Cultural Heritage Protection and the Humanitarian Ecosystem Video Series

Script: Cultural Heritage Protection, Destruction and its Impact on Crisis-Affected People

Slide 1: Hello and welcome to the third presentation of the video series of cultural heritage protection and the humanitarian ecosystem. My name is María José Romero Torres, from Guatemala. I am part of Casa K'ojom Cultural Rescue Center team and an alumnus of the Leadership course for cultural heritage stewards of the Cultural Emergency Response (CER) and SCRI (the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative). I have experience in projects with Mayan communities in Guatemala. So welcome to this presentation.

Slide 2: In this presentation we are going to discuss what cultural heritage is, its destruction and protection, and its impact on crisis affected people. To do so, we will discuss these 4 points:

- The first: how cultural heritage is enshrined in international law and the differences between cultural property and cultural heritage.
- Whether cultural heritage is as important to protect as people?
- The third: the different contexts of cultural heritage destruction, and
- The impact of cultural heritage destruction on crisis-affected people.

Slide 3: So, to start, what is cultural heritage? This can be a difficult question to answer. However, broadly speaking, it provides links to the past that are both tangible (for example, objects, buildings, sites, and monuments) and intangible (like stories, songs, dances) that help to provide individuals and communities with a sense of place, and identity, and belonging, contributing to individual and communal well-being and dignity. Important to note again here is that, as mentioned by Nigel in the introduction presentation, people are indivisibly linked to their heritage.

Slide 4: Due to this indivisible connection between people and their heritage, the protection of certain cultural heritage is enshrined in international humanitarian and human rights law. As we can see on the slide, this is a very text heavy slide, and I don't intend to go into too much detail here, but it is important to recognize that cultural heritage protection is enshrined in many different legal statutes and conventions, with all the resulting obligations to uphold their provisions. If you are interested in this international law, please follow the link in the additional resources to the Blue Shield Law Library on our website, where you can find more information.

For our purposes of understanding cultural heritage and the humanitarian ecosystem, I draw your attention in particular to two pieces of international humanitarian law. The first is the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, and the second is the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols of 1954 and 1999.

Slide 5: First, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols (from 1977) specifically protect people who are not taking part in the hostilities (for example, we are talking about civilians, health workers, and aid workers), and their property, and those who are no longer participating in the hostilities.

Today they form the basis of International Humanitarian Law.

Both of the Additional Protocols have specific provisions (Articles 53 and 16, respectively) relating to the "Protection of cultural objects and of places of worship" above and beyond the protection afforded to normal civilian property, recognising its importance as part of "the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples".

Slide 6: Turning to the 1954 Hague Convention, which we have discussed in the previous presentations, we can see that it uses the term "cultural property". As mentioned previously, cultural property is essentially tangible cultural heritage, and centres of heritage, such as museums, which have been identified at state level, to be of great cultural importance. Over 130 countries have ratified the 1954 Hague Convention and agree to abide by its principles.

The images on the slide show examples of such cultural property, such as Machu Picchu in Peru, Tutankhamun's death mask, the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, and the Palace of Versailles in France, all of which are tangible objects, buildings, or monuments, both moveable and immovable, with great cultural significance to the world.

Slide 7: However, as Nigel explained in the introduction presentation, modern definitions of cultural heritage also recognise the importance of natural and intangible heritage, and specifically use the term cultural heritage not cultural property - like the World Heritage Convention of 1972, which has been signed by almost every country in the world.

The term cultural heritage is more inclusive. It includes cultural property, but also places of natural importance, as well as songs, traditions, languages, and other intangible elements of peoples' culture. Many communities make no distinction between these different types of heritage, whether tangible or intangible, natural, or human-made, and see them all as one and the same thing.

Examples of such entwined heritage are shown in the images on the slide. For example, the stilt fishermen of Sri Lanka and their traditional fishing technique, and the prayer flags at Mount Everest base camp, are combinations of natural and human-made traditional cultural heritage. The human cultural traditions interact with the natural cultural landscape.

Slide 8: One of the criticisms of the Blue Shield and other heritage experts or heritage organisations that work to protect heritage during crises and emergencies is that we are prioritising old things over living people who are often in extreme danger or crisis. We make it completely clear to everyone that the Blue Shield would never prioritise, or ask anyone else to prioritise, protecting heritage before protecting people.

However, it is not always such an easy, binary choice between protecting heritage or protecting people.

We argue that the protection of heritage is an integral part of protecting individuals and communities, and in some cases, crisis-affected peoples' humanitarian needs also include cultural heritage protection.

Slide 9: We also want to be clear that Blue Shield is not recommending that the humanitarian community should divert resources away from crisis-affected peoples' humanitarian needs.

We know that the humanitarian ecosystem is under pressure, both financially and politically. The impacts of crises continue to grow, and humanitarian agencies are making difficult decisions over which needs should be prioritised.

Slide 10: The protection of people may be intrinsically linked to the protection of their heritage. There is a long-established link between the destruction of heritage and attacks on communities, and cultural heritage destruction continues to be a key element of contemporary genocide. There are many examples, including the Bosnian genocide in the 1990s, in which mosques, churches and other cultural items were among the deliberate targets of warfare alongside the murder and interment in concentration camps of the different communities. It was a combined effort to erase and forcibly remove all traces of the people, their culture, and their history from the whole landscape.

A more recent example is the Islamic State's attack on the Yazidi population in Iraq. A recent report into the Yezidi Genocide found that "In a planned and coldly calculated policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide, the Islamic State specifically and systematically targeted the culture, identity and heritage of Iraqi Yazidis. Not just murdered, Yazidis were enslaved, forced into sexual servitude, brainwashed and/or forcibly converted to Islam. Many historic sites and holy places were destroyed. Tens of thousands of Yazidis were forced to flee their homeland".

To reiterate, Blue Shield always believes that the protection of people comes first. However, as we can see, there may be no distinction between protecting people and protecting heritage. We firmly believe that people and their cultural heritage are intertwined and completely indivisible.

Slide 11: UNESCO also takes the position that the protection of cultural heritage is linked to the protection of people. In 2017, the then-UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova, addressed the UN Security Council in New York in response to global instances of high-profile heritage destruction. She informed the Security Council "The deliberate destruction of heritage is a war crime, it has become a tactic of war to tear societies over the long term, in a strategy of cultural cleansing. This is why defending cultural heritage is more than a cultural issue, it is a security imperative, inseparable from that of defending human lives".

Slide 12: The UN Security Council agrees, and in response to high profile cultural heritage destruction over the last 20 years, it has made numerous Resolutions to reiterate the importance of protecting cultural heritage to international peace and security.

These resolutions condemn the destruction, looting, and trafficking of cultural heritage in armed conflicts. In particular, Resolution 2347 explicitly states that it "… now adds the thorough awareness of culture's role as a source of stability and inclusion, and as a driver of reconciliation and resilience".

Slide 13: Now we have looked at what cultural heritage is, and its legal protections, I would like to turn our attention to the different contexts of heritage destruction. Often, they overlap with, and often occur in, humanitarian contexts. Therefore, the emergencies that humanitarian agencies work in are the same in which heritage destruction occurs, and the crisis-affected people you serve will most likely be experiencing the impacts of some form of heritage destruction.

This slide is a simplistic overview of the 4 main heritage destruction contexts that also correspond to humanitarian contexts.

There is intentional destruction in armed conflict. Cultural heritage destruction has been a part of armed conflict throughout history, and continues to be so, even though the 1998 Rome Statute makes it a war crime under international criminal law to attack historic monuments without a military need. Crisis affected people, therefore, may also be experiencing heritage destruction as part of an overall conflict.

Heritage destruction also happens during peacetime, or in situations that are outside of armed conflict and are therefore beyond the remit of the 1998 Rome Statute and International Humanitarian Law. The destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001 in Afghanistan is an example of this.

As well as intentional destruction of cultural heritage, there can be unintentional destruction. This can include, for example, where historic buildings are damaged or destroyed with no specific intention, often during urban conflict; so-called 'collateral damage', or as the result of environmental disasters, such as earthquakes and cyclones. The image on the slide shows the protection of heritage in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake in 2015.

The final context on the slide is population displacement which can cause intangible heritage loss. After disaster, the usual community celebrations, festivals and social events are disrupted and this affects the social fabric of the community. The heritage destruction from displacement can be deliberate, caused by hostile groups forcing people to move or exiling them from their traditional areas, or it can be non-intentional and just a result of the emergency situation as people move to seek safety. Sometimes it can be both.

Slide 14: So, what are the impacts of all this heritage destruction on crisis-affected people? Unfortunately, we have some knowledge gaps as there is a lack of research and data, and crisis-affected people are generally not asked about their cultural needs. However, from the research that we do have, we know it impacts on certain issues, and in complex ways, that also correspond to humanitarian needs.

The next few slides will highlight a few key areas, using quotes from affected people themselves, as told to journalists.

We know cultural heritage destruction impacts on social cohesion, due to the fracturing of communities in cases of displacement. If this displacement occurs across borders, we know that the loss of cultural identity can be a concern for people, especially for children.

For example: "Syrian parents want their kids to learn in Arabic. They're scared their kids would lose their language, culture, and Syrian identity if they send them to Turkish schools". This quote from a Syrian refugee in a refugee camp shows that education in particular may be a concern, and that intangible culture and the cultural identity it forms may be at risk if children are integrated into local schools. The impact may be that the children are not allowed to go to school, which results in them missing out on their education.

Slide 15: We also know that deliberate cultural heritage destruction, especially as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing and genocide, can impact on the safety and security of people.

For example, the quote on the slide says "When [the rebels] entered the city, people said if you were an artist they would cut out your tongue, because they hate music and want to ban it". This refers to the rebel occupation of Timbuktu, and has clear implications for the physical protection of people. However, it also has implications for economic and livelihood issues, with artists and musicians not allowed to organise or participate in cultural activities, and finding their livelihoods and their sources of their incomes banned.

Slide 16: We also know cultural heritage destruction impacts on the mental health of crisis-affected people. Mental health is perhaps the most researched impact of heritage destruction as a humanitarian concern, and it will be discussed further in the next presentation.

The quote on the slide refers to a loss of identity caused by the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan: "I will never forget … I walk past every day and see. Sometimes I lose my bearings as I walk past. It is too much to take in". And another person said: "People and children were crying … We lost our identity."

There are most likely other impacts too that we have not identified yet, especially in the food and shelter clusters. Food, in particular, can be very cultural, from the types of dishes and the ingredients used in everyday meals, to the feasts traditionally served at celebrations. This most likely also impacts on mental health. However, there is currently a significant lack of research and we are relying on trends identified from anecdotal evidence. As more research is conducted and more data gathered, clearer understanding of the impacts of heritage destruction and how they translate into humanitarian needs will be established.

Slide 17: As we come to the end of the presentation, I would like to conclude with the fact that it is highly likely that heritage destruction will have occurred, or be occurring in real time, in many, if not all humanitarian emergencies. We will consider in the next presentation, if and how the humanitarian ecosystem should respond to this cultural heritage destruction, and how to meet the humanitarian needs of the people affected by it.

Thank you very much for listening.