

THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN POST-CONFLICT AND POST-DISASTER SITUATIONS

Introduction

Early 2010 the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO organised an expert meeting to discuss the role of culture in the various stages of community development after a conflict or disaster. Culture in this context encompasses not only tangible or intangible heritage but also the 'way of life' and the social structure of a community. The aim was to examine the involvement of cultural institutions in activities of relief and reconstruction. Following a conflict or disaster, a broad range of actors, international, national and local, come into action. Initial attention, understandably, goes to shelter, food and medication. Culture is in most cases not a priority though the participants of the expert meeting argued that this should be the case as it is a 'basic need'.

Themes emerging from the meeting

It is important to separate post-conflict and post-disaster. They require a different approach as they are two different situations. A disaster generally has a clear beginning and an end whereas this is often unclear with a conflict. Also, the political and public opinions regarding a conflict or disaster differ. Furthermore, with conflict there is often a winner and a loser. A disaster affects all communities in that area.

It was also felt that the protection of culture is politically charged. The decision to protect one object and not the next is in itself already a statement. The reason for protection is in itself unfortunately a reason for someone else to destroy it. It is not just about the object but especially about the connotation given to it. Regarding assistance, UNESCO has a specific mandate concerning culture and as an international organization of Member States mainly works with national governments. Communication regarding their work is crucial to explain to all everyone involved what UNESCO is doing and why.

But it is also essential to pay attention to the cultural infrastructure as this constitutes the identity of people. In the case of semi-permanent refugee camps, the location of the settlement is often determined by security reasons, not cultural ones. There is a strong focus on material needs and sometimes a lack of cultural sensitivity. Refugees speaking the language of the aid workers are easier approached than those who do not even though they might be the actual leaders of that community. This can upset the social structure of that group.

An important and often difficult aspect is the division of roles and responsibilities between the various organizations coming in after a conflict or disaster. In certain situations there is an overlap of assistance in one area and neglect in another. Communication and coordination are key. There is also the aspect of cooperation with the army. A certain level of security is necessary to be able to work in dangerous areas but the association with the armed forces can have a negative impact on the work. Certain groups might not want to cooperate or the organization could even become the target of attacks. Moreover, cooperation remains crucial. For example, mine clearers might find archaeological remains but are not necessarily be aware of the importance of their find or how to handle it.

It was felt that a cultural equivalent to the International Red Cross was important. International attention does help with the safeguarding of and raising funds for cultural heritage. The Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield (ANCBS) could play a role in raising awareness and possibly in the coordination of monitoring missions to assess the condition of cultural property in conflict or disaster affected areas.

More case reporting, evaluation and analysis is needed to create guidelines for the protection of culture in post-conflict and post-disaster situations. This can only be successful when it is integrated in the general set of structures, institutions and national legislation. UNESCO could further develop its exceptional position and mandate to raise awareness in this area.

Conclusion

Fortunately there is increasing attention for culture in post-conflict and post-disaster situations but there is still work to be done. It is crucial to implement preparatory measures in order to protect culture in these situations. This means raising awareness and educating all parties involved. Another essential aspect is having an

inventory of heritage for example by means of the registration of monuments, sites and artefacts. Moreover, culture has to be included in all risk preparedness or risk management plans. Subsequently, it is important to make an assessment of the damage as soon as possible. Already having an inventory does make this job a lot easier. And finally, it became clear that there is a need for more research and analyses. These 'lessons learned' could function as a starting point for guidelines on the protection of culture in post-conflict and post-disaster situations.

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