

the question as: Who assumes the right to confer empowerment? Who is actually being empowered? This question highlights the need to identify what is meant by community, and also to recognize that conservation fundamentally relies on an identified community that is willing to support the preservation of the heritage. Four main themes arose:

1. Difficulties of identifying ‘the community’;
2. Terminology that is used (e.g. ‘stakeholder’ vs. ‘interest groups’, etc.);
3. How the various groups are to be involved;
4. Underlying motives for seeking community engagement: does it really alter decision-making?

Community engagement and shared decision-making have become recognized trends in international, regional and local governance. Still, there is a distinct lack of clarity in the use of terms such as ‘community’ and what is meant exactly by ‘engagement’. In heritage conservation this can often result in failure to identify and include interest groups beyond academics and heritage professionals in a shared decision-making process. For a more inclusive approach to developing conservation projects, a necessary first step is to consciously identify the various parties who should be involved in the project and their respective cultural heritage values.

Knowing the cultural, political and social contexts is crucial to identifying the various roles in decision-making, including that of conservation professionals, since it is important to be able to analyze and work with all legitimate and representative communities. Here the development of improved consultation and communication methodologies (e.g. for urban stakeholders or large numbers of decision-makers) would be useful, supported by a critical analysis of the concept of ‘community’ with the help of other social sciences (e.g. sociology, anthropology).

Another factor is understanding the rationale for seeking community involvement in conservation decision-making. The motives are often varied and non-transparent, for example to obtain increased knowledge of values, or legitimization of an action with community support. But to what extent are those working within heritage conservation prepared to change or adapt their approaches when the community does not agree with current conservation philosophy? Is it only when the community is in accord that their opinions are valued?

As one participant observed:

“There has in the past been a view in conservation of ‘Why do we need to engage communities? We should just get on with serving them!’ The truth is that we need them more than they need us; they give us relevance. We have been privileged in the past to determine what is important, but now we need communities on our side to justify decisions.”