Local museums and cultural sustainability: a case study from Greece

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Local authorities in Greece and other countries are often very interested in the establishment and running of local museums. These are considered an investment in the economic development of the region, since they are expected to become tourist destinations and provide reasons for more prolonged staying in the area and, therefore, to increase the economic impact of tourism. Usually, these museums are expected to be financed by the state, and to be part of a state touristic policy. And when this financing is not available, in times of crisis, this model seems unattainable.

But, this is only one aspect of the need for local cultural institutions, or, rather, one model for their establishment and support. On the other side of the same coin, these institutions have an important role to play in reinforcing local identity and providing a focus of development, not in financial but in social terms. Far from being local touristic resources, these institutions are, or can become, forces that encourage creativity, identity-building, community-enhancement, cultural sustainability. In this sense, their main audience is not the tourists but local communities, which participate in their creation and their development, which identify themselves through these institutions, which support local development in a more profound way. Their financial support relies with the community and far from being a state project they are community initiatives.

This paper will discuss these two models for establishing and supporting local cultural institutions, using as a case study the museums in the island of Lesvos in the North-East Aegean Sea. It will mainly discuss the Museum of Refugee Memories in the little village of Skala Loutron, and the way this local institution supports the sustainability of the local community in cultural and social terms, and contributes to a participatory culture that recognizes and supports diversity.

*Keywords: museum, community, Lesvos*