

## BEIT SAHOUR OLD TOWN : A CORNER OF CULTURE



**CULTURAL RIGHTS TRADITION HERITAGE**  
**REGENERATION DIVERSITY CULTURAL IDENTITY**  
**ATTRACTIVENESS PEACE**

### 1. Context

The city of Beit Sahour holds a huge legacy of customs and traditions due to its origins going back to the Bronze Age (3000 B.C.). The Canaanites inhabited its numerous caves as traces of inhabitants were found in these caves, going back to Roman times. The origin of the name Beit Sahour (the house of vigilance) reputedly stems from the Canaanite words "Beit" meaning place, and "Sahour" meaning night watch, which reflected the importance of the area for shepherds. The Municipality of Beit Sahour, dating back to 1925, is the main entity providing a large number of services to the local community. The Municipality is committed to preserve the historical character of the Old City and considered it as a living legacy.



Beit Sahour Municipality in cooperation with the Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation in Bethlehem carried out a field survey in the historic city and were surprised by the number of homes and areas which were neglected and abandoned, representing a total area of 2 600 m<sup>2</sup>. This made the Municipality work on preparing an emergency investment plan to revive the historic city.

THE AIM OF THE PROJECT IS TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE CULTURAL IDENTITY AND RESPECT CULTURAL DIVERSITY.

## 2. Beit Sahour and culture

Culture has always been embedded in the Palestinian identity. In addition, projects related to intangible cultural heritage and traditions preservation also take place. Beit Sahour Municipality arranges annually traditional festivals like the Shepherds Nights Festival, the called Beit Sahour Al Faqqous Festival and many others. These occasions are brimmed with traditional music and dances helping to empower the identity of the town. Furthermore, in order to transmit the historical and traditional identity from generation to generation, annual events such as handcrafts bazaars and procession routs, Christmas events take place enhancing once again the historical identity of the city.

Beit Sahour performs those activities trying to find ways that will create opportunities to participate in international exhibitions, build international partnerships and exchanges. Therefore, Beit Sahour would like to extend its reputation as a center of culture and become a place to be considered by International artists to visit, explore and be inspired. Finally, new practicing artists would improve cultural creativity, showcase local talents and provide major marketing opportunities to an international audience for the benefit of local economy.

The Municipality is engaged with the Agenda 21 for Culture and therefore committing to the following principles:

### 1. Rights

Beit Sahour witnessed to reach a sustainable development by including and making culture available to anyone. Public and free initiatives were inaugurated (ancient library, a museum, training courses, a social space for women, youth council committees and *Dabkeh* dance group).



**2. Heritage, diversity and creativity**

Tangible and intangible events (mentioned previously) are being launched in order to stimulate and encourage diverse and creative skills among its citizens.

**3. Education**

New courses and trainings are prepared to foster and include culture inside the education system (lectures, public library or Beit Sahour Divan).

**4. Environment**

Renovation and beautification of old buildings in the city is taking place in pursuance of contributing to a cleaner environment.

**5. Economy**

Economic reactivation is being encouraged through cultural business oriented initiatives (shops, guesthouses, restaurant rented for the community).

**6. Equality and social inclusion**

All sectors of society are now included by adapting public spaces to their needs (access to disable people for example).

**7. Urban planning and public space**

A new urban plan is being drafted in order to embed a cultural attitude (survey on conservation plans).

**8. Information and knowledge**

Culture is now included in new sectors such as the technological and touristic ones (with inclusion of Alternative Tourism Groups and Information Center, Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between people, Abraham Path, the handcraft village etc...).

**9. Governance**

Partnership and cooperation among different actors is now taking place when scheduling cultural events and activities (organizations previously mentioned and more).

THE CITY OF BEIT SAHOUR CONSIDERS CULTURE AS A CRUCIAL COMPONENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EMPHASIZING THAT IS A CRUCIAL FACTOR FOR SECURITY AND STABILITY.



### 3. Objectives and implementation of the project

#### 1.1. Overall and specific objectives

The main goal is developing a cultural agenda that runs from the heart of the old City of Beit Sahour. It includes all events and institutions in the city, in order to make culture a right for and to recognize identity and cultural diversity. Therefore, stressing that culture is an important component of sustainable development, and emphasizing that culture is a significant factor for security and stability through the resolution of conflicts.

More specifically, the main goals of the revitalization of the historic Old City are: 1) Protect and enhance cultural identity and respect cultural diversity, 2) Protect the rich cultural heritage of the historic city 3) Improve the physical condition of the traditional buildings and enhance architectural features, 4) Encourage tourism to the old core in addition to the Shepherd Fields' Churches, 5) Increase economic development since it relies heavily on tourism, 6) Promote cultural industries, handicrafts and traditional products, 7) Environmental conservation and development, 8) Improve the quality of social life, 9) Encourage community engagement and ownership, 10) Partnership between the Municipality ,private sectors, local organizations and educational institutes, 11) Encourage decentralization and community participation and promote dialogue and partnership with all sectors, 12) Encourage creativity and folk art.

THE PROJECT INCREASED THE QUALITY OF SERVICES PROVIDED AND IMPROVED THE IMAGE OF THE CITY, ITS IMPORTANCE, AND PROMOTED IT INTERNATIONALLY.

#### 1.2. Key stages

In order to achieve these goals, Beit Sahour Municipality worked on a conservation plan of the Old City and did the following actions: 1) Renovate more guesthouses, 2) Renovate a building for the use of the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between people, 3) Renovate a community center and a training center, 4) Renovate a library and a museum, 5) Renovate a building for the support of local handicrafts(handcraft village , 6) Renovate a building for Alternative Tourism Group, 7) Rehabilitation of public spaces in the Old City to be used for cultural and social events, 8) Rehabilitation of the historic and touristic routes of the Old City,9) Renovate the tourist information center.



As for the phases of the project, Beit Sahour Municipality created an emergency plan to revive the Old City, worked with other local organizations, partnered with international funders to carry out the project, and renovated the buildings according to plan. It also carried out awareness programs that aim to define cultural heritage, its significance in the history of human societies, the importance of cultural heritage as a constant in the building of identity and underline the need to protect it, initiate a change with regard to cultural heritage through a process of learning about its specifics and adopting new behavioural attitudes.

## 4. Impacts

### 1.1. Direct impacts

#### Impacts on the local government

Projects provide monthly income to the Municipality and maintains mutual trust and respect in the community. Increases the number of committees supporting the work of the Municipality. Moreover, the city receives more expertise from local experts and turns old buildings to modern healthy eco-friendly buildings. Finally, increases the quality of services provided and improves the image of the city, its importance, and promote it internationally.

#### Impact on culture and local cultural actors of the city/territory

Beauty and originality of architecture in the Old City is shown. Public spaces are provided for artists to be creative, for folklore dance group to hold their trainings and for the community meetings, workshops, activities and cultural events like a bazar of Palestinian traditional handicrafts and an exhibition of olive wood carvings for fair trade artisans. There is also cultural diversity in the Old City through institutions such as the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between people, the Alternative Tourism Group, and other traditional art centres as well as guesthouses where international visitors are immersed in the local culture and Palestinian cuisine.

### Impact on the territory and its population

Beautify the Old City of Beit Sahour, making it look attractive enough for citizens to invest and recreation, since many of these buildings were left and abandoned. Additional space are opened to allow the community to start small projects in the Old City. Consequently, local economy is further developed and create job opportunities and source of income. Exchange of cultures as citizens were introduced to other cultures through engaging in activities with the foreign visitors and by promoting their local products and handicraft work.

THE MUNICIPALITY RECEIVED ENCOURAGEMENT FROM ALL PARTS OF THE COMMUNITY – FAMILIES, ENGINEERS, INSTITUTIONS AND THEY ALL PARTICIPATED IN PLANNING, PROSPOSING IDEAS AND DECISION MAKING.]

#### 1.2. Evaluation

The Municipality measured success through these factors: Schedule, meeting objectives, community Satisfaction and finance.

#### 1.3. Continuity

Part of the events are carried out by the private sector and the other part by the local institutions, so the continuity of the project is their own responsibility, as well as any maintenance required in the future. Though, the Department of Engineering, Planning and Projects at Beit Sahour Municipality provide maintenance financed by the Municipality. Operation of events is also the responsibility of the tenant of renting the restored building.

## 5. Further information

The city of Beit Sahour was a nominated candidate for the second 'UCLG International Award – Mexico City – Culture 21' (January – May 2016). The awards jury produced a final report in June 2016 and asked the UCLG Committee on Culture to promote this project as a practical example for the implementation of Agenda 21 for Culture.

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