



Safeguarding indigenous storytelling: Community-based heritage initiatives and SDG 11.4 in the Mah Meri community, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how community-based heritage initiatives can support the sustainability of Indigenous cultural practices within development-oriented policy frameworks. Focusing on the Mah Meri community of Carey Island, Malaysia, the research evaluates the implementation of CITA-HEA: The Mah Meri Storytelling—Giving Voice to the Voiceless, an initiative introduced by the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) to support storytelling traditions and women's livelihoods in alignment with SDG 11.4. The study adopted a qualitative case study approach based on document analysis, focus group discussions with Mah Meri women participants, and site observations. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and interpreted through APPGM-SDG's six-domain Return-on-Value (RoV) framework. The findings indicate that the initiative strengthened participants' sense of cultural pride and created opportunities for women's economic participation through heritage-related activities. However, the analysis also identifies several structural challenges, including limited knowledge retention from short-term training activities, uneven institutional engagement, and the additional labour burdens experienced by women participants. These findings highlight tensions between development-oriented programme structures and the relational processes through which indigenous cultural knowledge is sustained. The study contributes to critical heritage and sustainability scholarship by demonstrating how community-based heritage initiatives within SDG frameworks must recognise cultural transmission as an ongoing relational process rather than a measurable programme output.

Keywords: *Critical heritage studies, Indigenous cultural heritage, gendered labour, Mah Meri, SDG 11.4, storytelling traditions*

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the preservation of intangible indigenous cultural heritage has gained renewed attention within international development frameworks. In particular, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Target 11.4, emphasise the need to safeguard cultural and natural heritage as part of sustainable development agendas (UNESCO, 2025). While these frameworks have created new opportunities for heritage protection, they also raise important questions about how indigenous cultural practices are interpreted, managed, and evaluated within institutional development systems. Critical heritage scholars argue that heritage governance often operates through what Smith (2006) termed as Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), which privileges expert-led preservation, formal documentation, and measurable outputs. Such approaches may however, marginalise the relational, embodied, and community-based forms of knowledge through which indigenous heritage is sustained.

In Malaysia, the Mah Meri is an indigenous Orang Asli community belonging to the Senoi subgroup (Aminudin, 2014). The community has developed a rich system of intangible heritage expressed through ritual performances, ancestral ceremonies, wood carving, and oral storytelling traditions that have been practised across generations. These intergenerational practices function as mechanisms through which ecological knowledge, social values, and collective memory are transmitted within the community, highlighting the role of storytelling as a key medium of cultural knowledge transmission. However, such traditions increasingly face pressures associated with modernisation, tourism-driven commodification, and changing aspirations among younger community members. In 2009, the Mah Meri Cultural Village was established on a 1.85-hectare site as a cultural learning hub showcasing performances, crafts, and hands-on demonstrations for local and international visitors (Othman & Aminudin, 2016). Although located near a port, the community lacks direct sea access due to reclamation works; alongside line-fishing, they depend heavily on tourism and heritage activities, making them the most commercialised indigenous community in Peninsular Malaysia (Aminudin, 2014).

Policy interventions aimed at safeguarding indigenous heritage increasingly adopt development-oriented programmes intended to support cultural preservation and community livelihoods. Nevertheless, heritage policies are often shaped by institutional frameworks rooted in colonial systems that prioritise national narratives and formalised heritage management structures (Harrison, 2013). As a result, many development initiatives emphasise measurable outputs and short-term economic outcomes, which may not align with the slower, relational processes through which indigenous cultural knowledge is transmitted within indigenous communities.

Within this context, the All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia on Sustainable Development Goals (APPGM-SDG) introduced the CITA-HEA: The Mah Meri Storytelling—Giving Voice to the Voiceless initiative in 2023. APPGM-SDG is a parliamentary multi-stakeholder platform established in Malaysia in 2019 to support the localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals by connecting government agencies, civil society organisations, and community actors. The initiative was designed

as a community-based programme to revitalise Mah Meri storytelling traditions through a mentor–mentee model while simultaneously promoting gender empowerment and sustainable livelihoods aligned with SDG 11.4.

Despite growing policy interest in cultural heritage within SDG frameworks, relatively little empirical research has examined how such initiatives operate in indigenous community contexts. In particular, limited attention has been given to how community-based cultural programmes negotiate the tensions between institutional development agendas, evaluation frameworks, and indigenous systems of knowledge transmission. This study therefore examines the implementation and impact of the CITA-HEA initiative in order to understand how community-based heritage initiatives operate within SDG-linked policy environments and how indigenous storytelling traditions are sustained within institutional development frameworks.

To situate this study within existing scholarship, the following section reviews literature on the Mah Meri community, conceptualisations of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and debates surrounding indigenous heritage governance within sustainable development frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Mah Meri community

Scholars examining indigenous heritage in Malaysia frequently refer to the Mah Meri community as an example of how cultural identity, ecological knowledge, and ritual practice are closely interconnected (Rahman, 2010; Werner, 1974). The Mah Meri, whose name is commonly translated as “forest people,” is one of the indigenous groups belonging to the Orang Asli—the collective term used for the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia—and is a part of the Senoi linguistic subgroup (Werner, 1974).

Historically associated with coastal and mangrove environments, Mah Meri cultural practices reflect close relationships between spiritual belief systems, environmental knowledge, and everyday subsistence activities. Werner (1974) and Rahman (2010) described how Mah Meri rituals, wood carvings, and ceremonial performances—including *topeng moyang* (wooden spirit masks), *Tarian Jo’oh* (jungle dance), and *Tarian Topeng* (mask dance)—express spiritual connections with forest and marine ecosystems. Rahman (2010) argued that these practices demonstrate how ecological knowledge and cultural identity are embedded in artistic expression and ritual performance. Oral storytelling also plays a central role in the transmission of cultural knowledge and the reinforcement of community identity across generations (Werner, 1974).

Today, most Mah Meri communities are located on Carey Island, a coastal area in Selangor situated southwest of Kuala Lumpur. According to a 2004 census, the Mah Meri population numbered approximately 2,896 out of 149,723 Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia (Chan, 2015). While Mah Meri remains the first language acquired by children within the community, many members are also fluent in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language (Kruspe, 2010). Environmental change and development pressures have increasingly affected Mah Meri cultural continuity.

Mohamad Asri et al. (2018) argued that land conversion, tourism expansion, and coastal development have disrupted traditional livelihoods and reduced access to natural resources that historically supported both subsistence activities and ritual practices. Kruspe (2010) similarly noted that the destruction of mangrove ecosystems through timber harvesting has altered the environmental landscapes upon which Mah Meri cultural traditions depend. These studies suggest that environmental transformation has implications not only for economic survival but also for the sustainability of cultural knowledge and ritual practice.

Despite the loss of economic resources, Mah Meri women play a vital role in sustaining cultural practices and economic resilience. Mohamad Asri et al. (2018) highlighted the role of Mah Meri women in maintaining craft traditions such as palm-leaf weaving and storytelling while simultaneously generating income through tourism-related activities. Their role in sustaining storytelling traditions echoes findings from other communities, such as the Malaysian Iyers, where women safeguard cultural identity through ritual and domestic practices (Sankar, 2015). Like other indigenous communities, they are aware of changes around them and often draw on ideas, knowledge, and strategies from the wider world (Sadeka et al., 2023).

Cultural performances such as the *Main Jo'oh* dance have also been incorporated into Malaysia's cultural tourism sector since the late 1990s, creating both economic opportunities and concerns regarding the commodification of indigenous cultural expressions (Chan, 2015). At the same time, the Mah Meri community has experienced long-standing political marginalisation within national development and heritage governance systems. Nicholas (2000) argued that government programmes aimed at integrating Orang Asli communities have often prioritised state control over indigenous territories and resources. Rahman (2010) further noted that the exclusion of indigenous communities from environmental and heritage decision-making processes continues to threaten both cultural heritage and ecological sustainability. These dynamics highlight the importance of analysing Mah Meri cultural practices within broader discussions of intangible cultural heritage and indigenous heritage governance.

Conceptualising intangible cultural heritage

The concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the cultural practices of the Mah Meri community. Unlike earlier heritage approaches that focused primarily on monuments and artefacts, ICH emphasises living cultural expressions that are continuously recreated by communities. Lenzerini (2011) conceptualised ICH as a participatory and rights-based domain characterised by community self-identification, continuous recreation over time, embeddedness in cultural identity, authenticity, and a close relationship with human rights. From this perspective, heritage should be understood not simply as an object of preservation, but as a social process sustained through community participation and cultural transmission.

Earlier heritage governance frameworks, particularly those associated with the 1972 World Heritage Convention, have often prioritised material preservation and

institutional management structures. Contemporary scholarship therefore emphasises safeguarding approaches that recognise the agency of cultural practitioners and support community-based processes of cultural transmission. A key dimension of ICH concerns the ways in which cultural knowledge is transmitted through embodied practice and social interaction. Craft traditions provide a clear illustration of this process. Guo and Ahn (2023) demonstrated how artisans and researchers co-create cultural knowledge through collaborative craft–design practices across Chinese Belt and Road regions. Drawing on the SECI model—socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation—they show how knowledge is accumulated and transmitted through apprenticeship, observation, and hands-on engagement.

Ritual practices also play an important role in shaping heritage experiences and reinforcing cultural meaning. Yan et al. (2024) identified four dimensions of ritual experience—uniqueness, commitment, ceremoniality, and non-functionality—and show that these elements strengthen emotional engagement and identity-based connections among participants. Their findings suggest that rituals function not merely as performative displays but as affective cultural practices that reinforce communal belonging and shared cultural values.

These studies emphasise that intangible cultural heritage operates as a dynamic system of knowledge, performance, and participation sustained through community engagement and intergenerational learning.

Indigenous heritage and development, and SDG localisation

Despite growing recognition of cultural heritage within global policy frameworks, tensions frequently emerge when heritage is incorporated into development agendas. Indigenous heritage often exists at the intersection of cultural preservation, economic development, and political recognition. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) acknowledge the importance of heritage through Target 11.4, which calls for increased efforts to safeguard cultural and natural heritage. Indicator 11.4.1 measures government expenditure on heritage protection, and more than 80 countries currently report national data under this indicator (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020). However, scholars have noted that these policy frameworks frequently prioritise tangible heritage sites and state-led preservation initiatives over community-based cultural practices. As a result, many indigenous heritage systems remain marginalised within global heritage governance structures.

This marginalisation reflects the continued dominance of Western knowledge systems within heritage and development institutions. Smith (1999) argued that conventional research and policy frameworks have historically marginalised indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge systems—embedded in lived experience, spirituality, language, and relationships with land—often fall outside the epistemological boundaries of institutional heritage management. Battiste (2008) further emphasised that indigenous knowledge is collectively held and transmitted through oral traditions that connect land, culture, and community identity. Development approaches that disregard

these traditions risk reducing heritage to a marketable cultural resource while obscuring its deeper cultural significance.

There are four key methods in which cultural policy can support sustainable development: safeguarding cultural rights and diversity, encouraging ecological citizenship through cultural engagement, driving institutional transformation, and using the arts to foster awareness of sustainability (Duxbury et al., 2017). Although these pathways create opportunities, culture must not risk being reduced to an economic instrument but be recognised as a fundamental dimension of sustainable development. Therefore, a transformative cultural role prioritising social equity and community agency over the demands of development indicators is required.

Therefore, heritage practice linked to development must be anchored in principles of justice and recognition (Meskell, 2010). Although such initiatives may deliver material gains like infrastructure upgrades or greater visibility for marginalised groups, they risk deepening structural inequities when lacking accountability. When heritage is defined through institutional or elite lenses, it prioritises dominant narratives and obscures local perspectives, ultimately disempowering the communities it aims to serve. In Malaysia, the relationship between cultural preservation, community identity, and institutional mediation is observed in studies of minority cultural representation. Media institutions, for example, could function as bridges between community concerns, cultural rights, and wider national structures (Ng & Lee, 2020). This situation suggests how cultural preservation safeguards, but also ensures that communities can articulate their identities, claims, and values within broader systems of governance and public discourse. Such an insight is necessary in discussions about indigenous heritage contexts, as the question is about how cultural practices are preserved, and how communities are recognised, represented, and heard within the various institutional frameworks.

Despite these contributions, existing scholarship has paid limited attention to how community-based heritage initiatives navigate the intersection of Indigenous knowledge systems, institutional heritage governance, and SDG-oriented development frameworks. While previous studies have identified tensions between heritage governance, development policy, and indigenous knowledge systems (Battiste, 2008; Harrison, 2013; Smith, 2006), relatively few examine how these tensions unfold in practice within community-based cultural programmes.

To address this gap, the present study examined the implementation of the CITA-HEA: The Mah Meri Storytelling – Giving Voice to the Voiceless initiative. Drawing on document analysis, focus group discussions with Mah Meri women participants, and site visits, the study evaluated the programme using the APPGM-SDG six-domain Return-on-Value framework, namely 1) Deep, 2) Clear, 3) Wide, 4) High, 5) Gender, and 6) SDG awareness (Ab Rahman et. al., 2023).

This study addresses three interrelated research questions:

1. How did the CITA-HEA initiative contribute to the sustainability of Mah Meri intangible cultural heritage, particularly storytelling traditions?

2. What structural and cultural challenges emerged in aligning indigenous knowledge systems with institutional development agendas?
3. What lessons can be drawn for community-based heritage initiatives operating within SDG-aligned frameworks?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, participatory methodology to evaluate the CITA-HEA initiative. Specifically, the research adopted a qualitative case study approach informed by perspectives from critical heritage studies in order to examine how community participants experienced and interpreted the cultural, social, and knowledge-related impacts of the initiative, particularly in relation to storytelling traditions and cultural continuity. Qualitative approaches are well suited for examining complex social processes and culturally embedded practices that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study therefore treated the CITA-HEA initiative as an empirical case through which the interaction between institutional heritage initiatives, development-oriented policy frameworks, and indigenous cultural practices can be examined.

Case study approaches are particularly appropriate when research seeks to investigate contemporary social phenomena within their real-world contexts, especially where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Yin, 2018). Participatory research methods are also widely used in indigenous and community-based studies because they prioritise dialogue, contextual understanding, and the perspectives of cultural practitioners themselves (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Smith, 1999). This methodological orientation therefore enables the study to explore heritage practices as lived cultural processes shaped by community actors rather than solely by institutional frameworks (Smith, 2006).

Data triangulation drew from three primary sources: (1) official project documentation, including proposals, progress reports, and the final report submitted to the APPGM-SDG; (2) field observations conducted during site visit to Kampung Sungai Bumbun on Carey Island; and (3) a focus group discussion (FGD) conducted on 19 January 2025 with four female participants from the Mah Meri community in the same village. Participants were recruited through voluntary sampling, facilitated by the CITA-HEA project coordinator, who acted as a community gatekeeper to identify individuals directly engaged in the storytelling programme and therefore possessing first-hand experience of the initiative's activities and outcomes. The discussion was designed as an in-depth exploratory engagement rather than a representative survey. In qualitative research, smaller samples are commonly used to generate rich insights into participants' lived experiences and interpretations, particularly when participants possess direct involvement in the phenomenon being studied (Guest et al., 2013).

The FGD was facilitated by a team of independent researchers in Bahasa Malaysia and followed a semi-structured guide exploring participants' reflections on project involvement, the relevance of skills acquired, perceived cultural impacts, and alignment

with the SDGs. With informed written consent, the session was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following the iterative coding procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial open coding identified recurring patterns and themes within participants' narratives, which were subsequently organised into broader analytical categories reflecting experiences of cultural learning, community participation, and perceived programme outcomes.

Triangulation across documentary evidence, field observations, and participant narratives enhanced the reliability and depth of the analysis by allowing institutional documentation and community perspectives to be cross-examined (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2015). By comparing insights from these different sources, the study was able to situate participants' experiences within the broader institutional objectives and operational context of the programme while providing empirical evidence to address the research questions concerning cultural sustainability, institutional challenges, and the role of community-based heritage initiatives within SDG-oriented frameworks.

To structure the evaluation, this study employed the Return-on-Value (RoV) framework developed by the APPGM-SDG. Although RoV is primarily a programme evaluation tool designed to support the localisation of the SDGs in Malaysia, the present study adopted the framework as an analytical lens to examine how institutional evaluation mechanisms interact with indigenous cultural practices. The framework evaluates programme outcomes across six domains: deep (beneficiary satisfaction and relevance), clear (new skills and knowledge acquired), wide (institutional processes and procedures), high (formation of relationships and networks), gender (equity in access to resources and opportunities beyond numerical representation), and SDG awareness (alignment with and awareness of SDG goals) (Lee et al., 2024).

As conventional evaluation tools often prioritise efficiency, scalability, or quantifiable deliverables, the RoV framework is particularly suited to heritage and sustainability initiatives where outcomes may be relational, experiential, or intangible. Drawing on the work of Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995), the framework informed the analysis of participant learning outcomes and training effectiveness while also recognising the importance of community narratives and cultural processes. In this study, thematic findings from the focus group discussion were mapped against the six RoV domains to interpret participants' experiences of the initiative and its intended outcomes.

Using a locally developed and policy-endorsed framework also allowed the analysis to remain attentive to the cultural and institutional context in which the initiative operates. This methodological integration therefore enabled the study to examine both the measurable programme outcomes and the broader cultural implications of the initiative, particularly in understanding how community-based heritage initiatives negotiate the intersection between cultural continuity and development-oriented policy frameworks.

Case study context: The CITA-HEA Mah Meri Storytelling initiative

Based on a review of project documentation, the Mah Meri initiative was designed as a community-based, participatory heritage initiative. The initiative focused on Kampung Sungai Bumbun and Kampung Judah villages. The project was conceived as a bottom-

up community-led intervention and was therefore led by Jungle School Gombak and Kalam Training Services. Aimed at revitalising Mah Meri's storytelling practices and embedding them within the sustainable development agenda, notably SDG Target 11.4, APPGM-SDG also supported the project with an RM40,000 (USD10,000) allocation. A mentor-mentee system was adopted to ensure and encourage youth participation, where Mah Meri elders paired up with their younger community members. To ensure that storytelling traditions and the values embedded within them were transmitted in culturally meaningful ways, the elders facilitated workshops to encourage youth participation in storytelling, document cultural heritage, and promote community-led education. Other activities involved cultural immersion and artistic showcases highlighting oral history, ritual knowledge, and craft practices.

To build on critical heritage studies, heritage needs to be conceptualised as a discourse shaped by power and ideology (Smith, 2006). Instead of viewing heritage as a natural asset, AHD privileges institutional authority, monumentality, and expert-led narratives. Such viewpoints have sidelined the lived and relational dimensions of indigenous heritage. Additionally, colonial-era governance structures often ignore heritage management (Harrison, 2013), and such influences overlook plural and community-based expressions as they enforce singular national narratives. Heritage is therefore continuously contested, negotiated and embedded within power relations (Waterton & Watson, 2011; Winter, 2014). This situation occurs when development frameworks impose normative expectations around visibility, measurability, and economic value. Global power shifts, as witnessed in Asia, are reshaping heritage conservation through development-focused governance models. There is an increased use of heritage in economic and political strategies and calls for conservation frameworks that recognise non-Western epistemologies and contest inherited colonial priorities.

Central to this initiative was storytelling, as it is positioned as a medium of cultural agency. As such, the project title, *Giving Voice to the Voiceless*, reflected a commitment to centring indigenous epistemologies long underrepresented in state policies and media. Though not formally defined, the term CITA-HEA itself suggests a focus on *cerita tradisi* (trans: traditional storytelling) as a means of cultural preservation and community empowerment that challenges the tendencies of heritage tourism and institutional heritage discourse that often commodify or oversimplify indigenous practices. Designed to align with three SDG Targets: 4.4, 4.7, and 11.4, the initiative created valuable interfaces between community-defined heritage values and national development policies. The project included more than 100 children and youth participating in basic storytelling, communication skill-building, and outreach to more than 250 local and foreign tourists, policymakers and educators.

Studies on traditional tattooing in the Cordillera region highlight the need to document and resignify indigenous practices as strategies for cultural preservation (Demeterio, 2017). Likewise, Mah Meri storytelling requires innovative approaches to sustain it as both a cultural practice and a living heritage. The CITA-HEA initiative unfolded over four interconnected phases. Phase One (May 2023) focused on community profiling in two villages and recruiting Mah Meri elders as facilitators. Phase Two (June

2023) involved a Training of Trainers (ToT) workshop to prepare Mah Meri mentors and volunteers in heritage transmission and storytelling pedagogy, deepening their understanding of Mah Meri culture and ritual practices. Phase Three (July 2023) introduced school-based learning activities in local primary and secondary schools, culminating in storytelling performances and visual exhibitions created by mentees. Phase Four (August 2023) concluded the project with a state-level public event featuring cultural showcases, performances, and product exhibitions that promoted educational tourism and enhanced the visibility of Mah Meri cultural expressions.

The project's beneficiaries were 50 Orang Asli children and youth, and it indirectly extended to around 250 members of the wider community and public visitors. The project also focused on gender inclusivity as women were encouraged to take on leadership roles in storytelling, weaving, and hospitality. Male participants were involved in performances and craft-making. The emphasis on intergenerational and gender-inclusiveness addressed two critical threats to indigenous heritage—the erosion of oral transmission pathways and the decline in interest of younger generations in traditional knowledge systems. In parallel, the project used digital storytelling and social media to expand the reach of Mah Meri voices and challenge the commercialised and often stereotypical representations of indigenous culture.

Aligned with Malaysia's SDG localisation agenda, CITA-HEA functions as both a cultural preservation effort and a strategic intervention that supports the development of sustainable cultural ecosystems by embedding heritage practices in everyday learning environments such as schools and community spaces. As an oral tradition and pedagogical tool, storytelling becomes a strategy for empowerment and a source of economic participation through responsible tourism and cultural entrepreneurship. Visual storytelling connects Mah Meri culture and heritage to contemporary issues, including environmental conservation, gender equity, and cultural resilience. This paper contributes to critical heritage studies by examining how the Malaysian Mah Meri community navigates the pressures of institutional heritage frameworks while sustaining cultural knowledge through gendered, embodied, and relational practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Six Return-on-Value (RoV) domains evaluation

The evaluation of the six domains showed varied levels of impact that reflect both documented project outcomes and participants' lived experiences. The Deep (personal impact) domain recorded the strongest result. Scoring 4, this score indicates how the project left a strong impression on the participants. The women participants described feeling a sense of pride and confidence when demonstrating cultural weaving activities for foreign visitors. During the FGD, one participant stated that guests came "*from many foreign countries*" and admired her weaving techniques and woven crafts. Participants explained that these interactions made them feel that their skills were recognised and appreciated outside the village context. For women with limited income opportunities,

the ability to generate household income through traditional craftwork offered economic benefit as well as emotional and cultural validation. These reflections suggest that the initiative contributed to strengthening personal confidence and cultural pride among participants, although this interpretation is based on the perceptions of the four women involved in the FGD. From a critical heritage perspective, these responses suggest that the initiative may have reinforced the affective and embodied dimensions of heritage practice among participants involved in the programme.

The Clear (knowledge and skills) domain scored lower. A score of 2 indicates that participants demonstrated limited clarity or retention of what was taught during some training activities. While participants attended various workshops that included creative sessions such as cartoon drawing, none could clearly recall what was learned, even when shown visual prompts. During the FGD, participants mostly responded with “*I cannot recall*,” “*I don’t know*,” or “*I don’t remember this*.” Based on these FGD responses, the transfer of knowledge from some workshops appeared to be limited. This outcome may reflect the short duration of certain training activities, particularly when sessions were conducted as one-off events without sustained follow-up practice.

The Wide (networks and linkages) domain showed early potential but limited formal development. A score of 2 indicates that participants identified some networking opportunities but reported limited sustained collaboration. During the FGD, participants mentioned interactions with government agencies such as Kraftangan Malaysia (Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation), the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), and the Department of Orang Asli Development (JAKOA). However, participants explained that these interactions were typically associated with events or visits rather than ongoing partnerships. One participant described these encounters simply as “visits” or “invitations” rather than long-term collaboration. Participants also referred to an active WhatsApp group used for communication among community members. While this suggests the development of informal networks within the community, the available data did not indicate the establishment of formal institutional partnerships during the project period.

The High (systems and strategic alignment) domain received the lowest score. A score of 1 indicates that participants had limited awareness of institutional frameworks such as project guidelines, standard operating procedures (SOPs), or heritage policy structures. During the FGD, participants mainly referred to their roles in practical activities such as craft demonstrations and storytelling events, rather than discussing broader project governance or policy alignment. Participants confirmed that they followed practical instructions such as signing attendance sheets or preparing for activities, but none indicated familiarity with institutional frameworks guiding the project.

The SDG (awareness and sustainability) domain reflected a strong intuitive understanding. A score of 4 indicates that participants demonstrated environmental awareness in their everyday practices. Participants described using natural dyes and harvesting weaving materials from their surrounding environment. During the FGD, one participant explained that materials had become “*harder to find now... because of*

the cutting of mangrove trees.” Although participants did not explicitly refer to the SDG framework during the discussion, their comments reflected awareness of environmental change and its impact on cultural practices.

The Gender (inclusion) domain showed the strongest outcome. Women were central to the initiative, not only as participants but also organisers, facilitators, and cultural practitioners. The women-led *Tompok Tomboh* weaving collective enabled income generation from home, allowing participants to earn while managing caregiving duties. This quiet, functional leadership reflected a grassroots model of gender-inclusive cultural entrepreneurship. However, despite their central role, support structures remained limited. Many women had to juggle weaving, childcare, household duties, and, in some cases, external employment. These overlapping responsibilities placed significant economic and social pressure on them. In this context, empowerment existed alongside strain, underscoring the need for care-based infrastructure to accompany cultural programmes.

Structural and cultural challenges

The examination of the CITA-HEA initiative revealed several structural and cultural tensions that shape the experiences, livelihoods, and sustainability of Mah Meri cultural practices. One key challenge was the project’s short-term, event-driven format, which did not align with the community’s indigenous learning system rooted in observation, repetition, and embodied practice. As a result, some activities functioned as isolated events, and several participants noted difficulty recalling elements of the training. Although exposure occurred, it did not always translate into long-term retention, highlighting how externally driven programmes may overlook indigenous learning practices grounded in time, place, and relationships (Battiste, 2008). This finding suggests the limitations of initiatives that prioritise short-term deliverables over sustained engagement.

A second challenge concerned the gendered distribution of labour within the initiative. Women form the backbone of cultural activities—producing crafts, hosting visitors, and managing community events—while also carrying household responsibilities and, in some cases, external employment. One FGD participant noted that “*demand for cultural products was sometimes overwhelming.*” Without cooperative production models, childcare support, or shared labour systems, women’s contributions risk becoming overextended and insufficiently recognised. This observation reflects broader patterns identified in creative and cultural economies, where women’s labour often sustains cultural production while reinforcing structural inequalities (Murray & Gollmitzer, 2012). In this context, opportunities framed as empowerment may also generate additional pressures when adequate structural support is absent.

A third challenge relates to the limited recognition of indigenous knowledge within institutional development frameworks. Although the Mah Meri community demonstrates strong environmental awareness and cultural ethics—through their use of natural materials, adaptation to environmental change, and adherence to cultural protocols—such forms of knowledge are not always easily translated into institutional language or integrated into formal evaluation systems. As a result, these practices may remain less

visible within SDG metrics and heritage reporting. Indigenous knowledge represents a form of collective intellectual sovereignty shaped by ethical relationships with land, kin, and memory (Battiste, 2008).

When development initiatives do not fully engage with these epistemological foundations, there is a risk that cultural knowledge becomes simplified or detached from its original context. While SDG Target 11.4 provides a global platform for cultural heritage protection, its local implementation may not always reflect existing indigenous sustainability practices. The Mah Meri community, for instance, has long practised environmentally grounded ways of living, yet institutional recognition and long-term engagement do not always fully reflect these alignments. This disconnect can also emerge when heritage initiatives are framed primarily through policy or institutional perspectives that privilege dominant narratives while limiting opportunities for community-led participation (Meskell, 2010). In the case of this initiative, interactions with state agencies such as JAKOA or MOTAC appeared to take the form of visits or invitations rather than sustained collaboration, resulting in limited opportunities for co-design or long-term dialogue.

Recommendations for strengthening future initiatives

The findings of this study suggest several ways in which future heritage initiatives could better support community-based cultural practices. These recommendations address the third research question by identifying key lessons for community-based heritage initiatives operating within SDG-aligned frameworks. The CITA-HEA initiative highlights that heritage should be understood as a sustained, relational process grounded in cultural sovereignty, care, and continuity. This perspective calls for a reconceptualisation of how heritage programmes are designed and implemented. Rather than treating heritage work as short-term interventions or deliverable-driven outputs, future initiatives should recognise local knowledge systems, redistribute labour more equitably, and cultivate long-term community partnerships. The following recommendations aim to strengthen the equity, impact, and sustainability of cultural and heritage programmes.

First, project timelines should be extended to align with the relational and intergenerational nature of indigenous learning. Short-term, event-based interventions are often incompatible with Mah Meri learning practices, which rely on observation, repetition, and collective participation. Future initiatives should incorporate structured mentorship systems by appointing community elders or experienced practitioners as mentors. Such arrangements can support the continuity of knowledge and skills while reinforcing internal cultural authority and hierarchy. Learning must therefore be understood as a living, relational process rather than a discrete project deliverable. At the same time, limited exposure to digital tools and insufficient funding constrained women's sustained participation, reflecting broader inequalities in which economic and political power remains concentrated in Malaysia's urban centres (Ahmad & Lee, 2015).

Second, gender inclusion must be supported through structural care. Although women lead many cultural activities, they often carry disproportionate domestic and economic responsibilities. The initiative revealed how women-led weaving and hosting

groups struggled with increasing demands. To prevent extractive participation, future programmes should incorporate practical support such as childcare provision, cooperative production models, and collective labour platforms. Such measures help ensure that participation does not lead to exhaustion and that empowerment is accompanied by a redistribution of labour.

Third, indigenous knowledge should be recognised as central and sovereign in heritage initiatives. Institutions need to move beyond extractive consultation or token inclusion and instead work with communities through genuine collaboration and equal partnership. Rather than collecting stories or practices for external use, institutions should allow communities to decide how their knowledge is shared, adapted, or protected. Evaluation systems should also reflect these approaches. Many conventional assessment tools rely on written reports or measurable outputs, which often fail to capture oral, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge. Future evaluation frameworks should therefore be developed jointly with communities and designed to reflect Indigenous ways of knowing.

Finally, while global frameworks such as SDG 11.4 provide strategic leverage, their value depends on meaningful localisation. Localisation should be approached as a collaborative, bottom-up process rather than a top-down translation. As the Mah Meri community already practises sustainability through its cultural lifeways, institutions must learn to listen and adapt rather than translate these practices into institutional language. Co-designed frameworks that bridge local knowledge with global aspirations can enable meaning to emerge through dialogue. Institutional partnerships must therefore move beyond one-off invitations toward long-term commitments. Agencies such as JAKOA, MOTAC, and Kraftangan Malaysia should invest in sustained relationships built on co-governance, shared accountability, and adaptive planning, including co-designed workshops, participatory monitoring, and community-led evaluation. In this process, communities must be recognised not merely as programme implementers, but as co-authors of their cultural futures.

CONCLUSION

The CITA-HEA: The Mah Meri Storytelling—Giving Voice to the Voiceless initiative offers valuable insights into what is possible when community heritage work is approached with sincerity, care, and cultural grounding. The project created spaces where Mah Meri women could lead, express themselves, and generate income through craft and performance. The outcomes were significant: they affirmed cultural identity, encouraged intergenerational dialogue, and provided tangible forms of value for indigenous knowledge at the everyday level. The women participants reported increased pride and confidence while also creating new connections and experiences through their involvement in the initiative. Taken together, these findings demonstrate how the CITA-HEA initiative contributed to sustaining Mah Meri cultural practices while also highlighting the role of community participation in strengthening intangible cultural heritage.

The initiative also highlighted certain limitations. Issues relating to knowledge retention, institutional follow-through, and strategic alignment with broader development frameworks emerged during the evaluation. In addition, the event-based structure of the programme did not fully accommodate the learning processes and cultural practices of the Mah Meri participants. Other challenges also arose, particularly in relation to the distribution of responsibilities within the community. Women were often required to carry both cultural and domestic responsibilities with limited structural support. These tensions suggest a broader mismatch between how indigenous knowledge is practised within communities and how heritage is often managed within development-oriented frameworks.

Viewed constructively, these challenges serve as reminders that supporting indigenous heritage requires shared responsibility among institutions, communities, and programme partners. They also highlight the importance of allowing communities to define the forms of knowledge that require protection, the ways in which knowledge is transmitted, and the contexts in which it may be shared. While SDG 11.4 provides an important policy mandate for safeguarding cultural heritage, the success of such initiatives ultimately depends on how they are localised and implemented at the community level. A more bottom-up approach may enable culturally grounded initiatives in which community members, particularly women, play leading roles in reinforcing identity, fostering resilience, and sustaining Indigenous knowledge practices that are often overlooked within institutional frameworks.

These findings also underscore the potential value of locally designed and implemented evaluation approaches such as the Return-on-Value (RoV) framework, which can accommodate qualitative and process-based outcomes rather than focusing solely on quantifiable outputs. The experience of the CITA-HEA initiative suggests that heritage sustainability should not be understood solely as a technical outcome of development programmes, but as a relational process rooted in ongoing collaboration between communities and institutions. Cultural initiatives may therefore become more transformative when institutions engage with communities through dialogue, empathy, and co-creation, recognising indigenous communities as active partners in shaping the future of their cultural heritage.

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