made available to tourists in recent years has not been a desirable one. The creation of an image of the destination mobilizing both cognitive and affective dimensions is a crucial factor in the process of attracting tourists. Its cognitive dimension is related to the knowledge and beliefs of tourists about a destination, whereas its affective dimension relates to the tourist’s feelings towards the destination (Pezeshki et al., 2019). Interviewee 11, for instance, argued that “in their [foreign tourists’] minds Shiraz is a poor, very traditional city that isn’t clean”. Interviewee 3 similarly stated that “seeing unpleasant scenes in the historic district of Shiraz makes tour guides avoid taking tourists to this area”.

#### **4.6 Awareness**

*Stakeholder awareness, migration* and *NGOs* are the codes relating to the theme of awareness. The analysis of the data revealed that local communities and authorities are largely unaware of the importance of small heritage sites, their potential spiritual value, and the importance of the sustainable management and development of these cultural heritage assets. The importance of a well-informed local community in winning support for heritage tourism development has been shown in previous research (Vargas, 2018; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2019). Interviewee 9, for example, stated that, as regards the lack of awareness of those in charge, “heritage managers

have difficulty in understanding the value of small heritage sites”. Interviewee 2 also argued that “there may have been a deliberate wish to ignore heritage sites in the past, but now I feel that the owners just aren’t aware. If the owners had any awareness, they wouldn’t allow this degradation to happen”. Interviewee 10 stated that “one of our business tourists asked us: ‘Why do you sell oil, you can get the annual budget of your country from Shiraz’”.

Migration is a pervasive phenomenon in the city of Shiraz that has greatly affected the communities living in the historical district of the city (Aref, 2011). This has affected the way in which these communities interact with small heritage sites located in the area. In general, immigrants, especially those who were economically and socially disadvantaged at the time of migration, do not have much information about the cultural and historical background of the area. They also show little motivation to obtain such information. This lack of awareness paves the way for neglecting the cultural heritage of the destination and even damaging it. Dutt, Harvey & Shaw (2017), for example, demonstrated that there is a direct relationship between community attachment to tourism development and the length of time spent living in the community. Interviewee 9 argued that:

in the last hundred years we’ve faced the issue of immigration more than in any other historical period in Fars province. The immigrants living in the historic district didn’t have any information about the heritage monuments. The lack of awareness of immigrants about the value of what they have in their possession hinders their efforts to maintain and make optimal use of these cultural heritage resources.

In the last two decades, several NGOs related to cultural/historical heritage have been established in Shiraz, their mission being to strengthen the awareness of the local communities and create demands for improvements. Wearing et al. (2005, p.427), for instance, argue that NGOs “often engage in tourism with the aim of achieving socially appropriate tourism, which is defined as having community support and involving the host community in decision making”. It is evident that the current NGOs in the city have failed to perform their main function and have not been able to strengthen heritage tourism in the city. Interviewee 10, for instance, argued that:

we [the NGO’s] played a key role in promoting the historical district in the past, but today we’ve lost sight of that aim. We must put aside our differences and unite but I doubt this’ll happen. This is because NGO’s have become individualistic and have ignored the aim, which is working for the common good.

## **5. Conclusion**

As French historian and discourse theorist Michel Foucault once wrote, “[i]n this ‘world of ideas’ ... the future always anticipates itself, whereas the past is constantly shifting” (1972, p. 166). As our study has shown, the importance of the “world of ideas” cannot be underestimated: indeed no workable understanding of the many realities we inhabit is possible without a clear grasp of how forward-looking ideas are generated and socially circulated, in the case of our study the body of ideas relating to the possible future attainment of the sustainable management and development of cultural heritage assets in Shiraz, ideas rehearsed mostly pessimistically by our interviewees. However, our study has also shown that the sheer plasticity of the past in relation to heritage sites is at the same time the malleable and contested product of a range of

forces operating in constant tension with each other, including in our case political, economic and educational forces, with highly material results in the here and now.

The main focus of our interviewees' responses was by some margin the economic field, hardly surprising since their primary locus of operation was the small business field of the city of Shiraz. The political field was reserved for their views on the higher-level and more distant power-play arena in which the small heritage sites operate, in particular that relating to the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, the target of a considerable amount of criticism in relation to what was seen as its lack of understanding of the local context and the challenges this posed. The educational field emerged primarily in response to specific questions raised by us in relation to the level and forms of knowledge made available (or not) to tourists and to immigrants into the area, though even here the educational field had a strong economic framing. The multiple challenges identified by our interviewees presented a small heritage tourism management scenario in Shiraz elements of which – specifically our interviewees – clearly feel deeply about caring for the past but find their attempts to manage the situation stymied at every turn by a pervasive lack of care in relation to visitors, residents and their own ambitions for a more fully functioning sector.

The findings of this study have therefore shed new light on some of the most important challenges for sustainable development of small heritage sites in Shiraz and across Iran in general, in particular weak policy and planning by public stakeholders. This issue was repeatedly highlighted in the interviews. In addition, the public stakeholders' lack of specialized knowledge of cultural tourism potentials and how to use them to their advantage, as well as the lack of knowledge of the local population with regards to historical and cultural background, was another major challenge in this area.

In addition to the theoretical contributions relating both to social constructionism as an applied philosophical and analytic frame, and to the conceptualisation of the notion of small heritage sites, this study also offers a number of practical contributions. (1) It highlights the need for transparent, comprehensive and systematic tourism policies to aid the sustainable development of cultural/heritage attractions in the city and the country in general. (2) It shows that provincial government stakeholders should systematically prevent the misuse of resources and destruction of the city's historical heritage: the findings also show that this can be achieved by prioritizing the development of strategic policies and plans for the province and the historic district of Shiraz, where the majority of the small heritage sites are located. (3) Private stakeholders must also use their resources to raise public awareness and knowledge of the importance and value of small heritage sites and should also be actively engaging in the development of strategic plans and policies. (4) The private sector, along with the NGO's, should be encouraged to begin a (most probably protracted) process of negotiation for a fundamental change in the attitude of Iranian religious and political leaders towards the value and importance of small-scale heritage assets and subsequently a greater desire on the part of the governing bodies to remove the barriers to sustainable tourism development of small heritage sites. (5) The study offers insights which, with the relevant adaptations to local conditions, can be at least partly generalized to the study of other small heritage sites.

## **6. Limitations and possibilities for future research**

This study is not without its limitations. Public stakeholders were very reluctant to participate in the interviews. Accessing some of them also proved to be very challenging due to their other numerous commitments which slowed down the interview process considerably. During the



interviews, the interviewees also focused at times on the overall barriers to tourism development in the city rather than the small heritage sites. The interviewer therefore had to constantly return them to the main topic of the interview. It was also very time-consuming for the interviewer to conduct individual interviews at the interviewee's chosen location. The lack of reliable statistical sources relating to economic parameters and nationally registered historical heritage sites in Iran also proved to be challenging.

Initially, one of the main aims of this study was to identify opportunities deriving from the sustainable development of small heritage sites. However, due to the specific circumstances in Iran (among them the current economic crisis), the limited conditions of possibility meant that our interviewees could hardly address the non-economic opportunities and limited information was obtained in relation to these. Therefore, the researchers decided to abandon this goal and focus only on the challenges. Even so, among the opportunities identified by the interviewees, two themes of *enhanced cultural responsibility* and *enrichment of the database for small heritage sites* were most prominent and are worth mentioning here. Based on the data, the interviewees hoped that the creation and implementation of sustainable tourism development plans could lead to increased local communities' willingness to preserve the tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, by law, investors in Iran are required to conduct adequate documentation of the sites' architectural plans and historical background. Therefore, the presence of more investors could lead to better documentation of these sites, the enrichment of the database and ultimately a worthy gift to future generations.

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