

**INTERSESSIONAL WORKSHOP ON CULTURAL RIGHTS AND THE PROTECTION OF
CULTURAL HERITAGE**
Organized by OHCHR

14 June 2021 from 3 to 5 pm – online

**Opening remarks by Ernesto Ottone R.,
Assistant Director-General for Culture of UNESCO**

Your Excellency Mr **George C. Kasoulides**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of Cyprus to the United Nations office in Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland,

Your Excellency Mr **Abdul-Karim Hashim Mostafa**, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of Iraq to the United Nations office in Geneva,

Ms. **Nada Al-Nashif**, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights,

Ms. **Karima Bennoune**, UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights,

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, Dear colleagues,

It is my great pleasure to join you today for this Intersessional workshop on cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage organized by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

I would like to express my gratitude to the Office of the High Commissioner for inviting UNESCO to discuss ways to mainstream a human rights-based approach to the safeguarding of cultural heritage. This has been the shared goal of UNESCO, the Office of the High Commissioner and the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights for many years, and particularly since the adoption of the first resolution 33/20 of the Human Rights Council.

[UNESCO's human rights-based approach]

UNESCO's work in the field of culture is firmly rooted in a human rights-based approach. UNESCO has developed a set of normative instruments that codify cultural rights and highlight their vital importance for the safeguarding of culture in all its forms. We do so because we

firmly believe that culture can serve as the foundation for sustainable peace and respect for human rights, by supporting dialogue and ensuring access to cultural life in all its diversity.

Despite growing recognition of the role of culture for resilience, peace and stability, as seen through the adoption of a series of Resolutions by the UN Security Council, much work remains to safeguard cultural heritage at risk and to promote cultural rights. Culture is yet to be fully integrated into peacebuilding, security or humanitarian policies and practices, even as organizations like UNESCO are increasingly called upon to protect culture in emergencies around the world. In recent years, UNESCO has supported the reconstruction of heritage and the revival of cultural life in Mosul, Beirut, Yemen and Timbuktu, just to name a few. In all these cases, fostering access to culture and the enjoyment of cultural rights has been a key part of our efforts. Prevention is also essential to our work. It is only by promoting respect for diversity and intercultural dialogue that we can prevent the intentional destruction of cultural heritage before it occurs.

[COVID-19 and cultural rights]

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on culture and cultural rights, as highlighted in a recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur. Measures to control the spread of the pandemic have led to widespread closures of World Heritage sites, museums, performance venues and festivals, which limits access to culture and the rights to free assembly, movement and expression that are so central to cultural rights. Cultural property has been increasingly threatened by large-scale illegal archaeological excavations and illicit trafficking, and indigenous and living heritage practices have been disrupted, denying communities the ability to access and practice their culture. Many artists and cultural professionals have lost their livelihoods as a result of this crisis, which has revealed the preexisting vulnerability of the sector. UNESCO is calling for the full inclusion of culture in national COVID-19 recovery plans, to avoid a permanent setback for cultural rights around the globe.

[Importance of cooperation and “culture as a common good”]

No one organization can tackle these challenges alone. That is why we so value our cooperation with OHCHR, the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, Member States, experts, and cultural rights defenders. Going forward, the challenge will be to extend this cooperation with actors outside the culture domain, so that culture is fully integrated into humanitarian, security and peacebuilding efforts. As COVID-19 has brought to light, more so

than ever, the fragility of the culture sector, UNESCO believes that culture should now be viewed as a “common good” – something that benefits and is shared by all, and as a result we all have a responsibility to safeguard. Culture is also a fundamental tool for responding to crises and ensuring respect for human rights. It does this by serving as a source of resilience, dialogue, respect for diversity, and recovery.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am looking forward to listening to your ideas, experiences and lessons learned, which will guide us in this joint effort to safeguard cultural heritage and promote human rights.

Thank you.