

ICOA1900: THE BLUE HELMETS OF CULTURE: MAKING HERITAGE A TOOL FOR PEACE, STARTING FROM ITS MANAGEMENT STRUCTURES

Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

Session 1: Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

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Following three masters in international heritage law, in comparative law of public and private cultural institutions, in cultural economics and World Heritage studies, I specialised - as a barrister – first in the field of intellectual property rights, then in the design of the management structures of cultural associations and institutions. At the moment I am a PhD candidate. My research investigates the role of UNESCO in “enhancing in one movement” human rights and the diversity of cultural expressions.

Resume: From official political speeches to widespread references in the international press, the “Blue Helmets of Culture” are presented as an on-going initiative. What the Blue Helmets of Culture actually refer to is an ongoing negotiation on the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding signed on the 16th of February 2016 between the Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, and the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Paolo Gentiloni. The Blue Helmets of Culture, or more precisely the *Italian National Task Force*, are expected to work within the framework of UNESCO’s *Global Coalition Unite4Heritage*. While the actual content of the activities of the Task Force (and its functioning) are to be agreed on, the literature on the topic is scarce, sources are fragmented and most often prove contradictory.

Having spent the last 9 months conducting direct interviews with the main actors involved in this on-going negotiation, in this paper I will present the first overall analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of this initiative. While taking into consideration the various fields in which the Task Force could be asked to intervene, the paper will underline how this initiative could indeed develop into a unique asset to transform heritage into a tool of cultural negotiation and socio-economic conflict management; to be used not only in armed conflict or in the aftermath of natural disasters, but also when heritage is jeopardised by the conflicts emerging among different stakeholders. The paper will conclude that the outstanding potential of the Blue Helmets resides in the role that the category 2 UNESCO Centre on the Economics of Culture and World Heritage Studies (which is part of the overall initiative, with a special agreement involving the City of Torino) will play in embedding participatory human rights-based mechanisms within the management structures of heritage sites.

Key words: *Blue Helmets of Culture, conflict management mechanisms, cultural negotiation*

Introduction

During the last decades ICOMOS has devoted a growing attention to the protection of endangered heritage. In so doing, the Organization has matched the demand arising from a global situation where growing conflicts emerging at the intersection of ethnicity, identity and heritage had to compete with the unprecedented challenge of climate change, along with structural socio-economic inequalities which have significantly reduced the financial resources states could devote to heritage protection and preservation. The combination of these three factors has created a situation of unprecedented risks for the protection of heritage as well as for its promotion as a pivotal tool for sustainable and inclusive development (ICOMOS 1999; ICOMOS 2011). Such situation was already abundantly clear in the 2006-2007 ICOMOS Heritage@Risk Report (ICOMOS 2008), edited by Michael Petzet and John Ziesemer. In the Report “climate change”, “military conflicts” and “civil unrest” were understood as requiring a “forward-looking approach” capable of “address[ing] potential risks” as well as past and present ones.

Precisely this approach to risk management and prevention is the red thread which instituted the 2016 Memorandum the Blue Helmets of Culture.

This paper advocates that because the current global situation “calls”, quoting the aforementioned ICOMOS Report, “for united and in many cases – urgent – action at all levels of society to help in the safeguarding of our priceless cultural heritage and the environment”, ICOMOS has a crucial role to play in both the Global Coalition United for Heritage and in the future developments of the Blue Helmets for Culture initiative.

The Global Coalition United 4 Heritage

Before going into the details of the BHC initiative and its foreseeable developments, I will first devote some paragraphs to the institutional framework in which the initiative was situated and in which it is expected to become operative, namely the Global Coalition United 4 Heritage.

The Global Coalition was launched in June 2015 by UNESCO’s Director General Irina Bokova. It was originally intended as a “campaign designed to strengthen the mobilization of governments and all heritage stakeholders in the face of deliberate damage to cultural heritage, particularly in the Middle East”¹. Since then, the Coalition has evolved into “a widely expanding global movement devoted to the engagement of the global audience”, with a special attention devoted to the on-line “creation and sharing of content” aiming at “engaging viewership, ensuring that the narrative surrounding cultural pluralism and heritage preservation are widely understood by the global community”².

The development of the Global Coalition into a participatory platform which utilises social media to create social awareness and mobilise heritage actors worldwide is a clear indicator of the difficulties

¹UNESCO. (2015, June 29). Launch of global Unite for Heritage Coalition in Bonn. Retrieved from the official UNESCO Website: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1303/>

²UNITE4HERITAGE. (n.d.). Retrieved from the Website: <http://www.unite4heritage.org/en/unite4heritage-celebrating-safeguarding-cultural-heritage>

(well-known by ICOMOS members) in getting states to fully implement non-binding international heritage law instruments. From this point of view, the potential role of ICOMOS in the Global Coalition has become greater as a result of the disproportionate balance that- in the actual performance of the initiative- non-state actors have assumed when compared to governmental agencies. It is worth noting for example that the Coalition has not yet produced a single database that- similarly to ICOMOS Reports on Heritage at Risk- enables experts and local constituencies to create bottom-up national databases regarding endangered cultural and national heritages.

The Coalition promoted and supported a great number of initiatives (including volunteering units, UNESCO Youth Fora, etc.) and distinguished itself by implementing a variety of media strategies (ranging from “Site of the Week”, photo exhibitions and short video series dedicated to heritage, national heritage days, etc.). Inter alia, it is important to underline that a number of initiatives performed within the framework of the Global Coalition included conferences and interviews with academic institutions and renowned heritage experts, conducted by the UNESCO Brussels Office, or organized at UNESCO Headquarters and involving senior officials of the Organization.

Çava sans dire: ICOMOS and its members could bring a very valuable expertise and support to the Coalition which, in turn, could also provide greater international recognition and cross-cutting social visibility for ICOMOS and its initiatives. It is worth underlying how, in many respects, the Coalition indeed answers to the visionary inspiration that permeates ICOMOS H@R Reports.

Blue Helmets for Culture: foreseeable developments

While the BHC entered into force upon its signature, to this day (March 2018) remains non-operative. According to the MoU between Italy and UNESCO, prior to its official launching, an operation agreement needs to spell out how the taskforce will operate on the ground. This contrasts sharply with the media fanfare surrounding the initiative. Nevertheless, I argue that on a positive note it still allows for the initiative to evolve comprehensively by taking into account all the ways it could safeguard heritage- especially by involving local stakeholders.

As stated earlier, BHC’s MoU previews, inter alia, ‘providing technical supervision and training in order to assist national authorities and other local actors in implementing emergency preparedness and response measures for the protection and safeguarding of cultural and natural heritage’. The Memorandum does not go on defining who comprises the ‘local actors’ or what constitutes the operational guidelines that might shed some light on the matter. Notwithstanding the foregoing, by examining UNESCO Conventions on heritage and culture, it does not require a far stretch of imagination to understand the ‘local actors’ reference as including the communities relevant to the heritage in need of protection. The recognition and the elevation of the role of communities in regard to heritage – presently a matter of rigorous scholarship and formal recognition under international law³ was a concept that nonetheless evolved through time to reach its present status.

³Urbinati, S. (2012). The role for communities, groups and individuals under the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. BORELLI e LENZERINI (Eds.). *Cultural Heritage, Cultural Rights, Cultural Diversity: New Developments in International Law*. 201–221. Retrieved from the SSRN Website: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2710593>

Training local communities in emergency preparedness measures for protecting their heritage has the advantage of assisting the States in reacting quickly to situations in crisis. Local communities in this respect would be like trained personnel who are always ‘on duty’ due to their proximity to the area. The minimization of costs is also a benefit; in crisis situations where human lives are at stake, the prioritization of protecting heritage may not be either high in the list nor rendered active in the first phase of the crisis situation – crucial in preventing damage from occurring. A crucial example could be the community volunteers of the Italian National Civil Service and its central role for placing mobile cultural properties into safe havens before buildings and churches damaged by natural disasters collapsed. This example is a crucial one since, according to the Memorandum, the BHC will also respond to UNESCO member States’ requests for assistance in protecting their heritage also in natural disaster situations. It is especially in these kinds of scenarios – in which the ‘enemy’ to heritage is not a destructive iconoclasm but the natural elements – that having trained local communities really makes the difference between success and failure in preventing damages to cultural and natural heritage.

Most importantly, the BHC would provide an international setting in which local communities’ involvement in regard to their participation and training in protecting (their) heritage would be tested and best practices could be shared. From this perspective it could not go unmentioned that, along with the Memorandum, a special agreement was signed between the Italian City of Turin and UNESCO regarding the operationalization of the UNESCO Centre (category 2) for the Economics of Culture and World Heritage (ITRECH). Already approved by UNESCO General Assembly in November 2011 ITRECH is likely to play an increasingly relevant role in the promotion of sustainable management structures for World Heritage and local heritage sites alike, counting on a significant connection with both ICOMOS Italia and the UNESCO Chair of Turin. The BHC’s deployment, per Memorandum stipulations, is undertaken only after a bilateral agreement between the Parties involved has taken place. Instead of trying to convince State parties and the international community of the theoretical soundness of involving local communities in heritage protection, I argue that seeing is believing. BHC can provide the kind of small-scale paradigms and case studies – through multiple examples of successful bilateral cooperation – that demonstrate there are many value-creating opportunities in involving local communities in protecting cultural heritage. Furthermore, strengthening the relations between ITRECH and ICOMOS would enhance the role of ICOMOS not only in the Global Coalition, but in the development itself of the BHC initiative.

It is in this context that ICOMOS “Heritage@Risk” expertise could contribute significantly in shaping BHC’s development in the direction of involving local actors-communities-in safeguarding heritage.

Conclusion

In this paper I argue that there is great potential for synergies between the Italian/UNESCO BHC initiative and ICOMOS in general, and its “Heritage@Risk” initiative specifically, regarding safeguarding heritage through community involvement. While the BHC remains non-operative and “Heritage@Risk” largely concerns solely awareness raising regarding heritage in danger, ICOMOS extensive research on the subject can positively contribute on how BHC shapes up and operates on the ground in cooperation to local actors-communities- which can be taught how to operate safeguarding heritage in crisis situations- especially those concerning natural disaster.

ICOMOS considerable network, cooperation with governmental agencies and international NGOs alike, could significantly help the BHC initiative to expand on other countries besides Italy.

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