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# The Role of Local Communities and Well-Being in UNESCO World Heritage Site Conservation: An Analysis of the Operational Guidelines, 1994–2019

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**Abstract:** UNESCO's world heritage program aims to protect sites of cultural and natural heritage worldwide. Issues of local communities and well-being have been given increasing attention by heritage conservation scholars, but a systemic review of UNESCO guidelines has not been performed. Here, we examine the evolution of the 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention,' documents representing the heritage conservation policies of UNESCO over the period 1994–2019. Using keyword analysis and document analysis, the findings show evidence of an increasing emphasis on local communities, growing primarily since 2005. However, the theme of well-being only first emerged in the operational guidelines in 2019. Political, economic, and environmental challenges idiosyncratic to specific places often complicate the role of local communities and well-being in heritage conservation priorities. Future research should investigate the potential implementation and implications of these changes for the guidelines at specific UNESCO world heritage sites.

**Keywords:** UNESCO; operational guidelines; local communities; well-being; world heritage sites

## 1. Introduction

Since its establishment in 1945, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its governing bodies, the General Assembly of States Parties to the World Heritage Convention and the World Heritage Committee, have worked to protect the world's diverse world heritage sites. As of 2021, the total number of enlisted heritage sites is 1121, including cultural, natural, and mixed categories, registered in 167 countries [1]. The protection and management of registered sites depends on the mutual collaboration and reconciliation of multiple stakeholders. Among those stakeholders, the active participation of the local communities residing nearby or within world heritage sites is key for properly conserving the enlisted heritage places [2–4].

The participation of local residents has received growing attention from heritage researchers, primarily focusing on the designation and implementation of heritage sites [5–7]. Negative effects on local communities in the process of heritage management have been documented in the literature [8,9]. Recently, some scholars studying heritage sites maintain that it is necessary to include local communities into the sites' operation and management, which is both beneficial to conserving heritage sites and to the sustainability of local communities [10–12]. The scholars argue that natural and cultural conservation efforts through the world heritage program should be considered in collaboration with local residents because world heritage sites also serve as important resources and livelihoods in local residents' daily lives [8].

While there is growing attention to incorporating local people and communities into the established procedure for implementing UNESCO heritage sites, well-being, which is a key element of a heritage site's impact on local communities, has garnered little

attention from heritage studies and other pertinent scholarship [13]. Broadly identified, the notion of well-being incorporates physical, mental, economic, and social aspects of health [14] (p.240) [13,15], and can be understood to include facets of thinking, feeling, and imagining that affect health [16]. A handful of studies have emphasized the role of well-being in heritage sites, especially in the context of community-based conservation as a way of examining the status and condition of concerned local people [13,15,17]. However, this prior research is primarily centered around internal networks of local communities and does not explicitly address the external relations of those local communities with government agencies and with relevant international organizations, such as UNESCO, by which local communities' traditional ways of life have been impacted. We argue here that heritage conservation should be considered along with local communities' well-being, of which a critical component is the relationship between local communities and other stakeholders (including UNESCO and its governing bodies) in heritage site management.

The present research seeks to address this lacuna in the literature by examining how the positioning of local communities is reflected in UNESCO heritage site management and conservation guidelines. By utilizing keyword analysis and document analysis of official UNESCO publications, we investigate how attention to, acknowledgement of, and issues of local communities and their well-being have been identified and changed over the past two decades. Examining these changes will contribute to an understanding of evolving UNESCO heritage conservation objectives and will provide guidance for scholars and policy-makers regarding heritage conservation, indigenous populations, and their well-being.

## 2. Literature Review

Much research related to UNESCO and heritage conservation has focused on interrogating registered natural and cultural sites in specific regions and countries [17–20], or on the ways in which the conservation efforts of UNESCO and World Heritage Committee have contributed to economic development, mainly through natural or cultural tourism development [21–24]. Research concerning local communities' involvement associated with UNESCO world heritage has only started to emerge in the past decade [25–27]. We consider three categories of the ways in which researchers have addressed the role of local communities in heritage conservation: (1) the influence of heritage sites on local communities; (2) conflicts and cooperation between local communities and other agents concerning heritage sites; and (3) the significant roles of local communities in heritage conservation. Regarding the first category, researchers examine how heritage site registration and operation have positively or negatively influenced local people's lives [9,27]. For instance, in the registration processes of marine parks in Western Australia, local governments catalyzed coastal fishery prohibitions by extending reserve areas to protect the coastal environment, which damaged the traditional livelihoods of local communities dependent on a small-scale fishery [9].

The second category addresses conflicts and cooperation between local communities and other stakeholders such as visitors, different levels of governments, and international organizations [28–31]. For example, Zhang and colleagues [31] articulate the multiple layers of conflicts regarding heritage tourism in China. With the increase of the Chinese tourism industry through heritage site conservation, an encounter of local cultural, social, and economic values with the external values of the conservation program catalyzed conflicts regarding new governmental regulations and guidelines, which intermixed with the conflicts of interests among multiple stakeholders (e.g., governments, local raft workers, tourism agency, and tourists) in Wuyi Mountain, China [31]. Another study touches on how tourists visiting a certain heritage site will result in the degradation of existing local peoples' economic, social, and environmental conditions because, in many developing countries, heritage tourism is often funded by international organizations or supported by foreign capital with a top-down development model [30]. Thus, local communities' concerns become relegated and compromised for the sake of tourism development [30].

This research also suggests that this tension can be resolved when different actors are identified and 'take responsibility for governance and development of the designated area' [30] (p.44).

The third category incorporates the role of local communities in the sustainability of heritage site conservation [11,32–34]. Deacon and Smeets [34], for example, investigate in what manner local people are involved with the operations of UNESCO heritage sites, including nomination, registration, and management. This research indicates that local communities are often neglected in terms of decision-making processes [34]. By recognizing that the notion of 'community' was largely neglected in the criteria of early heritage sites' nomination and management processes, Rössler [33] also takes into account that community involvement should be prioritized in order to sustain a desirable heritage conservation.

Highlighted as one of the key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (Goal 3: Good health and well-being for people), well-being has recently received increasing attention in heritage conservation, especially concerning the well-being of those who live in developing countries [35,36]. Although many heritage sites are located in such countries, there have been few attempts to engage with issues of well-being among heritage studies researchers [15]. A handful of research on well-being and heritage conservation can be classified into research focusing on visitors (i.e., tourists) and on local communities. Regarding the former, researchers have found that visitors benefit from heritage conservation sites, including from physical exercises and mental restoration [37–39]. On the other hand, the latter has shown negative consequences of heritage site conservation on local communities' well-being. For example, Su and colleagues [40,41] pay attention to the resettlement of local communities as a result of the protection of heritage areas. The authors argue that resettlement plans often lack sufficient and concrete strategies, including the provision of health care facilities at the new settlement, which can negatively affect the long-term well-being of the local residents of the Yinhuwan village, in Mount Sanqingshan National Park, China [40,41]. Other researchers noted that local residents' subjective well-being is associated with their socio-economic status, indicating that people with high income through heritage tourism are more likely to show positive subjective well-being regarding tourism development [42].

Research on Australian heritage sites and Aboriginal Australians' well-being highlights the mental and cognitive connections between Aborigines and the cultural values of spiritual heritage sites [15,43–46]. In analogous research on the domestic heritage site in the East Anglia region of England, Power and colleagues [13] explored the social well-being of local participants toward local community-based heritage conservation, such as personal enrichment, social learning, and satisfaction from conservation-related activities. These findings suggest that heritage sites and their management have the potential to provide positive effects for the well-being of local communities, by enhancing the level of their physical and spiritual satisfaction.

## 3. Data and Methods

To investigate the extent to which the issue of local communities and their well-being is recognized by UNESCO, we examine the 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention' (referred to hereafter as the 'operational guidelines'), that have been published by UNESCO on an occasional basis since 1977. The operational guidelines specify the overall procedure regarding the designation, management, monitoring, and support of the UNESCO world heritage program [47]. In the present research, the operational guidelines are used for gathering data on the recognition of local communities in heritage site conservation as well as local community well-being in the operation of the world heritage program. For the analysis, the operational guidelines for 1994–2019 (a total of 14 documents) were downloaded from the UNESCO website and examined. Offering fundamental protocols for the overall heritage maintenance, the operational guidelines reflect UNESCO's policy changes through updates to related concepts, knowledge, and experiences [47]. The transformation of the operational guidelines reflects the results of the

negotiations taking place during the sessions of the World Heritage Committee. The operational guidelines have been analyzed previously in multiple academic papers, presenting pivotal stances of UNESCO on heritage site management [27,33], but not with a focus on local communities or well-being, as in the present research. Using these operational guidelines, we conduct a keyword analysis and a document analysis to demonstrate how the interest of UNESCO in the themes of local community and well-being has changed over time. While a quick overview of the changes of the operational guidelines is available in a separate report of the sessions of the World Heritage Committee, it does not provide a detailed explanation of what has been updated in which contexts. Thus, a systemic examination of the operational guidelines will complement this gap by identifying more details.

Stemming from the field of linguistics, keyword analysis has been identified as a mixed quantitative and qualitative analytical technique [48–50]. A quantitative step involves collecting the number of words indicating a particular theme [51]. In the qualitative step, a researcher identifies each world within the context of the main themes [50]. After this two-step verification is completed, the counted words are used for investigating the annual transitions in the themes of the operational guidelines from 1994 to 2019; the more frequently specific words are used, the greater the assumed importance of these words in the document [52].

The process of selecting keywords is based in part on the 'World Heritage POLICY COMPENDIUM' webpage, a portion of which represents the policies regarding community engagement: 6.1 Participation of local communities and other stakeholders, 6.2 Human rights and right-based approach, 6.3 Gender equality, 6.4 Indigenous people, 6.5 Youth, and 6.6 Fostering of peace and security. Among the policies, 'local communities,' 'human rights,' and 'indigenous people' served as keywords that indicate a focus on local communities. Regarding the selection of 'human rights,' we referred to literature invoking the interactions of human rights and well-being (health) where well-being is considered a necessary component to facilitate human rights [53–55], through which we also include 'well-being' as one of keywords for the analysis. Six other keywords are reviewed and identified based on the pertinent literature, including 'local community' and 'local communities' [27,34], 'traditional societies' and 'indigenous societies' [56], and 'local people' and 'local population' [27,34]. These eight keywords are employed to undertake a word count for each by browsing the number of words in the PDF formats of the papers published in 1997–2019 (a total of 12 documents), and manually browsing the papers published in 1977–1996 (a total of 11 documents), since tracking electronic versions word by word were not available for these years.

As a complement to the keyword analysis, we also interpret the text of the operational guidelines in light of the selected keywords to place them in context [57], to provide a more detailed and nuanced understanding of UNESCO's attention to local communities and their well-being. Furthermore, we examine a series of other related official documents: decision papers adopted in the ordinary sessions of the World Heritage Committee from 1977 to 2019 (a total of 43 documents), focusing on the context of the keywords, since the operational guidelines mirror the decisions adopted in these annual sessions [33]. In our examination of the decision papers, we interrogate where the selected keywords of the operational guidelines occur in the decision papers and in which contexts, such as the background topic within which the keyword appears, the reason why the keyword is mentioned, and the progress noted in advancing the UNESCO's objectives. This comparative review of these various sources assists in identifying pertinent narratives that are bound up with the changes in the operational guidelines.

## 4. Results

The operational guidelines from 1977 to 1992 (a total of eight documents) do not include any of the keywords. Figure 1 displays the annual frequency of the keywords in the operational guidelines from 1994 to 2019. The emergence of the keywords begins

with the appearance of the term 'local people' in the 1994 document, which serves as the first acknowledgment of the role of local people in the maintenance of heritage sites (The authors highlighted and indented the keywords inside the quotations below.). However, the context of the 1994 term, shown below, suggests that local concerns are considered secondary to the committee's decision-making processes. In the 1996 operational guidelines, the corresponding part became revised with a separate article 14 that eliminates the clause specifying the secondary status of local communities' participation in the nomination process, reflecting the decision of the 19th session of the World Heritage Committee (1995) that endorses the inclusion of 'cultural properties in the world heritage list' [58] (p. 74).

... ... Participation of ***local people*** in the nomination process is essential to make them feel a shared responsibility with the State Party in the maintenance of the site, but should not prejudice future decision-making by the committee [59]. (part of Article 14, 1994)

14. Participation of ***local people*** in the nomination process is essential to make them feel a shared responsibility with the State Party in the maintenance of the site [60]. (Article 14, 1996)
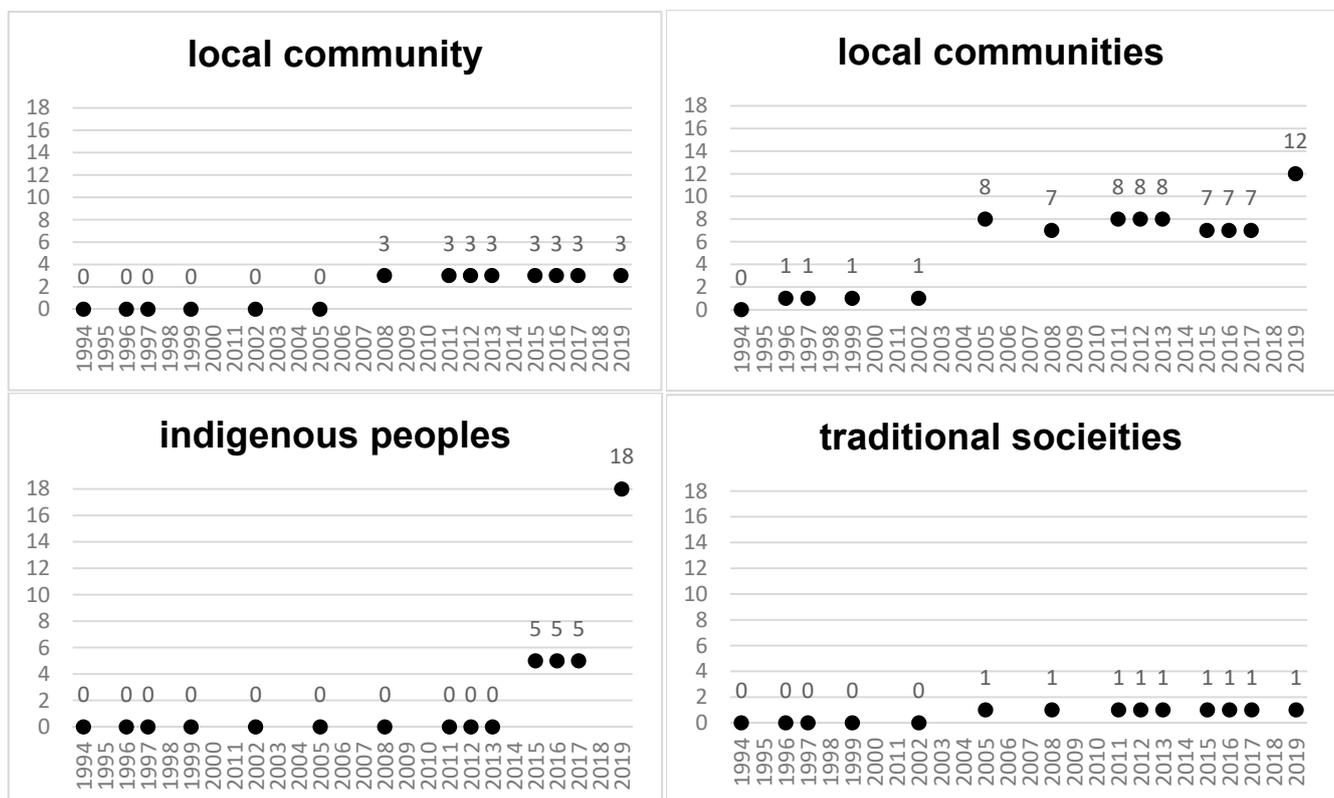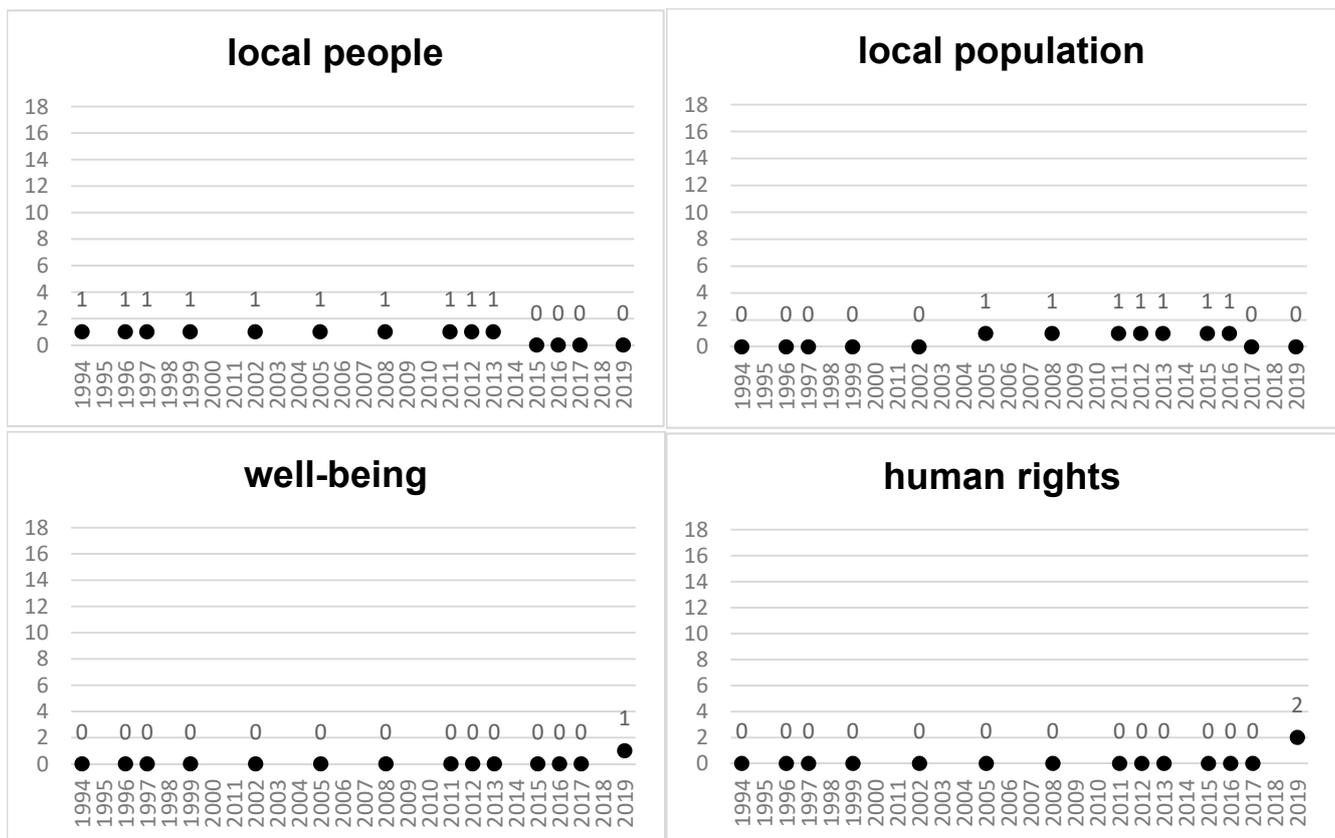


**Figure 1.** *Cont.*

**Figure 1.** The frequency of the keywords in the operational guidelines (1994–2019); Data Source: [59–72].

The term 'local communities' appears for the first time in the 1996 operational guidelines, emphasizing that the approval of local communities, as well as the collaboration with those communities, are important in the nomination of heritage places.

> . . . . . . It is important that due attention be paid to the full range of values represented in the landscape, both cultural and natural. The nominations should be prepared in collaboration with and the full approval of *local communities* [60]. (Article 41, 1996)

The frequency of keywords concerning the theme of local communities did not increase further until the 2005 publication. The frequency of the term 'local communities' surges to eight occurrences in 2005 (see Figure 1). In addition, the terms 'traditional societies' and 'local population' also make an appearance that same year (see Figure 1).

> Partners in the protection and conservation of World Heritage can be those individuals and other stakeholders, especially *local communities*, governmental, nongovernmental and private organizations and owners who have an interest and involvement in the conservation and management of a World Heritage property [64]. (Article 40, 2005)

> . . . . . . Human activities, including those of *traditional societies* and *local communities*, often occur in natural areas. These activities may be consistent with the outstanding universal value of the area where they are ecologically sustainable [64]. (Article 90, 2005)

While the increased appearance of the keywords in 2005 is meaningful in demonstrating the increasing attention given to local communities, their context within the operational guidelines suggests that the emphasis is on the role and responsibility of local communities in conserving UNESCO heritage sites sustainably, rather than the impact of heritage

conservation on local communities or the challenges to local communities' livelihoods or well-being presented by heritage conservation.

This argument is supported by the decision papers between 1996 and 2004. These decision papers indicate recurrent revision processes of the operational guidelines that are finally adopted in the 2005 decision paper. For example, the 1999 decision paper shows a growing reference to local communities and their participation in heritage management, as cultural heritage lists have increased more than ever before. The Director-General of UNESCO, in the address of the 1999 session of the World Heritage Committee, also emphasized the role of local communities as 'the true custodians of the World Heritage sites' [73] (p.74). Several parts of the 2000 decision paper also provide broader contexts in which political negotiations for revising the operational guidelines played out, partly recognizing global institutions' special attention to indigenous people and their communities by accepting the recommendations of the World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts (WHIPCOE) [74] (p.96), and from the Principle 22 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and Chapter 26 of Agenda 21 [74] (p.98).

The keyword count remains relatively constant between 2005 and 2015, at which time the term 'indigenous peoples' first emerges. Compared with the passages from 2005 in Article 40 and 90, above, the passages from 2015 reveal the development of a more sophisticated appreciation of local communities. While the concern about local communities continues to be centered around conserving heritage sites, as it was in the 2005 document, Article 123 suggests that local (indigenous) communities have gained more concrete and indispensable roles in the operation of heritage sites, through the use of 'prior and informed consent, public consultations, and hearings,' as compared to prior years' documents.

> Partners in the protection and conservation of World Heritage can be those individuals and other stakeholders, especially *local communities, indigenous peoples*, governmental, non-governmental and private organizations and owners who have an interest and involvement in the conservation and management of a World Heritage property [69]. (Article 40, 2015)

> Participation in the nomination process of *local communities, indigenous peoples*, governmental, non-governmental and private organizations and other stakeholders is essential to enable them to have a shared responsibility with the State Party in the maintenance of the property. States Parties are encouraged to prepare nominations with the widest possible participation of stakeholders and to demonstrate, as appropriate, that the free, prior and informed consent of *indigenous peoples* has been obtained, through, inter alia making the nominations publicly available in appropriate languages and public consultations and hearings [69]. (Article 123, 2015)

The decision papers during this period also present a growing recognition of indigenous peoples and their communities. According to the 2012 decision paper, as more natural sites with indigenous residents become enlisted, the references to indigenous people accordingly become more noticeable [75]. With respect to the revision of the operational guidelines, there were several meetings dedicated to discussing how to deal with indigenous peoples [76] (p.7). The 2014 decision paper also shows that the World Heritage Committee will continue to focus on local communities and indigenous peoples, as they are part of 'the eight key dimensions of sustainable development' [77] (p.7). This transition of the World Heritage Committee to local communities and indigenous peoples contributes to adopting a number revisions of the operational guidelines in the 2015 decision paper entailing the emphasis on those keywords [78] (p.243).

The keyword count increases abruptly again in the 2019 operational guidelines, where the frequency of the terms 'local communities' and 'indigenous people' increases to 12 and 18, respectively. Importantly, this year also marks the first use of the terms 'well-being' and 'human rights,' which suggests a greater concern over the impact of the conservation of

natural or cultural heritage sites on local communities. For example, in the Article 214bis (2019) [72], below, there is a greater recognition of the economic benefits and opportunities offered to local communities associated with protected sites.

> . . . . . . The programmes may be based on innovation and local entrepreneurship, and aimed in particular at medium/small/micro scale levels, to promote sustainable and inclusive economic benefits for ***local communities*** and ***indigenous peoples*** and to identify and promote opportunities for public and private investment in sustainable development projects, including those that promote use of local materials and resources and foster local cultural and creative industries and safeguarding intangible heritage associated with World Heritage properties [72]. (Article 214bis, 2019)

Moreover, Article 215 (2019) [72] indicates that local communities' knowledge and traditional ways of resolving conflicts are also regarded as legitimate and valuable, contributing to 'the conservation and management of World Heritage properties.'

> . . . . . . States Parties are encouraged to support scientific studies and research methodologies, including traditional and indigenous knowledge held by ***local communities*** and ***indigenous peoples***, with all necessary consent. Such studies and research are aimed at demonstrating the contribution that the conservation and management of World Heritage properties, their buffer zones and wider setting make to sustainable development, such as in conflict prevention and resolution, including, where relevant, by drawing on traditional ways of dispute resolution that may exist within communities [72]. (Article 215, 2019)

Although the emergence of both terms, 'well-being' and 'human rights' incorporate multiple stakeholders, and are not limited to local communities. This conspicuous shift toward an emphasis on well-being and human rights suggests that the impacts of conservation efforts on local communities receive more attention from UNESCO than they have before.

> States Parties are encouraged to mainstream into their programmes and activities related to the World Heritage Convention the principles of the relevant policies adopted by the World Heritage Committee, the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention and the UNESCO Governing Bodies, such as the Policy Document for the Integration of a Sustainable Development Perspective into the Processes of the World Heritage Convention and the UNESCO policy on engaging with ***indigenous peoples***, as well as other related policies and documents, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and international ***human rights*** standards [72]. (Article 14bis, 2019)

> . . . . . . Properties may support a variety of ongoing and proposed uses that are ecologically and culturally sustainable and which may enhance the quality of life and ***well-being*** of communities concerned . . . . . . [72]. (Article 119, 2019)

> In recognizing the diversity mentioned above, common elements of an effective management system could include: b) a respect for diversity, equity, gender equality and ***human rights*** and the use of inclusive and participatory planning and stakeholder consultation processes; [72]. (Article 111b, 2019)

The keyword well-being appears for the first time in the 2011 decision paper, but its context is not related to local communities, but to the general context of 'the economic and social well-being of all the inhabitants' [14] (p. 240, p. 242). Although well-being has been invoked when deciding to inscribe certain sites on the World Heritage Lists ([79] (p. 208); [80] (p. 169)), its articulation is limited in the recent decision papers. In terms of human rights, the decision papers alternatively use descriptions such as 'their rights to maintain sustainable traditional use of resources' [78] (p. 64), and 'user access rights, cultural rights' [79] (p. 149) to express the specific dimensions of human rights. The decision papers also show that the recent increased attention to human rights is a

reflection of global concerns raised by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [78] (p. 158) and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Right (ACHPR) [78] (p. 67).

In summary, the UNESCO's operational guidelines display an increasing transition to the theme of local communities, with 2005, 2015, and 2019 standing out as important years when key phrases related to local communities' emerged or increased in number. Importantly, however, much of the attention on local communities has been focused on the role of such communities in heritage conservation practice and management, as opposed to the potential impacts of conservation on local communities. This emphasis remained until 2019, when issues of well-being and human rights began to receive attention in the operation guidelines.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings from the operational guidelines over two decades illustrate that UNESCO and the World Heritage Committee have increasingly recognized that local people and their communities are to be included in the overall initiatives and implementations of UNESCO heritage sites. The rise in the number of keywords referring to local communities, shown in Figure 1, indicates these pertinent organizations' efforts to recognize local communities as a vital component of sustainable heritage site management. These findings suggest that UNESCO has made some attempts to respond to prior critiques regarding the lack of attention to local communities in heritage conservation. Our findings regarding well-being, however, suggest that UNESCO has only just begun to engage with issues of local communities' health and well-being.

The growing emphasis on local communities by UNESCO can be attributed to specific decisions of UNESCO's governing body, the World Heritage Committee, arising from broader interests related to human rights at the UN. Deacon and Smeets [34], for instance, claim that the UNESCO 2003 convention on intangible cultural heritage was committed to emphasizing the roles of local communities for collaborative and sustainable heritage conservation. Other scholars also argue that the 'United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)' in the general assembly of 2007 enabled the growing concern for local communities at heritage conservation sites [16,27]. These efforts reflect the interest of heritage conservation researchers on local communities, such as Bortolotto [81], who argues that protecting 'intangible cultural heritage' is inseparable from the concerns of local communities, and Logan [82], who argues that the rights of local communities' cultural practices ought to be recognized as a form of human rights. Those shifts in the emphasis on local communities are consistent with the records of the meeting sessions of the World Heritage Committees, with increasing appearances of the term 'human right' in recent years [78,79,83–87]. Several scholars have noted that UNESCO has engaged with the idea of local communities in heritage preservation for a number of years, albeit without putting the prioritization of local communities into practice [88–90].

Given that the concept of well-being has only appeared in the operational guidelines in 2019, the recognition of well-being as an important aspect of heritage conservation is only emerging and deserves continued monitoring and attention, particularly regarding the impact of heritage conservation on the well-being of local communities. This transition is also identified in the sessions of the World Heritage Committees (The references of the illustrated years are as follows: [91–96] (The documents of [93] and [95] were searched using the term 'wellbeing' instead of 'well-being.'). Such an effort follows previous efforts to place the issue of well-being and human rights in international organizations with respect to sites of cultural heritage [16] and sustainable development [97]. These efforts could be extended to considerations of different mental and physical health aspects of well-being [98,99] as well as to the challenges and implications of implementing considerations of well-being in natural and cultural heritage site management [8,100].

There are a number of challenges to involving local communities as stakeholders in heritage management. For instance, a large heritage site may include several community

groups, and protecting the rights of one group may neglect the rights of other groups [9,16]. Deacon and Smeets [34] argue that in the heritage designation process, local communities are unlikely to participate in the ultimate decisions of heritage management, even though the authenticity and cultural importance of a heritage site often rests with that local community. Moreover, it should be taken into account that, while we identified a growing recognition of local communities both in the operational guidelines and decisions papers, incidental observation suggests that associated practices at the heritage sites themselves do not seem to adhere to the guidelines. In this regard, local people and communities neglected in heritage conservation may exemplify a continued mismatch between the practical reality and the administrative ideal [101] regarding the role of local communities and well-being in heritage conservation. These challenges raise questions about the capability of UNESCO to address the interests of local communities, even though the issue receives greater attention in the operational guidelines, as the operational guidelines serve primarily as recommendations and do not carry any regulatory consequences. Thus, enhancing the well-being of local communities in heritage conservation may require more than simple changes to the operational guidelines.

We acknowledge several limitations to this research. First, our study is limited to the analysis of the UNESCO's operational guidelines documents, and thus, while this analysis does reveal important transitions to the recognition of the concepts of local communities and well-being in UNESCO's objectives in heritage conservation, we do not have information on the causes or consequences of these changes to the guidelines, despite the interrogation of the decision papers, whose decisions are reflected on the changes to the operational guidelines. Additionally, the relationship between other official documents (e.g., charters, recommendations, and declarations, etc.) of UNESCO, and its governing bodies, and their explicit impact on the operational guidelines is also unknown. An analysis of this relationship might contribute to gaining a more contextualized understanding of noticeable changes of the operational guidelines in 2005, 2015, and 2019. Second, our choice of selected keywords may have limited our recognition of all instances of concepts relating to local communities and well-being. Notably, none of the selected keywords appeared in the operational guidelines from 1977 to 1993 (a total of nine documents). Other potential keywords implicating local communities or well-being more implicitly may reveal a recognition of these concepts in earlier UNESCO documents.

To our knowledge this is the first study to systemically examine UNESCO heritage conservation guidelines regarding the emphasis on local communities and well-being. The findings show a growing emphasis of UNESCO on local communities beginning primarily in 2005, and the emergence of issues of well-being and human rights, just in 2019. We are convinced that these issues are increasingly recognized as key components of heritage conservation, though we recognize that political, economic, and environmental challenges idiosyncratic to specific places often complicate the place of local communities and well-being in heritage conservation priorities. Future research should investigate the potential implementation and implications of these changes for the guidelines at specific UNESCO world heritage sites.

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