

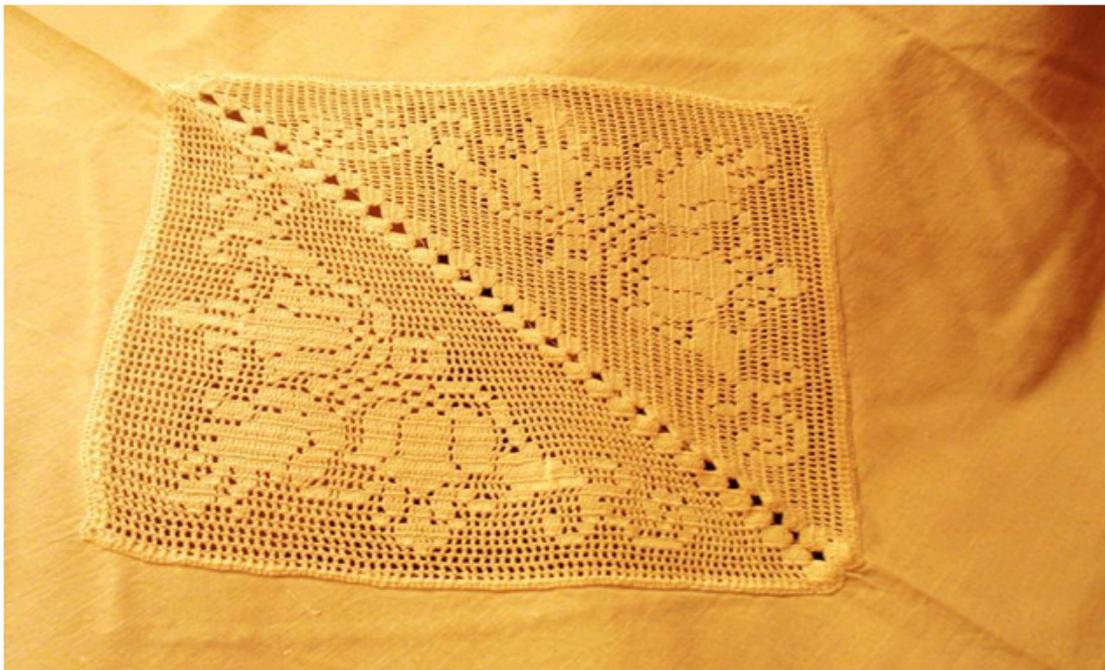


Arab Reform Initiative

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# The Cultural Map: A Tool for Development and Peacebuilding

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A model of a joint textile production common among many cultures in Syria © Hassan Abbas



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The cultural map can be defined as “a practical cognitive tool to improve the living conditions of people in their places of residence, based on their cultural resources.” As a tool for development and peacebuilding, a cultural map provides the raw material with which to formulate and activate methods of interaction that help citizens manage fault lines in their communities. Cultural maps can unite citizens through projects that pave the way for social cohesion and contribute directly to achieving transitional justice – a prerequisite for civil peace in post-conflict societies. Cultural maps also provide effective tools for the creation of local and regional development programmes based on available cultural resources.

To develop the tool, the concepts of “culture” and “cultural resources” require a certain degree of theoretical unpacking and operationalization. Here, culture does not refer to the narrow descriptions often used in media, or in discourse on politics and cognitive science. Culture is not limited to intellectual products but is instead expanded to include all intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical relationships that arise between humans and the tangible and intangible elements surrounding them. In this sense, culture is not a “universe of knowledge” – meaning a certain awareness and interpretation of reality – but rather a set of practices related to an individual’s substantive, practical know-how stemming from their mode of living.<sup>1</sup> By making this distinction, humans shift from being merely intellectually aware of their own condition to being agents capable of changing these conditions through action.

This understanding of culture is the basis for constructing a cultural map. For practitioners, the construction of a cultural map for peacebuilding develops through three sequenced stages of: documentation of cultural resources within the defined area, analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of these resources, and activation of intervention plans. This paper serves as a brief guide to these three stages to provide local civil society actors and peacebuilding practitioners with the skills to carry out cultural mapping.

## Stage I: Documentation

Documentation means defining the cultural resources within the map’s area of



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concern. This area may be as small as a secluded neighbourhood or extend across a country. The accuracy and detail of the documentation process is, however, inversely proportional to the breadth of the area studied: it is possible to learn about a small neighbourhood in much more detail than a town, city, or country. Moreover, the cultural resources in an area of study are inherently related to the distinctive features of individuals or groups living there.

Cultural resources can be divided into four main categories, with further subdivisions allowing greater precision:

**Fixed material resources:** These include the results of all human efforts to fill or utilize space for a functional or aesthetic goal (architecture, infrastructure, monuments, etc.). These also include all human inventions: technology and practical solutions to the issues humans face (water canals, water wheels, spacecraft, etc.).

**Mobile resources:** Any industrial or manual product which provides a benefit to people in their material and non-material needs (food, drinks, drugs, works of art, clothing, etc.), or that serves as a tool useful in particular kinds of work (musical instruments, hand tools, etc.).

**Intangible resources:** All resources that have no concrete or physical presence but often have a profound influence on relations within the community and its surroundings (worship, poetry, tales, rituals, dance, annual farming calendars, water distribution shares, communication systems, etc.). These also include the expertise knowledge and capacity to produce other resources, including physical resources.

**Natural resources:** The environs that characterize the place where a given social group lives (the desert, caves, mountains, shores, lakes, etc.), as well as the components of these environs (trees, vegetation, animals, etc.).

Cultural resources			
a. Fixed material	b. Mobile material	c. Intangible	d. Natural
Archeology and museums	Traditional medicine	Tales	Mountains
Buildings and structures	Antiquities	Beliefs	Water
Religious structures	Foods	Literature and poetry	Caves
Cultural structures	Drinks	Rituals	Forests
Touristic structures	Crafts	Popular feasts	Woods
Service structures	Art works	Symbols	Lakes



Practical structures	Musical instruments	Dance and music	Shores
	Books, printed or written material	Games	Animals

There are bonds between the cultural resources of any given place and the people living in it that an interested outsider cannot always easily discover or understand. These bonds may sometimes be deliberately obscured from the researcher due to reverence or the special status of the resource and its meaning for a particular group. It is therefore essential that, during the documentation process, multiple sources of information are utilized. This necessitates a multi-track approach providing access to the widest possible stock of information about a given resource, its history, and its significance in the life of the community. This multi-track approach includes five basic tracks, which represent a mixture of desk research and field research:

1. **Official:** This includes information and assistance provided by official bodies or government departments. Government and administrative documents provide a wealth of information that helps better understand the social connections – or what Belgian sociologist Marce Bolle De Bal refers to as the *reliance sociale*<sup>2</sup> – as well as identify cultural resources and how people relate to them. If they are accurate, statistics provide, for example, the numbers and types of trees planted in an area or the population size or sectarian and ethnic backgrounds.
2. **Scientific:** This includes scientific studies by specialized researchers.
3. **General:** Generated by the map-builders, this track employs methods such as questionnaires and surveys distributed to sample segments of a community (e.g. families) to determine the depth of people's connections with a given resource (e.g., the number of families that place religious symbols in their homes to determine the depth of the relationship with beliefs and indicate the degree of community religiosity).
4. **Dialogue:** A qualitative method, this track involved interviews with local dignitaries who have practical experience in, or wide knowledge of, the area in question. They usually provide information from memory that may not be found otherwise, making their oral memory a cultural resource in itself that must be documented and preserved.
5. **Interactive:** This involves holding focus groups with acknowledged



representatives or social actors in an area. These focus groups help to identify the mechanisms of relations among people, and between people and their cultural resources.

The process of developing a cultural map can stop at the end of this stage, when the information collected from the different tracks is archived systematically. This information can form a reference document for the collective memory of the time it was developed and become an information bank or be used in designing interactive maps or other multimedia tools. These tools can be placed at the disposal of the people of the region, civil society organizations, and government institutions. The second stage of the general construction of the cultural map – the analysis phase – will depend on these tools.

## Stage II: Analysis

After identifying and documenting the resources constituting a map, the map-builders possess a large information bank varying in size according to a number of factors. If a map is of a small residential or administrative unit such as a refugee camp, neighbourhood in a town, or natural habitat, there will be a manageable amount of documented material. However, with a bigger area, such as a river basin, a city, or a whole country, the volume of documented information may require systematic division. In addition to the physical size, the amount of documented information is also commensurate with the cultural richness of the region. Huge differences may exist between the data collected for a newly constructed city, industrial facility, or residential suburb and the data on an ancient, vibrant city that has developed through consecutive civilizations.

The process of analysis bridges the documentation process and the construction of the information bank with the activation stage, when intervention strategies are developed. The work in the analysis stage focuses on a number of issues. First, analysis entails identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each documented resource. Citizens living in certain places may use only a small part of the total resources available because the population does not fully exploit them, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. They may not have the need, or know-how, to activate or build intervention strategies focusing on these resources, or a



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resource may be off-limits to its reverence or special status. In addition, people may lose interest in certain resources due to scientific and social progression, e.g. open evening social gatherings in rural areas – a crucial act in maintaining the vibrancy of intangible heritage and consolidating collective memory. Such gatherings have decreased in frequency and are gradually being replaced by family evenings around the television as rural areas gain access to electricity.

Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of a cultural resource depends primarily on the attitude of the area's population toward the resource. It is useless to propose strategies of intervention contrary to the convictions of the people of the area. However, in some cases, such as post-conflict situations, the period of war may have destroyed certain convictions, and it may become very difficult to adhere to this guiding principle. In addition, some scientific studies may provide data and perceptions that contradict the prevailing ideas about a particular resource. For example, residents living next to mountain forests agree to build a gondola because they think such a project would contribute to the development of the area, but a scientific study may show such a project could damage the environment and quickly eliminate vegetation.

The analysis phase should also identify the connections between people, and between people and documented resources. Although the cultural map focuses on cultural resources, its main subject remains humankind. The promotion of human dignity, prosperity, and peace remain its ultimate goals. As such, a cultural map does not acquire its true meaning unless the people in charge of its construction keep the human subjects in mind and direct their work accordingly.

The study of social connections between people helps to identify the mechanisms and linkages – whether conscious or unconscious – that bring individuals or groups together who differ in culture, experience, and social or economic status. Cultural maps can then help identify *l'acte de reliance*, as well as the results of those acts, the *état de reliance*. Additionally, such analysis allows for the identification of the mechanisms linking people and cultural resources, and the type of relationships resulting from these mechanisms. This knowledge represents an invaluable contribution in clarifying the mechanisms of social cohesion and of building common identities. When citizens from different backgrounds build shared identities, they develop special relationships – local, regional, or collective



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– involving a given cultural resource. This results in a participatory framework that brings them together, articulated in combination with the resource. A simple example of this partnership is traditional musical forms, which citizens use to express their unique cultural connections and build networks between individuals. The musical forms become indicators of a common identity, enhancing social cohesion. Popular feasts, on another level, involve a complex network of established connections, creating social cohesion even among different cultural elements. Collective memory and historical narratives are both ongoing processes and dynamic resources in this regard

In the analysis stage, cultural map-builders depend on the mechanisms used in the interactive track, especially focus groups, to develop intervention plans. These dialogues are more effective if the map-builders have already identified the intended direction for the activation phase.

### Stage III: Activation

The activation of the cultural map is largely linked to ideological, political, social, and economic trends, and the aims of the map builders' work. This makes the map employable toward many ends.

The activation process begins with the development of a plan or plans for intervention, based on the results of the analysis phase. It proceeds according to a particular goal-oriented process, which may be developmental – as are the majority so far – or sociopolitical, in that it aspires to build "civil peace" in societies emerging from war. Building civil peace is fertile ground for activating a cultural map for several reasons. Cultural resources are the most common elements shared by citizens of different backgrounds. They are integrated into the course of daily life and affect the formation of individual and group identity. War's impact on individual and group identities involves changes and damage to cultural resources. The preservation of these resources can be grounds for maintaining peace.

In addition, dealing with cultural resources does not require elite or exceptional expertise. People's lives are in constant and direct contact with cultural resources, and those same people are often the best at dealing with and determining their



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relationship with a resource. Cultural resources, for the most part, cross conflict lines and can therefore provide common ground between belligerents. Indeed, as shared cultural resources are part of the collective memory of belligerents, their preservation and refinement can help prevent the recurrence of war. Many intangible cultural resources are linked to values shared by belligerents, and many material cultural resources are associated with shared experiences. Locating the shared aspects of these resources can provide a bond for some or all belligerent parties.

Moreover, the cultural resources of one area can be integrated with the resources of another, allowing for the construction of shared projects. In this sense, the process of building the map is itself a peacebuilding process because all parties to a conflict can work on a joint project to document the resources of the space in which they live.

Importantly, whatever the map's objectives are, they cannot be achieved without the active participation of civil society in all three stages. Building a cultural map is a civil exercise *par excellence* and its different stages depend mainly on the contribution of civil society actors. The breadth of the sectors of civil society involved will influence the amount of information collected about an area. Managing the entire process cannot be done by an individual or small group and likely requires oversight from an independent institution. This is ultimately a process built and supervised by members of civil society, for the benefit of the whole community.



## Endnotes

1. This definition of culture is based on UNESCO's position in the 1982 *Mexico Declaration on Cultural Policies*, issued at the World Conference on Cultural Policies. The UNESCO definition states that "culture, in its general sense, is the sum of the spiritual, material, emotional and intellectual features of a particular society or social group. It encompasses arts, literature, lifestyle, value systems, traditions and beliefs, and the basic rights of people, and values, traditions and beliefs."
2. Marcel Bolle De Bal, "Reliance, déliance, liance: émergence de trois notions sociologiques", *Sociétés* 80(2), pp. 99-131.



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## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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