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# Living Heritage and Emergencies

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THE CONVENTION  
FOR THE SAFEGUARDING  
OF THE INTANGIBLE  
CULTURAL HERITAGE





**INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE** – or ‘living heritage’ – means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

As the United Nations’ specialized agency for culture, UNESCO is tasked with safeguarding living heritage, and ensuring it is safeguarded and transmitted to future generations. In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which encourages and supports countries to take the necessary measures to ensure that communities safeguard their living heritage.



**‘Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage helps address the human dimension of crises, enabling individuals and communities to maintain their sense of identity and dignity, and withstand and recover from crises.’**

**Mr Ernesto Ottone Ramírez**

UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture

# Safeguarding Living Heritage in Emergencies

## Living Heritage and Emergencies

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Living heritage throughout the world is increasingly affected by emergencies, including conflicts and disasters. On the one hand, emergencies directly threaten the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, which provides a foundation to people's identity and well being. On the other hand, living heritage is a valuable resource that communities may draw on to strengthen their resilience and ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from various types of emergencies.

In **conflict** situations, the destruction of living heritage can be part of a deliberate strategy to deprive people of the cultural markers that shape their identities. People

caught up in conflicts face violence, physical and psychological suffering, and the loss of property and livelihoods. Those who are forcibly displaced experience a radical separation from their places and communities of origin. All these factors inevitably induce changes in lifestyles and cultural practices.

Community-based assessments with refugees and displaced populations in the Middle East and Africa have shown that massive deaths, destruction and forced displacement dislocate the contexts and channels people need to express their living heritage. Yet, at the same time, these assessments show how communities turn to various forms of cultural expression to address their situation. Such forms may include rituals of grieving and mourning,

collective practices of social bonding and remembrance, and the celebration of birth, marriage and other festive events. Within new environments, the performing arts or craft skills can also provide a source of livelihood and traditional knowledge systems may be harnessed for survival.

In relation to **disasters**, living heritage – and particularly knowledge and practices related to the environment – can be a critical tool for disaster risk reduction strategies to directly increase resilience and reduce vulnerability. For example, in the **New Guinea** highlands, repeated famines caused by frost and drought have given rise to food security strategies and networks of support maintained over successive generations. This knowledge of how to harvest and prepare famine resistant

foods passed down over generations can help communities to better cope with destructive events and reduce the time and resources required for recovery.

Emergencies can reveal the fragility of living heritage, but at the same time its continued meaning and importance to the communities concerned. Despite the challenges they face, communities turn to their living heritage in times of crisis to help them provide a sense of solidarity, dignity and hope.

This is why the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in emergencies is of utmost importance and indivisible from the protection of the lives and well being of people around the world.



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# UNESCO in Action

## UNESCO's approach

Under the 2003 Convention, UNESCO supports States to safeguard living heritage in a wide range of emergency contexts. Its approach is guided by the **Operational principles and modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies**. They seek to raise awareness of the dual role of intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, both as being under threat and as a powerful tool for resilience and recovery. They identify actions appropriate to the three main phases in an emergency management cycle.

The operational principles and modalities are in line with the **Strategy** for the reinforcement of UNESCO's action for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict and its **Addendum** concerning emergencies associated with disasters. They also contribute to UNESCO's **Thematic Programme Heritage for Peace** in synergy among the UNESCO Conventions in the field of culture.

### Operational principles and modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies



#### PREPAREDNESS

- Provide resources and support to communities to engage in all aspects of risk reduction and emergency preparedness
- Integrate information on the vulnerability of elements to potential emergencies into inventories of intangible cultural heritage
- Take preventative measures to address the potential vulnerability of intangible cultural heritage and enhance its mitigation capacity

#### RESPONSE

- Identify, locate and reach out to communities whose living heritage is known or likely to have been affected by the emergency as early as possible
- Prioritize resources and support to these communities to allow them to identify and address their immediate safeguarding needs
- Ensure that intangible cultural heritage is incorporated whenever a post-conflict or post-disaster assessment is undertaken

#### RECOVERY

- Carry out the community-based needs identification if not already undertaken
- Provide communities with resources and support to undertake safeguarding measures or enhance the mitigation capacity of their intangible cultural heritage
- Engage living heritage in fostering dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation between communities, including displaced populations and host communities



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# How UNESCO can help

**There are different forms of support available for countries affected by emergencies.**

## 1 International Assistance

States Parties can make an emergency request for technical and financial assistance to the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund if they find themselves unable to carry out safeguarding activities due to emergencies.

→ More information can be found [here](#).



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In **Colombia**, an [innovative project](#) using culture for peacebuilding brought together local communities and former combatants of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the Guajira village of Conejo. By inviting them to identify, document and safeguard their living heritage, which had been affected by the conflict, the project helped to foster bonds between the two groups, revitalize their shared cultural identity and lay the foundation for reconciliation and reintegration. The project received emergency International Assistance through UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund and was inaugurated at the first ever Paris Peace Forum in 2018.

## 2 The Heritage Emergency Fund

This was created by UNESCO to finance activities that enable the Organization to assist its Member States in protecting culture from disasters and conflicts by more effectively preparing for and responding to emergencies.

→ More information can be found [here](#).



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In 2018, a series of earthquakes hit Lombok, an island in **Indonesia**, killing more than 560 people, and affecting the lives of hundreds of thousands more. UNESCO's Heritage Emergency Fund was used to help traditional weavers in the east and north of the island to recover from the disaster, which threatened to wipe out their livelihoods. The project first assessed their needs and identified what was required for them to resume their activities. It also helped the weavers to document their practice, including age-old techniques, patterns and motifs, as well as innovate their products through training in digital archiving, production, and marketing support to ensure the survival of the next generation of weavers.



The **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, and particularly the region of North Kivu, has been the site of mass displacement – a consequence of the protracted political and humanitarian crisis affecting the country and its neighbours. In response, the Heritage Emergency Fund supported a **participatory needs assessment** for safeguarding living heritage in North Kivu. Consultations with more than 200 stakeholders showed how the living heritage of communities had been severely disrupted by the violence. Together with the communities, UNESCO compiled a list of needs for safeguarding living heritage in the region, including the revitalization of cultural spaces, awareness raising with local media and capacity-building for teachers.

### 3 International recognition

The Convention has a number of **Lists** to help safeguard different aspects of living heritage. The **List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding** aims to mobilize international cooperation and assistance for stakeholders to undertake appropriate safeguarding measures for elements in need of urgent safeguarding, which could include elements threatened by a specific disaster and/or conflict. The **Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity** seeks to raise international awareness about elements of intangible cultural heritage, including those that may play a role in disaster risk reduction, conflict resolution or peacebuilding.



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Inscribed in 2009 on the Representative List, the **Manden Charter** from **Mali** has the promotion of peace at its core. One of the first human rights charters in the world, it advocates values such as social peace in diversity, the inviolability of the human being and the abolition of slavery.

### 4 Capacity building

**UNESCO's global capacity-building programme** offers tailored support to strengthen capacities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies. Its international network of more than 150 heritage experts can help countries to implement UNESCO's approach in line with the 2003 Convention.



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**A pilot project** in the **Philippines** and **Honduras** aimed to strengthen capacities for safeguarding living heritage in disaster contexts through the integration of disaster risk reduction into inventories of intangible cultural heritage. Drawing on UNESCO's unique training curriculum and network of facilitators, the project held online workshops and pilot activities with local communities, disaster specialists, national authorities and civil society representatives to help them better understand how their intangible cultural heritage may help disaster risk prevention and management.

## Integrating living heritage into COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans

The **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** went far beyond our physical health as festivals and cultural events were cancelled or postponed, and cultural practices and rituals restricted. At the same time, many elements of living heritage were adapted to support and reinforce COVID-19 public health measures. For example, artists in **Peru** used traditional design and techniques to create face masks. In **Sri Lanka**, string puppet performances told stories of confinement and social distancing, while in **Senegal**, Kankurang, a mythical figure revered for guaranteeing order and justice, who is usually embodied by a masked dancer, was seen parading in the streets enforcing village curfew.

In April 2020, UNESCO launched a **global survey** to better understand how people are experiencing their living heritage during the pandemic and received more than 200 testimonies from all regions of the world. The survey found that while social distancing and quarantine measures directly threatened many forms of living heritage, communities found innovative ways to keep their living heritage alive as a source of inspiration, hope and resilience. The survey provided three main recommendations for action to help safeguard living heritage in post-pandemic recovery plans.

### Recommendation 1

Help communities build back better by strengthening recovery support mechanisms to living heritage bearers at the local level, including through local governance structures

### Recommendation 2

Take advantage of digital technologies to increase the visibility and understanding of living heritage

### Recommendation 3

Strengthen and amplify the linkages between safeguarding living heritage and emergency preparedness, response and recovery plans and programmes





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