

Preparedness and Response for Cultural Heritage Disasters in Developing Countries

Nimal De Silva

Dean

University of Moratuwa - Faculty of Architecture

Sri Lanka

Resumen

La gestión de los riesgos relativos al patrimonio cultural en peligro en los países en desarrollo

Es alarmante comprobar que en el mundo proliferan las situaciones de emergencia - provocadas por la naturaleza o las actividades humanas - en las que se pierden definitivamente elementos enteros de la memoria común para las generaciones venideras. En Asia, los desastres naturales más importantes son las inundaciones, las sequías y los huracanes.

A pesar de la riqueza del patrimonio cultural de Sri Lanka, el gobierno asigna recursos financieros muy insuficientes para su protección, ya que se da prioridad política a otros problemas (aumento de la población, escaso desarrollo económico, etc.). En este contexto económico, es imposible plantearse por ahora la elaboración de un plan de gestión de riesgos. Cuando una situación de emergencia sobreviene, las consecuencias pueden ser dramáticas como ocurrió en el caso del atentado perpetrado contra el Templo del Diente Sagrado, que provocó un pánico general y una desorganización de los servicios de socorro (policía, ejército, etc.).

Résumé

La gestion des risques pour le patrimoine culturel en danger dans les pays en voie de développement

Il est alarmant de constater que le monde est affecté en maints endroits de situations d'urgence causées par l'homme et par la nature faisant disparaître à jamais une mémoire commune pour les générations futures. L'Asie peut se caractériser par trois catastrophes naturelles majeures : inondations, sécheresses et vents de tempêtes. Malgré la richesse du patrimoine sri lankais, les allocations gouvernementales à la culture sont faibles, laissant la priorité à d'autres secteurs de la scène politique (augmentation de la population, faible développement économique, etc.). Dans ce contexte économique, aucun plan de gestion des risques ne peut être envisagé à l'heure actuelle. Les conséquences sont dramatiques lorsqu'une situation d'urgence surgit comme lors de l'attentat du temple de la Dent sacrée qui a provoqué une panique généralisée et une désorganisation des services de secours (police, armée, etc.).

Cultural heritage is very important in fostering a quality of life with value and pride in all civilizations. It comes together with an historic message and information that the cultural materials transmit from the past to the present and the future. Therefore, the protection of world cultural heritage from natural and man-made disasters has been a focus both nationally and internationally for the last fifty years. Yet many examples of recent human-made and natural calamities show the extent of the irreplaceable destruction of cultural heritage throughout the world. This includes the destruction of heritage by armed conflicts in Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, Croatia, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and this year in Iraq. Fire even burned down Windsor Castle in the UK. A great deal of cultural property and many human lives were lost in major earthquakes in Kobe and Los Angeles and exceptional floods in North Korea.

With a view to greater understanding and an earnest desire to protect cultural heritage, international conventions have been established to protect cultural property in the event of armed conflict, e.g. the Hague Convention of 1954. Many round table conferences at UNESCO, international symposia and national conferences are held on the subject every year, international organisations for cultural heritage such as ICOMOS, ICOM, ICCROM and others are dedicated to the protection of world cultural heritage, yet all were helpless in the case of the blasting of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of Herat and Kabul museums and a few months ago the Baghdad museum in Iraq housing the heritage of Mesopotamia. This is the harsh reality. It is alarming that the risk of destruction of world heritage is increasing. The loss of cultural heritage will deprive present and future generations of the possibility to enjoy and learn lessons from the accumulated wisdom of the past.

What is this cultural heritage? There are two kinds: tangible and intangible heritage; the two are inseparable and for full benefit both should be preserved together. Tangible heritage is also classified as immovable and movable, immovable meaning monuments and sites, while movable cultural heritage is mainly museum and archival collections. This may cover many thousands of years of human history and achievements. It is fragile, vulnerable, subject to destruction, and of great commercial and artistic value for rich collectors which means a high risk factor for preservation and protection.

When disaster strikes, whether due to natural or man-made causes, it destroys both cultural property and the people. Of the serious types of natural disaster identified worldwide, drought accounts for 57%, floods for 32%, windstorms 9% and earthquakes 2%. Floods mostly destroy heritage material during the period of inundation which may last for few weeks, but droughts sometimes last for many years, disrupting human settlements and activities and causing loss of intangible heritage which may not have been studied and recorded by the world community. With armed conflicts there is the instability of everyday life, displacement of people, loss of property and fear for one's life, sometimes over a period of years, and this will invariably destroy human activities and ultimately the intangible heritage.

With different climatic, geographical and sociological conditions, the types and degree of natural disaster vary from region to region. In Asia all three major catastrophes — floods, droughts and windstorms — have

destroyed people's lives and their heritage. In Africa droughts are the main natural disaster, suggesting that Africa needs a different type of natural disaster preparedness. Other geographical regions also need to be considered separately.

What are these developing countries? They are always developing but hardly developed. They have long-standing traditions of intangible and tangible cultural heritage, their needs have not been satisfied, they have large population growth and low economic development. In government budgetary allocations, culture is the least priority. As cost-effective allocation of resources is required for heritage protection, no measures are available for risk prevention and preparedness and emergency response. In this scenario, preparedness for the protection of cultural property will not have a place in the national planning process, being deemed of lesser importance and not a priority.

For these reasons, no risk preparedness plans are drawn up; or if plans are prepared, no financial allocations and trained personnel for the implementation of these plans are available. Museums in developing countries are poorly equipped for preventive care and protection and are poorly managed. There is no culture of awareness of risk preparedness amongst museum staff. Most museums are housed in old buildings with electrical wiring many decades old and a high fire risk. It was in fact found that fire extinguishers installed in museums had not been tested or changed for years. The situation may be due to lack of funding or because curators are not aware of the risk. No building plans are available for use in an emergency. And these conditions are very common in many museums in developing countries.

Man-made disasters through armed conflict are on a different scale, bringing terror, fear for survival, loss of life and mental distress. It is very difficult to have pre-planned strategies; actions must be intelligent and situation-based. When Tamil terrorists bombed the Sacred Tooth Relic Temple, the supreme monument of the World Heritage City of Kandy, it was a disastrous experience with loss of life and destruction of buildings and museums. The thick clay-based walls of the main gateway buffered the shock waves travelling towards the main shrine. The roofs of all the historic buildings around the palace complex were blown off; hundreds of historic palm leaf manuscripts in the Octagon library cupboards were blown out and loose leaves were found scattered everywhere. Statues fell face down and broke; all the stained glass windows of the nearby church fell to the floor; the doors and windows of all the buildings were blown out. It was a terrible and sorry experience.

There were no risk preparedness plans. The immediate action was to call the police to control the public; power connections were disconnected, broken roof beams were propped up, and the army and navy were called in to help. The situation was documented. All the scattered palm leaf manuscripts were carefully gathered in bundles, wrapped in white cloth, labelled and placed in temporary storage. Luckily there was no rain. Within five hours the salvage situation was brought under control. It took two and a half years and a lot of money to get the situation back to normal.

Over the last decade there has been a notable increase in awareness and preparedness for natural hazards and man-made disasters. A consensus

has emerged about what constitutes disaster preparedness and the vital role of planning. Individual institutions have prepared emergency plans with great enthusiasm. Valuable professional inputs from international and local experts have enriched these plans. But the reality found in developing countries is that there is no consistency in updating the plans and keeping them alive. Risk preparedness plans are invariably forgotten with time because of changing priorities or a lack of enthusiasm from management. It was noted that all the risk preparedness plans were for material heritage and not for the preservation of cultures and traditions, i.e. living intangible heritage.

Risk preparedness for the protection of cultural heritage is important, as disasters can strike at any time irrespective of whether it is a developed or developing country. It is important to learn lessons from the past. Human cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible components. It is very important to develop an understanding, commitment, preventive attitude and culture among professionals, administrators and the public concerned. As it is difficult to have any control on the causes of both natural and man-made disasters, planning needs to cover four main phases: the preventive action phase, response phase, salvage action phase and the rehabilitation phase.

In planning, it is necessary to document and list the cultural property, understand the risk factor and look at the strategies required for action in a collective manner. Awareness of the guidelines and plan, motivation and commitment, training and periodic drills and exercises are needed to see risk preparedness take shape. It must be made a living process changing and evolving with time and experience. All plans for risk preparedness for cultural property need to be situation-specific but developed through general guidelines prepared on the basis of past experience around the world. It should also be noted that the success of the plan will not depend on the availability of money but on each individual and on the collective commitment of all the people involved.