



Twinning Project AZ/15/ENP/OT/35

Support to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic
of Azerbaijan for the modernization of its policy and
management system in the culture sector

The Pilot Project for the Culture Club in Lahij

Draft proposal, 12 January 2007

Michelangelo Fabbrini (*), Simone Siliani (**)

(*) Confservizi Cispel Toscana (**) Regione Toscana

The need of a pilot project example, stated by the Twinning work plan, is due to the necessity of testing the methodology for renovation and improvement of Culture Club that we have outlined in the main general document. It is also necessary to carry out as soon as possible a pilot project on a located Culture Club to demonstrate that investment in these institutions can be profitable from a cultural and political point of view. Once effective, this pilot project can be a role model for improvement of other clubs and of the network as a whole, thus being a starting stage of the whole improvement process.

Together with the Beneficiary we agree on selecting the area of Lahij as the one where identify the Culture Club adopted as the pilot example.

Lahij is one of the most ancient human settlements in Azerbaijan, located in the Ismaili *Region*, on the southern slopes of the Greater Caucasus Mountain Range at a height of 1,211 meters above sea level. Population is several thousand people.

Lahij is a notable place in Azerbaijan, with its authentic handicrafts traditions, particularly related to copper. The village's carpet and rug crafts are also well known in Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus.

The settlement of Lahij is a unique living district, with its unusual planning lay out, transport systems, and its public, private and religious buildings. Lahij is an example of early urbanization and architecture, as shown by its cobbled streets and squares, together with its developed sewerage systems and water pipelines. Subterranean *kurabandis* ('sewerage system'), made from river stones, and dating back to almost one thousand years, are thought to be one of the most ancient sewerage systems used in the world.

Lahij is renowned for its production of arms and copper items, decorated with carved ornaments, and for leather goods' manufacture, that created suitable conditions for the development of other craftsmen, such as saddle makers, bridle makers, cobblers, hat makers and sheepskin makers. A large collection of Lahij are in the Azerbaijan Museum of National History, further in the Russian Museum of Ethnography (Saint-Petersburg), the State Museum of Oriental Art (Moscow), the Louvre, the Museum of Bern. The major part of the cultural heritage of the Lahij represents religious interpretations, as well as folk rites, traditions, ceremonies and celebrations related to pre-Islamic faiths.

Both the State of Azerbaijan and the Lahij community make continued and considerable efforts to preserve Lahij's unique culture, applied arts and traditional system of arranging handicraft production. For artisans, the tradition represents a major source of living and provides a strong sense



of identity and community pride. In 2015, copper craftsmanship of Lahij was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The development of international tourism, together with more knowledge about the people and cultures, has resulted in a gradual interest in the cultural diversity of the Region. Lahij, in recent years, has attracted the attention of many tourists visiting from countries worldwide and as a result Lahij is now included in the travel tours of several leading tourism agencies.

There is a historical museum in Lahij, which was founded in 1985 on social basis and gained public (state) status in 1992. There are more than 1,000 exhibits here, which covers 3 periods: ancient (II-III centuries B.C.), middle ages and modern periods. In 2016, there were around 12,000 visitors to museum, both local and international. The museum organized excursions and tours for visitors as well. Currently, the museum occupies 9 paid staff members: director, chief museum fund specialist, junior scientific specialist, restorer-painter, guide, daytime guard, nighttime guard, worker and cleaner. No ticket sale – free entrance. Area: 100 m² (10m x 10m). The museum is subordinate to the newly established Ismaili Regional Department of Culture and Tourism (Chief: Mr. Elnur Huseynov.).

Furthermore, Lahij is seat of an environmental, historic, cultural reserve, which released the following data (2015):

- total tourists: 31,595, divided in locals (27,059), and foreign ones (4,536)
- guided visits, 582.

Through a representative of Head of Ismaili district executive power for Lahij, we were told about the following (census 2007):

- 510 households,
- 731 retired/pensioners,
- 237 youngsters,
- 212 schoolchildren,
- around 60 artisans
- around 30 carpet-weavers
-

There are 14 villages surrounding Lahij, with a total population of around 2,500 inhabitants, several villages having just 15-25 households located in 5 to 37 kms. distances from Lahij, the most far one is Burovdal (37 km).

As regards the construction of a new road from Demirchi, Shamakhi region to Lahij, Mr. Fikrat mentioned the project first started by SOCAR, and now it is being implemented by AzerAvtoYol Open Joint Stock Company. The road construction project aims to improve the road infrastructure by making a new road from Demirchi to Lahij for easy access and travel by tourists and ensuring the overall economic and touristic development of those regions via creating tourism route chains of 2 regions which can be stretched in future to the neighboring regions like Gabala, Oghuz, Sheki, Gakh, Zagatala and Balaken.

Consequently, several factors are key in choosing Lahij as a pilot destination.

- First of all, the area of Lahij is a unique representation of the history (since the medieval times), the folk arts and traditions, the craftwork activities and the intangible heritage (the copper craftsmanship of Lahij is included in the UNESCO Representative List of the

Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity) of Azerbaijan. The existing Culture Club focuses on this latest subject, as a handicraft centre, providing services such as exhibitions in Ismaili festivals of the 40 kind of handicrafts existing in Lahij, and training for young students. Also in the Lahij area there is a public library, an historical and ethnographic museum, a tourist information centre and headquarters of the Lahij Reserve.

- Secondly, Lahij is a well known tourist site (a recent survey shows that among local tourists, Lahij is awarded as the best tourist area of the country, mainly because of its natural landscape and forests) and already local authorities are devoted to promote the area for foreign tourism (some tourist brochure are published in English). Some data state that the number of tourists in Lahij per year is around 32,000 (almost 85% local tourism), over a population of 2,500 inhabitants (data source: Lahij Reserve): these are very interesting numbers, suggesting that services to tourists could be a very important issue for the new Culture Club, not only for tourism activity but also for leisure and entertainment.
- Thirdly, there is an existing design project for a new building that may be used as the site of the new culture club, together with other additional services, therefore to cover the large spectrum of the mission of the culture club as stated by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 273 dated 14th February 2014, approving *Culture Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, and also other services for citizens and tourists.

Finally, in Lahij there are favorable conditions to develop both a network between the new building Culture Club and many of the historical sites and craftwork atelier and culture activities carried on by local groups, and to create new cultural proposals and activities economically sustainable.

The activities to be located in the new Culture Club

In order to define the cultural activities to be located in the new Culture Club of Lahij, we have conducted the following surveys:

- enquiring and discussion with the following persons: Mr. Mirdamad Sadigov, Head of Ismaili District executive power; Mr. Elnur Huseynov, Head of Ismaili Regional Department of Culture and Tourism; the MCT staff devoted to the present Twinning assignment, and EC Twinning project staff (respectively, Mr. Ramil Abbakirov, and Mr. Telman Malikzada);
- the *Exemplary Regulations of Urban (District) Cultural Centers*, approved with Decree n. 8, dated 27 December 2012;
- gathering data from the representatives of cultural institutions (Mammadov Zulfuqar, responsible of the local Culture Club; Quliyev Qurban for the public library; Aliyev Dadash Agameshadi, responsible of the tourist information center) based on the community of Lahij;

Activities that may be presented in the newly reformed Culture Club building in Lahij can be divided into three categories:

- Cultural and educational activities
- Tourism services
- Handicraft
- Social services

Getting into details:

1. Cultural and educational activities.

- The existing *public library* in Lahij might be moved in the new building, but by doing so the whole concept of the library should be radically changed. As a matter of fact the existing library is a two room building without a reading room and without internet service, no software program to classify books and no membership system. The library owns 12,500 books and a DVD section with one computer and a printer. Three staff members work in the library. Despite this clear deficit situation of instruments, books and technologies, the library states that they had 1,029 visitors last year, meaning that there is a certain level of demand for library services. So, we suppose that in a new format (possibly - new building), with new technologies (WiFi, software), open-shelf library (so that visitors can choose books by themselves), a reading room and a borrowing service, the library could improve its role and capabilities to serve both the community and the tourist. But a training program for the staff, a project introducing new services and an important technological improvement must be taken into account, because just to move the actual library in a new building will not bring feasible results.
- *Language courses.* The opportunity to provide languages courses (English in the first place, but also other languages) can be a new service that the Culture Club might offer to the public. This implies to establish in the new building at least two rooms equipped with PCs, wifi, screens. Plus that, in the case, the project will need a staff composed by a secretary that will organize the courses and manage reservations and, of course, language teachers. Other courses may include computer, drawing, volunteering (ASAN) and etc.
- *Cinema and theatre hall.* The new Culture Club should have a cinema and possibly a theatre hall. Not a big one (around 50-100 seats) equipped with digital technology to show CD and on streaming films, theatres, events such as operas from important theatres around the world (stating that in Lahij in 1912 was performed the first opera in Azerbaijan after the one in Baku in 1908) or movies in the original language. Also some theatre company could perform in the hall, but most of all, perhaps young people could participate to theatrical courses and further on establish a local theatre company. At least 1 person of staff should be dedicated to the management of this venue, if other functions (administrative, marketing, etc.) can be carried out by a staff dedicated to these functions for the Culture Club as a whole. Additional activities: presentations, expert meetings, meetings with writers, musicians, charity events, etc.
- *Historical Museum of Lahij.* There is also a big benefit from moving the Historical Museum of Lahij inside the new Culture Club building. The museum is located in a small building of 100 square meters and is a free entrance museum. The idea is to link the history of Lahij (and particularly the handicraft activity) to the modern Lahij and to make people and visitors understand how the community and the activities have developed through the centuries. There is also a possibility to make specific internships or traineeships programmes for tourist (e.g. for school children).

2. Tourism services

- *Services to individual tourists.* Activities already provided by the Tourist Information Centre and by the Lahij Reserve, such as excursions or guided tours booking, can be moved in the new building and managed by one single staff member for all therefore rationalize costs and have a better performance. This desk can also distribute brochures and be a call center for tourism services.
- *New tourism services.* The new building can be the opportunity to develop new services to tourists and to enterprises working in the area of tourism. I.e. new trekking and excursions paths and proposals, new tourist packages (culture+tourism+gastronomy+sports), booking centre for hotels, Bed & Breakfast, ground transportation, car rental, car sharing, etc., training for young people or internship, etc. Also, in the new building tourist fairs and BtoB meeting can be organized to help tourism industry and enterprises to develop and to innovate their services and management.
- *Lahij State Historical-Artistic Reserve.* The Reserve headquarters can be moved inside the new Culture Club building together with the activities they manage.

3. Handicraft

- *Handicraft centre.* The Lahij Culture Club, which is primarily focused on handicraft should move inside the new building. The mission of the centre is to develop handicraft - specifically coppersmiths, carpet-weaving, saddler, blacksmith, forging, hatting – through workshops and exhibitions in different festivals and training of young students. These services are provided to the 17 members of the club, but the new location and environment should help to enlarge the membership and also to provide master class lessons to young artisans so that the know-how that the old artisans have may be transmitted to young artisans, but at the same time the young artisan could improve their capabilities with language, marketing, economy, etc. competence. Also the new building will provide the opportunity to give demonstration on artisans work and to organize laboratories “hand on” of handicraft activities for tourists. The 2 full members of staff and 1 part time cleaner should be sufficient to organize these activities.

It is important to stress the fact that not all the activities on the three areas that are carried out in Lahij should move inside one building, otherwise the building will be jeopardized and will lose its identity which is to be the engine and the main reference for high excellence activities in the region. But at the same time it is important that activities that will remain based on the territory keep being linked to the Culture Club forming a network with a governance located in the Culture Club.

4. Social Services

- Social services should include all the possible administrative assistance, included paid services for the local population and for people travelling across the place. Here we should mention cooperation with ASAN Service and possible services that can be located there by ASAN, by banks and etc.

Staff of the new Culture Club in Lahij

Although a more detailed definition of the staff needs to be evaluated having in consideration the organization of the building management, we can imagine that the governance of the Culture Club and the staff should be composed as following:

- 1 general manager of the Culture Club and the building;
- 4 responsables for each one of the four departments we can imagine to establish inside the building:
 - o *Culture* (library, cinema & theatre, training courses, museum, entertainment)
 - o *Tourism* (information office, booking office, events)
 - o *Handicraft*
 - o *Lahij State Historical-Artistic Reserve*
- 1 responsible for Communication, Marketing, Events department. This department shall serve for its functions all of the four other departments: it is very important that this department coordinates all the communication, marketing and agenda of the events happening inside the building, so that the Culture Club will have a unique brand and external communication system.
- 1 responsible for budget managing. It is important that the Culture Club has one only budget and that there is one person (or staff) managing it, who is responsible for it, so to keep the budget under control and that you have comparative costs for each department, and also optimize global costs.
- 1 responsible for technological infrastructures, that can manage purchasing, prompt intervention, setting and anything else needed to make the building work under this matter.

Other members of staff shall be evaluated, considering the existing workers in the different activities already existing and the new activities to be developed within the new Culture Club. It is important to underline that salaries for workers inside the building must be comparable and adequate to the quality of services we are willing to provide through this new facility.

Reviewing the existing design for the new building

Reviewing the existing design of the new building for the Culture Club, therefore to reshape it to better fit the needs of the activities that are willing to take place in the building and to adapt it to a new concept of the Culture Club (i.e. if the building shall contain a new concept library or a cinema, then the design must reflect the needs of such activities), is crucial for the best outcome of the pilot project.

The idea is to first discuss and establish which are the activities take will take place in the culture club and then to fit the design of the building to them: once these activities are decided and consolidated, we can proceed to reviewing the existing design.

During the meeting with the newly appointed head of Ismaili Regional Department of Culture and Tourism, Mr. Elnur Huseynov, said that his office will take on this task.

Managing plan

Defining a managing plan of the new Culture Club in Lahij, therefore to have a clear idea of which will be the costs both of the building and of the managing of the culture club and of which can be the revenues that the club may generate, is another crucial step for the realization of the pilot project. The managing plan should be a pluriannual one, therefore to evaluate the developing of the management

during the years, until reaching the breakeven. Managing plan should include possible financing sources.

Cooperation with ASAN

Discussion with ASAN to establish cooperation with the Culture Club: coexistence of additional services provided by ASAN and cultural services of the Club may be at mutual convenience at the condition that both kind of services are clearly defined (provided by ASAN and Ministry of Culture and Tourism) and identified (with different logo, etc.). The target of this discussion is to define a Memorandum of Cooperation between the two entities (Ministry and ASAN) for the management of the new culture club.

At this stage, we have been told that a previous discussion between staff of ASAN and MCT, have pointed out the possibility for ASAN to provide the following services and facilities within the Culture Club in Lahij:

- *ASAN paying terminal.* This facility can concretely help citizens and tourist to get through administrative procedures such as fines, services as light and heating, passport, etc. One can suppose that mainly young people will be able to approach this facility: that is an important issue because probably the functions provided within the Culture Club will be more attractive for young people.
- *Information touch-screen service.* This facility should cover not only services provided by ASAN but the cultural services as well. And also the facility should provide information of cultural activities in the territory of the Ismaili Region
- *ASAN WiFi.* This is a crucial service because only if a good WiFi system is working many of the cultural services will have the possibility to be improved (library, cinema, etc.)
- *PC stations open to internet.* This is another important issue and attractive service. One should evaluate the possibility to provide free internet access for a maximum time of an hour a day per person, then the exceeding time could be charged so to get some revenues and also to avoid the risk that few users monopolize per PC stations
- *Volunteers.* ASAN can provide training for volunteers from Lahij and the surrounding villages therefore to help people to approach the more technological services and also to run the building, supporting the staff of the Culture Club
- *Involvement of ABAD¹.* The possibility to involve ABAT in the pilot project is also very important. They can provide training courses for artisans and young practitioners specifically in the field of marketing, company management, languages etc. This is a crucial point to help the handicraft activity to take a giant step from local based economy to a larger and more industrial approach, and maintaining the quality of handicraft knowhow as well.

¹ ABAD (Easy Support to Family Business) is an agency, established under State Agency for Public Service and Social Innovations under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The aim of ABAD public legal entity is supporting development and formation of family businesses in Azerbaijan, stimulating development of small and medium entrepreneurship, creating additional employment opportunities for population.