

Disaster risk management and cultural heritage in Central America and Dominican Republic

Opportunities
to strengthen
resilience of
heritage and
sustainable
tourism

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Cover photo: alogonz/shutterstock. Above: Antigua, Guatemala — Church of *Nuestra Señora del Carmen* and market. Photo: Lucy Brown/loca4motion

Executive Summary

Cultural heritage reflects the knowledge and history passed down through a society from one generation to another. In the region, where poverty and inequality are the main drivers of risk, heritage plays a fundamental role in strengthening community resilience and social inclusion. The Understanding Risk Central America (URCA)¹ forum shed light on the interest and potential that exists in Central America and Dominican Republic to integrate Cultural Heritage—in the broadest sense, which includes both tangible and intangible assets—within Disaster Risk Management (DRM). The Forum helped lay the foundations for establishing regional-level cooperative activities aimed at strengthening the cultural sector and contributing to more sustainable tourism. New challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic have made the goals of the forum even more relevant.

In 2018, the tourism sector accounted for US\$20 billion in economic activity for the member countries of the Central American Integration System (SICA, as per its Spanish acronym) and – growing at an annual rate of 10 percent²– was the source of formal employment for more than 1.3 million people, with one out of eight people working in the tourism sector. On average, tourism contributes 4.7 percent of the GDP to Central America’s economies³. Tangible and intangible cultural heritage in Central America and the Dominican Republic not only forms the basis of community identity, but is also an important driver of tourism in the region. The SICA region is home to 19 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, which include pre-Columbian archaeological sites, natural areas, colonial cities, and ancient fortifications in the Caribbean. At the same time, the region is one of the most vulnerable in the world. It is highly exposed to geological risks due to its location atop multiple tectonic plates and the presence of a large number of active volcanoes, as well as suffering a wide range of hydrometeorological hazards, the intensity and frequency of which are increasingly affected by climate change.

The history of the region has been marked by disasters. Antigua Guatemala, for example, was the third settlement of the historic capital, relocated once again after the 1773 Santa Marta earthquake leveled much of the city, prompting the change of capital to what is now Guatemala City. The urban structure and ruins of the old capital have been well preserved and was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. Such combinations of notable hazards and exposed and vulnerable heritage are common across Central America and the Dominican Republic and show that cultural heritage, tourism and disaster risk are inextricably linked.

This report presents the preliminary results of the technical assistance to connect and develop coordination between three sectors in the region—Disaster Risk Management, Culture and Cultural Heritage, and Sustainable Tourism—by promoting robust regional and multisectoral cooperation. Presenting an overall view of the current legal and institutional situation in terms of the region’s capabilities and opportunities, the report is structured around three main elements:

1. Key actors | 2. Capabilities | 3. Challenges and Opportunities

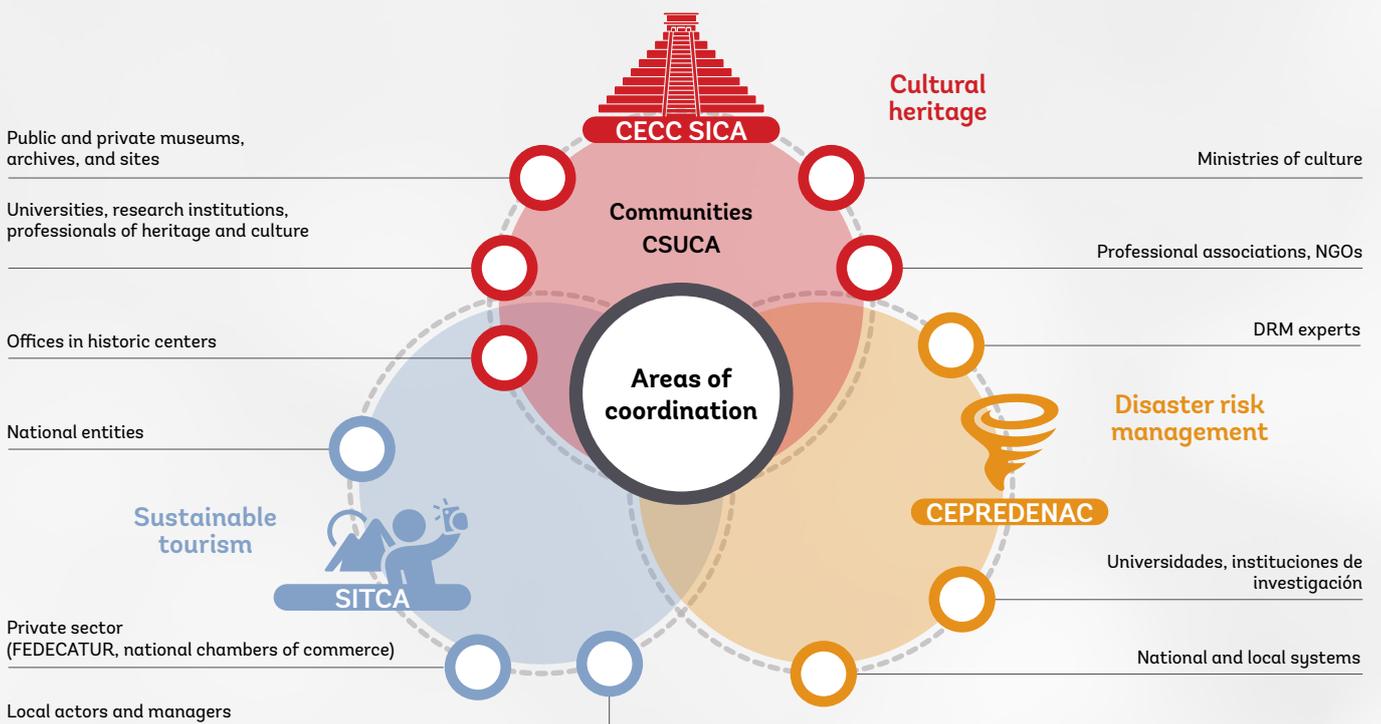
¹ understandrisk.org/sesiones-tecnicas-ur-centroamerica/

² SITCA, 2019

³ Policy Brief from the Economic Intelligence Directorate published by SIECA: “The economic role of tourism in Central America” available on the link: inventariandocr.wordpress.com/2015/07/09/el-papel-economico-del-turismo-en-centroamerica/

1. Key actors

Multiple institutions operate within each of the three sectors at both regional and national levels. The three regional agencies responsible for the sectors relevant to this initiative are: the secretariat for Central American Education and Cultural Coordination (CECC), the Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America and the Dominican Republic (CEPREDENAC), and the Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat (SITCA). As shown in the following figures, additional institutions and professional practitioners in the DRM, tourism and cultural areas were also part of the initiative. The interconnections and interplay between the various sectors represent the opportunities for which institutional coordination is in greatest need of strengthening.



2. Capabilities

Cooperation between the different sectors and territories is critical for achieving effective results and enhancing the resilience of communities. Each country has its own characteristics, processes, and experiences that can be shared, adapted and replicated regionally, as shown in the following figure.



3. Challenges and Opportunities

The technical assistance identified four major areas with ideas useful for strengthening regional cooperation as summarized in the table below. These ideas mirror the interest and commitment shown by a large number of qualified professional practitioners; government officials from the DRM, culture and tourism sectors; and experts and managers from civil society and the private sector; all of whom shared their experiences and opinions during workshops and interviews.

ORGANIZATION-COORDINATION-REGIONAL REGULATION	
<p>The major challenge identified in this section is the strengthening of links between the different sectors in order to develop integrated strategies, regulations and institutions.</p>	<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Integrate the tourism sector in the project to strengthen the resilience of cultural heritage ■ Draft a regional DRM plan for cultural heritage; ■ Organize a regional forum to strengthen integration between the sectors; ■ Develop an online platform on the CEPREDENAC website; ■ Review national regulations with the purpose of strengthening regional regulation; ■ Establish regional risk observatories for the tourism sector, heritage sites and historic centers.
INFORMATION - KNOWLEDGE - DISSEMINATION	
<p>The main challenges here involve identifying the specific disaster risks faced by cultural heritage sites and establishing their economic value.</p>	<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop a geo-referenced map of cultural heritage assets in the SICA region; ■ Digitize existing heritage inventories; ■ Develop national-level records of cultural heritage damage and losses; ■ Define DRM zones showing the cultural landscape of the region; ■ Document the DRM experiences of historic centers; ■ Create an archive of national and regional DRM projects related to cultural heritage; ■ Conduct studies on the cost of integrating DRM and cultural heritage and on the estimated economic costs of failure to integrate; ■ Create a joint definition of cultural heritage for the region.
EDUCATION - TRAINING	
<p>A major challenge in the area of education and training is finding qualified practitioners to deal with matters of cultural heritage who can prevent and respond effectively and appropriately to possible disasters.</p>	<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strengthen education and training by connecting the different initiatives under implementation in the region; ■ Design a regional-level training plan to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - training in matters of cultural heritage for practitioners in the emergency management area; - DRM training for the staff of museums and cultural heritage sites; ■ Include cultural heritage as a sector in CEPREDENAC's annual regional simulation; ■ Create regional DRM manuals for cultural heritage sites.
STRENGTHENING LOCAL COMMUNITIES	
<p>The major challenge shared by all countries is to involve the communities in working to protect their cultural heritage from disaster risks.</p>	<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Systematize the recovery of oral and/or written traditions referring to risks and disasters and organize a contest to retrieve community knowledge on DRM; ■ Organize training in local communities to identify, recognize and assign value to tangible and intangible cultural heritage assets in relation to potential disaster risks; ■ Identify and map risks at local level through the historical memory of community members; ■ Help local governments and communities strengthen the institutional aspects of integrating DRM and cultural heritage.



Copan ruins, Honduras. Photo: milehightraveler

Looking to the future: strategic lines of action

To advance the integration of DRM with cultural heritage and sustainable tourism, several strategic approaches have been identified:

1. Maintain and strengthen intersectoral cooperation and collaboration:

As the result of the technical assistance, the organizations involved have initiated activities to bring together the different actors in all the sectors and countries. It is clear there is commitment and determination to forge closer regional collaboration as well as intersectoral collaboration within the countries.

2. Continue to develop activities at regional level:

It is important to note that this initiative has made it possible to identify concrete challenges and opportunities for building an agenda that involves working together. In this respect, it is important that the work continue beyond the technical assistance to become an integrated part of a regional initiative with reliable support from the three key institutions and increased collaboration among the involved professionals.

3. Contribute to the strengthening of legal and institutional frameworks:

Once concrete actions to integrate DRM, Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism have been made, governments should undertake the necessary actions – establishing regulatory frameworks, policies, and institutional strengthening activities, etc. – to support and reinforce these achievements.

4. Increase resilience by strengthening knowledge of the territory and cultural heritage, as well as the risks to which they are exposed:

The first action needed to protect cultural heritage from the multiple diverse threats is to understand the risk involved. Moreover, culture is not just another sector needing public support during disasters: i) culture and tourism together can also help quicken socio-economic recovery after crises, including the current pandemic; and ii) intangible cultural heritage is key to helping communities to recover and strengthen social inclusion and cohesion.

5. Consider that crises can also be opportunities to re-think the future:

In post-crisis situations, opportunities arise to rehabilitate heritage sites and redesign tourism strategies in a more resilient and sustainable manner. For this to become a reality, culture, heritage and the communities themselves must play a central role in the recovery processes.



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