

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of On-site interpretation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites using ICOMOS Charter: Historic Cairo as a Case Study

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## Abstract:

This article aims at assessing the effectiveness of on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo world heritage site, using ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites as a benchmark. The study employs a qualitative approach, consisting of a focus group discussion with five experienced tour guides. Open-ended questions were used to evaluate the degree to which current interpretive tours conform to the ICOMOS Charter. The study findings reveal several gaps in the current interpretive tours that hinder Historic Cairo from showcasing its unique features and performing at its full potential as a UNESCO world heritage site. These gaps include limited physical accessibility to a wide range of the site's cultural resources; narrow interpretation scope that focus on individual buildings and monuments rather than developing interpretive content that showcasing the social, cultural, religious and economic value of the site; standardization of current interpretive content and lack of customize interpretation that would expand the scope of target audience; exclusion of

local community from being involved in the decision-making; limited contribution to the sustainability of the site's tangible and intangible resources; inability to provide a comprehensive authentic visitor experience; inadequate coordination between all the stakeholders; infrequent evaluation of interpretive tours; and lack of capacity-building programs for concerned stakeholders. To address these gaps, the study highlights the need for an appropriate heritage interpretation strategy that aligns with the ICOMOS Charter, which would enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation of the site's diverse value, ensure the sustainability of the site heritage resources; involve local community and increase economic returns. The study emphasizes the need for more inclusive and community-driven approach to on-site interpretation of Historic Cairo; the development of multi-dimensional interpretation that links the tangible and intangible heritage of the site and highlights its significance; enhanced collaboration and coordination between all the stakeholders involved in the interpretation and presentation of Historic Cairo; regular evaluation and of interpretive tours, and provision of capacity-building trainings for concerned stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Historic Cairo; On-site interpretation; ICOMOS Charter; Interpretive Tours, World Heritage Site

### تقييم فعالية التفسير بمواقع التراث العالمي باستخدام ميثاق المجلس الدولي للمعالم والمواقع (القاهرة التاريخية نموذجاً)

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مستخلص:

يهدف البحث إلى دراسة مدى فعالية الجولات التفسيرية بمنطقة القاهرة التاريخية من خلال تقييم مدى توافقها مع ميثاق تفسير وعرض مواقع التراث الثقافي الذي تم اعتماده من قبل المجلس الدولي للمعالم والمواقع ICOMOS "عام 2008. استخدمت الدراسة الزيارات الميدانية للموقع ومجموعات التركيز لجمع البيانات حيث تم طرح مجموعة من الاسئلة مفتوحة النهايات

على عدد خمسة ادلاء سياحيين من ذوى الخبرة فى القيام بالشرح والتفسير لمعالم القاهرة التاريخية كشفت نتائج الدراسة عن العديد من اوجه القصور فى الجولات التفسيرية لمنطقة القاهرة التاريخية والتي اثرت بالسلب على القيمة التاريخية والاثريّة والاجتماعية للموقع وكذلك على العائدات السياحية للموقع وكذلك على استدامة عناصر التراث الثقافى للموقع. تضمنت اوجه القصور قيام الجولات التفسيرية بالتركيز على عرض وتفسير الاثار المعمارية بدلاً من تطوير محتوى تفسيري يعرض القيمة الاجتماعية والثقافية والدينية والاقتصادية للموقع والتي كانت السبب الرئيسى لإدراجة ضمن قائمة التراث العالمى؛ كذلك ثبات وتوحيد المحتوى التفسيري للموقع على الرغم من اختلاف الزائرين فى اهتماماتهم وأولوياتهم؛ عدم وجود آلية تمكن المجتمع المحلي من المشاركة فى صنع القرار او تقييم هذه الجولات؛ عدم وجود تنسيق كافى بين جميع أصحاب المصلحة؛ عدم وجود تقييم بصورة دورية للجولات التفسيرية؛ ونقص برامج بناء القدرات لأصحاب المصلحة المعنيين. اظهرت الدراسة ضرورة انتهاج استراتيجية مناسبة لتفسير وعرض التراث الثقافى للقاهرة التاريخية تتماشى مع ميثاق ICOMOS ، والتي من شأنها العمل على تعزيز فهم الزوار وتقديرهم للقيمة الاستثنائية للموقع، وضمان استدامة موارد الموقع التراثية؛ وكذلك العمل على زيادة إشراك وتمثيل المجتمع المحلي بهذه الجولات وزيادة عوائدهم الاقتصادية من السياحة . كما أكدت الدراسة على الحاجة إلى تطوير جولات تفسيرية ذات موضوعات متنوعة تعكس الأبعاد المختلفة للموقع وترتبط بين عناصر التراث المادي وغير المادي؛ وكذلك تعزيز التعاون والتنسيق بين جميع أصحاب المصلحة المشاركين فى تفسير وتقديم القاهرة التاريخية؛ التقييم المنتظم للجولات التفسيرية للوقوف على اوجه القصور ، وتوفير التدريب لبناء القدرات لأصحاب المصلحة.

## Introduction:

Heritage interpretation is a vital tool for educating visitors about cultural and natural heritage sites. According to Tilden (1957, p. 8) interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information”. Interpretive methods such as guided tours, exhibitions, and signage help to engage visitors with the site and promote a deeper understanding of its significance. Effective interpretation should convey the unique qualities of a site, as well as its relevance to contemporary society (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Studies have shown that interpretation can have a positive impact on visitor satisfaction, and

learning outcomes (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Nyaupane & Morais, 2015), and can also contribute to the sustainable management of heritage resources (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Nyaupane & Morais, 2015; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). As such, heritage interpretation plays a critical role in ensuring the continued preservation and appreciation of cultural and natural heritage.

Given the critical role that interpretation plays, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) developed the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites in 2008, which outlines seven cardinal principles for interpretation and presentation at cultural heritage sites (Silberman, 2008).

The significance of the study lies in the fact that Egypt is a deep rooted country where archaeological and cultural sites are considered among the most important competitive advantages for the tourism sector (Mustafa, 2021). As a result, effective on-site interpretation is essential to promote Egyptian tourism, ensure the preservation of heritage resources, and generating economic benefits for the local community, as a well-designed interpretation strategy can help in providing the hosting destination with attractive tourism offers (Moreno-Melgarejo et al. 2019; Almuhrzi et al., 2020) and conveying the significance and diverse heritage values to the visitors (Wimalasuriya et al., 2022)

The interpretation of Egyptian cultural heritage has been a topic of interest for a number of scholars and researchers, including Shaikhon (2019), Shehada (2021), Salem (2015), Kamel (2011), and URHC (2012). Despite the extensive research in this field, the evaluation of on-site interpretation, which employs various interpretive methods such as guided tours, interpretive boards, exhibits, interactive displays, and audio-visual presentations (Newsome & Dowling, 2006), in relation to intentional charters has been overlooked. To address this gap in the literature, this study focuses

on on-site interpretive tours as they are considered essential tools for visitors to comprehend and engage with heritage surroundings (Moreno-Melgarejo et al. 2019).

Historic Cairo has been chosen as a case study due to its significant cultural and historical value, which led to its inscription on the World Heritage List in 1979. However, an initial observation of the interpretive on-site tours offered by a number of Egyptian tour operator's websites such as Viator. (2023); TripAdvisor. (2023); GetYourGuide. (2023); local Guides. (2023); Cairo Tour Company. (2023) to provide visitors with the chance to visit the site and experience its tangible and intangible heritage resources reveal that there is a real problem in both the preparation stage "content creation" at which the information is gathered and interpretive itinerary is designed and the implantation stage where the visitor should obtain the in-visit interaction and authentic cultural experience. Such interpretive guided tours have limited the cultural, historical, social, religious, and artistic significant value of the site for which it was inscribed in the UNESCO world heritage list, and turned it from a site that has a universal value into a site that looks similar to any ordinary non-listed archaeological sites.

The primary objective of this study to evaluate the degree to which the on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo comply with the international standards adopted in the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. It also aims to identify gaps and areas for improvement in the on-site interpretation of Historic Cairo, with the ultimate goal of aligning the interpretation of Historic Cairo with the principles adopted by ICOMOS Charter to achieve sustainable development of the site by providing visitors with an authentic and immersive experience; engagement of all stakeholders; generating greater benefits for the local community; and preserving the heritage resources of the site.

## Historic Cairo:

Historic Cairo was inscribed on the world heritage list under the name of “Islamic Cairo” in 1979 based on the recommendation of (ICOMOS). The site met three out of the ten criteria adopted by the World Heritage Operational Guidelines, leading to its inscription, these criteria are: (ICOMOS, 1979; W.H.C. 2013, p.20-21; URHC, 2012; Elmenshawy & Shalaby, 2022. P.2)

**Criteria I:** to represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;

**Criteria V:** to be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

**Criteria VI:** to be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.

Due to the fact that the site is not solely an Islamic heritage site, but also has a rich and diverse cultural landscape that includes significant Coptic, Jewish, and modern heritage, in 2007, the Egyptian government submitted a request to the world heritage committee to change the name from “Islamic Cairo” into “Historic Cairo”.(URHC, 2012; Elmenshawy & Shalaby, 2022. P.2)

According to the nomination file, Historic Cairo is an area covering approximately 32 square kilometers located on the eastern bank of the River Nile. The site was acknowledged as a historic fabric with vast intact areas. The nomination file highlighted the following main areas from south to north: ((URHC, 2012. P. 11)

- Al-Fustat, which contains the Mosque of Amr Ibn Al-As, the Roman fortress Qasr Ash-Sham, and Babylon, where Coptic churches are located.
- The area where the Mosque of Ahmad Ibn Tulun is

located and the nearby regions of As-Saliba and Al-Kabsh, which house several significant Mamluk monuments.

- The Citadel area, which comprises of Mamluk palaces and the Mosque of Sultan Hassan, along with Darb Al-Ahmar, where thoroughfares Suq As-Silah and Khatt At-Tabana are lined with Mamluk and Ottoman monuments.
- Additionally, the Fatimid area from Bab Zuwaila to the North Wall, which includes the city gates Bab Al-Futuh and Bab An-Nasr, is home to a concentration of major Ayyubid and Mamluk monuments on the main street, Shari Al-A'zam.
- Lastly, the necropolis stretching from Al-Fustat to the northern limits of Fatimid Cairo that comprises a large number of mausoleums and funerary complexes from different periods.

According to Antoniou (1998, p.6), the area contains the greatest concentration of Islamic monuments in the world in terms of quantity and quality. According to the nomination file, the area included around 600 architectural buildings dating back from the seventh to the twentieth century distributed over the above-mentioned geographical areas (ICOMOS, 1979). Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, significant urban and demographic changes have occurred, leading to a reduction in the number of buildings of historical and artistic significance from 600, as stated in the nomination file to only 400 by 1979. However, after the site's inscription, the loss was offset by adding 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, resulting in a total of 520 monuments listed in 2007 as part of the World Heritage Site. (Angl 2018, P.143) also it is mentioned that the unprofessional way that was used for the restoration of some monuments have resulted in the loss of its authenticity such as the restoration which was carried out by Bohra community for three mosques which are located within the area which are Al Aqmar, Al-Guyushi and Lulua (UNESCO 1995, p.26)



Since 1993, the World Heritage Center has annually assessed the state of historical preservation in historic Cairo, in response to the earthquake that occurred in 1992. Based on evaluation reports, it is evident that the monuments within the site have been considered the most important component; this is evident from the numerous restoration projects and activities that were carried out by the Egyptian government (WHC, n.d.) in addition to restoration projects and activities, a number of adaptive reuse projects were carried out to repurpose monuments as cultural centers, libraries, museums, and shops selling souvenirs (Angl 2018, P.144)

### **ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites**

The Charter was ratified during the 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and International Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The Charter identified seven principles that should guide the interpretation and presentation of heritage resources as part of the overall process of cultural heritage conservation and management, these principals are: (ICOMOS. 2008; Silberman, 2008, p.5)

**Principle 1:** Access and Understanding

**Principle 2:** Information Sources

**Principle 3:** Attention to Setting and Context

**Principle 4:** Preservation of Authenticity

**Principle 5:** Planning for Sustainability

**Principle 6:** Concern for Inclusiveness

**Principle 7:** Importance of Research, Training, and Evaluation

The main objectives of the Charter are: (ICOMOS. 2008; Silberman 2008, p.5, 6)

- To enhance public awareness and engagement in safeguarding cultural heritage sites by promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of their significance.
- Communicate the significance of cultural heritage sites to diverse audiences and protect their tangible and intangible



values within their natural, cultural, and social contexts.

- Protect cultural heritage sites from potential harm caused by intrusive interpretive infrastructure, visitor pressure, and inaccurate or inappropriate interpretation while conveying their historical and cultural importance.
- Support sustainable conservation efforts by encouraging public participation and understanding in their preservation.
- Facilitate stakeholder and associated community involvement in the development and implementation of interpretive programs to promote inclusiveness in interpreting cultural heritage sites.

Develop technical and professional guidelines for presenting heritage that encompass various aspects, such as technologies, research, and training, and tailor them to suit the social contexts in which they are implemented while ensuring their sustainability over time.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

A qualitative approach was utilized in this article through a focus group discussion involving five experienced tour guides who specialize in interpretive guided tours in Historic Cairo. The selection criteria for participants required a minimum of five years of experience conducting tours in the area to ensure a high level of knowledge and expertise of the site.

The discussion was guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to elicit information about the current status of on-site interpretive guided itineraries in Historic Cairo and to assess the extent to which the interpretive guided tours in Historic Cairo are aligned with the principles of the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. The discussion was audio-recorded for analysis. In order to protect the confidentiality of the study participants, a coding system was employed to replace the interviewees' names. Participants were assigned a unique code that consisted of the first letter of their first name and a number that indicated their age.

In addition to the focus group discussion, the data was collected from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of on-site interpretive tours in Historic Cairo. On-site observations were conducted through several site visits throughout 2022. These observations were used to take notes on the interpretive content of the interpretive tours and the items that are selected for presentation to visitors.

In addition to on-site observations and the focus group discussion, the researchers also collected secondary data from a variety of published studies and credible online sources. This secondary data was thoroughly analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of heritage interpretation and guided tours in Historic Cairo.

### **Data Analysis:**

The audio recording of the focus group discussion was transcribed and analyzed using open coding technique to identify key themes related to the current status of on-site interpretive guided itineraries in Historic Cairo. Findings were presented in a narrative form supported by quotes of the focus group participants and compared with relevant literature. They were structured according to the principles of the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites.

	<b>Data collection sources</b>	<b>Segment / site/ materials</b>	<b>Tool</b>
<b>Primary data</b>	Focus group discussion	Five Egyptian tour guides	open-ended questions
	Field visits	Historic Cairo WHS	Personal observation
<b>Secondary data</b>	Literature sources	published articles, reports, websites	

## Table 1 sources of data collection

### Figure 1 Research tool used

### Findings and Discussion

#### 1- Assessing the effectiveness of on-site interpretive tours in Historic Cairo in light of principal No. 1 of ICOMOS Charter (access and understanding):

This principle refers to the necessity to develop an effective interpretation that facilitates physical and intellectual access to cultural heritage sites in a way that would enhance the respect, understanding of heritage resources and create a meaningful connection to it, as well as encouraging additional exploration and learning opportunities. According to this principle, the interpretation and presentation programs should be customized to suite the diversified profile of the audience (Silberman, 2008).

The term Accessibility in general means, the capability of any individual to utilize an intangible service or a tangible product; regardless of their gender, age, physical attributes, and mental abilities (Deffner A. et al. 2015). Effective heritage accessibility can lead to increased visitation and engagement, as well as a greater appreciation and understanding of cultural heritage for all visitors (Gursoy & McCleary, 2004). Therefore it crucial to ensure the physical and intellectual accessibility to heritage resources, as the equitable access to heritage sites would enhance understanding and appreciation of its significance among both locals and visitors (ICOMOS 1999).

#### 1.1 lack of adequate accessibility:

During the focus group discussion, several participants pointed out the lack of infrastructure and facilities at Historic Cairo that restrict access for a wide range of visitors. M40, for instance, noted that: “not all heritage resources in the site are accessible, as many of the architectural buildings are inacces-

sible due to their poor condition and the need for restoration projects to address the issue”.

H43 Also highlighted the lack of basic facilities at the site, stating that “the site lacks some basic infrastructures including clean toilets, directional signs, parking slots, interpretive boards that present information in an engaging manner, as the existing boards provide dull factual information, failing to capture the interest of visitors”.

N52 expressed concern about the lack of services and infrastructure that would enhance the accessibility for visitors with special needs, saying that “the site is not adequately equipped with infrastructure and tools to cater to visitors with special needs. Facilities such as resting places, ramps, technological tools like audio guides, signs written in Braille are needed to accommodate visitors with special needs”.

The lack of adequate facilities, services, and basic infrastructure, which have also been noted by the World Heritage Center in their reports on Historic Cairo (WHC. n.d.), have significantly hampered the current on-site interpretive tours’ ability to provide a comprehensive and inclusive visitor experience and limited its ability to cater to a diverse range of visitors and fully showcase the unique value of the site.

## **1.2 Limited Scope of Interpretation**

It is noted that the current on-site interpretive tours primarily focus on the architectural heritage of the site, while neglecting its social and cultural aspects. A45 states that “the current on-site interpretive tours focus on the architectural heritage of the site while disregarding the social and cultural aspects”.

Neglecting the cultural, social, religious and economic dimensions of a heritage site can result in an incomplete understanding of its value and significance. Therefore, interpretive tours should aim to cover multiple dimensions of a site to

promote a comprehensive understanding of its importance. Additionally, it is important to note that the lack of a diverse interpretation can also limit the appeal of the site to a wider range of visitors. Visitors may have different interests and preferences, and a single-dimensional focus may not be enough to capture their interest and keep them engaged throughout their visit.

### **1.3 Lack of customized interpretation**

H43 emphasized the need to customize interpretation programs to cater to the diverse profile of the audience, stating that: “the style of current itineraries and the limited time allocated for the visit restricted the tour guide’s ability to customize the interpretive content to the audience’s specific needs and interests.”

A45 emphasized the challenge of providing customized interpretive programs for all visitors, stating that “as tour guides, we often do not receive professional training on how to develop customized interpretation programs that cater to the specific needs and interests of individual visitors. Additionally, the itinerary items are often selected by tour operators who may not take into consideration the elements that would help us to develop more customized and engaging interpretive tours.”

The interviewee’s comments show that current interpretive guided tours are not contributing in enhancing the physical and intellectual accessibility to Historic Cairo, as there are number of challenges which made historic Cairo is performing at a level far below than it should be when it comes to the first principal of ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. As for the physical accessibility, the site lack some accessibility infrastructure like directional signs, parking slots, ramps, interpretive signs written in Braille, audio guides and resting places. This goes in line with the reports developed by World Heritage Center on Historic Cairo which

indicated that among the factors that affecting Historic Cairo is the dilapidated infrastructure and lack of a management system (WHC. n.d.), also Kamel, E. (2011) highlighted that the site lack interpretive guiding signs and audio guided tours.

The need for restoration projects which was highlighted by M40 also goes in line with World Heritage Center on Historic Cairo which highlighted that among the factors that affecting the site is “Neglect and lack of maintenance” as well as “inappropriate restoration works” (WHC. n.d.).

Also the interviewee’s comments highlighted that the on-site interpretive tours don’t contribute the multi-dimensional understanding of historic Cairo due to its focus on the architectural heritage and negligence of the cultural and social aspects of the site. This issue was also raised by World Heritage Center reports which highlighted the absence of focusing on socio-cultural fabric of the city (WHC. n.d.).

The study revealed the necessity for infrastructure and facilities improvement to enhance physical accessibility in Historic Cairo. Moreover, it emphasized the importance of developing interpretive methods that cover various dimensions of the site to facilitate a comprehensive comprehension of its significance. Narrative interpretation methods can be used to address multiple dimensions of the site and promote a more comprehensive understanding of it.

The findings also highlighted the importance of providing training and support to tour guides and staff, as well as giving them more flexibility in developing interpretive programs that cater to the unique needs and interests of different audiences.

## **2-Assessing the effectiveness of on-site interpretive tours in Historic Cairo in light of principal No. 2 of ICOMOS Charter (Information Sources):**

According to ICOMOS Charter, the interpretive content and

presentation of the site have to be based on evidence gathered from diversified scientific sources in addition to living cultural traditions (Silberman, 2008).

## **2.1 Availability of diversified sources of information needed for interpretive content:**

During discussions about the interpretive content of the city's history and heritage, participants emphasized the rich variety of information sources that can be used to develop a comprehensive interpretation of the site. As pointed out by A42, the city has been the subject of an extensive amount of research by numerous historians, researchers, archeologists, developers, and sociologists, resulting in a considerable number of books, articles, and scholarly papers about it. In this regard A42 noted that:

“Historic Cairo is considered one of the most famous deep-rooted historic cities which made a great number of historians, researchers, archeologists, developers and sociologists to develop considerable number of books, articles, and scholarly papers about it.”

Additionally, N52 highlighted that the interpretation of Historic Cairo goes beyond written records, as it also incorporates diverse sources of information such as “archaeological evidence, architectural drawings, and other visual records”. These all sources can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the city's rich cultural heritage.

N52 comment emphasized that there is a wealth of scientific and scholarly sources available to develop a comprehensive interpretive content of Historic Cairo world Heritage site. This assertion is fully supported by the extensive array of published resources on the subject, including works by Cornet and Sims (2003), Berkey (1992), Williams (2008), Feillard (2007), Behrens-Abouseif (1989), Kauffman (1995), Michell (1995), Chat-



ters (2007), and Elmessiri and Grinde (2010). Moreover, these sources are complemented by archaeological evidence, architectural drawings, and archaeological texts, which offer a diverse range of materials to inform the interpretation of the site. The combination of these sources provides a comprehensive understanding of the city's rich cultural heritage, ensuring that the interpretive content can be developed with a high degree of accuracy and depth. Hence, it is evident that the availability of these resources presents no obstacles in the development of the interpretive content of Historic Cairo.

## **2.2 Lack of incorporating living cultural heritage into interpretive content**

The focus group discussion highlighted the lack of incorporating living cultural heritage tradition in the on-site interpretation of Historic Cairo. N52 noted that:

“The focus on the physical architecture of Historic Cairo in the interpretive tours may have overshadowed the importance of the living cultural traditions associated with the site”.

The comment highlighted a significant gap in the interpretive content of Historic Cairo, specifically related to the underrepresentation and exclusion of living cultural heritage in the site's interpretation. It goes in line with the literature that indicates a growing feeling of disconnection and neglect among the local community in Historic Cairo, as they feel that all the efforts and attention are directed towards monuments and tourism at their expense (Kamel, 2011).

To address this gap, there is a need for developing and implementing a more inclusive and community-driven approach to on-site interpretation of Historic Cairo. This approach could involve creating opportunities for members of the local community to actively participate in the interpretation process after providing them with the necessary training programs and of-

ficial permission to become on-site interpreters. Additionally, it is essential to make full use of their oral testimonials and incorporate them into the on-site interpretation. This will foster a greater sense of ownership and connection among local community members towards their cultural heritage, while also improving the overall quality and relevance of the site's interpretation for visitors. Such an approach would help bridge the gap between the site's interpretation and the living cultural heritage of the local community, promoting a more authentic and meaningful understanding of Historic Cairo for all visitors.

### **3- Assessing the effectiveness of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours in light of principal No. 3 of ICOMOS Charter (Context and Setting )**

This principle emphasizes the significance of context and setting in the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites. It states that a comprehensive interpretation of a site should showcase its importance from various perspectives, including social, architectural, religious, cultural, historical, and economic viewpoints. By taking into account these diverse perspectives, visitors can fully appreciate and understand the cultural and historical significance of the site. Additionally, this principal stresses the importance of considering how the site has been shaped and influenced by its environment over time, and how these elements can be incorporated into the interpretation. The principle also highlights the inclusion of intangible heritage elements, such as cultural practices and traditions, in the interpretation process. Overall, this principal promotes a holistic and inclusive approach to site interpretation that takes into account the diverse elements that contribute to a site's cultural significance (Silberman, 2008).

#### **3.1 Lack of Comprehensiveness**

Responses obtained from the focus group discussion demonstrate that monuments and architecture get the largest

share of on-site interpretive tours in historic Cairo. As M40 noted that:

“Despite the historical, religious, social, architectural, and economic importance of Historic Cairo, the on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo have been designed to showcase the Architectural significance of the site which gives a non-comprehensive picture. It’s also important to consider other aspects of the city’s rich history and culture in future interpretive itineraries.”

Similarly, A45 noted that:

“Khan Al-Khalili is the only non-archaeological element in the on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo, and its inclusion in the interpretation programs provides visitors with an insight into the city’s social and economic history, as well as its everyday life and customs”

### **3.2 Time limitation of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours**

The participants in the focus group discussion emphasized that there is a serious challenge in developing a comprehensive interpretation of Historic Cairo due to the time limitations of on-site interpretive tours. As noted by H48:

“It is difficult to achieve comprehensive interpretation programs due to the limited time allocated to the visit of the site. In most cases, interpretive programs of historic Cairo don’t exceed 4 hours.”

This constraint makes it challenging to provide a complete interpretation that fully captures the rich history and cultural significance of the site. In other words, the time limitations for on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo make it difficult to provide a comprehensive interpretation that encompasses all aspects of the site’s history and cultural significance. As H48 points out, interpretive programs are typically limited to four

hours or less, which poses a significant challenge in presenting a complete picture of the site.

In the same regard H45 stated that:

“We cannot give a larger picture of the site, which transforms it from a site of exceptional value to an ordinary archaeological site.”

The focus group participants agreed that a more comprehensive interpretation is necessary to convey the true value and importance of the site. They stressed on the fact that Historic Cairo was inscribed on the World Heritage list due to its exceptional Social, historical and cultural significance, so that a more comprehensive interpretation is necessary to showcase this significance.

The findings from the focus group discussion revealed that interpretive tours of historic Cairo are not meeting the standards set by the third principle of ICOMOS Charter due to the narrow focus of the interpretive content and time constraints. This finding aligns with Kamel (2011) who argues that the current approach is inadequate and insufficient in conveying the complete cultural and historical significance of the site.

The findings also emphasized the need for a more comprehensive on-site interpretive tour that encompasses various important aspects of the historic Cairo site beyond just showcasing its architectural heritage. This would provide visitors with a deeper understanding of the site's rich cultural, social, and economic history. Through a more comprehensive interpretation, visitors can develop a greater appreciation for the exceptional value of the site. Furthermore, such an approach can provide a more immersive experience for visitors, allowing them to gain a more nuanced understanding of the site that goes beyond its superficial highlights. This would be particularly beneficial for visitors interested in learning about the so-

cial, economic, and everyday life aspects of the site, which are currently not adequately covered in the interpretive programs.

#### **4- Assessing the effectiveness of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours in in light of principal No. 4 of ICOMOS Charter (Preservation of Authenticity):**

This principle states that the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites should respect and preserve the authenticity of the site, including its material, visual, and spatial characteristics, as well as its intangible cultural and historical context. According to this principal the interpretation and presentation should effectively conveying significance of the site without negatively affecting its cultural values or making irreversible changes to its physical features. Also the design of all interpretive elements, such as interpretation panels, kiosks, and trails must be in harmony with the unique character, setting, and cultural significance of the site while still being easily recognizable. Also the planning of on-site events, such as concerts and performances, must be done with care to preserve the significance and physical environment of the site, and to minimize any disruptions to the local community (Silberman, 2008).

#### **4.1 limited contribution to the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage:**

Kamel (2011) identified 11 unique aspects of the authenticity of Historic Cairo, including historical, architectural, memorial, social, artistic, symbolic and associational, religious and spiritual, functional, interweaving, environmental, and ecological, which according to ICOMOS (1999) should be showcased in interpretation programs in a way that is both meaningful and easy to understand for both the local community and visitors

According to the focus group discussion, the current on-

site interpretive tours don't contribute that much in the preservation of the authenticity of the site and the long term survival of its cultural heritage elements. H43 noted that:

“large number of intangible heritage elements of historic Cairo including traditional festivals, traditional food, customs and traditions, performing arts and traditional handicrafts were lost, as none of the interpretive efforts focus on these elements which didn't create the motives of the local community to preserve it”.

The focus group participants also highlighted that the narrow focus on a limited number of architectural buildings has caused other buildings and elements to be deemed less important, leading to their neglect and potential loss. N52 has noted that:

“the focus on certain architectural buildings made many other architectural buildings to be regarded as less important the matter which led to its negligence, and may lead to its disrepair, and loss”.

Also the focus group participants also highlighted that the current on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo may have a negative impact on the visited attractions. As they highlighted that the focus on a limited number of architectural resources in the site increases visitor traffic to these resources, disregarding the principle of carrying capacity. H43. Noted that: “the focus on only a limited number of architectural resources leads to an increase in visitor traffic and a disregard for the carrying capacity principle, putting additional strain on these monuments”.

The feedback gathered from the focus group participants highlighted the inadequacy of the current on-site interpretive tours in terms of their contribution to the preservation of the tangible and intangible resources of

the historic Cairo. The limited access and the one dimensional interpretation of the site has resulted in the loss of many of its tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources, which no longer receive an adequate attention and interpretation. This according to Kamal (2011) has ultimately affected the authenticity of the site. This also goes in line with what mentioned by Al-Ansari and Al-Abshari (2014) and Angl, J. (2018) who highlighted the disappearance of a number of religious ceremonies, and traditional crafts which were replaced by mass-produced and cheap imported commodities. Additionally, the World Heritage Committee reported significant breaches in the authenticity of monuments, which included extensive renovation or partial demolition and reconstruction of major historical mosques using concrete materials (UNESCO 1995).

The findings from the focus group discussion have emphasized the importance of developing multi-dimensional interpretive on-site programs that link the tangible and intangible heritage of the site and highlight its significance. This would involve creating thematic-based interpretation tours that can help disperse tourists and expand the geographical scope of the current interpretive tours to include lesser-known attractions, this will reduce the pressure on the well-known attractions (Leanza et al., 2016). This goes in line with ICOMOS (1999) that suggests that creating specific paths would reduce any negative effects on the physical structure and will ensure the preservation of the site's authenticity and cultural heritage.

#### **5- Assessing the effectiveness of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours in light of principal No. 5 of ICOMOS Charter (Planning for Sustainability):**

This principle emphasizes the importance of ensuring sustainability while designing and implementing the interpretation



activity, It emphasizes that the interpretation activity should aim to minimize any negative impacts on the site and its setting, and at the same time maximize the benefits of all stakeholders .(Silberman, 2008).

According to (Nowacki, M. 2021) Heritage interpretation can play a significant role in the preservation and conservation of Heritage resources, increase the profits of the local community, enhance their involvement in all the interpretation processes, and finally providing the visitors with to the optimal experiences.

#### **4.1 Limited contribution to the sustainability of Cultural heritage Resources**

As previously mentioned, the on-site interpretive tours have had adverse effects on the preservation and protection of the Historic Cairo tangible and intangible resources. This impact can be direct, such as overloading architectural attractions beyond their carrying capacity, leading to physical deterioration of these structures over time. Additionally, there are indirect negative effects, such as the selective focus on a limited number of monuments that receive attention, while many other equally important attractions and intangible cultural heritage elements are neglected. As a result, these overlooked elements may disappear, resulting in the loss of their cultural and historical significance.

Kamal, E. (2011) shares the same view that insufficient interpretation and lack of connection with the tangible heritage have led to the loss of intangible heritage of historic Cairo. According to reports from ICOMOS missions, overcrowding and the lack of an integrated socio-economic revitalization plan have negatively affected the site. These challenges provide an explanation for the current situation where only 400 out of the 600 historically significant buildings listed in the nomination

file of Historic Cairo remain standing today (Angl, J. 2018).

#### **4.2 lack of community involvement and profit sharing**

According to Nowacki (2021), involving the local community in the design, implementation, and evaluation of interpretation strategies can play a crucial role in shaping the local identity. However, the focus group participants noted that the current on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo do not involve the local community in the design or implementation processes. This observation is consistent with Angl's (2018) who highlighted that the local community in Historic Cairo is typically left out of decision-making processes.

The focus group participants unanimously agreed that on-site interpretive tours do not yield significant economic benefits. This is primarily because the tours are short in duration and cover a limited geographic area, resulting in a lower consumption of tourism products and ultimately, lower economic returns (N52). This finding support Angl's (2018) claim that a great part of the local community of Historic Cairo struggle to meet their basic needs.

The findings indicate the crucial need to adopt a bottom-up strategy that incorporates the community in decision-making processes. This involves taking into account the community's requirements, inclinations, and feedback to ensure that the interpretive tours meet their expectations. Additionally, it is vital to equip the local community with training programs that enhance their competencies and abilities, allowing them to participate in the co-creation of a more personalized experience for visitors. Moreover, extending the interpretive programs' reach by creating multi-dimensional trails would enable more residents to benefit from tourism.

#### **4.3 Lack of authentic experience**

The effectiveness of interpretation can be heightened by

not only providing information to visitors but also by motivating and facilitating deeper engagement with the heritage of the site and a greater understanding of the culture of the local community (ICOMOS, 1999; Nowacki, M. 2021).

The focus group discussion highlighted that the current interpretive tours of Historic Cairo don't provide the visitors with the chance to identify the real value of the site because of time and spatial limitations. As stated by A45:

"we usually rush from one monument to another to stick with the planned tour so there is no chance for the visitors to get a deeper experience of the site, this, of course, lowers their emotional feelings towards the site".

A45 remark is supported by literature which indicates that current interpretive programs of Historic Cairo have decreased the sense of appreciation within the visitors towards the site due to lack of linkages between monuments, social and its cultural significance (Kamal, E2011).

It has been observed that the existing on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo do not allow visitors to explore the site at their own pace, which is crucial for providing a personalized and unique experience (ICOMOS. 1999). In this regard H48 noted that:

"The current interpretive tours of Historic Cairo assumes that everyone wants to see the same things and at the same pace. But that's not the case. People have different interests and preferences, and allowing them to explore the site on their own would provide them with a more fulfilling and enriching experience"

The comment underlines a crucial problem with the current on-site interpretive tours in Historic Cairo, which is their reliance on a "one-size-fits-all" approach. To enhance the visitors' experience, there is a need to develop a personalized and

adaptable approach that caters to the diverse interests and desires of visitors. Research shows that visitors today actively participate in co-creating their experiences by engaging with heritage in a way that matches their interests at a psychological and emotional level. Therefore, it's crucial to allow visitors to choose and explore specific aspects of heritage independently to enhance their experience. (ICOMOS, 1999)

#### **6- Assessing the effectiveness of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours in light of principal No. 6 of ICOMOS Charter (Inclusiveness)**

This principal aims to make sure that the interpretation of a cultural heritage site is not just a rigidly designed presentation created by a certain party/ individuals, but should involve diverse knowledge and skills of academics, members of the community, conservation specialists, government officials, those who manage the site, tour guides, and other relevant professionals. Also the right of each party should be respected (Silberman N. A. 2006).

#### **6.1 Lack of coordination between the concerned stakeholders**

The lack of coordination between the concerned stakeholders is one of the issues raised by N52, she stated that:

“The on-site interpretive tours of historic Cairo are solely designed and executed by tour operators, with no participation or contribution from local communities, cultural experts, or government authorities, except for the tourism police, who need to be informed in advance about the itinerary and the assigned tour guide.”

The absence of proper communication can have a negative impact on the on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo, resulting in fragmented efforts among involved parties and hindering the ability to achieve the desired outcomes of interpretation efforts. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and involve all

stakeholders who may be impacted by or have an impact on such initiatives. By engaging these stakeholders in the development of objectives, strategies, policies, and protocols, their efforts can be coordinated, and their support can be secured. This collaborative approach will help to unify the efforts of all parties involved and increase the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes of the interpretive programs (ICOMOS, 1999).

H43 also pointed out that the absence of coordination among stakeholders has resulted in several issues that have negatively impacted the quality of interpretive programs, the experience of visitors, and the potential benefits for local residents. He stated that:

“As a tour guide, I have witnessed the lack of coordination between the various governmental institutions managing the site, including the Ministry of Tourism and antiquities, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Endowment, Cairo Governorate, and Ministry of Interior. This leads to a number of problems, including inconsistent messages, conflicting interpretive strategies, and duplication of effort, ultimately affecting the quality of these programs, the visitor experience, and the benefits that could be generated for local residents.”

M40 highlighted a major issue regarding the neglect of local residents' feedback about the current interpretive program. This has created a sense of insignificance among the local residents who feel excluded and undervalued as a crucial component of the site. As M40 noted that:

“The opinions of the local residents are being disregarded in the development of the current interpretive program. This neglect creates a profound sense of insignificance and disregard. It also has resulted in a feeling of being excluded and not valued as a crucial component of the site”.

The observations made by the focus group participants about the lack of inclusiveness and coordination are consistent with the reports produced by the World Heritage Center on Historic Cairo which highlighted the lack of coordination between concerned governmental institutions (WHC. n.d.; Elmenshawy & Shalaby, 2022 ).

The findings reveal the urgent need for collaborative efforts between all the stakeholders involved in the preservation and interpretation of Historic Cairo. To create a meaningful and effective interpretation that maximizes benefits for all parties, a collaborative and participatory approach must be adopted. This involves actively engaging the local community, visitors, governmental sector, private sector, scholars, and cultural heritage experts in the design and implementation of the interpretive activity. Through this approach, stakeholders can share their knowledge and expertise, and work together to create a more comprehensive and inclusive interpretation of the site.

#### **7-Assessing the effectiveness of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours in light of principal No. 6 of ICOMOS Charter (Research, Evaluation, and Training)**

This principle states that the interpretation of a cultural heritage site should always be a work in progress and include ongoing research, training, and evaluation. The interpretive activity according to this principal should be designed in a way that allows for changes and revisions based on new information, scientific analysis, and public feedback. It should be also monitored and evaluated by visitors, members of the community, and heritage professionals. Periodic change should be made according to feedback from the stakeholders. In addition, professionals in the heritage interpretation and presentation field should undergo periodic training programs to update their skills and enhance their performance (Silberman N. A. 2006)

## **7.1 lack of linkage between research and improvement of interpretive tours**

The focus group participants highlighted that despite the abundance of updated scientific research on the site's history and cultural heritage, there is little evidence of using these studies to make adjustments/changes to the current on-site interpretive tours in terms of the offered attraction, the trail of the interpretive program, and time allocated to visit the site. This issue was highlighted by N52 who noted that:

“The interpretive programs have remained static for many years; there is no change in the selected attractions which we offer to the visitors, the trail we follow, time allocated to the program”.

The comment made by N52 is consistent with the literature which highlighted that interpretive tours in Historic Cairo have a minimal impact on enhancing visitors' overall experience (Kamel, E. 2011).

Based on that, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive review of the current interpretive tours and identify areas that need improvement. This should involve making full use of updated scientific research on the site's history and cultural heritage to develop a more dynamic interpretive program and engaging interpretive experience.

## **7.2 lack of evaluation of Historic Cairo on-site interpretive tours**

The lack of evaluation and monitoring of the interpretive guided tours, which could result in outdated information, less engaging experience for visitors, and dissatisfaction of local community, is one of the weaknesses which have been raised by A45 who stated that:

“The interpretive tours of Historic Cairo lack proper evalua-



tion. The feedback forms which are usually given to visitors at the end of their stay in Egypt focus on the overall tourism itinerary rather than specific sites. Therefore, the information received is not specific to the interpretive tours of Historic Cairo, and it doesn't provide us with the necessary detailed feedback to improve and refine our interpretation content"

## **7.2 Lack of capacity building training**

Based on the focus group discussion, it is clear that the capacity building training programs for interpretation and presentation of heritage sites, in general, and Historic Cairo, in particular, need to be enhanced. These programs are not held consistently, and even when offered, attendance is not mandatory for tour guides. This can lead to the possibility of the tour guides presenting outdated information and having varying explanations, which can negatively impact the quality of the visitor's experience. As N52 noted that H43:

"The capacity building training programs need to be improved. Attendance should be mandatory, and the programs should be held consistently to ensure that the tour guides have access to updated information and are presenting exceptional experience for the visitors".

It is essential to address this issue to ensure that visitors receive accurate and updated information during their tours of Historic Cairo. By enhancing these training programs, tour guides can provide a more engaging and informative experience for visitors, which would benefit all stakeholders.

## **Conclusions :**

The assessment of the current state of on-site interpretive tours in Historic Cairo has revealed that they do not conform to the best principals adopted by ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites. Several gaps were identified in the current on-site interpretive tours, includ-

ing the following:

- The current on-site interpretive tours fail to improve the physical and intellectual accessibility of Historic Cairo World Heritage Site.
- The on-site interpretive tours of Historic Cairo do not contribute to a multi-dimensional understanding of the site as it focuses solely on its architectural heritage, neglecting its cultural and social aspects.
- The current on-site interpretive tours don't contribute to the preservation of tangible and intangible resources of the site, leading to a loss of cultural heritage resources and affecting the authenticity of the site.
- Living cultural heritage is underrepresented and excluded from the site's interpretation.
- The on-site interpretive tours do not generate significant economic benefits because they are short in duration and cover a limited area, resulting in reduced consumption of tourism products and lower economic returns.
- There is a lack of proper communication and coordination among stakeholders when developing and implementing on-site interpretive tours.
- Despite the availability of updated scientific research, the current interpretive tours of Historic Cairo remain static and unchanged, indicating a lack of utilization of the latest knowledge in enhancing the tours.
- The on-site interpretive tours are not regularly evaluated and monitored, which may result in outdated information, a less engaging experience for visitors, and dissatisfaction of the local community.
- Insufficient capacity-building trainings that focus on enhancing the guides' abilities to deliver high-quality interpretive tours.

The current status of the on-site interpretive tours highlighted the

need for a new comprehensive heritage interpretation strategy that aligns with the ICOMOS Charter. This strategy would improve visitors' understanding of the site's value for which it was enlisted as a world heritage site; enhance sustainability of site's tangible and intangible cultural resources, increase the engagement of all the stakeholders, and increase economic returns.

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