Overview

Many of Bhutan’s cultural heritage sites, such as dzongs (fortresses), monasteries, and stupas (relic mounds), are today in active use virtually as they have for centuries, constituting what is known as “living heritage.” Often, these heritage sites are restored on an ongoing basis using traditional skills and practices. This has helped Bhutan keep alive much of its original heritage and is the reason for its unique identity. Preserving Bhutan’s unique heritage and rich cultural values and practices has therefore become one of the four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH), Bhutan’s guiding development philosophy.

Challenges

In assessing the damage following the September 2009 earthquake, it became evident that, in many places, local communities have adopted and used indigenous knowledge and traditions for centuries proven highly successful in disaster reduction and recovery. However, this indigenous knowledge and tradition is often overlooked in disaster initiatives, even at the international level, although cultural values and traditions are the heart of the social fabric of local communities worldwide.

With globalization and emerging challenges, many of our cultural traditions continue to fade and, in economic development efforts, are often marginalized.
And in the wake of disasters, they are at particular risk of being lost forever owing to tight reconstruction and restoration completion deadlines and limited skilled technical capacity to guide and monitor these works and architectural modifications.

**Approach**

The Conference addressed the following key issues:

- Assisting in closing a crucial gap by addressing how to link existing international and national disaster management initiatives with local cultural traditions, knowledge, and values.

- Taking stock of disaster management experiences and know-how potentially applicable to the specific geographical and socio-cultural context of the Himalayan region in general and Bhutan in particular.

- Bringing policymakers and practitioners together to formulate a practicable action plan.

**Results**

The Conference highlighted the importance and challenges of cultural heritage site management throughout disasters, and identified solutions.

Having gained a general understanding of Bhutan’s main challenges and gaps in disaster management, the Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) and the World Bank (WB) mobilized grants in support of different activities to overcome them. To strengthen the institutional, legislative, and policy disaster management framework, the GFDRR/WB is also supporting the formulation of rules and regulations to support the implementation of the recently-enacted Disaster Management Act 2013.

The World Bank has also made available additional financial assistance for a national vulnerability assessment of Bhutan’s primary structural types, developing emergency structural assessment capacity and improving general knowledge of the seismic resilience of Bhutanese traditional buildings.
ICDMCH proceedings were published and widely distributed to draw greater attention to and provide impetus for action to integrate cultural values and practices in disaster management. The Conference also drew world attention to Bhutan for the importance of its iconic cultural heritage. Most significantly, it issued a call to the international community from the Royal Government of Bhutan to consider mainstreaming cultural values, practices, and heritage in global disaster management agendas and programs, preserving fading traditional practices and wisdom, and resurrecting this knowledge for use in disaster management mechanisms and in addressing cultural heritage issues.

The main output of this Conference is its Action Plan, now in draft form. Its main aim is to promote the application of the major guiding principles and recommendations arising from the Conference as specific and concise activities and feasible and practicable programs for implementation by relevant authorities and agencies in Bhutan. This Action Plan will be used as guiding document in prioritizing the activities of the country’s 11th Five-Year Plan.

**Action Plan**

The main programs envisaged are summarized below:

1. Detailed study and vulnerability assessment of vernacular (non-engineered) housing and heritage sites in Bhutan and, to that end, the production of a vulnerability map and development of architectural guidelines and building codes for each of its regions. These guidelines are to be developed taking account of each region’s specific typologies and unique features/traditions to prevent the loss of Bhutan’s diverse cultural heritage.

2. Development of damage assessment methods for traditional structures, including historical/heritage buildings.

3. Development of a technical intervention system for the repair, restoration, and retrofitting of these traditional structures as a further contribution to the heritage building restoration guidelines. The technical manual produced for effective repair and retrofitting of traditional structures should take account of the typology...
of traditional and vernacular building materials and their behavior in earthquakes and related disasters.

4. Preparation of comprehensive guidelines for restoring cultural heritage artifacts.

5. Establishment of a master craftsmen database and establishment and implementation of frameworks for training traditional construction craftsmen. Preparation of an appropriate training manual to strengthen local construction and design methods and ensure that local architectural heritage is not lost.

6. Integration of the roles of religious and spiritual bodies into each region’s general disaster recovery framework. This includes:
   - A study of each region’s religious and spiritual bodies and how they could be available during disasters. Identification of key spiritual agencies and their roles.
   - Discussions with stakeholders to establish frameworks for the integration of these spiritual bodies into the general disaster recovery framework.

7. Establishment of a strategy for the inclusion and mobilization of religious institutions, the media, and the private sector to disseminate information and raise awareness of traditional knowledge for disaster risk reduction and cultural heritage protection.

8. A study of local traditional disaster management practices. Incorporation of local knowledge systems in the disaster risk management process.

9. Development of compensation policies and criteria and identification and establishment of funding and compensation mechanisms.

10. Establishment of ways and means to provide easy access to networking information.

**Partners**

Partners include the World Bank, with funding assistance from the GFDRR, the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Government of Sweden (SIDA), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

**Next Steps**

Having realized the vulnerability of the cultural heritage sites, the Royal Government of Bhutan has underscored the importance of integrating disaster risk management in development planning, focusing especially on cultural heritage. Initiatives have been launched to assess the risk to much of the country’s traditional architecture and to its iconic structures.

The Government is also seeking technical and financial assistance from all development partners, including the World Bank and GFDRR, to support this strategy.

**Lessons Learned**

A strong institutional basis for disaster management and cultural heritage protection requires inter-ministerial, cross-sector, and multi-stakeholder mechanisms, complemented by clear and formalized operating procedures and implementation measures. The protection of cultural heritage should be promoted for its intrinsic historical or artistic value, the fundamental spiritual and psychosocial support and sense of belonging it affords communities during the disaster recovery phase, and its contribution to building resilience to disasters—of increasing frequency and intensity, and adapting to climate change.

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