

Intersessional Workshop on cultural rights and the Protection of cultural heritage
Session 2 | Cultural heritage in crisis
15/06/2021
Past and present role of MINUSMA in the protection of cultural heritage in Mali
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Good morning everyone,
Thank you for giving the opportunity to share our experience.

I would first start my intervention by reminding that peacekeeping operations, like MINUSMA in Mali, is part of the UN Secretariat – like OHCHR. As such, we can only do what we are being mandated to do by Member States, in our case the UN Security Council.

In 2013, at the creation of MINUSMA, UNSC gave through its resolution 2100 a mandate, in which there were **two operational paragraphs mentioning culture**, one more on internal management and the other one asking to work with external partners.

At that time, it was considered to be a new issue for peacekeeping and therefore there were some questions on how and what to do about it. The **only guidance document which was already referencing cultural heritage in peacekeeping was actually the DPKO/DFS Environmental Policy for UN Field missions approved in 2009**, which is more focusing on internal UN environmental footprint, but provided a good basis for start. This is why there has been the creation of the Environment & Culture unit in MINUSMA which would tackle both issues, as indeed the second paragraph mentioning culture related to internal management was also the one mandating MINUSMA –also for the first time in peacekeeping – to manage its environmental impact. It is worth mentioning that the **entry point of protecting culture was not from the cultural rights approach** while there is a human rights division in all peacekeeping missions.

In addition, there has been an early work regarding the interpretation of the paragraphs. **The security – physical protection - aspect became secondary due to the wording** which was not strong for MINUSMA but also because most of the destruction already happened before MINUSMA's deployment. However, there were several aspects that we considered important: **the reference to “in collaboration with UNESCO” which clearly made UNESCO as the UN lead on culture in Mali and would work on that with Malian authorities; and the title of the paragraph “support for cultural preservation” which gave an opening for wider interpretation than just the security aspect.** In addition, there were other aspects of the mandate which referred to *“national reconciliation and social cohesion”* for which culture in Mali was definitely an important tool knowing its important place in the Malian society in all regions. Also, after June 2015 when the Peace Agreement was signed in Algiers, MINUSMA was tasked to support its implementation and there were some articles as well as in one annex, referring to culture. Overall, this was just to explain how, as a UN Secretariat entity, we could work on this issue.

Now in concrete terms, what did we do?

We agreed very early on (in June 2013) with UNESCO Mali on a cooperation strategy around three pillars: 1/ on training of our UN personnel; 2/ on logistical and security support for the rehabilitation projects as per the agreed Paris Action Plan of February 2013 developed with Mali and 3/ on joint communication.

1/ on **training**: UNESCO developed the content of two modules which have been delivered since October 2013 (and still are today) during the mission induction courses:

- a. What is cultural heritage in Mali and how to behave? A Heritage passport with GPS coordinates of the World heritage sites was shared with all attendees. In addition, a specific leaflet was developed in French and English.
- b. Cultural awareness on Malian culture

The two training responded to the mandate related to our internal management which would also have impact on the other paragraph on external activities, because how could people support if they are first not informed/trained? **In addition, we worked with the Conduct and Discipline unit to add/emphasize the respect for culture in the Mission's code of conduct and ethics.**

2/ on **logistical support**

For instance, we 'sponsored' 720 seats in MINUSMA flights in the course of less than 3 years, which the Mission absorbed in its budget. This supported in particular the deployment of experts for the rebuilding of the 14 destroyed mausoleums in Timbuktu which was finished in September 2015. **It is important to note that all reconstructions were done at the request of the local communities and with their own participation reusing traditional techniques.**

While always liaising with UNESCO, we also financed and supported different projects:

- Refurbishment of three libraries of ancient manuscripts
- Ablution of the Djingareyber mosque
- Flying materials for the regional cultural missions so that civil servants can effectively work (which supported our mandate on restoration of the State authority in the North)
- **Used our internal technical expertise and resources** to support the national authorities:
 - o GIS/cartography by updating all GPS coordinates of Malian national heritage sites;
 - o Engineering/GIS to delineate the Saneye/Gao archeological site to protect it from looting.
- **Supported the intangible heritage** - which is very important in Mali - and also in line with the Peace Agreement, by:
 - o Purchasing music instruments and equipment for the Gao Regional orchestra 'Songhoy star' whose instruments were destroyed by the extremists during the 2012 occupation. This was an important project to rebuild social links locally as the orchestra was often used for local events such as weddings etc.
 - o Supporting the return of music festivals in the North (e.g. in Gao), with musicians from the whole country
 - **This logistical support has been in the end a tool facilitating access to cultural rights by supporting the revival of travel related to cultural and artistic events.**

We of course wanted to do more. We worked with the **Military** to scout some far-away sites which we heard were looted. Also, as soon as 2013, both MINUSMA and UNESCO saw an opportunity to have a full time **UN Police (UNPOL)** officer to focus on illicit traffic on cultural objects which was already increasing due to absence of tourists, especially in the Dogon country. That person would have monitored the trends but also trained Malian customs and other police/gendarmerie officers but at that time, there was no Member State who could provide a specialist for that. However, I am very happy to let you know that just last month in May, UNPOL just did a specific training on illicit traffic on cultural objects for the Malian Defense and Security Forces.

In terms of what we are doing today: There is no more reference to culture at all (both external and internal management) in MINUSMA mandate since 2018. However, the issue is still alive in peacekeeping using the Environmental policy angle. Since 2017, there is now a DOS Environment strategy, which requires all field missions to report annually to the UN General Assembly on their environmental scorecard. The scorecard is based on a number of indicators through different pillars and there are two indicators focusing on culture: one on training and one on behaviours. In addition, there are still some ad hoc projects, such as the recent support to the Gao regional museum, and our Peace and security trust fund is financing a UNESCO project related to the support to the development of a new curriculum and capacity building in the Malian education system related to the *Diplôme Universitaire de Technologies (DUT) sur les Metiers du livre – mention manuscrits anciens*.

In terms of lessons learned and recommendations, I can share the following personal thoughts which are more targeted for organizations that are planning to or would work on cultural heritage in crisis:

- **Prevention is key.** Peacekeeping often arrives after the damage is done; it is therefore important to find a way to protect before, also when there are peace enforcement activities. A UN mission may not be the answer for the issue of protecting cultural heritage.
- **Mandate does not mean resources** – MINUSMA did not have any, we got only one UN Volunteers after two years
- Suggest basing the intervention with existing partners and through mainstreaming in other mandates (e.g., social cohesion, peace agreement, human rights, Action for Peacekeeping)
- It should also be part of an internal doctrine, so that staff are aware on their own behaviors but also know how they could support or use it to achieve other mandate goals
- Therefore, **it is important to train personnel**, ideally before any deployment. Of course, training national counterparts is also key.
- Related to support, it is important to have dedicated experts, of course relying on UNESCO country offices, but also in Headquarters and Missions to ensure continuity; however, discussion on where place those staff in organigramme may also need some thinking.
- I will also finish by the most important part: **listening to the local communities' wish and needs is very important**
- As such I would plea **to not only focus on where the media and donors push, both in terms of locations but also in terms on the type of heritage**, as it could be counterproductive locally/regionally in the end. In particular, **local intangible heritage** is very important for the population and being more proactive in protecting it will support the respect for their cultural rights.

Thank you.