

PMDA: a Potential Partner in the Coordination of Disaster Preparedness and Response Programmes for Cultural Heritage Institutions in Africa

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Resumen

El Programa de Promoción de Museos Africanos (PMDA) : un asociado potencial para la coordinación de programas de gestión de desastres relativos al patrimonio cultural en beneficio de instituciones africanas

La región del África Subsahariana, que se caracteriza por su gran diversidad de riquezas culturales, carece de una institución central encargada de coordinar las actividades encaminadas a reparar los daños causados por los desastres naturales o humanos. A falta de esta coordinación, esas actividades sólo incumben a las autoridades gubernamentales o a algunas personas de cada país.

Teniendo en cuenta esta situación, el PMDA tiene que poder desempeñar un papel coordinador importante en esta vasta región, ya que cuenta con una red de profesionales y actividades de formación de alto nivel, así como con capacidades técnicas a nivel nacional e internacional, que no sólo le permiten definir claramente las etapas de las actividades exigidas en situaciones de emergencia, sino también llevarlas a cabo (preparación de planes de emergencia, realización de cursos de formación, coordinación entre diferentes instituciones, identificación de necesidades en función de las zonas geográficas, etc.).

Résumé

PMDA (Programme pour le développement des musées en Afrique) : un partenaire potentiel pour la coordination de programmes de prévention des catastrophes en faveur d'établissements culturels en Afrique.

Caractérisée par une grande diversité de richesses culturelles, l'Afrique subsaharienne n'a pas d'institution centrale responsable de la coordination des désastres naturels ou humains. Seules, les autorités gouvernementales de chaque pays ou des institutions culturelles, à titre individuel, sont susceptibles de prendre le relais.

Dans ce contexte, le programme PMDA doit pouvoir jouer un rôle important en tant que coordinateur sur ce vaste territoire puisque, fort d'un réseau de professionnels et d'activités de formation de haut niveau, il dispose d'une expertise nationale et internationale capable d'identifier et de mener à bien les étapes clairement définies concernant les situations d'urgence (élaboration de plans d'urgence, développement de sessions de formation, coordination entre différentes institutions, identification des besoins en fonction des zones géographiques, etc.).

Within sub-Saharan Africa there is no overall institution responsible for the coordination of disasters that threaten or inflict damage on cultural heritage in the region.

It is common knowledge that the task of establishing and maintaining active disaster mitigation and response structures is the responsibility of national authorities in each country or of individual heritage institutions. This being the case, there is a need to strengthen the collaboration network between national and local authorities and international and regional partners, including PMDA.

In this paper, it is argued that the Programme for Museum Development in Africa (PMDA), through its growing network of heritage professionals, is well positioned to take on this responsibility of complementing existing national and international efforts in disaster mitigation and response.

Introduction

Africa is endowed with a rich and diverse heritage, including cultural landscapes and archaeological and prehistoric sites. In addition, museum and cultural centres continue to be established in Africa as resources for education and for the preservation of community identities and related intangible heritage.

This heritage, however, is suffering on an increasing scale from the impact of recurring natural and man-made disasters: floods, fire and volcanoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, landslides, the effects of wind, plus war and other catastrophes which bring destruction to the environment and sometimes completely destroy entire areas of cultural heritage.

Recent examples of destruction include Liberia where, in 1985, the country's rich cultural heritage was destroyed during the civil war. Similar observations have been made in Angola, Mozambique, and Rwanda and, most recently, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

There have also been cases of fire reported in Madagascar and Kenya where irreversible damage has been done to cultural heritage. Furthermore, vandalism and looting have been reported even in recent times during the conflict in Iraq.

This insurgence has had a serious negative impact on the continent's cultural and social base, a prerequisite for balanced human development. Thus the continued loss of cultural heritage through disasters and the subsequent loss of cultural values associated with this heritage are contributing to the backward state of economic development on the continent.

How are heritage professionals coping with these disasters? How have international institutions responded? Can PMDA and other partners make a contribution?

This paper outlines the potential contribution of PMDA in cultural heritage disaster mitigation and response as a complement to existing international partnerships and organisations. It makes further recommendations on how these actions can be accomplished.

PMDA and Capacity Building for Cultural Heritage Disaster Preparedness and Response

The Programme for Museum Development in Africa (PMDA) is Africa's premier institution undertaking capacity building for the heritage sector in English-speaking countries of sub-Saharan Africa. PMDA is rooted in the notion that the problems in the management of Africa's heritage can only be addressed by integrating conservation in sustainable development. PMDA therefore focuses on heritage preservation and advocates the inclusion of heritage in national and regional planning and development.

PMDA serves over 700 cultural heritage institutions in twenty-five countries in English-speaking sub-Saharan Africa through regular training of heritage professionals and the provision of technical support to institutions. The flagship training activity at PMDA is the postgraduate course on "Conservation and Management of Heritage Collections". The course, as well as other short technical courses, includes a disaster planning module covering disaster preparedness strategies, risk reduction, early warning and detection systems and the development and coordination of response plans for man-made and natural disasters.

With the establishment of the Programme for Museum Development in Africa, significant developments are expected. Through a training program, a network of professionals with awareness and skills in planning disaster control for cultural heritage is being created, but more needs to be done.

The inclusion of the module on disaster preparedness arises from a training needs assessment study conducted by PMDA in 2001 which revealed that most national heritage institutions in Africa did not have professionals or staff able to conduct, prepare and manage disaster control plans. Subsequently, there were no established disaster response teams to monitor and respond to emergencies if and when they occurred.

Through the PMDA courses, participants are taught how to establish local disaster response plans relevant to their own institutions.

Moving from Discussion to Action: the Potential Role of PMDA

As indicated, PMDA is mandated to seek, establish and maintain partnership with relevant institutions at national, regional and international level, and to promote the development of the heritage sector through training activities. In addition, PMDA undertakes research and assessment of the heritage situation in sub-Saharan Africa with the aim of identifying current issues and needs for cultural heritage.

Thus in consideration of its role in the region, PMDA makes the following proposals:

- through surveys, the network can make a contribution and determine the current situation of disaster planning and response within its geographic areas. PMDA will continue to organise training workshops and courses on this theme, and continue its involvement in the production of educational material on preventive conservation;

- PMDA will encourage awareness of the role of other international organisations committed to disaster preparedness as a tool for mitigating and responding to disasters affecting cultural heritage. In practice it will encourage the establishment of a national committee of the Blue Shield in each country covered by PMDA and work together with the committees so formed.

PMDA is also able to contribute to:

- the development of emergency plans for the museums and heritage sites in each country served by PMDA;
- the development of training sessions on emergency planning, risk preparedness, response and recovery at local, national and if necessary regional levels;
- the continued coordination of institutions which have taken part in PMDA training sessions;
- the improvement of relations between the ICOM National Committees, AFRICOM, PMDA, EPA and Blue Shield to ensure that appropriate disaster mitigation and control structures are put in place to save heritage.

Conclusions

It has been argued that PMDA can play an increasing role in the education and training of heritage professionals in disaster preparedness and control within Africa. PMDA can also complement efforts made to find appropriate ways of preventing and responding to identified risks that threaten heritage in Africa.

Finally, PMDA can make a contribution by helping coordinate international responses in the event of disasters, to save endangered African and global heritage.