

Preserving the Environment and Local Traditions in Emergency Preparedness and Response

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Resumen

Prevención y planes de emergencia para proteger el medio ambiente y las tradiciones locales

La vulnerabilidad del patrimonio cultural constituye un motivo de preocupación importante en caso de catástrofes naturales y/o conflictos armados. Preservar ese patrimonio del mayor número de peligros posibles supone adoptar una serie de precauciones con los bienes culturales, y más concretamente disponer de lugares seguros y vigilados donde puedan ponerse al resguardo de actos de vandalismo o de destrucciones con armas explosivas.

La guerra civil que ha devastado Burundi en los últimos diez años ha tenido graves consecuencias para el patrimonio cultural protegido. Por ejemplo, el Museo Viviente de Bujumbura, después de las obras de restauración realizadas en 1998, ha vuelto a sufrir deterioros graves en 2003, ya que sirvió de lugar de refugio prolongado a un numeroso grupo de 500 personas a raíz de un ataque de fuerzas militares rebeldes. La reparación de los daños ocasionados entraña costos de restauración muy elevados, que el gobierno del país no puede sufragar porque tiene que hacer frente a los gastos generales acarreados por la guerra civil.

Résumé

Préserver l'environnement et les traditions locales lors de la prévention des risques et la mise en place de plans d'urgence

La vulnérabilité du patrimoine culturel est un sujet majeur de préoccupation en cas de catastrophes naturelles et/ou de conflits armés. Le préserver du plus grand nombre de destructions possibles sous-entend une prise de précautions à l'égard des biens culturels, à savoir notamment la localisation d'un lieu sécurisé les mettant à l'abri du vandalisme et des explosions par exemple.

La guerre civile qui a ravagé le pays ces dix dernières années a eu de graves conséquences sur le patrimoine culturel protégé. Après la restauration en 1998 du Musée vivant de Bujumbura, ce dernier a de nouveau subi de graves détériorations en 2003 après le regroupement massif et le séjour prolongé de cinq cents personnes dans le musée à la suite d'une attaque de rebelles. Les dégâts ont engendré un coût de réhabilitation élevé ne pouvant pas être pris en charge par le gouvernement puisque celui-ci a dû faire face aux frais engendrés par la guerre civile.

The beginning of the 21st century has been marked by substantial destruction of cultural heritage, particularly in Afghanistan as a result of religious fanaticism and in Iraq following the occupation of Baghdad.

The world has remained powerless, watching these acts of vandalism which have deprived humanity of invaluable treasures testifying to the once glorious past of the Afghan and Iraqi people. However, we can applaud the initiatives of UNESCO and ICOM to alert the international community to the situation and to rehabilitate the cultural heritage of these States.

The vulnerability of cultural heritage is a serious problem of protection during war or disasters such as fire, flood, hurricane and earthquake. War is the leading destroyer of cultural property.

In cases of overt warfare, cultural heritage sites must be protected from destruction. Here the 1954 Convention banning the destruction of cultural properties during armed conflict must be implemented. To prevent any possible destruction, those responsible for cultural heritage must take precautions, putting cultural properties in a safe place prepared in disaster planning, e.g. cellars or underground sites able to withstand bombing or vandalism, otherwise the cultural heritage can be seriously damaged or vandalised. Once an emergency has occurred, cultural properties still intact must be put in a safe place. An inventory of damaged cultural heritage must be prepared by professionals who will also decide how to restore it.

The support of the Museums Emergency Programme initiated by ICOM is very important in cultural heritage disaster preparedness and response. The stated objective of the programme is "provide information and raise public awareness to the types of disaster, to minimise their effects and protect cultural heritage through preservation and preparedness measures and the implementation of resources as response".

Disaster response must also preserve the environment and local traditions. The restoration of cultural heritage should respect the original environment of the cultural property: a broken statue or damaged print or canvas should be placed in its environment when restored. Access paths to cultural heritage sites damaged in a disaster must also be restored to their previous condition.

Cultural heritage disaster emergency preparedness and response must involve local communities in discussions. Each community has its own history and traditions, differentiating it from other communities. In general, a community does not welcome anything which turns its way of life upside down, with an impact on habits and understanding in the region where it exists. The restoration of cultural heritage must take the concerns of the local community into consideration, with due respect for cultural identity. In this way, cultural heritage emergency preparedness and response will be accepted and will have full involvement and support from the local population.

As for Burundi, my country, and cultural heritage disaster preparedness and response, how can the environment and local traditions be preserved there?

Burundi, my country, is concerned by cultural heritage disasters. I would like to point out that prior to colonization in 1897, Burundian civilization had no houses or buildings designed to stand up to bad weather. Traditional Burundian architecture has no stone, bricks or mortar. Traditional architecture means huts made of straw, from the ground to the roof, rarely lasting for more than five years.

A copy of this type of architecture was produced in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, featuring traditional furniture, kitchen utensils and household cleaning items. The traditional royal palace is a major open-air cultural attraction and vivarium museum which is a paradise of Nile crocodiles and snakes. The other museum, the National Museum of Gitega in central Burundi, was built in colonial style. Its ethnographic collections, which are small but rich, stand as records of Burundian civilization and history.

The civil war in Burundi, which has lasted for ten years now, caused great damage to cultural heritage which had been protected: trees which were the few vestiges of the traditional royal palaces, were cut down by people waging war and in need of wood to cook food. The National Museum of Gitega has been vandalised, although some of the cultural property has been restored. The "Musée vivant" of Bujumbura was in ruin until 1998 when, through French cooperation, support was provided to restore it to its original state. Visitors, in particular students, can again come to admire the only national heritage site in Bujumbura, the capital. Unfortunately, in July 2003, rebels attacked a popular outlying quarter and forced the population to move to the centre of the city. More than five thousand people, including many women and children, settled in the large area of the "Musée vivant". Children and vulnerable persons moved into the restored traditional royal palace and other straw huts in the exhibition. Many others were living in rough conditions on the grassed area. It was a major disaster and it was difficult to have a quick response to the situation.

The people who had fled stayed there for two weeks, causing a lot of damage to the site: the hedge with dried branches surrounding the traditional royal palace was completely destroyed as wood was taken to cook the food provided by humanitarian NGOs; the straw which covered the traditional royal palace was used to make fire to keep warm at night; all the traditional furniture, kitchen utensils and household cleaning tools were used in this emergency situation. When the refugees returned to their own district after the attack, they took all these cultural properties with them and left the lawn trampled; it looked as if a herd of cows had been there.

The director of the national museums was very distressed at the sight of the "Musée vivant". He had no power to throw the people out as it was an emergency situation itself and had the support of government authorities.

The inventory of damaged cultural properties has been done and the disaster will cost over ten million Burundian francs (US\$956). It is too much for a museum which does not have enough money, or for the government which already has several financial problems to

solve because of the war. But in response to this disaster, a local NGO specialising in the environment and herpetology has agreed to restore the "Musée vivant" if it gets further financial assistance.

A number of concrete actions are needed in response to the situation in Burundi, the first being to raise general awareness on the issue of cultural heritage in emergency situations: the government of Burundi will soon ratify the 1954 Hague Convention banning the destruction of cultural properties during armed conflict. The Burundian National Committee of ICOM will take the opportunity to provide the public with information on the convention. It is important for the public to know how cultural properties have been damaged and what their cultural value is. Since 1983 Burundi has had a law protecting national cultural heritage and the public should be reminded of the need to protect cultural and natural heritage. Both government authorities and the public must be informed of preparedness and response to emergency situations affecting cultural heritage. Curators must be trained in preparedness and response to cultural heritage emergency situations. Everyone must pay attention to the environment and local traditions in disaster response situations. What is a successful experience in certain circumstances may not necessarily succeed in all countries.

The second stage is the rehabilitation of the cultural property damaged. The "Musée vivant" requires the following work:

- rebuilding the royal residence (the main hut and three other huts);
- repairing the protective hedge around the museum;
- repairing the hedge around the enclosure for small wild animals;
- repairing the exhibition huts;
- replacing damaged plant species;
- replacing animal species killed;
- replacing items stolen from the Gitega National Museum and the "Musée vivant";
- restoring damaged cultural properties.

The rehabilitation of the "Musée vivant" must reconcile tradition and modernity, and also suit the general topography of the site.

If an emergency arises, I will call on the Museums Emergency Programme to assist Burundi in the response to the national cultural heritage disaster. I hope this symposium helps each of us understand the crucial question of cultural heritage disaster and emergency preparedness and response, with due respect for the environment and local traditions.