

# When Disaster Strikes: Editorial postscript

Wenn die Katastrophe zuschlägt: Postskriptum des Herausgebers

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In this postscript I reflect on the specific policies at the international level that address arts and cultural policy relating to disaster. This issue focuses on responses to, and long-term changes in the arts and cultural policy fields related to current climate, health, and economic crises. From this standpoint the publication of this issue of the journal is a timely contribution given the contemporary challenges and vulnerabilities evident in the global pandemic and the recently launched war in Ukraine.

Disasters cause widespread and unprecedented loss of lives, livelihoods and material and environmental damage which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources. Disasters have many sources, for example, natural, human or hybrid and have multiple impacts and often long-term implications for the affected politico-economic and socio-cultural spaces, communities, and institutions. Also, disasters have various spatio-temporal dimensions, for instance, small or large scale, frequent or infrequent, and they can be slow-onset or a sudden-onset events. In short, the discourse on disasters speak to the issue of how societies manage the risk-resilience matrix.

In the disaster risk management and reduction literature the impact of disasters on the arts, cultural practices and heritage institutions is recognized as a concern in disaster response initiatives. The *Sendai Framework*, which aims to prevent the creation of new risk, reduce existing risk, and increase resilience was endorsed by the UN General Assembly following the 2015 Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR). The WCDRR advocates for “the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons, businesses, communities and countries” (UNITED NATIONS 2015: 6).

In the aftermath of the World War Two with the creation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) museums and culture were advocated as bridges among nations to build lasting peace. Initially focussed on developed countries ICOM expanded to developing countries in 1977 at its 11th General Conference, Moscow-Leningrad.

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ICOM's role in disasters were accelerated with the Museum Emergency Program (MEP) launched in 2002 as well as ICOM's participation in the International Council of the Blue Shield (ICBS).<sup>1</sup>

The integration of cultural heritage into wider disaster risk policies has been facilitated by the 10-year work programme of International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) since 2013. Strategic interventions have reinforced policies, institutions and local communities in risk-prone regions.

This area of work is also enabled through the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), a global fund facilitated through a public-private partnership established in Switzerland in 2017. The aim of ALIPH is the protection and rehabilitation of cultural heritage in conflict zones and post-conflict situations.

ALIPH has recently (March 07, 2022) announced the allocation of an initial envelope of USD 2 million to contribute to the emergency protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine on account of the current war. ALIPH is already supporting a dozen museums and their collections through the finance of, among others, inventories, the purchase of protective equipment, and the reinforcement of storage security. ALIPH has supported more than 150 projects in 30 countries (for instance, Iraq, Yemen, Mali, Afghanistan, Sudan, Libya, North-East Syria) on 4 continents (DE DREUZY/BIALYSTOK 2022).

UNESCO estimates that the COVID pandemic has had a huge impact on the cultural and creative industries with losses valued at US\$750bn, in terms of the contraction in the Gross Value Added in 2020 relative to 2019. This economic decline is estimated to have resulted in over 10 million job losses worldwide (NAYLOR et al: 2021). The COVID context illustrates that the impact of disasters have a broad systemic impact on tangible as well as intangible heritage and cultural practices.

What is notable is that disaster response measures have largely focussed on securing tangible heritage. Intangible heritage, which often represents the artistic and cultural practices and artforms of subaltern and marginal communities, tends to be under-represented, if not under-invested, in disaster reduction measures.

The issue has not evaded the attention of ICOM or UNESCO. For example, ICOM argues that "Museums can contribute significantly to the safeguarding of intangible heritage, using their mandate, infrastructures

1 See, International Council of Museums, History of ICOM <<https://icom.museum/en/about-us/history-of-icom/>>.

and resources to develop creative initiatives about its preservation” (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS n.d.).

“Museums and Intangible Heritage” was the theme of ICOM’s 20<sup>th</sup> General Conference in Seoul in 2004 which gave birth to the International Journal of Intangible Heritage, published by the National Folk Museum of Korea since 2006. Another initiative of ICOM is the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project (IMP), which started in 2017. The Project fosters cross disciplinary peer learning, develops professional skills and tools and creates international networking possibilities for the exchange of good practices (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF MUSEUMS).

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes that intangible or living heritage is increasingly under threat from emergencies, including conflicts and disasters.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, intangible heritage is viewed as a critical resource for strengthening the resilience of communities reducing vulnerabilities and helping communities in preparation, response, and recovery from emergencies (BEDJAOUI 2004). The Convention maintains that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in emergencies is of utmost importance, and further that it cannot be separated from protection of lives and wellbeing of the bearers of culture (BEDJAOUI 2004).

This postscript suggests that there is an expanding and critical role for international agencies in addressing and mitigating risks to culture in the context of disasters. These efforts are to be supported and further facilitated with greater emphasis and resources for living heritage. This is a critical concern as the global context pivots to a more illiberal world order and the processes of climate change impact wider dimensions of human cultural activities.

## References

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2 For further details see the *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* <<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>>.

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