

National library of Latvia Conference
***Protection and Rescue of Cultural Heritage in Crisis Situations and Disaster
Risk Management in Libraries, Archives and Museums***

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KEYNOTE SPEECH
Protecting Culture in Emergencies

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I thank the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO, the Latvian Ministry of Culture, the Latvian National Heritage Board, and the National Library of Latvia for organizing this important conference. It is a great honor to participate and introduce UNESCO's efforts in safeguarding cultural heritage in emergencies.

The theme of the conference is of high relevance and importance in the current context, as we witness with grave concern the destructions, damages, looting and illicit trafficking of cultural property in many regions of the world due to armed conflicts, disasters, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic. It is more urgent than ever to protect cultural heritage as evidence of our history and cornerstone of society.

Overview of UNESCO's work for safeguarding cultural heritage in emergencies

Since its inception, UNESCO has always remained in the forefront of international efforts in protecting cultural heritage. Over decades, the Organization has built significant expertise and operational experience in this field, and established a robust institutional architecture which gradually evolved as a result of key policy developments and events.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, several key conventions were adopted by UNESCO as the genesis of the organization's mandate for the protection of culture in emergencies, notably the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (hereinafter the 1954 Convention), the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (hereinafter the 1970 Convention), and the 1972 Conventions Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

Afterwards, the 1990s witnessed important progresses when culture became increasingly recognized as a resource for peacebuilding. One example is the reconstruction of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the war in former Yugoslavia at the gates of Europe and whereby cultural heritage was recognized as a fundamental component for sustainable peace through the Dayton Accords peace agreement.

In the past 20 years, in response to the increase in deliberate attacks on culture, as well as the increasing impacts of natural and human-made hazards, UNESCO has strengthened its efforts to tackle not only the damages and destructions of cultural heritage, but also the impact on communities. From the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan in 2001, to the destruction of the mausoleums in Timbuktu, Mali, in 2012, and the subsequent wave of attacks against culture in different countries, including Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, these events marked a major shift in the way UNESCO operates in emergency contexts.

As a result, a number of important initiatives and milestones were achieved under the auspices of UNESCO. In 2013, for the first time, the protection of cultural heritage was successfully

integrated into the mandate of a peacekeeping mission by the UN Security Council, with more than 5,000 military and civilian personnel of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) trained on the protection of cultural heritage. In Mali, as well, the reconstruction of the mausoleums of Timbuktu in 2013 was an important initiative in view to support and elevate the affected communities. In this context, UNESCO, in cooperation with the Trust Fund for Victims of the International Criminal Court, has started working, since 2021, to enhance the protection of cultural heritage in Timbuktu (Mali) and render reparations to the victims of crimes against cultural heritage.

In 2015 and 2017, two UN Security Council Resolutions (2199 and 2347) prohibited illegal trade of cultural property from Iraq and Syria and advocated for the protection of cultural heritage in situations of armed conflict.

The growing threats faced by cultural heritage in many parts of the world as a result of armed conflict and disasters have emphasized the importance of emergency preparedness. It is for this reason that UNESCO encourages and assists States Parties to take all necessary measures and set up preparedness plans for protecting cultural heritage, including through awareness-raising, documentation and monitoring, and capacity-building.

Several concrete measures could ensure the effective protection and emergency preparedness for libraries, archives and museums, particularly within the framework of the 1954 Hague Convention and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols, the 1970 Convention, as well as UNESCO 2015 Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (hereinafter the 2015 Recommendation).

The 1954 Hague Convention and its two protocols

UNESCO's 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict is the first international agreement of universal vocation focused exclusively on the protection of tangible cultural heritage in the event of armed conflict. Its scope covers immovable property, such as monuments of architecture, art or history and archaeological sites, and movable property, which include works of art, manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest as well as scientific collections and important collections of objects of art.

It is the main instrument to ensure the protection and the respect of cultural heritage during peace time, armed conflict, post-conflict situations, including occupation, through a variety of both protective and preventive measures.

To date, 133 States Parties have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention. 110 States Parties have ratified the First Protocol, and 84 States Parties have ratified the Second Protocol. Latvia ratified the Convention and 1954 First Protocol in 2003, however, it has not yet ratified the 1999 Second Protocol.

The benefits of ratifying this treaty are many. Becoming party to the 1999 Second Protocol would enable Latvia to propose its cultural property of the greatest importance for humanity as well as its sites including libraries, archives and museums for inscription on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection to ensure the highest level of protection. Latvia has 2 World Heritage sites and 4 sites on the Tentative List that could be inscribed under enhanced protection to add another layer of protection such as from criminal offences.

After being a Party to the Second Protocol, Latvia will also have access to the international assistance, including financial assistance under the Fund for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict to enhance cultural property protection, technical assistance in improving domestic criminal legislation, as well as trainings for military and law enforcement agencies to strengthen their capacity for cultural heritage protection. These treaties also guarantee the protection of movable and immovable cultural heritage through preventive measures, including inventories and risk preparedness plans.

UNESCO Heritage Emergency Fund

Another UNESCO initiative, the Heritage Emergency Fund (HEF), a multi-donor and non-earmarked funding mechanism, is also of high relevance in the emergency context. The HEF allows UNESCO to assist Member States to both prepare for and respond to emergency situations quickly and effectively, including the through the identifying and mitigating of different risks before crisis, from inventories of sites and collections, training, and development of disaster risk management plans.

Within the framework of the Heritage Emergency Fund, UNESCO's work also covers the protection of cultural heritage from disasters caused by natural hazards such as earthquakes, storms, and floods, with particular consideration to the impact of climate change. For example, in 2018, in terms of preparedness, UNESCO conducted a national workshop on managing disaster risks to cultural heritage at the Ethnographic Museum of Belgrade, Serbia.

In this regard, Latvia is invited to explore the activities carried out by the Heritage Emergency Fund and to consider requesting support to strengthen the resilience of the museums and cultural heritage assets.

Safeguarding cultural institutions and collections in emergencies

Since the 1970s, the global museum sector has developed rapidly. Today, the estimated number of museums around the world has reached 104,000. Museums, libraries, and archives have become one of the most frequented institutions of the world and occupy a central role in communities' lives everywhere. However, the challenges and risks are also increasing due to armed conflicts, extremism violence, organized crimes, disasters, and climate change, among others.

Recognizing the essential role of museums to society, and the various challenges they face, in 2015, UNESCO adopted the Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, the first UNESCO international standards for museums in more than half a century. The 2015 Recommendation calls on Member States to strengthen policy support and resource investment for museums, and underlines the importance of emergency preparedness through enhanced museum security, risk analysis, the development of preparedness capacities and emergency plans, preventive and remedial conservation, and the restoration of museum objects.

In the meanwhile, the UNESCO 1970 Convention, the international reference to prevent and fight against illicit trafficking, highlights the measures to prevent risks of illicit trafficking, including the elaboration of laws and regulations, collection inventories, export control, education, and awareness raising.

Numerous guidelines and practical tools were produced by UNESCO and its technical partners, such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural property (ICCROM), and the Blue Shield International, to provide technical support. A very good example is the UNESCO/ICCROM manual "Endangered Heritage: Emergency Excavation of Heritage Collections" published in 2016 and now available in 13 languages, the most recent translation being in Ukrainian. This practical tool offers a field-tested simple workflow for the emergency evacuation of valuable objects which can be widely used in training and practical operation.

In addition to its work in standard-setting and technical guidance, UNESCO also brings assistance to Member States and cultural institutions through on the ground projects and emergency interventions.

Training in preventive conservation (to which inventories and digitization is central), emergency preparedness and fight against illicit trafficking have been implemented around the world, including Africa and Small Island Developing States. For example, following the deterioration of the security situation in Burkina Faso in 2018, UNESCO organized training on emergency inventorying, packaging and evacuation of museum collections for museums which contributed

to the effective evacuation of over 300 cultural objects from local museums in March 2020. Within the frame of its Priority Africa Program, UNESCO is currently developing a flagship project “Fostering cultural heritage and capacity development” to strengthen African museums’ capacity in heritage conservation.

After the breakout of the crisis, technical interventions are made immediately by UNESCO in close cooperation with our partners. The main actions include damage assessment, advising for response plan, and technical assistance in reconstruction, rehabilitation and restoration of cultural property. Through all these actions, since 2018, UNESCO has been one of the key actors in the restoration and reconstruction of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro after the devastating fire. And, after the heavy rain hit El Salvador in 2019, UNESCO quickly acted to support the National Library in preserving documentary heritage through provision of equipment and technical assistance.

It is important to underline that cultural heritage and institutions are not only victims of conflicts and disasters, but also possess great power to promote social inclusion, sustainable development, and lasting peace. They are important actors to raise awareness and mobilize public actions on key social issues, such as equality, justice, and climate change. Therefore, UNESCO has been promoting culture as a pillar for post crisis recovery in many regions of the world. An inspiring case is the reopening of the Somali National Museum in 2020 after thirty years to which UNESCO has closely accompanied through technical assistance for the creation of the museum’s administrative and management structures.

In recent months, a central part to UNESCO’s work is to support museums, libraries and archives in Ukraine. Our works encompass the areas of satellite monitoring, damage assessment, needs collecting, technical advice, and coordinating the international cooperation in our field of competencies. Upon the request of Ukrainian authorities, UNESCO has created the Emergency Group for museums in Ukraine, composed of a dozen of international museums to provide legal and scientific expertise, technical assistance and large-scale cooperation in an emergency and recovery context.

Moreover, UNESCO has also been spearheading the international efforts in preventing and fighting illicit trafficking of Ukrainian cultural property by facilitating information exchange and alerting international communities. A joint call was issued in April with our technical partners to sensitize the art market and other main stakeholders.

Culture is not a secondary issue in crisis, but a fundamental humanitarian and security concern. UNESCO has given this issue top priority, since it touches the very heart of our mission, building the defenses of peace in the minds of men and women, through culture.

Thus, I wish to encourage the Latvian authorities to continue the important efforts in safeguarding cultural property, libraries, archives and museums, and look forward to further strengthening our cooperation in this regard. As we have learnt from the past experiences that in face of emergencies, it is essential to be prepared and to work together in solidarity.

Thank you very much.