

**UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights
Call for Input: Cultural Rights and Climate Change**

Response by: The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)

Website: <https://www.ifla.org/>

Negative impacts of climate change on culture and cultural rights

1.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions ([IFLA](https://www.ifla.org/)) is concerned with the destruction of archives, books, special collections, audiovisual material, photographic negatives, and other examples of documentary heritage which gives evidence of cultural expressions and practices of the past and today. Preservation and access to these cultural expressions and practices is central to the cultural rights of the communities from which they come, as well as the memory of the world as a whole (UNESCO, 2015).

As with monuments and sites, documentary heritage and the memory institutions (libraries, archives, museums, galleries) which house them are under threat due to climate change. Primary sources of documentary heritage are often delicate and require sensitive care to preserve. Paper, film and other archival materials are at risk of degradation over time. This threat is exacerbated due to rising temperatures and the increased severity of natural disasters and storms.

IFLA's Preservation and Conservation (PAC) Centres around the world have reported seeing this threat acutely. For example, the PAC Centre for Latin America located at the Biblioteca nacional de Chile reported that rising temperatures year after year are putting additional strain on their already strained climate control system. In countries without capacity to upgrade air conditioning and humidity control systems, rising temperatures make the preservation of documentary heritage starkly more difficult.

As the ability to adapt equipment and processes to changing climate realities is expensive, it stands to reason that developing countries, and memory institutions of marginalised communities, will fall behind. In the case of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), this is especially dire, as these countries are in the most immediate danger of suffering negative effects of climate change.

2.

If no action is taken, any resulting migration and abandonment of areas due to climate change will likely lead to the loss of cultural heritage, materials and practices. IFLA acknowledges that refugees and migrants often lose their access to services that provide information, literacy and learning, and access to culture (Barckow & Pierce, 2017). The severing of social and informational ties can cut refugees off from participation in cultural life – both that of their home country and where they seek asylum.

Documentary heritage in particular gives the opportunity to represent the lives, stories, and histories of communities, especially those which have historically been marginalised. Loss of these stories is a loss

for mankind. Beyond material degradation, climate-caused mass migration threatens our memory: the birth and death records, photographs, newspapers, books, letters, registrations, manuscripts and more that tell stories of the past.

Considering 340 million to 480 million people live in areas that could flood due to rising sea levels, the threat of increased refugee numbers from climate change is real (Bates, 2019). This would make this already dire situation more urgent to address.

IFLA is currently writing Guidelines for Library Services to Refugees to address the role of libraries in ensuring the connection to culture, literacy, and learning is maintained. More cross-sectorial work is needed to ensure the cultural rights and human rights of refugees are preserved. IFLA is also committed to addressing gaps in capacity for risk assessment and disaster risk reduction. The [IFLA Register for Documentary Heritage at Risk](#) is a tool that will help collection-holders better catalogue, register, and address risks to their collection.

3.

Climate change is believed to be causing storms to increase in severity and frequency. In the case of tropical storms, these are bringing devastation to countries in the Caribbean and the Pacific on a yearly basis, to give just two examples. These countries often lack capacity to reduce risk and to provide recovery measures to citizens and cultural institutions.

Hurricane Maria is one such example, causing widespread destruction when it hit Puerto Rico in 2017. Beyond destruction of homes and loss of life, the island's memory institutions were badly affected. Irreplaceable losses of materials were reported from several archives and cultural institutions on the island—including The Archivo General, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña main offices, the National Gallery, University of Puerto Rico (UPR), the Museum of the Americas, the National Guard Museum, La Casa del Libro, and the Castillo San Cristóbal (Haskins, 2019).

The weeks without power that followed the storm brought the secondary threat of mold and mildew. With a lack of backup generators, fuel, and alternative energy sources like solar paneling, heat and humidity are a real threat to documentary heritage in tropical climates (Treaster, 2018).

There are of course other examples of threats, for example from fire or smoke damage associated with wildfires, damage from extreme weather such as hailstones or lightning strikes, and of course sea-level rises as mentioned above.

Positive potential of culture and cultural rights to enhance responses to climate change

4.

In recent years, there has been an established intersection of cultural heritage and climate action. ICOMOS's 2019 report *The Future of our Pasts: Engaging cultural heritage in climate action* stresses that "cultural heritage is both impacted by and a source of resilience for climate change" (ICOMOS, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, including heritage in the discourse of climate action is both impactful and necessary for enacting change.

Within IFLA's scope, documentary heritage that gives us access to information, like climate records and traditional practices, as well as the professionals that preserve and share it, are assets to climate action. Moreover, literacy, both traditional and digital, are key to informed, participatory societies, which necessary for action on all SDGs.

Libraries, information services, and conservation and preservation practitioners have a central role to play in providing access to culture and cultural resources that can inform practice and sway public opinion, awareness and understanding.

Maps, land usage, agriculture and irrigation practices, evidence of circular economies, and indigenous knowledge are all available to us through cataloging, accessing and sharing information. LIS professionals and archivists are needed to collect, document, preserve and provide access to this knowledge.

5.

One of the essential legal frameworks for the cultural ecosystem is copyright. Copyright determines the ability of heritage institutions to carry out their missions: preservation (the capacity to make preservation reproductions), research on collections (capacity for researchers access to digital heritage collections regardless of the country in which it is located), and the dissemination of collections (copies of collections for educational purposes). Copyright can therefore have a major impact on the ability to guarantee, and enjoy, cultural rights.

Many countries still have inadequate, outdated or simply nonexistent copyright laws that do not allow copying for heritage preservation, data storage in the cloud, to give access for users or to share collections for educational purposes. This lack of legal provisions leaves our collections – and the cultural rights they help deliver – highly vulnerable in the face of the danger of global warming (fires, storms, rising water). Especially in small island developing states, the lack of international frameworks allowing for the sharing of capacities and skills through preservation networks is a particular worry.

International copyright law is defined by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and does not currently offer a uniform legal framework for libraries, archives and museums. This reality thus generates inequalities in terms of capacity building of these institutions in their public service missions and in their capacity to respond to the needs of their audiences.

It is essential to facilitate the establishment of an international treaty within WIPO such as the Marrakesh Treaty adapted to the preservation of heritage.

7.

IFLA is a founding member of the Climate Heritage Network (CHN). This network includes “local and city, state/provincial and regional, indigenous peoples’, and national arts, culture and heritage governmental and quasi-governmental boards, offices, ministries and site management agencies as well as NGOs, universities, businesses and other organizations committed to aiding their communities in tackling climate change” (The Climate Heritage Network, 2020).

IFLA is currently involved in the CHN’s action plan involving the role of culture and heritage in communications for advocacy. By highlighting traditional practice, indigenous knowledge and changing landscapes and use across time, documentary heritage can be an asset for communicating on the linkages between the ecological and social values and functions of land and resources.

IFLA’s [Environment, Sustainability and Libraries](#) Special Interest Group connects professionals from across the library field and around the world to address effects of climate change on libraries, applications of environment-friendly practices in libraries, proposed environmental recommendations

for the profession, increasing and promoting sustainability-related library resources and services, and Increasing librarians' own awareness of environmental concerns. This group organises yearly sessions at the World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) to develop this area of work, and hosts the annual IFLA Green Library Award, sponsored by De Gruyter.

Measures taken and recommendations

8.

Central to the Climate Heritage Network's mandate is acknowledging that the Paris Agreement recognizes the role of non-Party (i.e. non-national government) stakeholders in climate change. This includes indigenous peoples, cities and regions, civil society, the private sector and others. This strongly mirrors IFLA's values, which include ensuring diverse representation of stakeholder voices from across the LIS field.

IFLA's professional units (expert working groups) include the Indigenous Matters and Library Services for People with Special Needs Sections, as well as regional Sections for LAC, Africa, and Asia-Oceania. There is the possibility of engaging experts in these sections to carry out future work related to increasing indigenous and otherwise marginalised voices in climate action.

In addition, IFLA's Environment, Sustainability and Libraries Special Interest Group provides an international platform to connect different perspectives of the library field on topics specifically related to climate action and sustainability.

For all networks working in climate action, there is always a need to improve reach and ensure more perspectives are included from Small Island Developing States, Developing and Least Developed Countries.

11.

There is a universal need in the cultural fields to evolve to more results-focussed and data-driven work.

IFLA works to help our members understand and align with UNESCO's normative instruments and recommendations that relate to cultural rights, most notably the *Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage, Including in Digital Form* (UNESCO, 2015).

Beyond implementation, there is the need for record-keeping, data collection, analysis and reporting to have a proven impact.

The Culture|2030 indicators (UNESCO, 2019) – a framework of thematic indicators to measure and monitor the progress of culture's contribution to the 2030 Agenda – is a good starting point to measure culture's role in climate action, alongside the other SDGs. IFLA plans to develop a toolkit or guide to help our members apply information from here to a LIS/documentary heritage context.

12.

Digitisation of heritage materials is one of the key ways for libraries to preserve materials at risk due to climate change or other threats. Making digitised collections accessible online allows more people to interact with these materials and participate in cultural life. These efforts generate locally relevant and unique digital cultural content, meaningful for the people in the community. The threat to the world's documentary heritage posed by climate change should be a catalyst for better document preservation and sharing. Namely, it could lead to a more systemic approach to digitisation as a policy – which in turn allows for greater accessibility and sharing capacities.

However, the ongoing expansion of cultural life to online platforms and digital engagement highlights the urgent need for further action to address the remaining digital divide. As such, equitable participation in cultural life online calls for more efforts to improve the affordability and access to ICT – both individual and shared connectivity (e.g. public internet access facilities) and inclusive opportunities for digital literacy and ICT skills training and support. Efforts to support digital inclusion as part of the recovery from COVID-19 are welcome, as they increase long-term possibilities for cultural participation faced with climate change.

Similarly, to reiterate the earlier points on copyright, this could also help put a spotlight on the urgent need for an international legal instrument with clear rules allowing this preservation of collections – including across borders.

A standard-setting organisation such as IFLA can address evolving needs by determining guidelines and best-practices with the consensus of international experts. IFLA's [Guidelines to Setting Up a Digital Reunification Project](#) (2019) is one such example. Experts from the documentary heritage field recommend steps by which collections that may have been split apart by political events, for commercial reasons or due to other circumstances can be digitally presented and shared together.

The development of Guidelines for Library Services to Refugees currently underway at IFLA is another example of a tool that addresses current and future needs.

13.

The Climate Heritage Network has been a leader in the intersection of climate change, culture and cultural rights.

Within IFLA's work, several Professional Units (expert working groups) have explored the role of libraries in climate action, namely the [Environment, Sustainability and Libraries](#) Special Interest Group. Again, this group has been overseeing the [IFLA Green Library Award](#) since 2016, which raises awareness of libraries' social responsibility and leadership in environmental education.

Looking to the future, the outcomes from the first CHN Action Plan will be instrumental in assessing the impact of this network and measuring success. There is as well the ongoing need to ensure that all voices are heard, and that participation from SIDS, LDNs, indigenous people and marginalised groups is systemic.

In addition, a 2019 [report on the roles of libraries in broadband policies](#) suggests that some national plans and strategies explicitly aim to engage libraries – especially national libraries – in digitisation of heritage materials (IFLA & EIFL, 2019). Including such clauses in national broadband policies – particularly if they entail measures to ensure an effective digitisation infrastructure for cultural and heritage institutions – could be one of the possible policy responses to the need to preserve cultural heritage in the face of climate change at the national level.

14.

Culture is a human right. Access to literacy education, traditional knowledge, diverse cultural expressions, and the internet are critical to protect this right. We need international action on copyright to ensure that libraries globally are able to preserve the works in their collections, including across borders.

For immediate action, we recommend stakeholders request an international copyright legal instrument with clear rules allowing this preservation of collections. Signing this [open letter to the World Intellectual Property Organization](#) from IFLA and partners would be a positive place to start.

Furthermore, we recommend taking immediate steps to implement the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation. To begin, IFLA has created a [2015 Recommendation Checklist](#) to help users map areas where their country's government and institutions have made considerable progress, and where more work is needed.

The importance of contributions from the past must be recognised. There are lessons that we can learn from the past that can help address the most pressing challenge of our time – that of climate change. However, in order to make an impact, there needs to be cross-sectoral approaches to finding solutions – where all voices are heard and new approaches (both innovative and looking to traditional knowledge) are considered.

Start documenting threatened heritage sites and collections now, invest in disaster risk reduction measures and enable the digitisation of documentary heritage, or else they could be at risk for being lost forever.

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