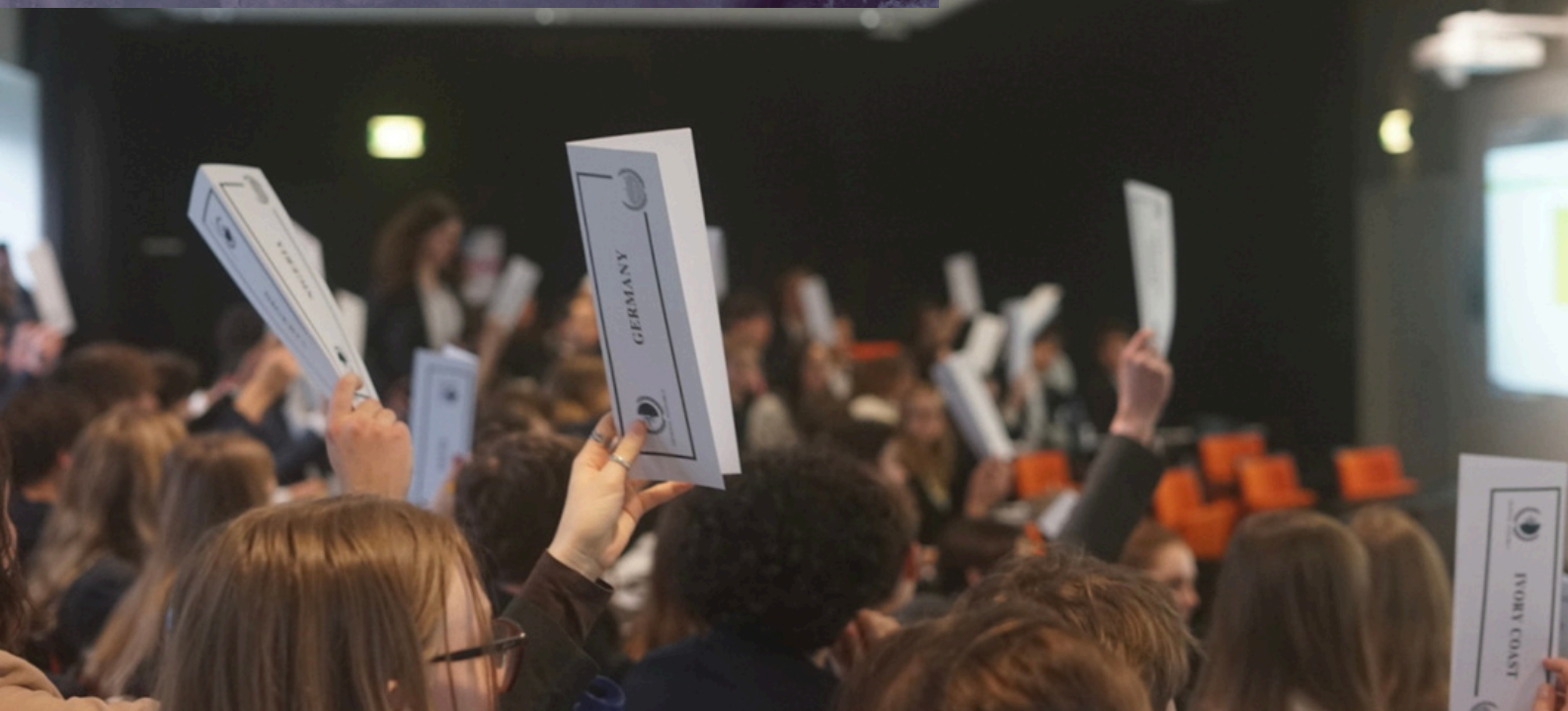


GUIDELINES UNESCO



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Presentation of the Committee : United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The UNESCO committee was founded in 1945 after the Second World War. At that time, it was clear that building a durable peace would not only require economic and political agreement, but also cooperation and shared knowledge on topics such as education, science, and culture. Since then, UNESCO has been a crucial organization within the United Nations, counting 194 members (as of today), and supporting projects and resolutions that have shaped the way these questions are addressed globally. Some of the most important UNESCO actions are the creation of the World Heritage List (1972), the Global Education Coalition (2020), and the “Pacific Tsunami Warning System (1965)”.

In this regard; this committee has always been the leader for changing the mentalities and preparing for the future, especially when it comes to cultural topics. For decades now, it has been natural that UNESCO has started working on climate change, especially on adapting to its consequences.

When it comes to heritage preservation or adaptation, UNESCO is a key actor that you will all be embodying during the debates. This guideline is made to present to you the key elements that you need to have in mind regarding the two topics that this committee will discuss during its MUNL 2025 session: safeguarding world heritage from over-tourism and climate change consequences; and adapting coasts and islands to rising sea levels.

Delegates here is the first step of your journey through UNESCO!

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Topic 1: Protecting and promoting international cultural heritage from wars and conflicts

Introduction

In his reflections on global security, the famous physicist Albert Einstein famously stated that "peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding." Einstein was a passionate advocate for international cooperation, believing that intellectual and cultural exchange was the only way to prevent the hatred that leads to conflict.

This idea is the very foundation of the protection of cultural heritage, which represents the shared history and "understanding" of all humanity.

This vision faces a massive challenge today: the deliberate targeting of culture in modern wars. When ancient temples, libraries, or monuments are destroyed, it is often an intentional act meant to erase a people's identity and memory. In this context, the central issue is no longer just about preserving old stones; it is about how protecting our shared history can help build peace and support reconciliation. If a community loses its past, it becomes much harder for it to imagine a peaceful future.

This is the difficult landscape where UNESCO operates. Acting as a guardian of the 1954 Hague Convention, UNESCO works to protect cultural treasures in war zones by marking them with a "Blue Shield" to warn military forces to stay away. The agency also uses satellite technology to monitor damage and helps local experts move artifacts to safety.

However, UNESCO faces many difficulties, such as limited funding and the difficulty of enforcing international laws in active conflict zones.

Understanding these dynamics is essential to answering one critical question: How can we better defend our shared cultural memory in a world where war is increasingly used to erase identity?

Contemporary Threats to Heritage in Times of War

A. Intentional Destruction: Heritage as a Strategic Target

In 21st-century conflicts, heritage is no longer just a victim of war; it has become a central objective. The deliberate destruction of cultural sites, which UNESCO calls "cultural cleansing," aims to destroy the identity, history, and dignity of an opposing group. By destroying iconic monuments, warring parties seek to break the psychological spirit of a population and erase any trace of cultural diversity. These acts, such as those seen in Timbuktu or Palmyra, are considered war crimes under the Rome Statute. The challenge for this committee is to find ways to prevent these highly publicized attacks, which are often used as propaganda by extremist groups to demonstrate their power and ideological dominance over a territory.



B. The Economic Engine of Conflict: Looting and Illicit Trafficking

The looting of archaeological sites and the theft of art from museums in conflict zones provide a major source of income for armed groups and terrorist networks. This illegal trade has become a global criminal industry, made easier by porous borders and the anonymity of online sales platforms. Every looted object represents not only an irreplaceable loss of historical data for humanity but also a "financial bullet" used by combatants to buy weapons. UNESCO works closely with INTERPOL to list stolen items, but the speed of digital transactions makes tracking them extremely difficult. Delegates must think of stricter regulations for the international art market to cut off this vital source of funding for war.

C. Collateral Damage and the Urbanization of Modern Warfare

The shift of warfare into densely populated urban areas significantly increases the vulnerability of historical buildings. Ancient city centers, which are often strategic locations, suffer massive collateral damage from heavy weaponry and airstrikes. Beyond direct destruction, when experts and museum staff are forced to flee due to insecurity, sites suffer from rapid decay and a lack of critical maintenance. The proximity of military targets to historical monuments creates a constant dilemma for armed forces. UNESCO should examine how to enforce "no-strike zones" and how to provide emergency stabilization for structures weakened by fighting to prevent their total collapse after the conflict ends.

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UNESCO's Response: Strategic Frameworks and Innovative Tools

A. The Legal Shield: International Conventions and Judicial Protection

The protection of heritage relies on a strong legal arsenal, centered on the 1954 Hague Convention and its two protocols. These laws require signing countries to safeguard their own cultural property and respect the heritage of others during war. A major turning point occurred in 2017 with UN Security Council Resolution 2347, which officially recognized that destroying heritage is a threat to international peace and security. However, these laws are not always followed, and many countries have not yet included these obligations in their national military rules. Delegates should explore ways to make these conventions more binding and improve how we hold individuals accountable for "cultural crimes."

B. The "Digital Shield": Satellites and 3D Mapping Technology

Since experts often cannot physically enter active war zones, UNESCO relies on modern technology to monitor sites. A partnership with UNOSAT (UN Agency for satellite observations) allows for high-resolution satellite imagery to document damage in real-time and discourage large-scale looting. At the same time, massive 3D scanning has become a priority. By creating "digital twins" of threatened monuments, the organization ensures that even if a site is physically destroyed, precise digital blueprints remain for future reconstruction. These digital archives act as a "backup memory" for humanity. The challenge is to ensure this data is used for good and does not fall into the hands of groups who might use it to plan more precise attacks or thefts.

C. Operational Intervention: The "Cultural Peacekeepers"

UNESCO does not have its own army, but it relies on specialized units provided by Member States, often called "Cultural Peacekeepers." These experts, such as the Italian Carabinieri, are trained to intervene in emergencies to secure museum collections, move precious archives to safety, and evaluate structural damage. This force works with local authorities to set up security perimeters around major sites. The committee should discuss how to create a faster deployment system for these units. Additionally, there is a need to train regular UN Peacekeeping missions (Blue Helmets) so they can include heritage protection as part of their broader mission to protect civilians and stabilize regions.

Persistent Challenges and Levers for Action

A. Sovereignty vs. Intervention: The Limits of International Mandates

UNESCO's work is often blocked by the principle of national sovereignty. A country can refuse international help or deny access to its territory, even if its heritage is in immediate danger. Furthermore, in civil wars, deciding which group represents the "legitimate" authority over a site is a major diplomatic problem. The organization must balance its universal mission with respect for a country's political independence. The idea of a possibility of creating "cultural humanitarian corridors" similar to aid corridors for civilians, could be implemented. This would allow experts to access sites without taking sides in the political conflict, treating heritage as a "common good" that justifies international attention.

B. The Funding Gap and the Challenge of Private Sector Cooperation

Rebuilding heritage after a war costs billions of dollars, an amount that UNESCO's regular budget cannot cover. While special funds like ALIPH have been created, funding still depends mostly on voluntary gifts from a few wealthy countries. Using help from private tech companies is necessary for expertise and money, but it raises ethical questions about who "owns" the data and the risk of turning history into a commercial product. Delegates will need to propose sustainable and transparent funding models, such as small taxes on the global art market or public-private partnerships that ensure the reconstruction stays true to the local culture and identity.

C. Beyond Monuments: Protecting Intangible Heritage and Memory

War does not just destroy stones; it kills the people who carry culture and uproots their traditions. Intangible heritage, such as languages, music, traditional crafts, and religious rites, is often the most fragile part of culture when people are forced to flee. When a community is scattered, a living memory dies, making it much harder for people to live together in peace after the war. UNESCO must therefore include the protection of artists, scholars, and traditional practitioners in its emergency plans. The committee is invited to think of "safe-guarding" programs for refugees, so that culture can be used as a tool for healing and helping displaced people maintain a link to their homeland.

Key Players

- UNESCO
- INTERPOL
- Private companies: tech industry
- Military: UN Blue Helmets, National army...
- International Red Cross Community
- NGOs

Key questions

- Should international law recognize "Cultural Humanitarian Corridors" that allow experts to evacuate artifacts and protect sites even during active combat, similar to corridors for civilian aid?
- How can UNESCO protect the "living heritage" (languages, oral traditions, music) of refugee populations to ensure that a conflict doesn't lead to the extinction of a culture?
- How can Member States improve cooperation between customs agents and the art market to prevent "blood antiquities" from being laundered into legitimate private collections?
- Should UNESCO implement AI-driven "crawlers" to monitor social media and the Dark Web for the sale of artifacts? What are the implications for privacy and national security?
- Since international treaties are signed by States, how can UNESCO legally hold non-state actors (rebel groups, militias) accountable for "cultural cleansing" in a court of law?

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Topic 2: How should the international community strengthen regulation of the global art market to curb illicit trafficking of cultural property?

Introduction

The global art market, currently valued at nearly \$68 billion, stands as one of the most significant unregulated financial frontiers in the world, where the traditional veil of "discretion" provides a convenient shroud for systemic illicit trafficking. This lack of transparency has facilitated a dangerous shift in the status of cultural property: no longer viewed solely as an aesthetic asset, antiquities have become a high-liquidity currency utilized by organized crime syndicates and non-state armed actors to finance instability and conflict.

As scholars of international law emphasize, this trade constitutes a sophisticated transnational crime that makes isolated national efforts insufficient. The imperative for UNESCO is to bridge the friction between national sovereignty and our collective duty to protect the "Common Heritage of Mankind" by moving beyond performative condemnation toward the creation of concrete regulatory frameworks.

It is necessary to establish binding accountability for auction houses, introduce oversight into the "black box" of free ports, and monitor the burgeoning digital platforms that currently allow looted history to be sold with a single click.

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Theoretical and Structural Foundations of the Illicit Market

A. Systematic Looting and the "Laundering" of Provenance

The illicit supply chain is characterized by "subsistence digging" in archaeologically rich but economically vulnerable regions. This refers to people illegally taking archeological objects with them. Once an object is unearthed illegally, it undergoes a process of "provenance laundering." By circulating through transit countries with "grey market" regulations, artifacts acquire fraudulent export licenses or falsified histories (often claiming they were in "old European collections" prior to 1970). This systemic deception integrates illicit goods into the legitimate market, making detection nearly impossible for even the most scrupulous curators.

B. The Convergence of Crimes: Terrorism Financing and Money Laundering

International security reports have highlighted the "crime convergence" where art trafficking intersects with broader criminal activities. For extremist groups, "blood antiquities" represent a low-risk, high-reward revenue stream. Furthermore, the subjectivity of art valuation makes it an ideal vehicle for money laundering. The practice of using "Free Ports" (high-security storage zones that allow goods to be traded tax-free and anonymously) remains a major structural vulnerability in the global financial system.

C. The "Deculturalization" of Nations: Ethical and Human Rights Implications

The removal of cultural property is an act of "epistemic violence." When artifacts are ripped from their geographical context, the scientific data they hold is obliterated. For the country of origin, this represents a loss of cultural sovereignty and historical continuity. Within the framework of UNESCO, this must be framed as a violation of the "right to access and enjoy cultural heritage," a principle increasingly recognized in international human rights law.

The Architecture of International Regulation

A. Interplay between the 1970 UNESCO Convention and 1995 UNIDROIT Principles

The 1970 UNESCO Convention operates primarily at the inter-state level, focusing on export/import controls. However, its effectiveness is reinforced by the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention, which targets the private law gaps.

UNIDROIT is revolutionary because it eliminates the "good faith" defense for buyers of stolen art, replacing it with a strict "Due Diligence"/prior verifications requirement. It would be interesting to explore how to make these standards universal, as many "market countries" have yet to fully integrate UNIDROIT into their domestic legislation.

B. Operational Synergy: INTERPOL, WCO, and Intelligence Sharing

The fight against trafficking is an intelligence war. UNESCO works in a tripartite alliance with INTERPOL and the World Customs Organization. The I-24/7 secure communication network and the Stolen Works of Art Database are essential for real-time interception. However, the efficacy of these tools is often made complicated by "information silos" where national agencies fail to report thefts to the global database in a timely manner

C. The Mandate of the ICPRCP: Mediation and the Ethics of Restitution

The Intergovernmental Committee (ICPRCP) serves as a vital safety net for cases that fall outside the temporal scope of current conventions, especially colonial-era acquisitions. As a permanent body, it provides a forum for soft law negotiations, where moral and ethical arguments for restitution carry as much weight as legal ones. This committee represents the shift in the international community towards a "culture of return."

Addressing Modern Vulnerabilities and Systemic Reforms

A. The "Opacity Crisis" in the Private Art Market: Institutionalizing Due Diligence

The primary obstacle to regulation is the resistance of the private sector to mandatory disclosure. Current "Codes of Ethics" for dealers are largely voluntary and lack enforcement mechanisms. To prevent trafficking, the international community must consider mandatory registers of beneficial ownership for art transactions. This would ensure that the "human element"—the anonymity of the buyer and seller—is no longer a shield for illicit activity.

B. Digital Frontier: E-commerce, Dark Web, and Algorithmic Tracking

The rapid shift to online sales has outpaced existing legal frameworks. Traffickers now utilize encrypted platforms and social media groups to facilitate peer-to-peer sales, bypassing traditional auction house scrutiny. Using technologies, such as AI-driven image recognition to monitor online marketplaces and Blockchain for immutable provenance records, is no longer an option but a necessity for modern heritage protection.

C. Policy Levers: Harmonization of National Jurisdictions and Capacity Building

The "weakest link" principle applies to art trafficking; criminals will always route goods through countries with the most lenient laws.

- Legal Harmonization: Standardizing the definition of "cultural property" across borders to prevent legal loopholes.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Moving from friction to cooperation by incentivizing tech companies to develop proactive screening tools.
- Ground-Level Enforcement: Strengthening the technical capacity of "source countries" through UNESCO-led training for specialized heritage police units.

Key Players

- UNESCO
- Countries
- INTERPOL
- Individuals
- Terrorist groups
- Art dealers

Key Questions

- How can we legally enforce the "due diligence" requirement on private collectors without infringing on property rights?
- What role should social media and e-commerce giants play in policing the sale of antiquities?
- How should UNESCO handle restitution claims that pre-date the 1970 Convention?
- How can the international community establish a standardized definition of what constitutes a "protected artifact" without infringing on a State's right to define its own heritage?
- Should major auction houses be legally required to publish the full provenance history of every object online for a minimum period before a sale can take place?


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