



Human Security, Culture and Protection of Humanity's Heritage

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Abstract

WAAS should be credited for its contribution to promoting integrated, multidisciplinary approaches to tackling global problems, emphasizing the importance of science, education and culture in their entirety, and recognising their close interdependence and interconnection. In the Millennium Development Goals and in the Human Development concept before, there was one missing link—the recognition of culture and heritage protection as critical for human development. This recognition was finally made in 2015 with the adoption of the UN Agenda 2030, which emphasized that while safeguarding and promotion of heritage and culture is an end in itself, at the same time it contributes directly to many of the SDGs—safe and sustainable cities, decent work and economic growth, reducing inequalities, protecting the environment, promoting gender equality, peaceful and inclusive societies. It represents a true shift in the understanding of how much the issues of identity and belonging, diversity, culture and heritage are critical for sustainable development. The launch of the campaign on Human Security for ALL with the support of UNTFHS goes to the heart of such an understanding and approach. Placing culture at the heart of development policies does not mean to confine and fix it in a conservative way, but on the contrary—to invest in the potential of local resources, knowledge, skills and materials to foster creativity and sustainable progress. Recognition and respect for the diversity of cultures also creates the conditions for mutual understanding, dialogue and peace.

Concern with the issue of human security runs indeed throughout the history of the World Academy of Art and Science. For more than 60 years, the Academy has served as a global platform for intellectual debate, fostering partnerships, encouraging the creation of knowledge and launching new global ideas—from the warning of the imminent danger of catastrophic nuclear war, to the existential threat of climate change and the environmental degradation, and today, the Human Security for All campaign.

In the last few decades, WAAS has influenced immensely the shift in understanding development beyond economic growth, expanding the richness of human life rather than simply the richness of the economy. Thus, WAAS's advocacy for focusing on people, their opportunities and choices as a measurement of humanity's progress, is a critical and timely idea. It was first embraced by the United Nations, which resulted in the publication of the Human Development Reports in the 90s and which subsequently led to the launching of the Human Development Index.

WAAS has been strongly engaged in supporting the elaboration and the adoption of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030, which has been a new major step forward in the deeper and comprehensive understanding of human development and human security that represents a true blueprint for the future of humanity and the planet.

The current crises of unprecedented intensity—the COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and the climate change—brought about the imperative to mobilise decision-makers, institutions and the general public around the world to promote a comprehensive, integrated, person-centred approach to enhance the security, human rights and sustainable development of people everywhere and to address all critical issues confronting the world today, including peace, human rights, inequality, health, food, education, jobs, safe communities and personal safety, energy, pollution, biodiversity and, of course, climate change.

Such a highly humanistic approach, which has marked the history of WAAS, cannot be implemented and consequently achieved without taking seriously cultural approaches that respect diversity and the common heritage of humanity, deeply rooted in the respect and the knowledge of other societies and cultures.

This is the idea of humanism, expressed by the spirit of Ubuntu, “human kindness” in the African language and the culture Bantu, by Confucius, by the 19th century Indian humanist Swami Vivekananda, and so many others.

Humanism is also the conviction that every woman and man can become everything they aspire to—what Michel de Montaigne, the French Renaissance thinker, called “*la hauteur extrême de l’humaine nature*”, “the highest expression of human nature”. But although it seems individualistic, it is at the same time a belief in a single humanity, embodied by each and all of us.

In his novel “Anthills of the Savannah”, the late Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe once wrote:

“You must find a way to accept something, however small, from the other to make you whole”—a wonderful way of expressing our common humanity.

A similar humanist conviction guides UNESCO, the UN Agency that was forged by the belief that peace must be defended by new ways, ways that start in the minds of women and men. This is as relevant now as it was in 1945, the year of its creation. And even more relevant today during the current multiple crises with unprecedented consequences—political, economic, social, humanitarian and ethical.

The need for “a human security approach” is an expression of the same humanistic approach, which is more than urgent today, when decades of efforts to reach and implement important international agreements are under threat of getting lost—the Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030 and the Paris Climate Agreement.

During the last session of the UN General Assembly, the UNSG António Guterres, launched an alarming alert—the world may be going back almost 25 years in its development and many achievements will be pushed back. The multiple crises show once again how

interdependent the world is today and how much humanity needs multilateral platforms to look for common solutions. They have served as a wake-up call for putting human security and wellbeing to the forefront of public policies, for investing in people, in economies and societies so they become cleaner, greener, healthier, safer and more resilient.

In the Millennium Development Goals and in the Human Development concept before, there was one missing link—the recognition of culture and heritage protection as a critical link for human development. This recognition was finally made in 2015 with the adoption of the UN Agenda 2030, where Goal 11 on inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban development, calls for strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage.

WAAS should also be credited with its contribution to promoting integrated, multidisciplinary approaches to tackling global problems, emphasizing the importance of science, education and culture in their entirety, in recognising their close interdependence and interconnection.

UNESCO's strong advocacy in the run-up to the adoption of the UN Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, brought about a historic result—culture was integrated for the first time in such an important strategic vision for the planet and humanity. Agenda 2030 emphasized that while safeguarding and promotion of heritage and culture is an end in itself, at the same time it contributes directly to many of the SDGs—safe and sustainable cities, decent work and economic growth, reducing inequalities, protecting the environment, promoting gender equality, peaceful and inclusive societies. It represents thus a true shift in the understanding of how much the issues of identity and belonging, diversity, culture and heritage are critical for sustainable development.

I have always insisted that if the purpose of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is an agenda of the people, by the people and for the people, then culture and heritage should play a central role. All the more, the SDGs enshrine a conceptual shift in thinking about development beyond economic growth—envisioning a desirable future that is equitable, inclusive, peaceful, and environmentally sustainable.

Our notion of culture has broadened significantly over the decades. The 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity compellingly states that “cultural diversity widens the range of options open to everyone and that it is one of the roots of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, moral and spiritual existence.”

Today, a comprehensive set of International Conventions protects every kind of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the diversity of cultural expressions:

- 1954 Protection of Cultural Property in the event of Armed Conflict
- 1970 Fighting Against Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Property
- 1972 Protection of World's Cultural and Natural Heritage
- 2001 Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage

- 2003 Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- 2005 Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

These Conventions represent a solid basis for understanding the role of culture and heritage in the contemporary world. Balancing the benefits of integrating into a globalized world against protecting the uniqueness of local culture requires a careful approach. Placing culture at the heart of development policies does not mean to confine and fix it in a conservative way, but on the contrary to invest in the potential of local resources, knowledge, skills and materials to foster creativity and sustainable progress. Recognition and respect for the diversity of cultures also create the conditions for mutual understanding, dialogue and peace.

“Protection of culture and heritage is vital for ensuring human security in all its multifaceted dimensions.”

The launching of the WAAS-UNTFHS campaign on Human Security goes into the heart of such an understanding and approach. All the more, it coincides with an important anniversary—50 years since the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World’s Natural and Cultural Heritage—one of the most visionary and transformative ideas of the last century.

Culture and heritage are not about bricks and stones—they are about identities and belonging, it is about humanity’s diversity, and it gains meaning when it is inscribed in the lives of people and local communities. It is our bridge from the past to the future. It is also a tool for reconciliation in many parts of the world today. Heritage can give confidence and help reconcile individuals with a globalizing world. Heritage is about the past as much as it is about the future.

This is the meaning of the 1972 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World’s Cultural and Natural Heritage, based on the respect and recognition of the “outstanding universal value” of monuments, sites, temples, historic cities and landscapes that embrace all the diversity of humanity. Cultural heritage is our most democratic resource and every time it is destroyed, a precious link with our past, our history and our identity disappears.

As the Cambridge University Heritage Research Centre rightfully states:

“Where history is the study of the past, heritage is the many ways the past is used in the present. Heritage can be understood as an active, dynamic relationship between then and now, formed through an on-going process of renegotiation, reconstruction, and recreation of what we choose to take from the past with us into the future.”

Today, the World Heritage Convention, with its 193 States Parties, is a universally ratified International Convention. As of 2022, there are 1154 sites in 167 countries on the World

Heritage List, which is an open book of humanity's diversity, of creativity, of memory, of aesthetics and of imagination.

Many of the sites on the World Heritage List teach us a lesson—there is no “pure culture”, no culture has ever flourished in isolation. In the long thread of history, cultures have always mingled, enriched and influenced each other, flowing into the same river of human civilization.

There is a very fine line between pride in one's culture and intolerance towards what is different. And in order to walk on this fine line, we need understanding and knowledge about the other. Many of the answers come through education.

This requires education systems founded on inclusive principles that combat stereotypes and prejudice. We need to foster education for cultural literacy, education for mutual respect and international understanding. We need to foster Global Citizenship Education that UNESCO included in SDG 4 on Equitable, Inclusive and Quality Education and Life-Long Learning for All.

Against this background, one of the answers to the global challenges today is the urgent need to promote the field of humanities. It is through humanities, unfortunately neglected for quite a long time, that we understand the social transformation of our societies and the way to manage it for the benefit of all, it is through humanities that we understand and get to know the history of others, it is through humanities that we understand better the challenges of globalization, it is through humanities that we can understand and embrace cultural diversity as a strength and not as a threat, it is through humanities that we can foster new global citizenship in an era of diversity. And last, but not least, it is through humanities that we can understand and find the right answers to the challenges of how to bridge the gap of inequalities.

Teaching philosophy or history or arts is fundamental for the opening of young minds towards the diversity and the “other”. It is the constant challenge of the present that can make it difficult to imagine and reinvent the future. A book can or a lesson of history or philosophy may change the perception of the world, may instil empathy and the sense of belonging. Knowing one's own history, culture and heritage creates a sense of belonging. Knowing others' history, culture and heritage creates a sense of “sharing” and solidarity.

There are many challenges today when it comes to the protection of heritage—unsustainable urbanization and mass tourism, natural disasters, lack of capacities and funding to preserve heritage. There is a need to forge new funding models, new management approaches, new ways to ensure that all actors, especially local communities, feel responsible for the collective preservation of cultural heritage. We need to share best practices to protect monuments as well as complex properties including cultural landscapes, historic cities and transboundary sites.

But two among these threats are of particular importance—conflict and climate change. And both are highly relevant to the all-embracing concept of human security.

We have all seen in recent years how heritage came to the frontline of “modern” conflicts by extremists in Mali, Syria and Iraq, who operated with the aim of erasing histories and identities. Bamiyan Buddhas, Palmyra, Mosul, the mausoleums of Timbuktu bear the scars of deliberate and barbaric attacks. Looting of sites and illicit trafficking of antiquities deplete people and communities of their identities. We have come to understand better that attacks against culture are attacks against the very identity of communities and peoples. They lead to devastation that can be irreparable, making reconciliation all the more difficult.

“By launching the Human Security for All campaign, WAAS is again true to its ideals of stirring intellectual, humanistic and academic debate about human development in a world of profound change, and also in making a strong case in the understanding that human security is about preservation of the common heritage of humanity, respect for diversity and promotion of culture.”

We have seen also how much cultural heritage is vital for peace, for reconciliation, social transformation and part and parcel of efforts to safeguard peace. Often the first victim of war, culture can restore ties that have been broken. Because culture heals, protecting cultural heritage is not a luxury that can be left for better days.

When a World Heritage site is destroyed anywhere in the world, we are all diminished, even if it is from another region, another period, another culture, or another religion.

When we visit a World Heritage site anywhere in the world—in Jerusalem or Istanbul, from the streets of Warsaw to the mountains of the Machu Picchu—we see how cultures influence each other, how they are irresistibly intertwined. We must show how all cultures are intertwined, how all have been enriched by mutual exchange, fashioning complex identities, and producing multiple sources of belonging.

Protecting heritage in conflict requires thinking and acting outside the “culture box” by building broad coalitions, by connecting the dots between humanitarian, security and cultural imperatives which is what is needed today. The adoption by the UN Security Council of several Resolutions on the link between peace, security and the protection of heritage, most particularly Resolution 2347 of March 2017, made history. No doubt this was a landmark decision as it recognised for the first time that safeguarding heritage and diversity are key to maintaining peace and security, that they heal and reconcile and give confidence to people. Thus, protection of culture and heritage is vital for ensuring human security in all its multifaceted dimensions.

And the second major threat to heritage protection is climate change. In recent years, it has been recognised by the World Heritage Committee and by the expert community as the fastest growing threat to World Heritage. When the UNESCO Convention on the Protection

of Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted, there was no knowledge about the link between the climate change and World Heritage preservation.

According to UNESCO, “Climate change is a defining issue of our time, and among the greatest threats facing cultural and natural heritage today. One in three natural sites and one in six cultural heritage sites are currently threatened by climate change. In recent months and years, we have seen cultural and natural heritage sites, including many UNESCO World Heritage sites, threatened by wildfires, floods, storms and mass-bleaching events, among many climate change-related impacts. We have also seen how climate change puts cities and living heritage – oral traditions, social practices, festive events and traditional knowledge – at risk. As climate change leads to displacement and forced migration, entire ways of life risk being lost forever”.

The striking examples of Venice, the Great Barrier Reef, Yellowstone and other iconic World Heritage sites, ring the alarm of the extent of the threat. Natural World Heritage sites are not just iconic places with exceptional nature, they also provide benefits that contribute to human wellbeing. They include very large areas: the 241 sites listed for their natural values account for 8% of the total surface covered by all 230,000 protected areas worldwide. Large sites with wilderness values include iconic places such as the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador, Yellowstone National Park in the USA and the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the Great Barrier Reef are providing nature-based solutions to climate change.

Natural World Heritage sites contribute to global climate stability by storing significant amounts of carbon. Forests found in World Heritage Sites in the tropics store 5.7 billion tons of carbon. Two thirds of natural sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List are crucial water sources and about half prevent natural disasters such as floods or landslides.

Albeit all these compelling facts, culture still is the missing link in the climate debate. There was some progress at the last COP 27 in Sharm-el-Sheikh in recognising the link between culture and heritage and adaptation, loss and damage and urban climate action. The conclusions admitted that, filling this gap can help get back on track a global system of climate policy and deliver transformative adaptation, especially for the most vulnerable.

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