



Endangered Cultural Heritage in the Global South Hub

Conference note

Reporting Heritage Destruction: A Double-Edged Sword

Based on the feedback from the Working Group and discussions held in the scoping meeting, the Secretariat of the Reporting Heritage Destruction is proposing to hold a one-day online conference in [date to be confirmed]. The conference will focus on addressing four key issues related to heritage destruction and present a recommended reporting framework. To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, keynote speakers will be invited to address each of the themes, and identified scholars will be given the opportunity to present their submitted papers. Following these presentations, a panel discussion will take place to delve deeper into the recommended framework. The proposed themes for the conference are as follows:

Theme 1: Who owns and values cultural heritage?

Taking an overarching view that addresses the preservation of humanity's cultural heritage as a whole, rather than focusing solely on specific groups or only on 'endangered heritage', could offer a more effective and holistic approach to heritage preservation. But the paradox of recognising cultural heritage as belonging to a global humanity (such as is embodied by UNESCO) is that this often takes it out of the hands of local communities in order to make it a lucrative tourist attraction. This sees control transferred to governments and commercial enterprises, with local communities reduced to guides and vendors. If cultural heritage is seen as a human right, however, it must be dealt with not as a set of artefacts but together with the communities in which it is located, who can then become its guardians and themselves part of the heritage that requires protection. There is a gap between 'humanity' and 'community', perhaps bridged between tangible and intangible – in that it is harder to ignore the local community when they are actively the producers of the heritage. Belonging to 'humanity' can only be made real if it does not exclude. The creation of neat boundaries and specificity around cultural heritage value (for example, where a site is recognised as important because of its 1st-Century role in the development of a specific religion), rather than reflecting universal values, is problematic as it may alienate more than it attracts and, in certain contexts, serve to legitimise it as a target. Cultural heritage has a presence in the modern world and is part and parcel of the accumulating modern landscape and heritage that surrounds us. We live through heritage. As such, it is still being modified and created, especially by local populations, and not preserved in aspic and unchanged. Reporting that places cultural heritage within its modern cultural context has the potential to reduce its attraction to proponents engaged in propaganda and warfare.

Theme 2: Cultural Heritage as a Human Right

The idea of cultural heritage has evolved over the past several decades, moving beyond the focus on artefacts, significant landmarks, and archaeological sites to include local heritage, customs, traditions, indigenous knowledge, and other tangible and intangible aspects of people's life. In all of its many dimensions, cultural heritage is central to human flourishing. The rights to access cultural



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heritage and to engage in the cultural practices which form part of it are human rights. Not only should cultural heritage be regarded as a human right, but its massive and systematic destruction can also serve as an indicator of other crimes against humanity, such as genocide and ethnic and cultural cleansing. The use and abuse of cultural heritage as political, communication and propaganda tools by state and non-state actors make critical reporting vital.

Theme 3: Media reporting and heritage destruction

The dangers of reporting cultural heritage destruction and the enhanced impact of heritage destruction propaganda are well known, as is the use of reporting in counter-propaganda. If heritage destruction is reported without taking into account cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, religious, and other human rights concerns, it can lead to discrimination, unpleasant feelings, shame, and dissatisfaction among communities and individuals. Additional aspects of misusing reporting on cultural heritage destruction might be a form of "war tourism" or "click trade" if the complex dimensions of conflict, human rights violations and unsustainable development are not taken into account. However, reporting is key to (a) help ensure that victims of destruction are properly heard and acknowledged, (b) help gather evidence for possible prosecution, (c) take steps, as soon as possible, towards reconstruction or memorialisation if possible/desirable, with engagement of local communities. Damage to heritage may also reveal much about wider conflicts, including, for example, the identification of issues such as ethnic cleansing, atrocities, gender-based and other sectional violence, and criminal enterprise.

Media plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of conflicts, human rights issues, and even cultural heritage. In the age of mainstream and social media, distinguishing between reality and hyperreality becomes increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, access to free, fair, and unbiased media is essential to obtaining timely and accurate information about human rights violations. However, the media also has its own limitations in reporting, such as limited access to accurate and timely information, a limited understanding of the breadth of the meaning of cultural heritage and its role in communities, and sometimes being directed by their own target audience/s. The absence of editorial guidelines on social media platforms can sometimes exacerbate the spread of propaganda, allowing it to proliferate unchecked. Algorithmic systems can also generate so-called 'echo chambers' which inform and consolidate perspectives as well as having other psychological effects. Considering cultural heritage as a human rights issue means that media reporting on its destruction is accompanied by special sensitivities. Avoiding the propaganda trap between conflicting parties, paying attention to the broad concept and diversity of cultural heritage, and reflecting the voices of local communities should be taken into account.

- **Recommended framework for reporting**

The recommended framework will be presented by the Working Group, followed by a panel discussion and Q&A.