



FIRST AID TO CULTURAL HERITAGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Background

Complex emergencies¹ such as the one witnessed in the aftermath of 2010 earthquake in Haiti² often result from a combination of natural and/or man-made hazards and pre-existing social, political, economic or infrastructure factors that cross-cut each other. They are characterised by extensive losses of life, property damage, displacement of populations, security risks, political and civil disturbances, and hindrances to humanitarian assistance. In short, complex emergencies typically involve multifaceted and multi-causal humanitarian crises that require coordinated international or national responses, which go beyond the mandate or capacity of a single agency.

Yet is it possible to protect **cultural heritage** under such circumstances? If yes, then when is the right time to intervene and who all can help? Seeking answers to these questions is the premise of ICCROM's international training on *First Aid to Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis (FAC)*.

Offered within the framework of ICCROM's multi-partner and international programme on Disaster Risk Management, FAC is aimed at strengthening national capacities for protecting cultural heritage during complex emergencies. It emphasizes cooperation and coordination with other mainstream emergency response actors, and identifies areas of joint programming between culture and humanitarian sectors. The aim is to ensure that the affected communities participate in their own cultural recovery, which in turn can become a driver for peace and holistic development.

After the course, participants are invited to submit proposals to carry out projects in their respective countries. The short-listed proposals get seed grants from the [Cultural Emergency Response Programme](#) of the Prince Claus Fund, the Netherlands. The aim is to utilize knowledge obtained from this training to strengthen capacities for disaster response to cultural heritage at national or regional levels.

¹ifrc.org, (2015). *Complex emergencies - IFRC*. [online] Available at: <http://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/definition-of-hazard/complex-emergencies/> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2015].

²Incidents of violence and a cholera outbreak followed the 2010 earthquake in Haiti due to a combination of political instability, lack of timely assistance for basic needs and complete dependence on outside agencies. *Haiti earthquake response: Mapping and analysis of gaps and duplications in evaluations*. (2015). [pdf] Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/countries/haiti/47501750.pdf> [Accessed 13 Feb. 2015].)

I. What's Cultural First Aid?

Commonly used in the field of medicine, “first aid generally consists of some simple, often life-saving techniques that most people can be trained to perform with minimal equipment.”³ Drawing a parallel to this definition of first aid, ICCROM chose to use the term in reference to initial actions taken to secure and stabilize endangered cultural heritage⁴ during a complex emergency. Such situations demand protection measures that are easy to implement, and do not require sophisticated equipment or special conservation materials.

Within a disaster risk management plan, first aid would reside in the domain of emergency response. Yet unlike the humanitarian response where reaction time, such as the first 48 hours or 72 hours, is considered to be crucial for saving human lives, first aid to cultural heritage can be delayed until the basic relief support (e.g., food, water, shelter etc.) is in place. Regardless, rapid response can help contain damage to cultural heritage.

The main objectives for providing first aid to cultural heritage (both, tangible and intangible) in a complex emergency situation are to assess the damage caused, stabilize or secure heritage to prevent further damage or loss, and promote recovery.

A Cultural First Aider is a person who has the necessary knowledge and skills to document as well as protect cultural heritage during a complex emergency. She/he is:

- proactive yet sensitive to human needs,
- respectful of the local context,
- capable of building trust and understanding amongst people who have different views,
- able to develop and implement first aid operations for protecting cultural heritage in coordination with other relief agencies,
- able to constitute and manage teams, and
- capable of assessing and mitigating future risks in order to ensure early recovery.

II. Philosophy and Guiding Principles

Culture cannot wait, the credo of the FAC training stems from the idea that for communities uprooted by disasters, culture in its both tangible and intangible forms, provides a thread of continuity and helps in overcoming the trauma of loss and displacement. Therefore, it cannot be separated from humanitarian assistance. Actions taken to secure and recover cultural heritage should closely align with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence⁵.

In order to support this idea in actual practice, ICCROM has identified a set of guiding principles and a framework of action that closely follow those prescribed for the humanitarian response:

³Medical News Today, (2014). *What is first aid? What is the recovery position?*. [online] Available at: <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/153849.php> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2015].

⁴Within the cultural heritage field, this term is also used in reference to the stabilization measures taken to protect archaeological objects and structures once they are excavated (Watkinson, D. & Neal, V. (1998) **First Aid for Finds**. London: Rescue/UKIC Archaeology Section).

⁵ *OCHA on Message: Humanitarian Principles*. (2011). [pdf] Available at: https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf [Accessed 13 Feb. 2015].

1. People centred first aid

Enhancing people's ability at securing and recovering their own heritage is integral to the design and approach of FAC.

Statistics indicate that in most disasters, local communities are the first to respond and secure their cultural heritage. For example, during the 2012 conflict in Northern Mali, privately held ancient manuscripts were kept safe through traditional inter-communal networks. Moreover, communities have time-tested coping mechanisms and a wealth of knowledge (e.g., traditional building methods) that could be utilized in reconstruction and recovery. Thus, involvement of the local communities is essential to the planning and implementation of first aid to cultural heritage.

2. An inclusive attitude and respect for diversity

First aid should embrace an inclusive outlook for recognizing elements that constitute the cultural heritage of the disaster struck-area.

As individuals and as professionals, cultural first aiders can unintentionally make subjective value judgements leading to the selective recognition of cultural heritage, and thereby increase the existing inequalities in the affected area. To avoid this, FAC training provides necessary skills for developing an inclusive approach for providing assistance. For example, traditionally institutional responses have centred on protecting iconic or monumental heritage where as vernacular heritage has been largely overlooked.

3. Context specific response

Careful assessment of the complex emergency context is the mandatory first step for providing first aid to cultural heritage.

Every emergency has a certain context. Its careful assessment allows identification of immediate needs in relation to the main actors and their respective capacities to protect cultural heritage. Assessment of the context also helps in identifying pre-existing risk factors that could increase damage to cultural heritage in a given crisis situation. For example, the on-going conflict in Syria has led to the deterioration of law and order in the country, which in turn has contributed to the systematic looting of cultural sites.

4. Interlock culture with humanitarian assistance

First aid to cultural heritage should be provided within the framework of humanitarian relief and recovery.

Acknowledging that in any crisis situation, saving human lives is the number one priority, and that people affected by disasters have the right to receive assistance for ensuring the continuity of their cultures, the FAC training emphasizes interlocking of cultural and humanitarian responses. Actions for securing cultural heritage should be thus, initiated in coordination and close cooperation with relevant government and humanitarian response agencies. For example, *cash for work* programmes launched by humanitarian organizations could be used to clear debris around cultural sites.

5. Do no harm

First aid actions should prevent further damage and promote recovery.

One of the main objectives for providing first aid to cultural heritage is to prevent further damage by assessing, mitigating and preparing for future risks. For example, while setting up a bombproof

temporary storage for cultural collections, ensure that it is not exposed to the other risks such as flooding or looting.

III. Framework for First Aid Actions

Based on the guiding principles listed above, the FAC training has identified an open framework of action for providing first aid to cultural heritage. Since emergencies are highly context specific, all other actions (except step one) mentioned below do not follow a particular sequence and can be tailored to the ground situation.

Step 1. Context Analysis

To be undertaken off-site, context analysis is an important first step for providing first aid to cultural heritage. It involves recognizing the man-made or natural hazard in relation to the local context and its potential impact on cultural heritage. This includes identifying pre-existing risk factors that might increase damage to cultural heritage, potential safety and security risks for deploying first aiders in the affected area, as well as actors and stakeholders who could assist in first aid.

Step 2. On-site Survey

Following the situation analysis, on-site survey involves a first assessment of the damage, and the risks the affected cultural heritage is exposed to that could lead to more damage and hamper recovery. The outcomes of the on-site survey include:

- a) An initial idea of site-specific damage;
- b) immediate needs at the site (for example, the need for security to prevent potential looting or road clearing for safe passage around the site);
- c) permissions/agreements needed for intervention;
- d) community consultations and a consensus on priorities;
- e) priorities for intervention;
- f) associated costs;
- g) first aid project plan;
- h) resources (funds, people supplies and equipment);
- i) monitoring and evaluation criteria.

Step 3. Security and Stabilization Actions

Based on the priorities identified, decisions can be made to secure or stabilize the endangered cultural heritage sites, buildings and collections. The actions comprising this step are only undertaken after the initial assessments have taken place. Moreover, they are context dependent and do not follow a particular sequence. The outcomes of this step help in developing a full damage assessment report⁶, which includes needs as well as costs for recovery and reconstruction of tangible cultural heritage.

Note: for protecting intangible heritage, actions such as field recordings or craft rejuvenation trainings are needed, which are beyond the scope of FAC training.

a) **Security** involves taking initial action to reduce further man-made threats to the affected site or collection, following an on-site survey. For example, while working at the affected site, placing a

⁶ First aid interventions lead to a complete assessment of damage caused to cultural heritage as they involve thorough condition assessments that feed into the process of identifying advanced conservation treatments for recovery and associated costs.

guard on-site during working hours and/or after hours; providing temporary cover; or re-locating objects to a safe area on or off-site. More advanced treatments can include caging of large and heavy objects such as a sarcophagus, stone sculptures or lifted mosaics, or backfilling an exposed archaeological site. However these actions should be implemented only after thorough risk assessment has been carried out.

b) Evacuation comprises packing, transportation and relocation of cultural objects to another temporary location. It involves systematic documentation and safe handling of objects/items during transfer from one location to another. It should be undertaken only if: the present location is considered to be unsafe; there is an alternate and safer storage area available and the required logistics are in place to support the operation. This action has legal implications and should be taken after due consultation with the owner(s) of the institution/site.

c) Salvage, Triage and Stabilization

Similar to evacuation, **salvage** usually implies careful retrieval of objects or building parts from any wreckage, building collapse or otherwise contaminated environment such as a flooded area. It involves documentation of the location from where objects/building parts were recovered. In case of a partial or full collapse of a historic building, salvage includes sorting of rubble, wooden members or stones or bricks that could be used for the reconstruction. Salvage is usually accompanied by triage and stabilization.

Triage is a system of prioritization that takes into account degree of damage, vulnerability of the object to other potential sources of damage, and value(s) associated with it provided they are clearly defined. However, defining values is inherently complex and in most emergency situations, some value definition should be carried out during the on-site survey.

Stabilization can involve a number of measures such as surface cleaning, rinsing, controlled drying or making customized supports for salvaged objects and building parts. If carried out, the stabilization treatments should be carefully recorded and condition of the object before and after the treatment should be documented (within given means).

d) Triage and In-situ stabilization

This action is undertaken to stabilize heavy objects, archaeological remains or building parts that face the imminent threat of a collapse or could be damaged from another source, which cannot be avoided. Examples include: shoring of walls, temporary structural supports, erecting temporary shelters, covering exposed surface etc. As mentioned above, a systematic triage, condition assessment and documentation should accompany in-situ stabilization.

e) Temporary storage

Both, evacuation and salvage can involve setting up of a temporary storage, as the original location might be unsafe. Setting up such a space includes a documentation plan for locating objects and appropriate fixtures and furniture in order to mitigate future risks.

Source: Aparna Tandon, ICCROM (2015)

