

Conference Paper

Exploitation of Local Assets: Prerequisites for Success

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Abstract

Natural and Cultural Heritage, including intangible cultural heritage, are precious assets for local development in many districts and local communities which could be significantly beneficial for them. In many cases, Local Authorities use funding programs from the State, European Union or other sources for investments to exploit such assets. Such public investments for exploitation activities are planned and incorporate description of parameters of sustainability, feasibility analysis and many times master plans, place branding plans, marketing plans and business plans. In many cases, especially in small and medium size local authorities, but not only, it is found out that such approach remains theoretical and although it could be realistic, it is distant from the actual performance. In this paper, we examine a case where a local authority did proceed with such an investment to exploit a specific mixed natural and cultural asset and we determine factors that are prerequisites for the successful and sustainable tourism development related to that asset. Success factors include a holistic approach, the devotion of appropriate people in the management and marketing of the asset, a road map linked to the deployment of the short and medium term marketing plan, the selection of the appropriate indicators and methodology of measuring. Furthermore, we do examine the importance of the involvement of all stakeholders, without exclusions.

Keywords: local development, sustainability, cultural and natural heritage

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1. Introduction

Globalization and severe changes in the economies, lead in many cases shift from one model of development to new approaches for local and regional development, while in other cases they lead to approaches for increase of the tourism sector through investments in natural and cultural heritage. Such investments at first glance seem to be logical, even in cases with limited related expertise at local level. After many examples of such implemented investments in hard and soft activities, such as renovations

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of cultural heritage monuments or creation of trails and tourism packages, as they are called, creation of networks and others, it is well proven that public funding for tourism should be wisely spend for activities that are beneficial for the local economies and lead to feasible results and local development with sustainability.

Over the last decades, European Union provides funding for Organizations –Local and Regional Authorities, Ephorates of Antiquities, Associations, Non-Governmental Organizations, Universities and others– so as to highlight and promote natural and cultural heritage as key factor for local development. Actually, this is the result of the examination and analysis of the needs, priorities and strategic approach for the distinctive programs and the regions, as negotiated and planned, which leads to identification of the objectives of each funding program, for each programming period. The viability of the results, including the assessment of the benefits to expenditure for each intervention, is rarely considered as a guide for the future. In many cases, we can find projects with positive or even impressive results but with minimum actual added value in the local economy and tourism sector. This wouldn't mean that such projects shouldn't be planned and implemented. It would mean that the exploitation plan was not the appropriate in terms of value, involved human and other assets, networking, participation of the stakeholders and holistic approach within the overall local development strategy. Thus, the problem is the combination of initiatives and projects with viable realistic exploitation plans for each and every public investment related to the development of tourism based on cultural and natural assets. Such combination could lead to tourism development and increase the local income and “to ensure that the destination retains and enhances the distinctive attributes that makes it attractive to beneficial tourism” [1].

In this work, we examine the case of a Municipality in Greece (The name of the Municipality is available for interested parties, upon request) that applied with a complete folder for funding by European structural funds in 2014 for an investment in rehabilitation of an ancient path and ancient technical work in combination with the extension of the path in an attractive natural environment. The project proposal was approved and the implementation was completed the next year. We define the factors of success, the role of the stakeholders, the sustainability measures and the approach for viable exploitation. We finally consider the value for money of the investment as a tourist attraction. Although the approach of this work is related to the feasibility of interventions in field of cultural and natural assets, we reject the idea that all interventions in culture and nature should be linked directly to the tourism industry and have a considerable 'payback period' and economic impact. There are and there should be

investments in culture and nature, not directly linked to tourism. For those investments the approach for sustainability is quite different than the management of exploited assets linked to tourism.

With our present work, by demonstrating the approach for a specific case of cultural investment, we contribute to the important question 'and now what?', set after the end of the funding for cultural projects, the subsequent questions for the viability of those projects and their added value for the local economy, by pointing out some important elements that should be part of an exploitation plan for such investments.

2. Exploitation of Local Assets: Prerequisites for Success

It is very common reading and listening politicians referring to public investments for growth, in the field of culture and nature, where such assets are valuable. However in most cases, especially in small and medium size Local Authorities, but not only, such claims and references do not rely on comprehensive approach, analysis and use of special tools assisting making decisions and choices. The existence of many funding programs for investments in culture and nature worsens the problem.

The vast majority of Programs co-funding interventions for local and regional development in Greece and all over Europe contain specific objectives for the "Conserving, protecting, promoting and developing natural and cultural heritage" [2-5]. The reason for the selection of this investment priority and the related objectives are: the richness of cultural and natural heritage assets in the intervention areas that in most cases are not exploited yet or not exploited to a certain potential, the trends of increment of tourism and the need for preservation of those assets to confront threats from human activities, climate change, etc. [2, 3, 5]. Furthermore, the changes in the global economy, the reduced industrial character of Europe due to the raise of the economies in the developing countries, the extremely tough competition between companies in the same industry, exerts pressure to decision makers to deal with strategic decisions for development, new forms of labor-relations, life-long learning and continues changes, deployment of policies confronting the unemployment. Although it could be considered as a simple approach, developing the local assets in each area, is a complicated procedure that requires the involvement of all stakeholders, changes in mentality and planning culture, continues assessment and review of the implemented policies at all levels. We accept for stakeholders the definition "any group or individual who is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" [6]. In most of the cases, it is not the evaluation of the assets and the planning followed with selected funding

programs, where Local Authorities apply for finance, but the existence of the programs and respective calls for proposals that are considered as good opportunity for receiving investment funds. Although in Greece it is provisioned to have an approved Municipal Operational Program and based on that apply for finance, there are alternative options such as 'Municipal Council decision for application with commitment to revise the operational program accordingly'.

The main problem related to exploitable cultural and/or natural assets and their linkage to tourism is the viable management of the asset with sustainability, in order to meet the overall objective of the investment and have positive impact in the local growth.

2.1. Literature review

Funding of the cultural sector is identified by three main sources: the public –central and local authorities–, the market and the non-profit sector, with the public remaining the largest sponsor of culture activities in comparison to other sectors funded [7].

There are quite differences in the magnitude of public funding among European Countries. According to data for years 2006–2012, spending of central government expenditure on culture per capita varies between 29.30 EURO –Bulgaria– and 32.04EURO –Greece– to 273.00EURO –Austria– and 300.00EURO –Denmark– [8]. The public budget in most of the EU countries shrunk in the first years of crises – 2010–2011– with the highest budget reduction in Italy by -14.08 percent and Greece by -18.04 percent, while in others it was raised like in France by +5.31 percent and Finland by +18.63 percent [9]. Especially in era of economic crisis, making decisions in European Union in most of the times is not a procedure based on a vision or strategy for growth, but on strategy to eliminate pure financial data of the general governments.

Cultural and natural assets can be precious input for development strategies. "In the context of modern attitudes to economic development, cultural heritage is accepted as both an engine, as well as a catalyst of economic and social development" [10]. However, policy makers should make decisions based on priorities linked to culture and nature as part of human history and requirements for preservation and protection of those precious elements, while at the same time they should prioritize the public investments related to projects for exploitation of cultural and natural assets to benefit the local communities in a way that sustainability would be an unconditional objective. Therefore it would be important input for the policy makers and the stakeholders, within a participatory process to have available data and preliminary performance

assessments, to evaluate in advance, potential investments. It should be unconditional to evaluate cultural investments as the evaluation quantifies the economic, the social and other effects, while it also assists in understanding non-monetary values in monetary terms [11].

Wise decisions for appropriate investments in assets of elements of culture and nature which are exploitable, followed by holistic approach and determination to succeed, could have positive results in local economy, reduction of unemployment, reduction of poverty, increase of the local Gross Domestic Product and reduction of brain drain, especially in the era of crisis, through the development of new businesses and expansion of existing ones.

There are good practices proving that cultural investments could be the source for economic growth, having a comprehensive plan that would correlate the funding with all related aspects in culture. A good example is Lille in France which set a cultural project with enormous tangible and intangible investments in Culture –‘Lille 2004’– taking advantage of the European Capital of Culture [12]. The impact was extremely positive with 2500 cultural events and 9 million visitors in 2004 only and with 96 percent of the visitors willing to recommend the city for visiting [12]. Jobs in cultural activities increased by 22 percent but the approach continued with the project ‘Lille 3000’ to take further steps for cultural development and the momentum was kept.

Cultural development plans and investments should indisputably involve the public sector, the private sector and the other stakeholders. For Ontario Government in Canada, which has prioritized the Municipal cultural planning,

“Successful municipalities will be those that offer an appealing and attractive community, that are diverse and welcoming, that have interesting public spaces, that celebrate public art and urban design, and that understand linking these elements are the magnet to attract people and talent. Cultural assets contribute to the overall attractiveness and vitality of a community, which in turn increases its competitiveness” [13].

When planning special cultural plans, involving all stakeholders, the principals and recommendations should be also part of the respective municipal operation programs/development strategies as in the example of the Municipal Cultural Plan for the Township of Springwater [13]. During preparation of such cultural plan, the cultural mapping and geo-coding/geo-reference of the assets of culture and nature, is among the first outcomes and out of that, assets to invest in with priority, will be selected

based on a series of criteria. In Figure 1 in Appendix 2, we provide as example of cultural mapping [13].

2.2. The case of the investment in a Greek municipality

The cultural investment –The ‘project’– of the Greek Municipality –‘Municipality’–1, included:

1. Hard activities –rehabilitation of an ancient technical work and an ancient path and connection with a path in nature–;
2. Documentation and Interpretation of the Elements of Natural and Cultural Environment of the Eco-path;
3. Promotion and Awareness Events, Materials and Other Activities;
4. Archaeological Works and Research;
5. Project Management and
6. Exploitation Guide for the Investment [14].

The hard activities –works– were concluded in accordance with the timeline and so were the Documentation and Interpretation of Elements of Culture and Nature. A series of promotion activities were implemented also as per the schedule, raising awareness in the local community and a sufficient number of visitors from the community participated. The last part of the ‘project’, the exploitation guide, which will be briefly described in this document, was planned to be the connection tool with the future development to attract more tourists and also to give alternative options for the visitors who wouldn’t visit the city for that particular asset.

2.2.1. Some prioritized planning measures

Any initiative or investment in cultural and natural assets, should be part of a general strategic plan, followed by a master plan, determining the priorities among optional interventions. The strategic plan has to be prepared through participatory procedures, involving all stakeholders, not because this is a trend, but because the stakeholders are those who will be involved in the development and actual exploitation. The stakeholders should be active players from the planning period.

The strategic approach should take into consideration the inner environment and the general environment of the area, thus, SWOT analysis (SWOT analysis –of internal and external factors—: Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses, the Opportunities and the Threats), PESTEL analysis (PESTEL analysis –of macro forces—: Analysis of the Political Factors, Economic Factors, Social Factors, Technological Factors, Environmental Factors and Legal Factors) and analysis of the five forces of competition of Porter [16, 17] should be conducted and provide precious data for the stakeholders and the decision makers to plan optimal [15].

The ‘project’ was planned by the ‘Municipality’ only after limited consultation, although it was in compliance with the general objectives for the local development in the area. That approach had its negative consequences as the stakeholders, including the organization that would be in charge for the operation, did not embrace the asset, despite its potential, as such was assessed during the promotion activities with the local community.

2.2.2. The exploitation approach

Prior to the exploitation approach, consultation about the ‘project’ and its potential occurred. However that did not have extended results after 2 meetings. Probably, the lack of participatory procedures before the investment played a role for that. The consultation results, although not extensive, were taken into consideration for the development of the added value [18, 19].

The exploitation approach for the ‘project’ was based on the following [15]:

1. the assessment of the current situation;
2. identification of the opportunities and special target groups;
3. quality measures;
4. assessment and calculation of the carrying capacity in order to protect the asset and sustain its use;
5. existence of similar assets that could be connected to the new structure;
6. justification of the synergies, methods and tools of actual connections with other tourism attractions in the area;
7. identification and selection of specific measurable direct and indirect indicators for the investment and the market;

8. awareness guidance in Greece and abroad for generic and special audience/target groups;
9. documentation of a flexible road map for the exploitation of the asset with viability and contribution to the local economy;
10. guidance for the selection of the highlighting and promotion of the asset.

2.2.3. The outcome of the approach of the 'project' exploitation

The study did lead to the factors that should be the prerequisites for the promotion of the new investment. Those prerequisite factors were [18]:

1. collection of all available development assets linked to nature and culture, under the coordination of one nominated Managerial Organization, appointed by the 'Municipality';
2. isolated exploitation of some assets should be avoided, as any possible results would be limited compared to the existing potential, with limited impact on the local economy;
3. the increment of visits and the use of the new asset should be regulated with certain specification and requirements to avoid negative effects for the environment and the city image;
4. the 'project' should be exploited in attracting trekking tourism but also other forms of tourism and access for the inhabitants for refreshment and recreation;
5. promotion to existing visitors to other cultural attractions of the area of intervention;
6. Existence of a unified framework of assets, categorized –nature, trekking, culture, etc.–. Detailed documentation of the assets and short versions of the descriptions, including terms such as mapping, routes, trail length, altitude differences in the trails, difficulty degree, points of interest, support / meeting points, etc.;
7. preparation of a unified development plan by the nominated Managerial Organization, for the assets, under its coordination and responsibility for review and intermediate assessments. The Organization should have also the responsibility for the promotion and the preservation/maintenance of the assets;

8. coverage of the needs of the visitors –relax and meeting points, refreshment, toilets, guidance signs, trail safety, etc.–;
9. preparation of the ‘regulation of operation’ and ‘specifications of use’ of the assets;
10. preparation of an emergency management plan for the visitors;
11. preparation of risk management plan for the assets;
12. preparation of a management plan for the assets, incorporating the plans for emergencies for the visitors and risks for the assets;
13. ensure the involvement of the stakeholders –Municipal Authority, Tourism Professionals, etc.– in planning and in implementation level;
14. incorporation of the new asset in the priorities of the local tourism development of the Municipal Operational Program with specific actions;
15. participation in networks and networking with area that develop similar activities in Greece and abroad. Networking should be active and have specific objectives;
16. ensure of funding for support of promotion activities, preservation, cleaning and highlighting of the new asset and other related assets;
17. continues training and capacity building of the executives of the Management Organization, who are dedicated to the promotion of the new asset and the other similar assets;
18. plans for future development including integration of all trekking trails, inclusion in the National network of eco-paths and connection with the European eco-path E6 [20], in order to benefit from the trekking market [21-24];
19. establishment of a system of direct and indirect measurable indicators [28] (A set of twenty seven indicators in total was suggested. 3 indicators from the European Tourism Indicator System –ETIS– [29], 1 indicator from ETIS [29] adjusted by Tsoukalidis [28], twenty two indicators adjusted by Tsoukalidis [28] and 1 indicator suggested by a stakeholder. The description included the note for the final plan to choose the optimal subset of indicators, after a testing period, and other important information for the application of the system of indicators).

The ‘project’ should develop active synergies with other existing structures that have interest for tourism. The Management Organization should achieve the continues and essential cooperation of its executives and the staff working in the different

departments and structures or have specific roles, have regular communication and exchange of opinions and ideas with recording, analysis and conclusions, in order to manage gaining the optimal synergies with all related assets under its coordination [18]. At the same time, the decision makers that appoint the employees and executives in important positions related to tourism development should make their choices with criteria that prioritize their knowledge, their interests, the quality of their character, the positive communication skills and the passion to achieve their goals.

During the deployment of the plan for the added value, a set of twenty five tools and methods were proposed to be developed within the unified framework for the promotion of the network of cultural and nature assets of the area of intervention.

A separate approach to the communication plan did focus on specific target groups and proposed a set of twenty six tools to promote the investment and the other related assets, with the mix of 4P –Product, Place, Promotion, Price– [19]. All activities and sets of tools should be part of the continues cooperation of all stakeholders and the management organization should take the appropriate measures to ensure the participation on the stakeholders, even if there would be some of them having different approach or conflicts between them. ‘Educating’ the stakeholders to communicate and debate is an essential part of the venture. The communication plan should be implemented in parallel with the plan for the networking with other Local Authorities with similar assets and organizations in the field of tourism, culture and nature, in Greece and abroad and the networking with the stakeholders.

The importance of the participation of the tourism stakeholders, when planning and implementing a strategy, is justified by many researchers. Without the support of the stakeholders, the organizations would cease to exist [26]. However, it has to clearly mentioned that prior to anything, a stakeholders’ analysis should be conducted to assess the importance –positive or negative– of each stakeholder and that not everything that is promoted by stakeholders would become part of the strategy, although they would definitely contribute through the debate to the optimization of the produced policies.

Even after all parameters would be set, such as nomination of the management organization, passionate executives and staff, unified framework of similar cultural and nature assets, stakeholders’ group and constant communication, planning of strategy and development of tools and methods including provisions for milestones and reviews, a key point would be to set the road map to achieve the objectives set.

A road map is a schematic of what we want to achieve with the object –the ‘project’ in the case elaborated in this study– and when [27]. The road map determines the

goal and approaches the future, with the time gaining a primary role in the planning. A good road map includes the procedures and incorporates the organizational capabilities that are required by the organization, including the human resources, the processes and the technology. Furthermore, the road map can be useful for the diffusion of the information to the rest of the human resources of the entire Municipal Authority and its legal persons and structures, which could enforce the development plan [25]. It would also allow the continuous evaluation of the progress achieved and the early reactions in case of problems in the implementation of the development plan. Therefore, the existence of a road map for the exploitation of the new asset, would be supplementary to the development plan and in compliance with the Municipal Operational Program, contributing to the achievement of the vision of the 'Municipality'. It should be mentioned that the road map is not a substitute for a good tool, but only a supplementary tool, which is "not something to have" but a necessity, although it cannot be measured easily in pure economic terms such as Return on Investment (ROI), etc. [27].

The road map for the 'project' would be precious if it would have had preliminary made the steps:

1. knowing the objectives and the path, including the perception of the visitors of the 'project' –their needs for the experience, their relation with the district and their opinion, the points that impressed them—;
2. understanding the objectives and the path with recording of the strategic approach in correlation with the vision of the 'Municipality', determining of the way to success and measuring of the results;
3. awareness of the weaknesses and ex ante assessment of the capacity in infrastructure, staff and other resources and determination of the requirements for achieving the objectives –processes, human resources, capacities, technologies – and
4. planning by incorporation of the findings during the preliminary work, the approach to the stakeholders and setting of characteristics of the service and technologies needed, with prioritization.

A set of sixteen steps, including subsets for some of those steps, with flexibility to be adopted to the strict regulations of the public services sector was suggested to the 'Municipality'[25]. The suggested approach was separated in two parts:

1. the preparation work and

2. the actions as shown in Table 1 in Appendix 1 (The diagram includes for each semester, the respective assessment).

For the 'project', the timeline of five years was selected to be suggested for preparation and deployment of the road map, due to the character of the investment, while in the fifth year a special session of final evaluation was provisioned to provide the general review and new setting out of objectives and milestones. It was proposed to be split in implementation semesters with intermediate assessments with the contribution of the stakeholders during every review.

2.2.4. Implementation of the exploitation plan

An important question when public funds are invested for cultural projects or projects in nature, which aim to become attractions and contribute directly and/or indirectly to the local economy, is whether the planned objectives were achieved or not. That question is followed by two other questions in case of failure, 'Why?' and 'What should we do next?'

In the case study of the 'Municipality', more than forty eight months after the works were completed and almost thirty two months after the exploitation plan was approved, it can clearly be documented that there was a failure to achieve the objectives and there are reasons for that. The main reasons for such failure are:

1. no unified framework for the similar assets was set;
2. the management organization was not nominated;
3. the people in the General Municipal Organization working in the field of tourism promotion were not dedicated to the promotion of the investment;
4. no actual plan was ever prepared, despite the proposals and guidance;
5. there was no network among stakeholders.

Many more reasons could be identified, however they would mainly be consequences of the primary ones mentioned above.

As the parameter of time is significant in investments and marketing of new products and services, should the 'Municipality' wish to implement the exploitation plan, it should:

1. analyze the situation of failure;

2. revise and update the contents of the tools in accordance with the new data and
3. make strategic decisions prior to any attempt, in order to avoid the reasons of past failure.

3. Conclusion

Public funding is important for investments and development by exploitation of local cultural and natural assets with terms of sustainability and can contribute significantly to the local economies. Especially in the era of crisis it is much more important to use wisely the funds that are planned for development projects. Project proposals, especially ones related to culture and nature, involving public funding invested by public legal entities, in order to be approved for receiving Grants:

1. should have had included more detailed design;
2. should have had demonstrated reliability;
3. should have had actual stakeholders' involvement and pre-existing participatory processes;
4. should have had conducted ex-ante preliminary exploitation plans including draft assessments, communication and networking plans, draft promotion plan and feasibility study and
5. should have had a draft road map.

The above should be accompanied with the commitment of the applicant Organization to perform as planned.

Our approach had the advantage of a recent studied case that reflects the most common result of similar cases, with rare exceptions. It presented some key-elements and success factors for investments in culture and nature, related to tourism development, which should be unavoidable part of the overall investment plan.

As the Organization of our case study did not perform key-actions for the exploitation of the investment in discussion, there was limitation to understanding other gaps that could occur, in case there was exploitation of the 'project'. We could not measure weaknesses that should be improved or aspects that could have been less significant than initially estimated.

The full set of the exploitation approach would be beneficial for districts where there are cultural and natural assets suitable for sustainable development and Local Authorities willing to invest for tourism development with high managerial standards.

It would be interesting in applying the exploitation approach in other investments in cultural and/or natural assets, suitable for exploitation. In that case it would be advisable to include the preliminary soft actions as described above in this chapter and follow up with the fine tools and methods, implement, assess the performance and measure the results.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Diagram setting the steps for the road map setting.

(Diagram would had been be more analytical including details by the manager, once the project team would had been appointed and would had specialized the action plan and the communication and network plan as described)

TABLE 1: Setting of a road map (Tsoukalidis, 2015d).

	YEAR 1		YEAR 2		YEAR 3		YEAR 4		YEAR 5		
	Semester1	Semester2	Semester1	Semester2	Semester1	Semester2	Semester1	Semester2	Semester1	Semester2	
Preparation - Planning with the Project Team	One 'Portfolio' of assets of nature and culture of the 'Municipality'										
	Appointment of the Managing Entity	Appointment of the Managing Person									
	Determination of the required human resources										
	Determination of the cost										
	Hierarchy of other prerequisites										
	Determination of objectives										
		Determination of the human resources and positioning									
	Establishment of the project team										
	Determination of actions and activities										
	Planning of the timetable and distribution of the resources										
Activities and Actions		Activation of the communication plan									
		Implementation of the communication plan									
		Commencement of the networking plan									
		Implementation of networking plan									
		Preparation of concept notes for co-funded projects									
			Planning, submission, approval, subsidy contract, implementation of co-funded projects, with priority in the framework of cooperation with partners								
Assessment	Regular Meetings of the Project Team in each semester										
		Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Interim assessment	Final assessment
		Review	Review	Review	Review	Review	Review	Review	Review	Review	

Appendix 2

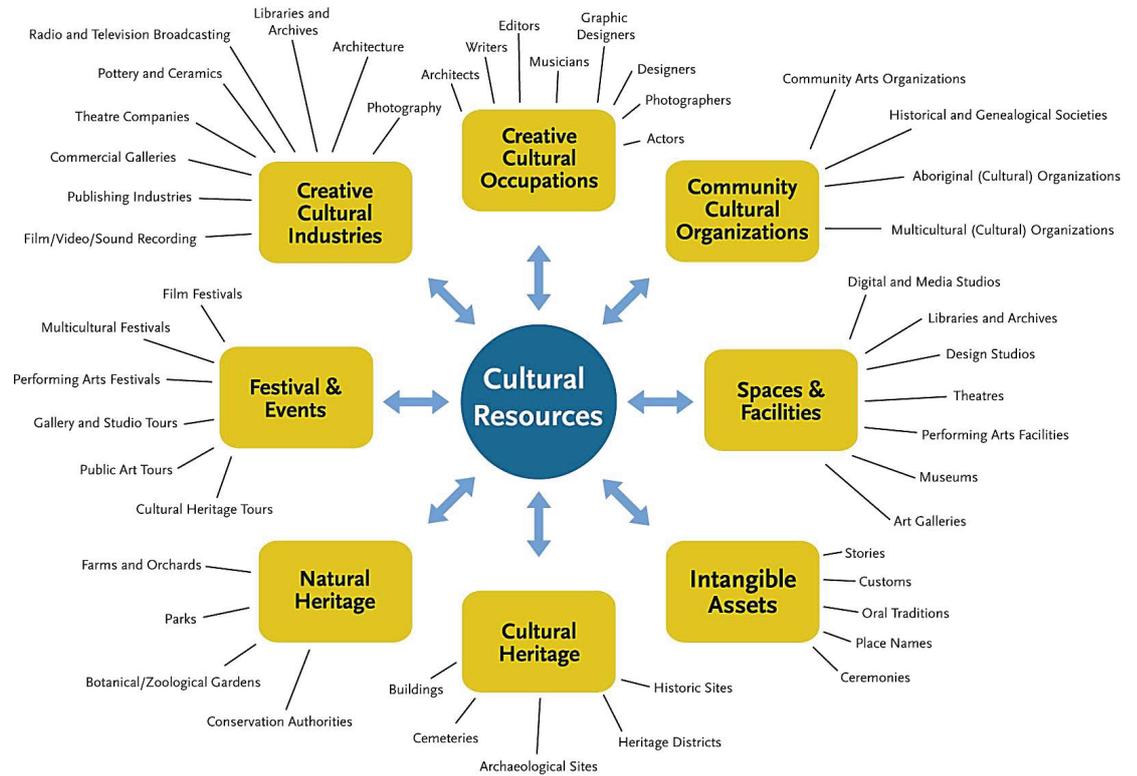


Figure 1: Indicative Diagram of cultural mapping (Cultural resources). (Millier Dickinson Blais, 2012. Fig 3).

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