

Press Release

Global Civil Society: Urgent Action Needed to Safeguard UNESCO's World Heritage The World Heritage Watch Network submits a Reform Agenda in its "Potsdam Papers"

The World Heritage needs urgent reform, more funds, and more rights for civil society and indigenous peoples, says the global network of World Heritage Watch. On occasion of tomorrow's 50th Anniversary of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, civil society activists from around the world have submitted a comprehensive reform agenda for the international body.

Under the name of The Potsdam Papers, the World Heritage Watch Network makes extensive suggestions on twelve key subjects from Politicization to Financing, Sustainable Development and Tourism how to make the World Heritage fit for its next 50 years.

"The World Heritage Convention, certainly the most popular international agreement in the UN system, has become a victim of its own success", says Stephan Doempke who has coordinated the work and drafted most of the papers before they were discussed and finalized in worldwide online meetings. "The prestige and the revenue from tourism have become so big that countries vie to have ever more sites on the World Heritage List without however doing enough to safeguard them. Now the list is becoming too long to be managed. At the same time, the signatories of the Convention care ever less about the strict requirements for protection of the sites, and there is little UNESCO can do about it. There are too many gaps and loopholes in their rules, and there is too much geo-politics instead of genuine care for our heritage."

Not surprisingly, overtourism is one of the biggest threats the group lists. "I was shocked to see in the Operational Guidelines of the Convention that countries aren't even obliged to submit tourism plans when they nominate a site for inscription in the List", explains Doempke, "and even some long-standing UNESCO officials weren't even aware of it. This must be addressed with urgency. And they have a lot of nice policy papers on sustainable development, climate change mitigation and the like, but when it comes to implementing them on the site, not much happens."

Doempke argues that the protection of cultural and natural heritage must become a subject of the international development agenda in order to safeguard them in the long term. "The donor countries must put their purse where their mouth is. Local people have to bear most of the restrictions that necessarily come with world heritage status of their site, and only if they can receive some of the economic benefits also they will be ready to protect it. The international community inscribes the sites in the World Heritage List, and by making them a heritage of all humanity we all take over part of the responsibility for them."

[Download the full Potsdam Papers, including an Executive Summary, here.](#)

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