Parliamentary Assembly
Assemblée parlementaire
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
75
1949 - 2024
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 2549 (2024)[1]
Provisional version

Cultural heritage and climate change

Parliamentary Assembly

1. In 2021, the Parliamentary Assembly called for an ambitious new legal framework, both at national and European levels, to anchor "the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment" to the European system of human rights. At the Reykjavik Summit in May 2023, a forward-looking agenda was set out for the Council of Europe, whereby the heads of State and government committed to strengthening the work on the human rights aspects of the environment. In line with this newly set political agenda, the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (CETS No. 199, "Faro Convention") affirms that cultural heritage and culture in general are at the centre of a new vision for sustainable development.

2. The Assembly is concerned that all forms of cultural heritage – tangible and intangible – are now directly and indirectly threatened by the consequences of climate change. Increased temperatures, extended heatwaves, violent storms, floods, drought, landslides and wildfires affect monuments, archaeological sites, historic cities, historical stately homes and vernacular buildings, cultural landscapes and historic gardens, museum collections, archives and libraries.

3. Similarly, climate change is seriously threatening the values, lives and practices of heritage communities whose livelihoods are intricately linked to nature, such as Sami communities in northern parts of Europe. The traditions and way of life of these communities are now at risk, not only through climate change but also through governmental and economic development actions in the fields of forestry, mining and energy supply, some of which are themselves designed to combat the effects of climate change and to diversify and expand energy sources within Europe. The Assembly therefore considers that a broader transnational European land-use plan for Sami rights is needed to deal with this European cross-border problem. This could be a two-way process in view of the Sami's thorough traditional knowledge of landscape and climate that would be valuable for scientific research, preservation of the natural world and climate adaptation in times of crisis.

4. Only a few member States of the Council of Europe include cultural heritage in climate change policies and there is generally little co-ordination between ministries that are overseeing different issues related to climate change. The challenges posed by climate change to cultural heritage require adequate political responses at national, regional, local and European levels, a radical change of mindset and institutional behaviour, and a review of current methods and processes.

5. Accordingly, the Assembly recommends that the Council of Europe member States:

5.1. sign and ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, the Council of Europe Landscape Convention (ETS No. 176) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and accede to the European and Mediterranean Major Hazards Agreement (EUR-OPA), if they have not already done so;

1. *Text adopted by the Standing Committee*, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 24 May 2024 (see Doc. 15926, report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Mr Andries Gryffroy).
See also Recommendation 2277 (2024).

5.2. where applicable, sign and ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (C169) of the International Labour Organization (ILO);

5.3. pursue the effective implementation of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)20 on human rights and the protection of the environment.

6. The Assembly also calls on national, regional and local authorities of the Council of Europe member States, each within their competences and in co-ordination with each other, to include cultural heritage preservation in their strategies designed to address climate change and its impact, and in particular:

6.1. value cultural heritage that is iconic and visible to the public as an asset to raise awareness about the impact of climate change and stress the urgency of climate action;

6.2. learn about and make use of traditional adaptation and mitigation strategies inherent in cultural heritage – such as water, fire and risk management; traditional land use and biodiversity; interconnections between the built and natural environment; energy efficiency, natural ventilation and cooling; local building materials, maintenance and reuse in the circular economy; transmission of acquired knowledge, skills and craftsmanship;

6.3. integrate cultural heritage and climate science to combine scientific findings and research with human experience acquired over centuries or millennia that is inherent in tangible and intangible heritage, such as climate-related evidence gathered from archaeological sites or knowledge of local ecosystems, climate conditions and changes that are perpetuated within heritage communities;

6.4. undertake heritage assessment to consider the consequences of climate change on different categories of cultural heritage and, in particular, develop better understanding of root causes and cumulative effects, monitor and map heritage vulnerabilities and establish comparative data and indicators at national and European levels.

7. As key elements of these strategies, member States should also:

7.1. build institutional capacity, platforms and co-operation processes for climate governance, which pay due attention to threats to cultural heritage, in order to work transversally, reinforce coherence between sectors, broaden partnerships and develop innovative business models;

7.2. develop participatory governance models to involve the public, and especially young people, in monitoring and recording of heritage at risk (photogrammetry, digital inventories and mapping initiatives) to raise awareness on this issue, gather knowledge, engage citizens in climate action and build community resilience to climate change;

7.3. rethink planning of urban and rural areas to minimise the adverse effects of climate change on different categories of cultural heritage;

7.4. use life-cycle assessment tools and review technical standards and energy efficiency requirements to adapt them to specific needs in the heritage sector, also to preserve authenticity and integrity of heritage sites;

7.5. foster efficient resource and energy management, and invest in research, seeking to combine high-tech with low-tech solutions, also learning from traditional sustainable solutions that are part of cultural heritage;

7.6. provide financial incentives, such as earmarked subsidies or tax incentives, to stimulate the circular economy and reuse of building materials in cultural heritage preservation, as well as the retrofitting and upgrading of historic buildings, and their regular maintenance and repair.

8. The Assembly invites the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe to assist local and regional authorities in the member States to play an active role in this process and to include cultural heritage concerns in local or regional strategies to counter climate change.

9. In the framework of the European Green Deal and to honour the ambitions of the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Assembly invites the European Commission to build synergies with the Council of Europe, UNESCO and international heritage organisations with a view to:

9.1. developing guidance to assess the impact of climate change on different categories of cultural heritage;

9.2. providing a framework to harmonise monitoring and mapping of heritage vulnerabilities, gathering comparative data and indicators at European level, also considering threats triggered or amplified by climate change;

9.3. reviewing technical standards and energy efficiency requirements at the level of the European Union to adapt them to the specific needs in the heritage sector.