

# The Italian experience and its contribution to the Union Civil Protection Mechanism in reinforcing cultural heritage protection through the *Proculther* project

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## Abstract

**Purpose.** The aim of the article is to explain how the Italian response capacities for the safeguarding of cultural heritage at risk of disaster has been enhanced over the past twenty-five years and how it has contributed to raising the awareness of this issue at international level.

**Approach/methodology.** For this purpose, the main steps made in the last decades by Italy in including the protection of cultural heritage among other emergency issues are described below. In fact, Italy has made many efforts in the past decades to improve the emergency management of cultural heritage, paying particular attention to preparedness, prevention and response actions. Since the end of the past century, dedicated training courses have been organized at all levels as well as local, national and international exercises with specific scenarios dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster in order to test specific procedures needed to ensure this type of response. In the meantime, the drafting of standard operating procedures specifically addressing the protection of vulnerable cultural heritage emerged as a result of a keen collaboration between the Italian Ministry of Culture (Italian acronym MiC) and the National Civil Protection Department (Italian acronym DPC).

**Findings.** In this process of constant evolution of operational and technical capacities aimed at reducing the risk of cultural heritage disasters, the combination of past experience and acquired competences of Italy, France, Spain, Turkey, ICCROM and Fondazione Villa Montesca has prompted the launch of the PROCULTHER project, co-funded by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO).

**Value.** The project aims to support and complement the efforts made by the European Un-

ion to strengthen cooperation between the EU Member States and Participating States in this field. In this sense, by pooling together European civil protection capacities and capabilities and providing for common standards enabling certified and well-equipped teams to work interchangeably when a disaster strikes, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), is an essential and effective system aimed at allowing a stronger and more coherent collective response. Under this framework, the project is promoting, for the first time, the development of a common European methodology, tools and capacities in order to include the protection of cultural heritage in the disaster risk management cycle and to ensure structured collaboration among cultural heritage and civil protection stakeholders at local, national and European level.

**KEYWORDS:** cultural heritage protection, disaster risk management, standard operating procedures, Union Civil Protection Mechanism

## 1. Introduction

As widely acknowledged, cultural heritage is more than an important economic resource linked to tourism; it is an invaluable source of our identity and evolution, as well as a driver of social development. It contributes to the continuous reevaluation of cultures and identities, being a key vehicle for the transmission of experiences, skills and knowledge between generations and an effective catalyst for social cohesion (European Commission 2020). For this reason, resilience capacities of disaster-prone communities are indissolubly linked to the protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Piacentini 2011). Therefore, protecting cultural heritage is also about protecting the life and dignity of communities at risk of disaster (UNESCO 2010). When a disaster strikes, emergency responders are the first to intervene to save lives and secure the areas affected. In the past years, due to the increasing impact of natural and man-made hazards on cultural heritage assets, the urgency of including the protection of cultural heritage in disaster risk management (DRM) processes has demonstrated to be crucial for improving the resilience of vulnerable communities. Continuous efforts have been exerted to facilitate understanding and dialogue about new interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches in order to develop a comprehensive heritage protection strategy based on integrated conservation and risk management providing the potential for building resilience to disasters. Over the years, the Italian Civil Protection System has gained a series of experiences that have enabled the progressive development of skills and tools dedicated to safeguarding vulnerable cultural heritage assets. In this sense, the considerable and persistent exposure to extreme natural phenomena has required more efforts in strengthening coordination capacities at various territorial levels. The Italian territory is exposed to almost all the main natural hazards: earthquakes, floods, landslides, forest fires and volcanic eruptions. Additionally, Italy has such a large amount of cultural properties to be considered one of the main cultural heritage holders in the world, counting more than 50 cultural sites included in the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage List. Currently, specific emergency procedures aimed to address the safeguarding of cultural heritage have been developed and the main stakeholders, involved in crisis management, as well as their tasks, have been well-defined. However, this had not been the case until recently, when those procedures were reported in a written form. In fact, until the first decade of the XXI century, the emergency measures, which were applied to cultural goods and buildings, consisted of good practices, handed

down verbally and then improved, time by time, by gathering knowledge from experience. In the following paragraphs, the main steps taken by Italy in the last decades, both at national and international level, aimed at including the protection of cultural heritage among other emergency issues, are described. At European level, the management of dedicated EU funded projects such as the PROCULTHER project, enabled Italy to work together with other countries active in the field of protecting cultural heritage against disasters on defining common objectives in this sector, at European level.

## **2. The protection of cultural heritage in emergencies: the Italian experience**

The modern Italian history concerning the protection of cultural heritage against natural risks started in the 1966's Florence flood, when many cultural assets belonging to the historical town had been endangered and, unfortunately, damaged, highlighting their fragility and their need of being protected (D'Angelis and Grassi 2020). At that time, a civil protection system did not exist and the country was not well prepared for facing such kind of events. Volunteers, neither structured nor organized in any sense, came from many parts of the world with the aim of helping in rescuing precious cultural goods, paintings, books and many of them were lost forever. Then, during the Umbria - Marche earthquake, in 1997, the rather newly founded National Civil Protection System realized that specific actions for protecting cultural properties were required. For the first time, dedicated commissioners were appointed in order to manage such particular issues. Meanwhile, fire brigade units and trained groups of organized volunteers started to specialize in the protection of cultural goods; new damage assessment templates dedicated to both movable and immovable cultural properties were drafted, and fire fighters started to set up specific short-term countermeasures, specifically dedicated to cultural heritage buildings (Barberi 2007).

The Abruzzo earthquake in 2009 was a very meaningful test bench for testing and enhancing the structures and procedures aimed at reinforcing the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster. A few weeks after the seismic event, a dedicated Vice-Commissioner for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage was appointed by the National Civil Protection Authority and the all the activities related to the protection of both movable and immovable cultural heritage were strongly coordinated between the Civil Protection Authority and the Cultural Heritage Authority (Marchetti 2010). In the following years, many efforts were made to improve the emergency response management of cultural heritage, paying particular attention to preparedness and response actions. Dedicated training courses have been organized at all levels and local, national, international exercises and specific scenarios dedicated to the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster have been performed in order to test those procedures: Eurocot 2005 and Terex 2010 on seismic risk, Mesimex 2006 on volcanic risk, Twist 2013 on tsunami risk, Neiflex 2018 on flood risk and Belice 2018 on seismic risk, among others. According to the experience gained, the existence of legal and institutional framework related to the management of cultural heritage at risk of disaster has proved to be essential. According to the Italian institutional framework, the primary normative reference at national level for the safeguarding of cultural heritage is the „Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape” (2004), which assigns the tasks of protecting, preserving, and enhancing the cultural heritage of the country to the Ministry of Culture. Protection and conservation activities are carried out in standard times through preventive and supervisory actions on the assets, and,

in the event of emergencies, with security operations designed to minimize the damage resulting from these events. However, operating procedures specifically addressed to the disaster risk management of cultural heritage only appeared in the form of Regulation in 2012, as the result of a keen collaboration between the Italian Ministry of Culture and the National Civil Protection Department. This document was then updated and republished by the MiC as a Directive named “Direttiva MIBACT 23 luglio 2015” (Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo 2015) and it serves as the national reference for dealing with the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster. The Directive focuses on the emergency management of cultural heritage and it describes the competences of the administrations involved in the protection of cultural heritage and aims at providing guidelines and regulations to effectively guarantee, in case of emergencies originated by natural hazards, the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage in synergy with the National Service of Civil Protection. Experience gained during the emergencies requiring the protection of cultural heritage, as well as the regulatory and procedural tools developed in recent years, are the starting point for the identification of the primary needs. During natural events of such intensity and extent as to generate an emergency, the National Civil Protection System (Italian acronym SNPC), which is composed of operational structures ranging from municipal to national level, is activated. When the emergency overwhelms local capacities so as to require national or international intervention, the DPC is in charge of the coordination and unitary management of the emergency relief operations. The Department gathers all the useful information on interventions and measures carried out at the local and regional level. After careful evaluation, if necessary, the Head of the Civil Protection Department convenes the Operational Committee that activates the various components and operating structures to contribute to the management of the emergency. During national emergencies, the DPC is in charge of setting up a national coordination structure for emergency management on site, the Emergency Management Command and Control Center – (Italian acronym DI.COMA.C), which operates in continuity with the actions of the Operating Committee. Within it, the ‘Safeguarding Cultural Heritage Cell’, co-led by DPC and MiC representatives, can be activated as a reference facility at central level for the implementation of activities related to the protection of cultural heritage affected by emergencies, with the role of monitoring and supporting all activities in place in the impacted areas. This Cell guarantees the involvement of the Regional Civil Protection Authorities as well as all the bodies of reference (Fire Fighters, Police Forces, Army Forces, Scientific Community, Religious Representatives and Civil Protection Voluntary associations specialized in the conservation of cultural heritage property and assets)<sup>1</sup>. With regard to cultural heritage, the MiC component, within the Operational Committee and the DI.COMA.C, will guarantee the necessary connection with its national and regional crisis coordination units, activated in the affected area to coordinate all interventions related to the safeguarding of cultural heritage, within the more general framework of civil protection activities. The connection between the operational structures of the MiC and the other members of the national civil protection system is essential both at central and peripheral level, to carry out all the activities related to census, damage assessment, buildings safety and securing operations, securing cultural assets and managing the rubble of cultural interest. Among all the actors who are usually involved in managing the protection of cultural heritage in emergencies, a specific role is covered by the Department of Fire Brigades - Public Rescue and Civil Defence (Italian acronym CNVVF). It is a civil structure through which the Ministry of the Interior ensures rescue activities and fire prevention

<sup>1</sup> For more details see: <https://storico.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sitoMiBAC/MenuPrincipale/Normativa/Direttive/index.html>.

and extinction across the national territory. The CNVVF is also involved in conducting post-recovery short-term countermeasures and rescue activities on cultural heritage assets. Another relevant stakeholder to be mentioned is the Carabinieri Corp, Cultural Heritage Protection Unit (Italian acronym CC-TPC), which directly responds to the MiC for the tasks of safeguarding the national cultural heritage. It has information and analysis functions, also in support of the other police forces, and an operational department (divided into the Antiques Sections, Archaeology, Falsification and Contemporary Art), dedicated to investigation operations across national territory and abroad, in cooperation with international police forces. The CC-TPC supports MiC in all operations related to rescuing movable cultural heritage. After the recent seismic events, the Army has also been involved for the purpose of the recovery of rubble from the collapsed buildings of cultural interest, patrolling sensitive areas (presence of buildings and goods of cultural interest) and the provision of equipment for handling rubble and earth. The DPC also provides, where necessary, the support of specialized volunteering and the scientific community, through the competence centres. Indeed, voluntary organizations have assumed the role of a „national operational structure” and have become an integral part of it.

Volunteers are one of the most vital components of the system: over eight hundred thousand people spread throughout the national territory, are affiliated to organizations that operate in multiple specialized sectors. The role of volunteering is fundamental during emergencies, in particular as regards the safeguarding of cultural assets, with the task of supporting the operations related to securing movable cultural heritage, selecting cultural heritage rubble and setting up temporary warehouses as well as working areas for rescuing cultural goods (Legambiente 2010). The scientific community – competence centres, universities, agencies, research institutes - contributes to the National Civil Protection Service by providing technical and scientific support through monitoring, forecasting and prevention of the various risk hypotheses on the national territory, development projects, and technological innovation of monitoring networks and studies and research. They provide services, information, data, processing and technical-scientific contributions in specific areas. The scientific community, through agreements with the DPC, also provides structural experts who are part of the teams for the damage assessment of affected cultural heritage buildings, such as churches and palaces. The involvement of the Italian Episcopal Conference (Italian acronym CEI), the official assembly of the bishops in Italy, has also to be considered crucial, due to the presence of a huge amount of religious cultural buildings and goods. Its specific task within this reference framework is linking with institutions involved in the emergency management concerning ecclesiastical buildings and religious objects and the supply and provision of the CEI database to the bodies and administrations involved in the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage.

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### 3. The European experience of the PROCULTHER project

In this process of constantly adapting and strengthening capacities to reduce the risk of cultural heritage disasters, the combination of the experience and expertise of Italy has given the idea of proposing to other countries active in the field of protecting cultural heritage against disasters, to work together on defining common objectives in this sector. In 2019, Italy, France, Spain, Turkey, ICCROM, and Fondazione Villa Montesca launched the PROCULTHER project. Implemented within the framework of a Union Civil Protection Mechanism initiative and

co-funded by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO), the project aims at supporting and complementing the efforts made by the European Union to strengthen cooperation between the EU Member States and Participating States in this field. In this sense, the UCPM, by pooling together European civil protection capacities and capabilities and providing for common standards enabling certified and well-equipped teams to work interchangeably when a disaster strikes, is an essential and effective system to allow for a stronger and more coherent collective response.<sup>2</sup>

Since its creation in 2001, the UCPM has responded to hundreds of requests for assistance inside and outside the European Union, some of which were also related to the protection of cultural heritage. However, at this stage, the UCPM does not include any “Module”, requiring registration by EU member States/Participating States, dedicated to protecting cultural heritage at risk of disaster. Procedures should be identified to allow interoperability among the existing UCPM modules in view of joint operations in Europe and at international level.

Under this framework, the PROCULTHER project is promoting the development of technical and operational capacities to reinforce cultural heritage protection in emergency as well as to enable the effective activation and deployment of an interdisciplinary UCPM driven module able to support requesting countries or interested international organisations in the protection of disaster-prone or affected cultural heritage assets. Based on the experience reported in the national reports and during the first international workshop, each partner has been assigned with topics to contribute to the elaboration of the document “Key Elements of a European Methodology to Address the Protection of Cultural Heritage during Emergencies”. This choice has been dictated by the wish to make the elaboration process as participatory as possible and, at the same time, by the importance to guarantee the valorisation of national experiences and best practices/lessons learnt in the field of cultural heritage protection. Moreover, the document has been conceived to allow for an adequate transfer of knowledge and replicability of the contents proposed. In this sense, the document aims at promoting a better understanding of the processes and mechanisms needed to improve the safeguarding of cultural heritage at risk of disasters at both national and European level by ensuring high quality and interoperability standards. The process of scaling up and the debate among the Partners’ working groups have provided a fruitful capitalization on the best practices and lessons learnt earned in recent years. In fact, the participatory approach, guaranteed throughout the elaboration phase, has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the mechanisms currently in place and helped to identify the margins of improvement to better advocate for a holistic and coordinated approach. In this sense, in order to build effective capacities in this field, the project has further explored many structural, technical and operational aspects on how to enhance the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster.

In particular, the document “Key Elements of a European Methodology to Address the Protection of Cultural Heritage during Emergencies”<sup>3</sup> proposes and deepens the following issues:

- the strengthening and/or the establishment and/or the enforcement of a legislative and institutional framework both at national and European level;
- the development of civil protection planning for the cultural heritage sector able to increase, in ordinary time, risk awareness, to organize the pooling of resources, to build skills

<sup>2</sup> For more details see: <https://www.proculther.eu/>.

<sup>3</sup> PROCULTHER Consortium Statement for the protection of cultural heritage at risk of disaster (16 November 2020)

and professional competence, and to ensure the connection between different administrations and institutions in DRM processes;

- the definition of training courses and exercises, to be possibly included under the learning structures of the UCPM, in order to strengthen and test capacities in this field;
- the structure and procedures of a team to be converted in a Module/Other Response capacity within the UCPM framework to ensure the safeguarding of cultural heritage at European and international level in case of emergency;
- a proposal of useful reporting tools for risk and needs assessment.

In this sense, the “Key Elements of a European Methodology to Address the Protection of Cultural Heritage during Emergencies” will cover the methodological and operational aspects related to the protection of cultural heritage, including a set of tools useful to improve DRM capacities in this field. At the same time, with the aim of strengthening a European approach toward the protection of cultural heritage by giving prominence to all the practices that have proven to be effective in DRM processes, the PROCULTHER project, through the organization of an international workshop, has provided an interesting space of discussion to revise the “Key elements [...]” currently proposed, as well as to discuss the inclusion of other practices that can enrich and make a European DRM approach more effective besides reinforcing cultural heritage protection.

## 4. Conclusion

A holistic and interdisciplinary approach is crucial to ensure the safeguarding of cultural heritage in emergencies, as well as to reinforce the resilience of vulnerable communities facing the impact of natural and anthropic hazards on their social and economic assets. Therefore, a structured collaboration among Cultural Heritage and Civil Protection stakeholders at national and European level lies at the core of the issue. Indeed, to ensure an effective management and protection of the cultural heritage at risk of disaster, stronger synergies among relevant Civil Protection and Cultural Heritage stakeholders should be addressed and reinforced at different territorial levels, promoting management models that link short-term relief measures with longer-term development programmes.

In order to provide a more sustainable and effective response to crises, the PROCULTHER project emphasizes, among other elements, the importance of defining, at European level, an interdisciplinary capacity/module within the framework of UCPM, able to support affected countries or interested international organisations during emergencies and in the prevention, preparedness and response phases, as well as strengthening inter-institutional coordination and communication among Civil Protection and Cultural Heritage authorities by establishing, through the UCPM, permanent consultation mechanisms and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for emergency preparedness and response.

At the same time, in accordance with the priorities foreseen by the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNISDR 2015), the PROCULTHER project highlights the importance of setting up an effective risk governance specifically dedicated to cultural heritage, based on adequate risk-informed decision-making processes. This should serve to establish a coordinated approach to reduce the risk of disaster in this field as well as to guarantee appropriate financial and technical resources to protect cultural heritage in a sustainable way.

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## Sažetak

### **Doprinos talijanskog iskustva stečenog kroz Proculther projekt Mehanizmu Unije za civilnu zaštitu u ojačavanju zaštite kulturne baštine**

**Cilj.** Cilj ovoga rada jest objasniti kako su talijanski kapaciteti za zaštitu ugrožene kulturne baštine ojačali u proteklih dvadeset pet godina te kako je talijansko iskustvo doprinijelo pitanjima zaštite kulturne baštine suočene s rizicima na međunarodnoj razini.

**Pristup/metodologija.** U nastavku su opisani osnovni koraci koje je Talijanska Republika poduzela posljednjih desetljeća u uključivanju zaštite kulturne baštine u mehanizme upravljanja hitnim situacijama. Italija je uložila znatne napore posljednjih desetljeća u poboljšanje sustava kriznog upravljanja kulturnom baštinom, posvećujući posebnu pozornost aktivnostima pripravnosti, prevencije i odgovora. Još od kraja 20. stoljeća organizirani su posebni tečajevi obuke sa specifičnim scenarijima posvećenim zaštiti kulturne baštine suočene s rizikom od katastrofa u svrhu testiranja posebnih procedura nužnih za osiguranje takve vrste odgovora. U međuvremenu, priprema operativnih procedura posebno usmjerenih na zaštitu ranjive kulturne baštine nastala je kao rezultat bliske suradnje između talijanskog Ministarstva kulture i Odjela za civilnu zaštitu Talijanske Republike.

**Rezultati.** Procesi stalnog unapređivanja operativnih i tehničkih kapaciteta usmjerenih na smanjenje rizika od katastrofa u području zaštite kulturne baštine, te kombinacija iskustva i stečenih kompetencija u Italiji, Francuskoj, Španjolskoj, Turskoj, Međunarodnog centra za istraživanje očuvanja i restauracije kulturne baštine i Zaklade Villa Montesca potaknuli su pokretanje PROCULTHER projekta, sufinanciranog sredstvima Europske komisije za humanitarnu pomoć i odjela za civilnu zaštitu.

**Vrijednost.** PROCULTHER projekt teži podržati i nadopuniti napore Europske unije u ojačavanju suradnje između država članica i suradničkih država u ovome području. U tom smislu Mehanizam Unije za civilnu zaštitu predstavlja neophodan i učinkovit sustav koji omogućava snažniji i koherentniji kolektivni odgovor, a zahvaljujući udruživanju europskih kapaciteta civilne zaštite i osiguravanju zajedničkih standarda omogućeno je kvalificiranim i dobro opremljenim timovima naizmjenično djelovanje u trenutku katastrofe. U ovakvim okvirima, PROCULTHER projekt prvi puta promovira razvoj zajedničke europske metodologije, alata i mogućnosti da uključi zaštitu kulturne baštine u ciklus upravljanja rizikom od katastrofa te da osigura strukturiranu suradnju između sektora kulture, civilne zaštite i dionika na lokalnim, nacionalnim i europskim razinama.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** Mehanizam Unije za civilnu zaštitu, standardne operativne procedure, upravljanje rizikom od katastrofa, zaštita kulturne baštine