Future Directions for AHRC-DCMS Cultural Heritage and Climate Change Research

How can arts and humanities research make cultural heritage and cultural voices an essential part of climate planning for the future?

Authors

Dr. Poppy Spowage
Prof. Paul Heritage
Vitória Kramer
Fernanda Vasconcellos
Gustavo Möller
Dr. Isabel Stuart

Executive Summary

In 2020 the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) launched a funding partnership, as a part of UK Official Development Assistance (ODA), to support research on how developing countries could respond more effectively to the impact of disasters and climate change on cultural heritage. Over three years a cohort of nine projects – extended through three Follow-on phases from 2021-23 – produced work that was broad in discipline, geography and methodology. From Sri Lanka, to Nigeria, to Brazil, the research ranged in scope, focusing on disaster prevention and resilience, preparedness and emergency response, and considered the realities of living with, as well as adapting to, change, damage and loss as a result of disasters and the climate crisis.

This report marks a moment of reflection: over four months the team at People's Palace Projects (PPP) have been exploring with academics, artists, activists and cultural heritage stakeholders potential future directions for AHRC and DCMS's Cultural Heritage and Climate Change Programme. The aim of this report is to provide recommendations to AHRC and DCMS on what the next phase of the programme might focus on, through identifying emerging research areas, exploring how the portfolio can enhance the value and impact of research on cultural heritage in climate planning and advising the potential format and structure of future funding opportunities. An urgent need to align, coordinate and effectively disseminate research in this field is clear. As outlined by HE Sheik Salem bin Khalid Al Qassimi (Minister of Culture and Youth, UAE) and HE Margareth Menezes (Minister of Culture, Brazil) in a joint op-ed on Culture-based Climate Action at COP28: 'The escalating climate crisis is rapidly evolving into a cultural emergency that threatens some of the world's most valued heritage sites. But leveraging cultural diversity can also play a pivotal role in mitigating and adapting to climate change, unlocking innovative strategies, and promoting inclusivity (Al Qassimi & Menezes, 2023).

The ambition is that the recommendations in this report will help maximise the impact of UK arts and humanities research, and ensure it supports cultural heritage and cultural voices to play an essential role in climate planning for the future.

Recommendations:

Themes, Contexts and Geographical Reach

#1: Expand scope of future call(s) to explicitly consider the ways in which tangible and intangible cultural heritage can also build resilience and contribute to climate action.

#2: Encourage interdisciplinary collaborations in all future funding calls.

#3: Encourage - and support - research that is co--designed and co-produced with the cultural heritage sector.

#4: Seek geographical diversity of cohort, but don't underestimate the challenge - and the necessary investment - of making disparate voices and places coherent.

Methodologies and Approaches: Co-creation and equitable partnerships

#5: Provide a transparent, long-term vision for UK cultural heritage and climate research to support more impactful and long-term interventions, teamed with application/project cycles that support collaboration with partners.

#6: Increase dialogue and training between funders, academics and research managers to align expectations and support effective and appropriate grant administration, particularly with international partners.

#7: Maintain the flexibility of the programme; provide a key point of contact for researchers; keep a focus on diversity and inclusivity within research teams.

#8: Reposition the centre of the research away from Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to local communities: structure funding calls to include scoping visits, sustainability and network building, early and robust stakeholder mapping/engagement; and embedding Community Co-Investigators (Co-Is) into the programme.

#9: Recentre traditional knowledge, recognising its material value in devising post-carbon futures alongside the devastating injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples.

Outputs and Impact: Public and Policy Engagement

#10: Move beyond mapping: focus on the impact rather than the output of AHRC/DCMS funded research.

#11: Incentivise risk-taking in future calls, investing in the discovery of creative and affective ways to tackle climate issues, and valuing the process alongside potential outputs.

#12: Set big research questions so that the aims, objectives and outputs of research simultaneously serve academic institutions, policy makers and communities.

#13: Encourage and support projects that have a focus on long term impact from the outset.

#14: Coordinate AHRC/DCMS research in cultural heritage and climate change to support dissemination, wider stakeholder engagement and policy impact.

#15: Ensure that DCMS/AHRC research on cultural heritage and climate change has a prominent role in COP30 (2025).

#16: Continue to build on the cohort model, establishing a Research Observatory on Cultural Heritage and the Climate Crisis.