

Preserving the Environment and Local Traditions in Emergency Preparedness and Response - the Liberian Experience

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Resumen

Preservar el medio ambiente y las tradiciones locales mediante la prevención y elaboración de planes de emergencia - La experiencia de Liberia

El patrimonio natural y cultural excepcional de Liberia ha sufrido graves deterioros a causa de la guerra civil que aflige al país desde 1989. Esta crisis política ha sido el factor principal de las destrucciones de los bienes culturales nacionales, pese a que existen muchas otras causas de destrozos (inundaciones, incendios, etc.) que entrañan costos de restauración y reconstrucción elevados. La población en general, las comunidades locales y las organizaciones no gubernamentales deben responsabilizarse y participar en actividades que aporten soluciones sobre el terreno a las situaciones de emergencia. Aunque las tradiciones locales tienden a desaparecer a causa de la mundialización, deben desempeñar un papel importante en la protección del patrimonio natural y cultural. En Liberia, la respuesta eficaz a las situaciones de emergencia debe basarse en la construcción de la democracia y en los representantes de ésta, así como en la elaboración de planes a largo plazo (jurídicos, económicos, sociales, etc.) y en la realización de campañas masivas de formación y sensibilización en pro de la prevención.

Résumé

Préserver l'environnement et les traditions locales dans la prévention des risques et les plans d'urgence : l'expérience libérienne

Bien que le Libéria dispose d'un patrimoine naturel et culturel exceptionnel, ce dernier a été endommagé par la guerre civile qui sévit dans le pays depuis 1989. Cette crise est le premier vecteur de destruction des biens culturels et naturels malgré la présence sur le territoire de nombreuses autres causes (inondations, feux, etc.) engendrant un coût élevé de restauration et de reconstruction. La responsabilisation et l'implication des communautés locales, des habitants et des regroupements non gouvernementaux doivent apporter des réponses de terrain aux situations d'urgence. Bien que les traditions locales tendent à disparaître du fait de la mondialisation, elles ont un rôle important à jouer dans la protection du patrimoine comme héritage naturel et culturel. Répondre efficacement aux situations d'urgence au Libéria repose sur la construction de la démocratie et de ses représentants, la création de plans à long terme (économiques, juridiques, sociaux, etc.) et enfin sur des campagnes massives de formation et de sensibilisation en faveur de la préservation.

The Honourable Secretary General of ICOM, convenor of this all important symposium, other high-profile guests present, our host, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of India, fellow delegates, ladies and gentlemen: I bring you greetings from the Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, the people and Chairman of the newly installed National Transitional Government of Liberia. Indeed, we are very grateful to the organisers of this event for the invitation extended to us as a nation. Certainly we are truly coming out of the ashes of isolation and neglect. My mission here is to contribute on the subject "Preserving the Environment and Local Traditions in Emergency Preparedness and Response, the Liberian Experience".

To analyse adequately and share the concerns of our experience as outlined in this paper (fourfold in structure, a logical, visual journey with me through history) the emergence of the Liberian conflict disaster situations and our preparedness and response will be described:

1. the background linking our history to the emergence of one of the world's worst man-made disasters;
2. the role played by heritage personnel and institutions such as museums in preserving the environment and local traditions;
3. the Liberian experience in terms of disaster preparedness and response related to the preservation of the environment and traditions;
4. an attempt to outline some of the challenges facing Africa (and Liberia in particular) in the area of natural and cultural heritage protection and preservation.

A Brief History of Liberia

Unlike all other African countries, Liberia was never ruled by a foreign government. It was founded by a group of philanthropists called the American Colonization Society. Two hundred years earlier the first Africans were transported to America against their will, and their descendants sailed back to the land of their ancestors. The result was that thousands of freeborn Blacks and former slaves sought to find a suitable place where these free Blacks could settle, as it was argued then that to allow them to remain in America would be a threat to the slave masters and the institution of slavery. This led to the settlement along the West African coast and eventually to what is now known as the "Land of Liberty" (Liberia). Liberia's growth from a "colony" to a modern state was not without challenges, especially its attempts to integrate settlers and early tribesmen in the hinterland of some 43,000 square miles. But nothing has upset and frustrated Liberians more than the country's devastating civil war which began on December 24, 1989 and has lasted for the past fourteen years.

Role of the Museum

In sub-Saharan Africa, in particular the West African region, museums were constructed by colonialists interested in the exploration of conquered or colonized lands. Their policies and programmes reflected their views and interests on what and how the history of the region should be documented through educational institutions and museums; these were presented in an artistic rather than a functional manner.

Even today researchers continue to invade West Africa, while collectors, dealers and tourists are said to be interested in "Airport Art". Their activities have caused dramatic and sometimes tragic erosion of the original spiritual and material culture of the sub-region. Following the independence of these colonized States, their leaders used museums and sites of cultural value as instruments to promote African Unity, in most cases, national unity to serve their geopolitical plans and also the need for enhancing the culture of peace. The National Museum of Liberia was established in 1958 by an Act of the National Legislature, the primary goal being to collect, preserve and display the country's cultural artefacts and other historical items. During this early period, Liberia could boast of having one of West Africa's most modern and lively museums. The museum was also responsible for regulating, coordinating, documenting and protecting other natural/cultural sites and for encouraging local traditional values, folklore, movements and customs. This level of achievement was interrupted by the series of battles for the city of Monrovia which destroyed the very fabric of society, not to mention infrastructures such as the museum building and its contents. However, we have begun to put the pieces back together by establishing a support arm called the Association of Friends of the Museum of Liberia and a vigorous reorganisation and revival of the entire undertaking.

Conflicts and Emergencies in Liberia

A major phenomenon in the emergency situation experience in Liberia has been the case of violent inter-ethnic fighting between settlers and tribesmen on the one hand and the quest for land on the other. The spirit of brotherhood and sympathy meant natives sold the first strip of land to settlers (pioneers) on Providence Island (1821), and helped foster communications and trade. However, these relationships did not last long. Cuban slave traders named Pedro Blanco and Canot prevailed on the kings and tribesmen to be hostile to the pioneers and supplied them with arms and ammunition. In the words of one of Liberia's historians, Mr. Karnga, this was the history and start of all subsequent wars between pioneers and natives. Apart from demands for the slave trade, colonialists had always been sceptical about the black (African) man's ability to acquire knowledge and political independence, and so they left no stone unturned in their bid to cause discord and confusion between the pioneers and indigenous people, giving the appearance that the indigenous people of Liberia had no interest in self-government and authority.

This trend continued most of the time up to the independence of Liberia on July 26, 1847. The country consolidated its gains among the community of nations, but problems of encroachment on its borders, internal tribal hostilities and other forms of violence persisted up to the 1920s when the situation settled, leaving relative peace that characterized Liberian statehood until the country was again plunged into another circle of violence, beginning with the "rice riots" of 1979 and continuing to the civil war in 1990. This period of man-made disaster saw a disproportionate level of wanton destruction, human suffering, and misery, with displaced persons and even deaths. Our infrastructures and natural and cultural heritage felt the brunt of these crises. There had been other disasters in Liberia such as floods, landslides, erosions and outbreaks of fire, but these were rare occurrences, warranting a limited

response in terms of relief strategies, time, attention and cost. The principal and first-hand response comes from the communities, local inhabitants, non-governmental bodies operating in Liberia and, at times, the central government.

Since armed conflict dominates all emergency situations in Liberia, our concerns have been on developing preventive and integrated solutions to address the causes such as bad governance, mismanagement, ethnocentricity, power and leadership struggles, illiteracy, poverty, and the competition for land and scarce economic resources. While conflict itself can be defined as a state of disagreement or argument between people, groups or countries, it is a universal human experience whose origin and nature are best explained within the framework of human nature and the environment in which man lives. It has the propensity to affect people and cultures across boundaries, thus prompting the need for collective concerns and approaches in averting, minimizing or eliminating it. It is about time that those of us in the cultural and environmental arena showed a close and careful interest in the security, management and protection of our natural and cultural heritage by implementing the 1954 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict as well as the 1972 UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. These instruments are definitely the bases and cornerstone of heritage protection.

Preserving the Environment and Local Traditions in Emergency Preparedness and Response

Environmental protection and promotion is indeed the work of all inhabitants of our planet earth if we are to have adequate enjoyment of the vast resources at our disposal. This, in return, will prolong our life-span and maintain the resources for generations yet unborn to experience and emulate. While it is true that so many conventions and groups are involved in the preservation and conservation of the environment, it is only positive actions by stakeholders that will make the difference. Yet the task of achieving a clearer, healthy and productive environment in our country is being hampered by continuous armed conflict, poor maintenance of culture and other socio-political issues, inhibiting our attempts to preserve the environment properly in all its forms, natural, cultural and human.

Cultural and natural heritage must be seen as priceless and irreplaceable possessions, not only of one nation, but of mankind as a whole. The loss through deterioration or disappearance of any of these most prized possessions impoverishes the heritage of all the peoples of the world. Parts of this heritage, because of its exceptional qualities, can be considered to be of outstanding universal value and, as such, worthy of special protection against dangers which increasingly threaten it. It follows therefore that it is absolutely essential for any country caring for its heritage to do its best to protect both the natural and cultural environment and the objects emanating from or associated with them. Liberia is blessed with very rich cultural and natural heritage, with sacred sites of religious and spiritual importance, cultural and tourist attractions including natural settings such as mountain peaks, rivers, lakes, forest reserves, islands, mysterious rock formations and the coastline, plus a

wide variety of flora and fauna, with wildlife and plant life in one of the world's largest rain forests. All of this heritage can only be protected if a concerted effort is made involving the local communities where these heritage sites are located, public education and awareness programmes, financial support and fully trained and experienced manpower to address the issues arising from the mismanagement of our cultural and natural heritage. New organisations are sprouting up in Liberia and are engaged in advocacy, protection, conservation and awareness of stakeholders and the public covering practices and trends in heritage preservation, particularly in disaster and emergency situations.

Protecting Local Traditions

Traditions are the way of life, customs and beliefs of a people, handed down from one generation to another. Many of us are aware that the Africa of today is not the Africa of yesterday. Changes which in other continents took centuries are taking place overnight. The social way of life is greatly threatened by those who want economic development. Museums in Africa have a pivotal role to play in balancing the need for social and economic change and the protection of these rich traditional values by recording what has happened and what is going on now so as to impress upon individuals the importance of social and economic development. Liberia, with its mixed ethnic, religious, social and political make-up, has brought together the values, beliefs and practices of the indigenous communities, settlers and other groups from diverse areas such as the former empires of Africa, Southern America and the western hemisphere (the Caribbean). While their integration and assimilation have raised their own difficulties, we can certainly boast of having a truly homogeneous society where the search for harmony, peace and co-existence have achieved some positive results.

Traditional and western lifestyles exist side by side. Although most of the indigenous values are disappearing because of western influence, conflicts and war, social and religious breakdown, educational inadequacies and the general disregard for law and order and constitutional authority, many of the earlier values, movements and behaviour patterns are still cherished and respected as a means of maintaining a storehouse of both oral and written traditions. What are the positive attributes to be obtained from such acculturation, and how can they be used for the benefit of society and in return bring pride and national identity to the people?

The National Bureau of Culture and Tourism in Liberia, is presently working towards the promotion and development of the tourist industry, enforcing regulations, providing information on all historic sites, landmarks and plans, and implementing programmes to preserve the folklore, movements and indigenous culture of the nation.

Disaster Preparedness

Disaster is any unforeseen event that might result in tragic loss of lives and property, be it natural or man-made. Natural hazard means danger and could include phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanic activity, landslides, cyclones, storms, tornadoes and high winds, river and coastal flooding, wildfires and associated haze, drought, sand or dust storms and insect infestation. A natural disaster is the result of the impact of

a natural hazard on a socio-economic system with a given level of vulnerability where the affected society cannot cope adequately with its impact. Natural hazards themselves do not necessarily lead to disasters; it is only their interaction with people and their environment that generates impacts which may reach disastrous proportions.

By definition a disaster is a serious disruption to the functioning of society, causing human, material or environmental losses beyond the capacity of the affected society to cope using only its own resources. Vulnerability to disasters is a state due to human action with inherent situations such as poverty, ignorance and disease; it describes the degree to which a society is threatened by the impact of natural hazards. This degree depends on the condition of the human settlements and infrastructures, the way in which public policy and administration are engaged in disaster management, the level of information and education on hazards and how to deal with them and other aspects. To understand the concept of disaster reduction and preparedness it is necessary to learn through concrete examples, seeing what to do at local, national, regional and international levels to build a safer world. The negative impact of natural and man-made disasters and the related environmental and technological consequences are increasing, mainly through the correlation of rapid population growth and poverty in disaster prone areas. In Liberia, disaster prevention and preparedness, which involves the outright avoidance of the adverse impact of natural and man-made hazards on the environment, is a possible first solution to our problems in this area, as we do not have the basic facilities and funding.

Preparedness, which actually encompasses measures taken in advance to ensure effective response to the impact of disasters, includes effective evacuation infrastructures and strategies that must be applied and, in our case, once we have also developed regular testing of early warning systems. Paradoxically, Liberia tends not to use such methods and procedures to address disaster situations because ready-made evacuation facilities and early warning equipment do not exist in the Liberian context. People are usually quick to react through physical mass movements to avoid the repercussions of disasters and these people are often forced to live in the forest, while the forests themselves are being depleted by uncontrolled logging and the development of new villages, towns and cities. While the provision of funding, equipment and technical advice for disaster mitigation and reduction may not be a lasting solution, we believe it can indeed help make would-be policy makers aware, first showing the dangers and risks posed to our people and heritage and developing a comprehensive approach and methodology to be integrated into development or economic planning and programmes.

The Response

The prevention of disasters (natural or man-made) is set to play a prominent role in global efforts to reduce human suffering and damage to natural and built environments. Disaster reduction is both possible and feasible if the science and technology related to natural hazards are properly applied. The extent to which society puts this knowledge to

effective use depends firstly upon the political will of its leaders at all levels. Coping with hazards, whether natural or attributable to human activity, is one of the greatest challenges for the applications of science and technology in the 21st century. While we cannot prevent natural and other man-made disasters from occurring, we can apply scientific knowledge and technical know-how, including other indigenous means we already have at our disposal, to increase the resistance of structures such as buildings and bridges and issue early warnings directly, organising proper community-based responses.

The situation in Liberia and West Africa in general, with the same geographical, climatic and political structures, requires similar solutions, except for minor differences. Having highlighted our major problem areas, i.e. the violent and continuous destruction of lives and property through “armed conflicts”, our major response is taken as a recommendation centred around alternative solutions to the dilemma and other less frequent disasters. First, there is consensus from the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) and the international community for the building of genuine democracy in Liberia, with its attendant value systems, the development of public awareness programmes on the preservation of the environment and local traditions in emergency preparedness and response.

Some steps, actions and responses in the achievement of this goal are listed below. The building of democracy and its attendant systems, addressing the root causes of war/conflict in Liberia, requires:

- investment to alleviate poverty, ignorance and disease;
- the enactment of laws to eliminate corruption, greed and intolerance;
- respect for human rights, justice and peace;
- curtailing abuse of public offices and disregard for law and order;
- putting an end to hypocrisy, sycophancy, ethnicity, bad governance and nepotism;
- equal distribution of the country's wealth;
- inclusion of all sectors of society in decision-making processes;
- encouraging peaceful co-existence and good neighbourliness;
- promoting genuine reconciliation, healing and national unification;
- preventing power and leadership struggles.

Existing and future responses:

- facilitating economic empowerment, job creation, mass and affordable education and the introduction of more medical facilities and doctors;
- petitioning the NTLA to be thorough in checking declarations of assets by senior civil servants;
- making laws that protect individual rights and liberties;
- promoting accountability of officials and strengthening the judiciary;
- clearly stating the codes of conduct required of officials and citizens;
- decentralising income and wealth generation and distribution;
- encouraging all-inclusive government with the NTGL;
- practising regionalism and positive solidarity;

- singleness of purpose and a shared purpose as a major ingredient in nation building;
- negotiation and genuine compromises taking precedence over force and violence.

Mass Preservation Awareness and Education Campaign:

- institute educational awareness programmes in schools and other public and private entities via the media, covering environmental and traditional protection;
- establish conservation entities and programmes;
- alleviate poverty through educational and economic empowerment;
- emphasise the need to address the impact of disasters;
- highlight the need for training, technical assistance in averting or preventing emergency crisis situations so as to limit the scale of response;
- advocate the reorientation of our concepts, beliefs and methods to preserve our cultural, traditional values, including sites and collections;
- set environmental consciousness as a priority in national and regional development planning;
- build capacities, manpower and structures to avert and respond adequately to disasters;
- introduce courses in museology and other related subjects on environmental, cultural and traditional protection in schools;
- introduce the legislation needed to outlaw offences, minimise the effects and institute punitive measures for violators of environment protection laws and regulations.

Remedial Action

As a consequence of the rapid disappearance and destruction of the Liberian forest by unscrupulous logging companies, farming practices and the need for energy sources, the authorities are now enforcing a reforestation programme and reviewing the acts and entire legal framework on the protection of natural and cultural heritage. Concerted efforts are being made to control and manage waste, pollution and contamination of the air, water, rivers, sea and ocean, thus protecting marine, plant and human life. Dumping of any form of toxic material is totally banned and punishable in Liberia. Adverse climatic conditions are now being monitored and identified so as to introduce preventive measures to minimise the effects of excessive rainfall, flood, landslides, water and sea erosion by building intermediate facilities such as gutters and embankments and restricting the construction of homes near disaster-prone areas. In cases of armed conflict and man-made disasters, the effects and related emergencies such as rescue and evacuation, medical, shelter, food and other relief supplies, have been and are still in great demand for the thousands of internally displaced persons and refugees yet to be assisted.

We certainly appreciate the efforts of major humanitarian organisations operating in Liberia, helping cut death rates and malnutrition. Seeing the relationship between political and economic stabilisation,

the development of emergency preparedness and response can be effectively enhanced if environmental protection policies are remodelled to meet the demands of present-day realities so as to minimise the threats. In so doing, we call on governments around the world to develop a collective approach in tackling conflicts and environmental losses in a collaborative and sustainable manner. The signing and ratification of conventions and treaties protecting heritage in general in times of peace and war should be mandatory as their destruction affects not only the immediate nation, but the world at large.

In conclusion, allow me to render praise and thanks to Almighty God and the international community for sparing the lives of Liberians by reaching a comprehensive peace agreement which guarantees the support and involvement of the United Nations and all other stakeholders this second time around. The strict and coherent implementation of the terms of the accord must also be enforced, while making room for continuing negotiations, compromises and peace-building efforts aimed at finally putting a stop to the unnecessary destruction in the West African region. Programmes are being set up to heal the wounds through conflict resolution and management strategies, counselling and trauma reduction, education and training through radio dramas, publications and talk shows. This trend has also been extended to the area of the preservation of the environment and traditions in emergency preparedness and response situations.

A process is needed for the adequate gazetting and protection of all natural and/or cultural sites, particularly in north-east Liberia, to create more recreational facilities with appropriate safety measures, to control the population and rural-urban migration coupled and the consequent effects on heritage, and to create a positive environment encouraging tourism and increasing the accompanying benefits. In an attempt to finally establish appropriate, workable mechanisms and strategies that can be implemented to preserve the region's heritage in relation to the great heritage of the world, new methodologies and perspectives investigating and funding solutions should be developed incorporating traditional and conventional or scientific approaches to disaster preparedness and response. There should be a forum or centre to encourage and promote on-site linkages, networking, funding, training and promotion of African countries ravaged by war and neglect so as to improve their capacities to relate to the changing trends in heritage preservation and conservation.

As a further means of reducing the global imbalance in terms of available response capacities, we are sending out a sincere SOS message to the international organisations present here and the world at large to come to the assistance of Liberia in almost every sphere of human endeavour as it now seems that the nation is just being born. However, we again take this opportunity to express our gratitude to PMDA, WAMP, UNESCO, Africa 2009, ICCROM, ICOM and all the other organisations for the roles they have played in training, advising, networking and promoting the objectives and goal of our heritage sector and entities. Indeed, the revival of this sector is a major priority for the new government in Liberia, but with the numerous hurdles facing us, this symposium and its theme create an ideal platform to inform the world of our plight.

Lastly it is our hope that such cooperation and assistance in technical and integrated regional programmes will help accelerate the process of restoring such a rich heritage in a country coming out of a brutal civil war with the constant threat to its natural and cultural heritage, thereby increasing prospects for transmitting our cultural heritage to future generations. Let us remember that environmental and cultural awareness enhances national pride and identity, encouraging human understanding and unity and, above all, promotes peace, tranquillity and certainly makes this world much cleaner, safer, healthier and more inhabitable for all. I thank you!

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