

Urban Heritage Climate Observatory (UHCO) Launch Event Highlights

Open online event | 26 April 2021 | 12:00-14:00 CET

The following is a synthesis of the key points made throughout the remarks, presentations and panel discussions, which took place at the UHCO launch. The event was facilitated by the Community Activity co-leads - Dr. Jyoti Hosagrahar (UNESCO's World Heritage Centre), Dr. Sara Venturini (GEO Secretariat), and Dr. Evangelos Gerasopoulos (Greek GEO Office) - with opening remarks provided by Dr. Mechtild Rössler, the Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, and Prof. Gilberto Câmara, the Secretariat Director of GEO and keynotes given by Mr. George Kremlis (Greek Prime Minister's Office), Dr. Joanna Post (UNFCCC), Dr. Shannon McDaniel (Global Covenant of Mayors), and Dr. Cristina Ananasso (European Commission).

As a growing majority of the world's population resides in cities, climate change continues to be an acute threat to these communities impacting the urban fabric as a whole, including aspects of cultural heritage. While urban areas contribute greatly to global emissions, cities are especially vulnerable to climate change impacts, however, they play a key role in the path forward and in some cases represent missed opportunities for enhanced impact. Urban heritage can serve as means to motivate climate action in these areas, employing the unifying emotional connection that exists between communities and heritage, utilizing historical practices and learnings of cities to respond to environmental pressures and inform adaptation to climate change.

Earth observations (EO) are crucial for determining the impacts of climate change in cities, assessing the current status and moreover, are essential for the protection, management and promotion of heritage sites, especially in developing countries, further outlining novel aspects of cultural heritage. The new GEO Urban Heritage Climate Observatory (UHCO) Community Activity, led by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the Greek GEO Office, and involving 75 partners from 24 countries and 11 international organisations, aims to serve as a forum connecting EO, climate change and urban heritage, in line with relevant policy frameworks and incorporating a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to minimize fragmentation and enhance urban resilience.

There is an identified need for useful and actionable city-level information beyond raw data, where such data is easier to use, more intuitive and supportive in terms of helping cities understand what is necessary to protect urban heritage from climate change. UHCO is situated so as to bridge this gap by providing scientifically robust EO-driven services and tools to help a multi-disciplinary set of stakeholders in managing and protecting urban heritage and supporting decision making, in collaboration with and elevating ongoing initiatives from UNESCO and user-centric open and free Copernicus Services, for example. In this regard, UHCO should focus on producing interpreted information and concrete applications to cross the knowledge space between science and decision makers, all while bringing citizens and communities closer to the process, informed by the use of World Heritage Cities as unique laboratories for monitoring climate change impacts, illuminating new applications for adaptation.

An opportunity exists at the crossroads of EO, climate change and urban heritage where UHCO can help integrate and mainstream heritage aspects into environmental policy frames and build on existing momentum. This can be achieved by utilizing EO in support of national adaptation planning, furthering the economic attractiveness of such implementations and helping to fully account for and address city-level needs. A parallel and politically facing ongoing endeavor is taking place as a joint effort between the Hellenic Republic, WMO and UNESCO to develop a Flexible Mechanism at the UN level, which will work to map and facilitate protection of cultural and natural heritage monuments from climate change. UHCO will contribute to this broader initiative by implementing the EO-related support needed for sound policy action.

UHCO's activities exploring, compiling and coordinating EO usage for cultural heritage by way of use cases in World Heritage Cities will constitute the starting point from which UHCO will be scaled up, expanding beyond inscribed heritage sites. By nature, UHCO holds a long-term perspective by exploiting the intersectionality of relevant policy frames and continuing to add to a knowledge base of climate change impacts on urban heritage, concretizing UHCO's important role for years to come.