



## The Historic Town of Vigan: Preliminary Findings from the Case Study

Vigan was inscribed on the WH List in December 1999 and was cited in UN Habitat's Best Practices on Social Sustainability in Historic Districts in 2008. In 2012, its recognition as Model for Best Practice in WH Site Management also signified the historic town's achievements in terms of conservation efforts.

The City Government of Vigan has been pursuing a *"heritage as tool for development"* strategy to improve quality of life in the city. The research focused on the city's heritage-and-development experience to explore rights issues within the site's WH context. Findings so far suggest that Vigan's development will involve determining how sustainable tourism is linked with the city's capacity to address environmental issues and poverty. More particularly, there are difficulties in the maintenance of "the ancestral houses" as well as some indigenous industries, and

there is a perception that economic opportunities from the heritage enterprise are not uniformly available across the population. Advancing the consultation process and ongoing research could help facilitate the expression and resolution of remaining aspirations and concerns.

Heritage-based initiatives in Vigan pre-date its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Some citizens and local government actors have long seen the town's rich heritage as its greatest asset in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life for its population. However, heritage-and-development efforts have been significantly bolstered by the inscription. The majority of Vigan's residents acknowledge the dramatic recent transformation of the town, whose reputation, in the 1990s, was still beset by its violence-scarred history. While social-systemic and environmental constraints still provide challenges to the city, its government remains confident that its heritage conservation program will, with the participation of the people, produce

further development and "eradicate" poverty. This confidence is sound if the capacity of the more economically vulnerable people is likewise strengthened for them to be able to substantially participate in and profit from the heritage enterprise.

### **Vigan's inscription and recognition as a model for WH Site Management**

Vigan's inscription as a WH Site gave the city's government the power to chart a future built upon a systematic heritage conservation and management program. In October 2012, thirteen years after inscription, this strategy was boosted by Vigan's recognition as a model of best practice in World Heritage management because of its multi-faceted sustainable conservation and management approach for the protection of the property, "with relatively limited resources" but with the participation of the local community.

## “Pride of place” and heritage

The City Government consistently looks for ways to increase pride in Vigan and its heritage among its residents. This value is expressed in policies of quite different sorts, including attempts to improve social services. It reflects the view that pride in place and satisfaction with living conditions are connected, so that heritage conservation and general development are mutually supportive. Such satisfaction and the confidence it generates are seen as especially helpful in a region where memories of the violence of the 1960s and 1970s are still active.

It was with the aim of inculcating pride that the City Government promoted and invested in Vigan’s competition with hundreds of cities to become one of the “New 7 Wonder Cities of the World”. Its campaign was successful: Vigan earned the title in December 2014, after a highly energetic campaign that capitalized on the city’s heritage and constantly urged Filipinos and supporters elsewhere to cast multiple votes for Vigan through cellphone texts. The City Government sees this new status as strengthening its “desire to conserve [Vigan’s] priceless heritage and sustain excellence in local governance.”

Vigan has also been accorded recognition through numerous regional and national awards, which have included those for excellence in various aspects of local governance. The people’s “pride of place and heritage” has truly surged since it began to develop in 1999.

### History of the heritage plan: Heritage conservation as tool for “development”

The path to WH status began with the conviction among some prominent citizens that Vigan had a unique strength, and thanks to its “ancestral” heritage. Precursor activities included the establishment of the Ancestral Homeowners’ Association and the initiatives of this group such as the launch in the early 1990s of the annual *Viva Vigan Festival* to promote culture and the arts, which was taken over by the local government several years later; the organisation of international conferences on heritage conservation; and the 1993-1996 inventory of ancestral houses. Local government was also active: Significantly, it introduced ordinances in 1997 to delineate the boundaries of the historic area’s core and buffer zones, and to define allowable uses for such zones.

Situated on the western coast of Luzon, 408 kilometers north of Manila, the historic town of Vigan, in the province of Ilocos Sur, was designated a World Heritage Site on December 2, 1999. It met criteria for inclusion on the WH list because it “represents a unique fusion of Asian building design and construction with European colonial architecture and planning” (c. ii), and “is an exceptionally intact and well-preserved example of a European trading town in East and South-East Asia” (c. iv).

Vigan was already important to regional trade prior to the arrival of Spanish conquistador Juan de Salcedo in 1572. The town became the center of colonial government in the north; Villa Fernandina de Vigan’s grid layout was defined in accordance with the Spanish empire’s *Leyes de Indias* of 1680. It became Ciudad Fernandina after the seat of the Archdiocese of Nueva Segovia was transferred to the site from Lallo, Cagayan in 1758.

Vigan has kept most of its centuries-old Spanish heritage, despite colonial upheavals and WWII, which destroyed architectural heritage in many other parts of the country.

The Mayor’s Office likewise issued an Executive Order creating the Vigan Conservation Council in 1999 given the “urgent need to create a management body involving all the major stakeholders in the conservation of the historic district in Vigan that will be vested with all the powers and functions necessary to properly protect the fabric of Vigan’s historical district...”

Projects that helped in shaping the heritage-founded development path of Vigan were carried out under the leadership of a range of agencies<sup>1</sup> and with the participation of representatives of the different stakeholders’ groups. The Vigan Masterplan Project/VMP, a Development Plan for the Revitalization of the Historic Center of Vigan, was formulated in 1999-2002. Among the activities that emerged

<sup>1</sup> The development of the Vigan Masterplan involved the following: The Government of Spain (represented by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional); Government of the Republic of the Philippines (represented by the Department of Tourism); Vigan Heritage Village Commission; Provincial Government of Ilocos Sur; Municipal/City Government of Vigan; and Fundacion Santiago. The VMP started when Vigan was still a Municipality, and was completed more than a year after Vigan regained its cityhood in 2001. The cultural mapping was under the guidance of the USTGS-CCCPET. The local stakeholder groups who participated in this mapping activity are numerous, with representatives from City Government departments; educational institutions from the Department of Education Vigan City Division to the University; craftspeople (weaving, pottery); hotels & restaurants’ association; community organizations like those of farmers, fishers, women/rural improvement club, youth, and others.

through the VMP were the restoration of the old Vigan Sports Complex to become the Vigan Culture and Trade Center, a two-phased potable water network project, a food security project with the fishing communities, and a resettlement program for informal settlers. Each taking at least four years for actual implementation, the last three projects involved a series of consultations and organizing efforts that saw the beneficiary communities as main actors and partnering government and non-government organizations as supporters and facilitators.

The resettlement program proved to be the most challenging among said projects because of limitations that could be attributed to resource constraints: The piece of land that could be availed of by the government for the purpose is situated at the city’s margins, with some parts of it in low-lying area and therefore vulnerable to flooding during heavy rains; and the quality of the row houses is only as much as what government or privately-donated resources could allow. Yet, the program must be credited for peacefully allaying earlier resistance by addressing most of the affected people’s concerns, for the smooth relocation process, for making ownership of settlement more possible for the urban poor, and for enhancing the latter’s capacities to improve their lot in their new communities through poverty-alleviation initiatives. Indeed, a few residents have already managed to gradually develop their units into better ones.

Since there was still much to be desired in the city’s socio-economic life, Vigan’s cultural mapping activity was undertaken in 2006 with the initiative of the City Government and under the guidance of the University of Santo Tomas Graduate School – Center for the Conservation of Cultural Property and the Environment in the Tropics/USTGS-CCCPET. The mapping

project's aim was to translate the city's heritage into an asset that could uplift the people's living condition. Another major turning point apart from the VMP, it provided the city with a system by which its heritage resources and their possible uses were identified: the *Heritage Conservation Program as Tool for Development* has been spelled out.

With conservation and cultural heritage tourism at the heart of its development strategy, the City Government strengthens its programs by every imaginable way, and strives to ensure that the city generates economic benefits from its heritage. The local government continuously crafts relevant legislation, and invests in infrastructure and associated services, confident that these would bring greater opportunities for Vigan's people. For example, traffic flows in the city and motorcycle engines were regulated with the goal of protecting the core of ancestral houses and historic buildings known as the Heritage Village and minimizing air and noise pollution; the 2005 *Investments Incentives Code* encourages tourism- and traditional crafts-related enterprises, while offering incentives for businesses to draw at least 60% of their workforce from Vigan; and the 2006 *Amended Conservation Guidelines* that also led to the 2010 publication of the *Heritage Homeowner's Preservation Manual*, which now provides homeowners and concerned technicians with visuals and details pertaining to the appropriate repair and restoration of the old buildings. The City Government has allocated 1% of its internal revenue allotment (IRA) from the national government for culture, arts and tourism, and at least 40% of the city's entire budget as a development fund. Infrastructure aimed at increasing visitor flow, such as the Convention Center and Conservation Complex, had been built. A building along the Heritage Village is being restored to become a multi-functional structure that would house at least two City Government offices, a gallery for local artists and a crafts shop, among others; a "sleep-and-parking" facility and a theme park project that would cater to both tourists and locals are underway.

The increased potential for the success of enterprises is changing local people's conservative views about investment. Business has bloomed radically, ranging from those that require small financial capital and social/technical skills to those that could only be built by multi-million peso investors. The City Government budget has risen twelve-fold from 1995

mainly because of higher revenues. Social services are also much improved. The incidence of poverty is claimed to be down to 7.1% in 2012 from dismal figures of about 40% in the 1990s. Heritage and development could not yet be statistically correlated; overseas workers' remittances also admittedly power economic growth. Most important, however, is that majority of people perceive Vigan to have transformed dramatically since the 1990s.

### **Vigan's Future: Development challenges**

The directly-delivered or *implied sentiments* and/or *perceptions* that have so far surfaced in the Vigan research are based on preliminary findings and warrant further consideration. Nevertheless, the research reported here suggests that Vigan's heritage-and-development policy is subject to ongoing challenges in respect of human rights.

Notwithstanding its achievements, the City Government aims to do better yet, and is confident that it can eliminate poverty in Vigan. However, constraints remain: Higher costs of living and production and losses from natural calamities reduce or negate the income/benefit especially of lower-income groups. Natural resources, especially land, are becoming more limited vis a vis the population that is growing from within and from outside as a result of the drawing potential of the city's socio-economic boom. New spheres and patterns of consumption are coming with consumerist-oriented developments, and new definitions and dimensions of poverty seem to be emerging.

The need to sustain heritage tourism and the new enterprises dependent upon it, coexists with concerns about competition for resources, about traffic, air and noise pollution, and waste management.

There is, moreover, a perception that economic opportunities from heritage enterprises disproportionately benefit the relatively small fraction of the population that can access social and economic capital. As pointed out in some discussions, larger chunks of income could only come through bigger investments and aggressive marketing, where economic and political clout are believed by some to further bring about differential success in competition. On the other hand, very low capital could mostly only create small profits even when greater labor is spent. Local farmers and fisherfolk could not fully

take advantage of the larger market demand because of limitations in resources for production. Restrictions on food peddling (an enterprise of low-income groups), below-minimum wages, and difficulty of access to employment have, for some, intensified their sense of marginalization. In addition, many still lack interest or confidence to engage in ventures despite the availability of training opportunities and lending facilities.

The increasing prestige of Vigan has also resulted in the immensely rising value of real property that has made it difficult for people with few resources to maintain or secure properties for settlement and livelihood. Only the wealthy could now afford to buy property within the city core and its immediate environs. In many instances, overseas work has become necessary to be able to purchase land even in the remoter parts of the city given prices that are about three times their zonal values. Those who simply lack the capacity to maintain or buy land add up to the number of people lining up for social housing and resettlement projects. Then, like those with least resources, informal settlers would have to be content with relocation into the city's geographic margins despite attendant costs and environmental vulnerability, and with housing quality that limited funds could build.

Similarly, the monetary worth of ancestral houses has quickly rocketed about ten-fold or more since two decades ago. Cost of maintenance especially in accordance with protective regulations is now also much higher, although bigger rentals for commercial spaces are offering better prospects for owners to earn money for repair, improvement or even for business. The houses' surged values, maintenance costs and management problems pose greater challenge to the often multiple heirs, with their varying claims and interests. Consequently, a number of heirs of ancestral houses have had to give up and others are on the brink of selling their heritage even to non-relatives as remaining hopes to hold on to family property and identity could no longer stand up to the opposite desire of others to financially gain from the same.

Indigenous industries that are integral to the history and culture of Vigan, i.e., the manufacture of *damili* (earthenware) pottery or *abél-Iloko* textile weaving are also, for different economic reasons, under threat. With a large clay quarry area having been sold by its owner to another who has

converted it for residence, the top concerns for potters now are the very limited quarry site, the possibility that owners would also in time sell the land, and that potters themselves do not have the capability to buy the property. On the other hand, the more intricate design-techniques of the *abel-lloko* may soon become extinct because of the absence of willingness among the young to carry on with the difficult yet hardly financially rewarding craft.

The preceding discussion points to risks faced by various stakeholders of losing their heritage – whether it be in the form of an ancestral house, land or access to specific livelihoods. Everyone has the right to hold on to land, resource, property, livelihood, and heritage. Yet, under the present system, realizing and enjoying these rights is dependent upon people's economic capacity to afford the price that such rights entail. In the case of equally legitimate but competing rights, those of actors with greater resources are easily favored, while the rights of people with less or none could only be subject to protection by political will.

In the case of Vigan, political will still lies in government, more specifically with local executives, so that the interests served are determined by the wielders' advocacy. So far, it is local government that has played the key role in addressing issues and problems of its constituency, with focus on marginalized groups like farmers, fisherfolk, urban poor and informal settlers. It is undeniable that city authorities have been urgently acting upon concerns brought to their attention.

Despite efforts by both government and non-government bodies to encourage

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Preliminary findings indicate that Vigan has been significantly transformed since the 1990s, when heritage and development became more intimately connected. The city's inclusion in the WH List and its heritage conservation cum development program have clearly played a major role in these changes. Nevertheless, "development" challenges remain; not all of these are directly attributable to limitations in basic resources: Some of the difficulties are generated and sustained by the very strategies aimed at furthering development.

While the city has made determined efforts to address some of concerns that moderate the success of urban development, a more in-depth exploration of the basic policy of expanding tourism has yet to be done. Equity issues have also surfaced in the face of perceived differential capacities to access the economic opportunities heritage enterprises can provide, including employment. The increasing shortages of land for settlement and livelihood, and the uneven impact they have on segments of the population are particularly likely to challenge future improvements, especially for the poorest. Furthermore, some ancestral homeowners have difficulties in maintaining their properties, with the result that they are exposed to the growing risk of losing their heritage.

The research sketched here also indicates the underdeveloped state of community organisations, in that meaningful projects are still mostly framed according to government initiatives. This tends to support people's option to maintain silence and feed their timidity in expressing their concerns. Raising people's awareness about their rights and obligations as citizens, advancing the consultation process and organizing efforts, as well as further research, could facilitate the expression of remaining aspirations and concerns, and enable the exploration of feasible means by which development challenges and linked rights issues can be addressed.

consultation and participation, however, the larger populace chooses to remain quiet on issues that they think may affect the politically influential. Apparently, vestiges of the past continue to linger in the imagination of many people who have witnessed that in the midst of distrust and violence, silence, acquiescence or collaboration are prerequisites to peace. They prefer to rely on themselves to remedy difficult situations, as well as depend on the discernment, initiative and goodwill of people in authority to intervene on their behalf. Even the activities of community organizations that have been envisioned to promote empowerment hardly go beyond those designed by

government. Cynicism that prevents people from significantly helping themselves and their communities has also been observable in some.

The explicit and implicit concerns of some sectors of Vigan's economy, and the limited undertakings of people's organizations, therefore suggest that consultation and participation processes have not yet been sufficiently institutionalized to maximize their potential in contributing to the achievement of development objectives and to the realization of rights.

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