

Cultural Heritage Protection and the Humanitarian Ecosystem Video Series

Script: Why and How Can the Humanitarian Ecosystem Support Cultural Heritage Protection?

Slide 1: My name is Fatima FALL NIANG, and I am the Director of the Centre for Research and Documentation of Sénégal (CRDS) Gaston Berger Université. I am the Chair of ICOM Senegal, and a member of ICOMOS, and a member of the Blue Shield Committee of Senegal. We are discussing today cultural heritage protection and the humanitarian ecosystem – “Why and How Can the Humanitarian Ecosystem Support Cultural Heritage Protection”.

Hello and welcome to the final presentation of the video series of cultural heritage protection and the humanitarian ecosystem.

Slide 2: In this last presentation we will discuss:

- The overview of the different perspectives of the heritage sector and the humanitarian ecosystem;
- The mental health impact of heritage destruction on crisis-affected people;
- Examples of cultural heritage integrated into humanitarian programmes, the positive impact on affected people, and lessons learnt; and, finally
- What Blue Shield is asking the humanitarian ecosystem to do, in order to include protection of cultural heritage in humanitarian response.

Slide 3: So, to start, heritage destruction is not usually considered a humanitarian concern by the humanitarian sector, which typically views it as either a matter of international law or an issue for organisations such as UNESCO. Although heritage destruction may be strongly condemned by the humanitarian sector, as was the case with the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and of the Ancient City of Palmyra in Syria, ultimately it is not seen as the role of the humanitarian ecosystem to address their destruction.

This overall perspective is disputed by the heritage sector. We can see how strongly UNESCO feels about this from the quote on the slide: “At UNESCO, we believe there is no choice to make between saving lives and saving cultural heritage. Protecting heritage is inseparable from protecting populations, because heritage enshrines people’s identities. Heritage ... is a force for social cohesion and recovery. This is why protection of heritage must be part of all humanitarian efforts”.

Slide 4: The Humanitarian Cluster System is a system used by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to coordinate multi-agency responses to large humanitarian emergencies. To familiarise ourselves with it, we can see that UNESCO has no official place in the cluster system, and has no formal humanitarian ecosystem presence, despite its broad remit.

So up until very recently, this has left things at an impasse, with cultural heritage not considered a humanitarian concern by the humanitarian ecosystem, while at the same time being viewed as a very important humanitarian issue by cultural heritage organisations.

To a certain extent, the humanitarian view is correct, in terms that it is not the role of the humanitarian ecosystem to engage with, or stop, or restore, cultural heritage at a political level. This

would contravene the humanitarian principles. However, it *is* the role of the humanitarian ecosystem to meet the basic needs of crisis-affected people, which, we argue, can sometimes include cultural heritage protection.

Slide 5: In fact, cultural heritage protection is already included in the humanitarian charter, in terms of recognizing the cultural context of humanitarian aid that is provided. “...more than the physical well-being; [dignity] demands respect for the whole person, including the values and belief of individuals and affected communities...”

Humanitarians should be ensuring all aid is culturally appropriate, as in doing so, we know that assistance is more trusted, there is greater likelihood of access to the affected populations, and positive humanitarian outcomes are increased. So, the humanitarian ecosystem already recognises how important cultural heritage is to humanitarian response.

However, Blue Shield and organisations such as UNESCO argue that cultural heritage should take a more prominent role in humanitarian response, going beyond its mention in the Humanitarian Charter to actual heritage cross-cutting programmes. In doing so, not only is cultural heritage under threat protected, but this approach offers more accountability to affected populations as well as a potential new and effective approach to meet growing humanitarian needs.

Slide 6: Cultural heritage needs during an emergency will most likely cut across all of the clusters, due to the indivisible nature of heritage and people. Although it is a cross-cutting issue, it may be also be a low-profile one, making it difficult to identify. From the evidence that we have, we believe it to be most visible in the health, protection, education, and food clusters.

Slide 7: Despite being a low-profile issue, in 2019, the International Organisation of Migrants (IOM) could not miss the overwhelming mental health impact of heritage destruction on the Rohingya refugees who had fled Myanmar for refuge in Cox’s Bazar in neighbouring Bangladesh.

The Rohingya community had been identified as at specific risk of mental health issues due to their prior history of systematic dehumanization, persecution and witnessing or directly experiencing extreme violence. The Rohingya people have also suffered deliberate attacks on their culture and history, and loss of collective memory and social cohesion as a consequence of their forced displacement, compounding their serious trauma and mental health issues. IOM saw this clearly in their mental health and psychosocial support programmes, and when they consulted on this further with the Rohingya people in a rapid assessment, the results showed a clear link between their mental health and their cultural heritage, and more specifically, identity, collective memory, and social cohesion. A MHPSS rapid assessment found **50%** of respondents identified an identity crisis as a common problem and **73%** of respondents identified a loss of cultural identity following their forced exodus from Myanmar in 2017 as one of the main factors of their distress.

IOM states that in their mental health and psychosocial support programmes worldwide, they consider cultural and traditional components as essential for the mental health and psychosocial well-being of crisis-affected populations.

Slide 8: Once the cultural needs of the Rohingya refugees had been identified, a heritage protection project was developed as a means of meeting their mental health and psychosocial needs.

Consequently, the concept of the Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre (or the RCMC) was developed and implemented.

The RCMC comprises of a built centre, a website, and a YouTube channel. The built centre is in the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, and it conducts cultural activities including creating and exhibiting traditional art work, festivals, performing arts, and workshops. Women and children have equal participation in the centre, and there is an awareness that the centre is important particularly for children born in the camp, with no knowledge or memory of Rohingya culture in Myanmar.

Slide 9: IOM states that the RCMC allows the distressed Rohingya population to share symbolic resources related to their identity as an ethnic group and as a community, in order to help them cope with their collective experience of displacement; and to incorporate new experiences into their identity, after their arrival in Bangladesh, in order to equip them with the tools needed to face the future.

We can see some of the participants' own opinions and experiences of the RCMC on the slide.

*"Refugee camp life sometimes makes me tense. But here, at the centre, I feel happy and at home."
"I felt like crying when I saw these things, because they are from my homeland Burma."
"The younger generation will not lose their culture".
"These activities will be a big help to our community until we can return to Myanmar".
"The days go by, but our history will remain".*

Slide 10: IOM has conducted impact assessments, which show that all the participants of the RCMC reported improved wellbeing, security, and a sense of belonging. The Deputy Chief of the IOM mission stated that "this centre's activities are crucial for supporting the Rohingya's mental wellbeing".

Awareness of the importance of cultural heritage and its protection in this programme has become a vehicle to achieve the overall improved mental health goals.

Slide 11: Interestingly, the impact of cultural heritage destruction on identity, social cohesion, and collective memory appears to be a common trend. It is experienced by different affected cultural groups in different displacement emergencies around the world. This suggests a common link between the impact of heritage destruction, displacement, and mental health.

Another example are the Syrian refugees in Jordan who organised their own cultural artwork. They sourced basic materials and re-created famous historical landmarks, which were displayed in the Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan. In this image, the artist has created a model of Palmyra using clay and wooden kebab skewers.

For these Syrian artists, this activity to preserve and document their cultural heritage has also provided a sense of purpose and psychosocial support. "There are lots of kids living here who have never seen Syria or who have no memory of it". The project has also given the artists a sense of purpose. Ahmad Hariri, the Project Coordinator who initiated the project explains that "by doing this work, they feel like they [the refugees] are at least doing something to preserve their culture".

As in the case of the Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre, cultural heritage protection has become the vehicle to achieve humanitarian mental health objectives.

Slide 12: Not only that, but the Project Coordinator, Ahmad Hariri, on the far left, also stated that “We chose this project to highlight what is happening in Syria, because many of these sites are under threat or have already been destroyed”. So for him, and the other artists involved in this project, the specific concern of cultural heritage protection was a priority issue in itself.

This project highlights several points; cultural heritage as a cross-cutting mental health and livelihood issue, cultural heritage protection as a priority issue in itself and affected people themselves identifying their own priorities and meeting their own needs by conducting their own initiative, which was then later supported by humanitarian organisations.

In the ‘Additional Resources’, you can find the final report of a similar programme, Syria in my Mind, run the by NGO Biladi, which engaged Syrian refugee children in Lebanon in learning about their heritage in order to enable them build a sense of belonging and pride toward Syria. Post-programme evaluation revealed increased knowledge of and pride in Syria, even amongst those who had never seen it, and psychological and emotional improvements for participants and course leaders (who were themselves refugees).

Slide 13: Intangible heritage is also important to affected people. A 2016 UNESCO report of intangible cultural heritage of displaced Syrians found that intangible heritage provides a sense of belonging, encourages psychological, social, and economic resilience, and, in many cases, helps mediate conflicts by fostering intercultural communication and mutual appreciation.

More specifically, the survey found that some forms of intangible cultural heritage can serve to bridge relations with host communities, such as the exchange of food and recipes, Syrian musicians performing at festivals, and Syrian artisans teaching their skills to local craftsmen. The report found that this exchange of heritage supported new social relations between displaced Syrians and the host society, improved the way Syrians were perceived, opened up a dialogue between cultural traditions, allowed for the development of friendship and respect, and helped communities learn new skills.

The report also found that some forms of intangible heritage can also provide displaced Syrians with opportunities to recover lost livelihoods even in the absence of economic capital. This can be the case with crafts and cooking skills, traditional health care practices, and the performing arts.

Slide 14: The findings of the UNESCO research report show that cultural heritage protection can contribute to durable solutions.

The Inter-agency standing committee framework on durable solutions for internally displaced persons explains that one-way durable solutions can be achieved is through host community integration. Internally displaced people also need access to basic needs, which include livelihoods and employment. Opportunities to build skills, assets, and networks also need to be available.

We can see from the projects we have examined and the UNESCO intangible heritage report, that they support the development of those conditions and therefore contribute durable solutions. I would suggest there are valuable lessons learnt that can be applied to other humanitarian responses.

Slide 15: So, now we can turn to how can humanitarian agencies include cultural heritage within their operations. Cultural heritage may be an area you are not familiar with or have any knowledge on how to include.

Blue Shield recognises the difficulties of taking on new issues, so we would suggest that cultural heritage is not viewed as a new issue, but instead an extension of the cultural sensitivity adaptations and frameworks you already use. In this way, it is not a new issue to take on, but instead, streamlined in current humanitarian approaches.

As such, Blue Shield suggests the 4 points on the slide. Namely:

- Include cultural heritage as a cross-cutting issue that has relevance within all clusters and all sectors in all emergencies. Culture is indivisible from people, and so it is reasonable to assume it will impact on all basic humanitarian needs;
- Although this is the case, Blue Shield recognises that cultural heritage may not be a humanitarian priority in emergencies. As such, we request that humanitarian agencies include cultural heritage in needs assessments and consultations with affected people;
- Consider the examples and lessons learned that we have discussed and adapt and apply them to other humanitarian programmes where possible; and finally,
- Please be aware of possible cultural heritage organisations operating in the same emergency, and include them in coordination if appropriate. It is possible they will have the awareness, capacity, and expertise to advise or deliver humanitarian cultural heritage programmes, and there may be opportunities for partnership.

Slide 16: A reminder that we do understand how overstretched the humanitarian sector is, with lack of capacity, inadequate resources, and growing needs. However, cultural heritage can be a useful cross-cutting issue to meet humanitarian objectives, foster positive relationships with host communities, support reconciliation, peace, and security, as noted by the UN Security Council, which we discussed in the last presentation, and may be a priority for crisis-affected people. Blue Shield believes cultural heritage can offer the humanitarian ecosystem a new perspective to ensure accountability to affected people and meet humanitarian needs.

The point is not to overburden the humanitarian system with yet more initiatives, but increase aid effectiveness.

Slide 17: I'd like to finish by bringing our attention back to this quote from Yves Daccord, former Director-General of the ICRC, "Protecting cultural property and cultural heritage against the devastating effects of war unfortunately remains a humanitarian imperative, today perhaps more than ever", and this is a sentiment that both the Blue Shield and ICRC share. I hope the humanitarian ecosystem and Blue Shield can move forward together with this in mind, as we address the biggest current humanitarian challenges of today, and those, unfortunately, of crises yet to come.

Slide 18: Many thanks for joining this presentation series, and I hope you have found it informative. Blue Shield believes that cultural heritage is important to crisis-affected people, and although is not usually included in basic needs assessments or analysis, and therefore not usually identified, the impact of heritage destruction is most likely present. We hope that we can move forward together to be more inclusive of heritage needs, for the benefit of crisis-affected people.

Many thanks for listening. You can see more on the website, Facebook, and Twitter. Thank you very much.