

Forum: General Assembly 4 (GA4)

Issue: Integrating cultural heritage in post-conflict economic recovery

Student Officer: Abhay Wadhawan

Position: Deputy Chair

Introduction

Very often, during armed conflict, cultural heritage sites are seriously damaged. This damage is mostly extensive and often very expensive to reverse. However, some countries, such as Iraq and Ukraine, have used the reconstruction of cultural heritage sites to restart their economies and regain their identities. Restoring cultural heritage sites can attract income and tourism and help boost economies after conflicts. With conflict persisting, especially in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, and Syria, people have taken greater interest in protecting and reconstructing cultural heritage to support their countries' economic recovery and build lasting peace.

The United Nations unanimously voted for Resolution 2347 in 2017 and, for the first time, recognised that cultural heritage destruction is a threat to world peace. The ongoing reconstruction of Mosul, coupled with the conflict in Ukraine, has shown the need to restore heritage sites as an important way to rebuild economies.

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Heritage

Cultural heritage consists of historical monuments, groups of buildings and sites of historical value, and sites of aesthetic, archaeological, and anthropological value. This includes traditional practices, oral history, and craftsmanship skills.

Post-Conflict Recovery

The economic, social, and psychological reestablishment a state or community undertakes to rebuild its infrastructure and institutions after a conflict ends.

Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs)

Sectors based on cultural values, creative expression, crafts, tourism, and the performing arts that the UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) has identified as significant drivers of trade and employment.

Adaptive Reuse

Cultural values-based creative expression, crafts, tourism, and performing arts sectors identified by the UNCTAD as trade and job-creation catalysts.

Background Information

Origins and Historical Development

Destruction of cultural property in war as an intentional strategy is not a new phenomenon. However, instances of large-scale cultural destruction and resulting global outcry picked up in scale following the Balkan wars of the 1990s, most notably in the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan and the 2015 demolition of the Temple of Bel in Palmyra, Syria, by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Protecting cultural heritage used to be a popular area of inquiry for scholars; these incidents shifted the focus to cultural heritage as an international security issue and led to new frameworks to counter the deliberate destruction and trafficking of cultural objects in times of war.

An important earlier response was the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The First Protocol highlighted the protection, occupation, marking and removal/return of cultural property, while the 1999 Second Protocol called for “enhanced protection”, outlining sanctions and criminal responsibility. These instruments established the legal foundation, but implementation depends on several other local and global legislative and security factors.

Heritage Destruction in Contemporary Conflicts

From 2014 to 2017, during the ISIL occupation of Mosul in Iraq, the Al-Nouri mosque and the Al-Hadba Minaret were destroyed, and the Mosul museum suffered serious damage. In Mali in 2012, armed groups destroyed nine mausoleums and a mosque door in Timbuktu, resulting in the first International Criminal Court conviction for the attack on cultural property. In Ukraine, a joint assessment by the Ukrainian government, the World Bank, the European Commission, and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) found extensive damage to cultural and tourism assets, with an estimated loss of \$3.5 billion after two years of war and a \$9 billion restoration need over the next ten years.

The Economic Case for Heritage-Led Recovery

Cultural and creative industries reached an estimated value of \$1.4 trillion in services and \$713 billion in goods in 2022 and, according to UNCTAD, are closely linked to sustainable development in fragile markets. UNESCO’s ‘Revive the Spirit of Mosul’ initiative provides a great opportunity to showcase this potential. Since the initiative began in 2018, fifteen international partners have mobilised efforts to reconstruct 124 heritage houses and three major religious sites, renovate over 400 classrooms, generate over 7,700 local jobs, and train thousands of young craftspeople. Comparable UNESCO-World Bank research within the ‘Culture in City Reconstruction and Recovery’ program revealed that heritage-based reconstruction also assisted broader urban recovery in Haiti, Mali, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

International Frameworks and Responses

The international response includes the following:

- The Hague Convention and its Protocols provide legal protection for cultural property under attack and hold parties accountable.
- The first Security Council resolution addressing heritage destruction and trafficking by armed groups was 2347. It called on member states to stop illegal trade and cooperate with UNESCO.
- Since 2017, the ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas) Foundation has funded more than 500 projects across 40 nations, including emergency stabilisation in Ukraine and reconstruction in Iraq.
- The Al Mahdi case highlighted how international attacks can result in international criminal prosecution.
- The integration of culture into urban planning through World Bank and UNESCO efforts helps highlight the importance of heritage protection.

While these efforts were established, funding gaps, a lack of cooperation between service delivery systems, and a protracted institutional build-up prevented heritage recovery from becoming sustainable economic development.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation)

UNESCO sets international standards, supports implementation of the 1954 Hague Convention, and leads reconstruction programmes, including 'Revive the Spirit of Mosul' and others (such as in Ukraine). UNESCO views cultural heritage as an important part of recovery, as it helps rebuild broken communities by reviving local markets and culture, restores the economy by protecting sites that promote tourism, and supports social identity and long-term reconciliation within the community.

The World Bank

The World Bank approaches heritage through urban and economic recovery. It developed the CURE framework with UNESCO and began to incorporate costs of cultural damage and reconstruction into official post-disaster assessments. It places culture at the centre of the city, emphasising local participation in rebuilding.

The ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas) Foundation

The ALIPH is a Geneva-based fund that finances emergency and reconstruction projects in conflict and post-conflict situations. Its past successes cover monuments, museums, documentation, and heritage across 65 countries. France, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and private donors support it.

UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development)

UNCTAD offers an economic perspective by conducting research to assess the role and potential of heritage-based creative industries in supporting long-term economic growth. Its findings support the growth of cultural tourism, design, creative industries and crafts in developing countries on the road to economic recovery. UNCTAD's Creative Economy Programme has showcased success cases in boosting craft techniques and markets in several countries.

The Republic of Iraq

Iraq is a significant case study in internationally supervised reconstruction using national resources. It illustrates the immense destruction and potential for heritage-based employment through initiatives such as the reconstruction of Basra and Mosul.

Possible Solutions

Integrate the cultural sector into post-conflict needs assessments and include heritage reconstruction costs in international recovery financing appeals, following the UNESCO-World Bank CURE framework.

Create or expand national "heritage-for-jobs" programs modelled on the Mosul training program. Link reconstruction contracts to hiring and craft quota training funded by UNESCO, ALIPH, and bilateral partners.

Urge Member States to ratify and implement the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols, and establish specialised customs and law enforcement to address trafficking of cultural property under UNESCO and INTERPOL.

Provide a biennial report to the General Assembly to enhance surveillance of Resolution 2347 regarding pledged and received funding.

Foster public-private partnerships to establish heritage trust funds, using cultural tourism to sustain communities and reduce external profit-making potential.

Increase contributions of regional states and diaspora communities to ALIPH regional heritage funds and lessen the burden on larger donors.

Support UNESCO- and World Bank-financed reconstruction, enhance the use of cultural enterprises, and increase gender inclusivity.

Bibliography

ALIPH. (2018). Aliph Foundation - protecting heritage to build peace. Aliph Foundation.

<https://www.aliph-foundation.org>

International Criminal Court, & El Abdallah, F. (2016, September 27). ICC Trial Chamber VIII

declares Mr Al Mahdi guilty of the war crime of attacking historic and religious buildings in Timbuktu and sentences him to nine years' imprisonment. International Criminal Court.

<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/icc-trial-chamber-viii-declares-mr-al-mahdi-guilty-war-crime-attacking-historic-and-religious>

The World Bank, & UNESCO. (2025). Culture in city reconstruction and recovery. World Bank.

<https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/708271541534427317>

UNCTAD. (2024, July 11). Creative economy outlook 2024. Unctad.

<https://unctad.org/publication/creative-economy-outlook-2024>

UNESCO. (1972, November 16). Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage. Unesco.org. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>

UNESCO. (1999, March 26). Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Unesco.org.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/second-protocol-hague-convention-1954-protection-cultural-property-event-armed-conflict>

UNESCO. (2018a, February). Revive the spirit of Mosul | UNESCO. Wwww.unesco.org.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/revive-mosul>

UNESCO. (2018b, February 13). UNESCO and the World Bank place culture at the core of city reconstruction and recovery processes at the 9th World Urban Forum in Malaysia.

Unesco.org.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-and-world-bank-place-culture-core-city-reconstruction-and-recovery-processes-9th-world-urban>

UNESCO. (2018c, November 19). UNESCO and World Bank use culture for building back better after conflict and disasters in cities. Unesco.org.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-and-world-bank-use-culture-building-back-better-after-conflict-and-disasters-cities>

UNESCO. (2024). Ukraine: UNESCO estimates the damage to culture and tourism after 2

years of war at \$3.5 billion. Unesco.org.

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-unesco-estimates-damage-culture-and-tourism-after-2-years-war-35-billion>

UNESCO Courier, & Fiankan-Bokonga, C. (2017, October 17). A historic resolution to protect cultural heritage. Unesco.org.

<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/historic-resolution-protect-cultural-heritage>

United Nations. (2017, March 24). Security Council condemns destruction, smuggling of cultural heritage by terrorist groups, unanimously adopting resolution 2347 (2017). Un.org.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12764.doc.htm>

United Nations Security Council. (2017, March 24). Resolution 2347 (2017). Un.org.

[https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2347%20\(2017\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2347%20(2017))