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1. Definitions of Key Terms

Stakeholder refers to any individual, group, or entity with an interest in a heritage place, including those who may be affected by or can affect its management decisions. Stakeholders encompass a wide range of actors, including government agencies, site managers, tourism businesses, local communities, NGOs, and tourists.

Rights holder extends beyond mere interest to include those with legal or customary rights to heritage. These individuals or communities often hold inherent entitlements based on historical connection, traditional ownership, or spiritual significance. Indigenous peoples are frequently recognised as rights holders with specific claims to territories and heritage sites . Rights holders possess inalienable rights that are personal, non-transferable, and non-waivable.

People-centered heritage management positions communities and individuals at the core of heritage processes. Unlike traditional approaches that prioritise material objects or expert values, this approach emphasizes heritage as a social practice where community well-being and values drive management decisions. Heritage becomes a process through which people perceive, understand, and reshape their world. The focus shifts from preserving objects to sustaining community connections and identities.

Capacity building involves strengthening the knowledge, abilities, and skills of individuals, improving institutional structures, and empowering decision-makers to achieve sustainable heritage management outcomes. UNESCO defines it as the ability of individuals, organizations, and societies to perform functions, solve problems, and achieve objectives sustainably. It operates at three inter-related levels: individual, institutional, and societal.

2. Analysis of Heritage Site Management Approach

Having visited the historic city of Cartagena, Colombia, I analyse its management approach against the three frameworks.

Cartagena's management exhibits characteristics of an expert-centered approach, as professionals historically determined which colonial structures merited preservation. The city's UNESCO designation was driven by expert assessments of architectural value, with minimal community consultation. However, this dominance has been challenged by grassroots movements demanding recognition of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous heritage.

The site demonstrates stronger alignment with a values-based approach, as management increasingly acknowledges diverse stakeholder values. The Burra Charter's emphasis on understanding cultural significance before intervention is reflected in Cartagena's efforts to balance conservation with tourism development. However, critics note that values are often still determined by experts rather than communities.

Most significantly, Cartagena is transitioning toward a people-centered approach. Local communities now participate in heritage interpretation through the "Cartagena Insurgente" initiative, which amplifies marginalized narratives. UNESCO's recognition of Indigenous peoples as both stakeholders and rights holders has influenced this shift. The approach aligns with living heritage principles, recognising communities as true custodians whose well-being drives heritage processes.

Nevertheless, challenges persist in fully empowering communities. While people-centered principles are acknowledged, decision-making power remains concentrated among institutional actors. Effective people-centered management requires genuine community empowerment, not merely consultation. Cartagena illustrates the complexity of transitioning between approaches, where expert knowledge, value assessment, and community participation must coexist.

References

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