

# ICOMOS CHARTER ON PREPAREDNESS FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

Draft submitted for approval to GA2026

## PREAMBLE

Cultural heritage, including sites, buildings, ensembles, landscapes and underwater heritage, together with their movable components and intangible dimensions, constitutes an irreplaceable pillar for all human societies, local communities and Indigenous peoples. Yet it is increasingly threatened by hazards of both natural and human origin such as earthquakes, floods, wildfires, structure fires, storms, and armed conflict, including hazards amplified by climate change that result in disasters and conflicts with severe consequences for cultural heritage. These often escalate rapidly into crises that demand an urgent and coordinated response to prevent further damage and to stabilize the conditions, until recovery can begin.

Recognizing these urgent challenges, *ICOMOS affirms its moral, scientific, and institutional responsibility to strengthen awareness, capacity, and preparedness for effective action.* The collective strength of ICOMOS lies in the coordinated engagement of its International Scientific Committees (ISCs), Working Groups (WGs) and National Committees (NCs), whose expertise and cooperation form the backbone of emergency response in times of crisis.

Preparedness for emergency response, as articulated in this charter, is conceived not as an isolated phase but as an integral dimension of disaster risk management. It connects the anticipation of emergencies with the operational phase of response, while remaining inherently linked to prevention, mitigation, and recovery. These phases form an interdependent process in which knowledge, action, and reflection continuously inform one another. This charter is therefore grounded in a systemic understanding of disaster risk management, in which preparedness functions as a cross-cutting element that links all phases of the risk management cycle and ensures that actions taken at any phase collectively enhance the resilience of cultural heritage.

This charter aims to establish a common framework for ICOMOS, clarifying its strategic approach to preparedness for emergency response. It calls for the development of measures for rapid and coordinated emergency response, as well as for strengthened international cooperation to safeguard cultural heritage at risk of disasters and conflicts. It provides a shared foundation that can be adapted to the specific cultural, legal, and physical conditions of each heritage context, while ensuring coherence with international conventions and the ICOMOS Ethical Principles.

## Article 1 - Scope of Application

- 1.1. This document applies to immovable cultural heritage, such as monuments, historic cities and towns, rural settlements, archaeological sites, including underwater heritage, and cultural landscapes, and associated movable and intangible heritage. Integral components of immovable heritage, such as mural paintings, mosaics, and stained glass, are also considered within this scope.

- 1.2. It addresses the impacts of rapid-onset hazards such as geological hazards (e.g., earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, landslides), hydrological and meteorological hazards (e.g., floods, tsunamis, cyclones, typhoons, hurricanes, droughts), environmental hazards (e.g., wildfires), biological hazards (including epidemics), technological hazards (e.g., fires, explosions, and nuclear plant accidents), and societal hazards (e.g., armed conflicts)
- 1.3. It applies to the development of actions related to preparedness for emergency response, with particular emphasis on rapid, coordinated, and ethically grounded actions aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage during crises that can last from short to long periods.

## Article 2 - Coordination and Partnerships

- 2.1. Through the ICOMOS Board, and with the support of the relevant International Scientific Committees collaboration will be established with relevant national, international and partner organizations as well as humanitarian actors; while National Committees facilitate cross-border cooperation for technical and, where necessary, logistical support.
- 2.2. Where the National Committees have the capacity, they will collaborate with the ICOMOS Board for national-level preparedness, capacity-building and training and developing national strategies for emergency response, working closely with national authorities, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions and experts.
- 2.3. Where formal national mechanisms are absent, constrained, or non-operational, coordination may also involve municipalities, local heritage custodians, religious or customary authorities, civil society organizations, and community-based structures, in accordance with context-specific governance arrangements.
- 2.4. Cooperation protocols will be established with civil protection and, where necessary, military actors, while ICOMOS will always maintain institutional neutrality. To reinforce these efforts, ICOMOS will establish and promote a heritage-related emergency communication network with relevant partners and actors to ensure timely information-sharing.

## Article 3 - Guiding Principles (Fundamental Awareness)

To ensure that preparedness and response activities uphold ethical principles and professional integrity in line with the ICOMOS Ethical Principles (2014 and subsequent amendments, 2020 and 2025) and relevant international frameworks, this Article establishes the following guiding principles for the protection of cultural heritage in times of disasters and conflicts. These principles shall inform planning, decision-making, and coordination at the operational level.

- 3.1. **Do No Harm**  
Safeguarding cultural heritage and related communities shall be guided by the principle of “do no harm” requiring minimal, ethical, and, where possible, reversible interventions. Even well-intentioned emergency response measures must avoid creating new risks, compromising authenticity, or diminishing heritage significance.
- 3.2. **Neutrality and Impartiality**  
Preparedness and emergency response activities shall be conducted with neutrality and

impartiality, ensuring independence from any biased or undue influence, particularly in conflict zones, while maintaining a primary focus on the protection of cultural heritage and full respect for human dignity and human rights.

### 3.3. Solidarity and Shared Responsibility

When national or local capacities are under strain, international expertise and assistance can be mobilized at the request of, or with the explicit consent of, the competent authorities of the affected State, and in coordination with relevant national and international heritage bodies. Such cooperation shall fully respect State sovereignty, security considerations, and the rights and agency of local communities. Early international cooperation can enhance preparedness and support effective disaster recovery

### 3.4. Integration with International Frameworks

Preparedness and response shall be aligned with relevant international instruments and standards, including the ICOMOS Doctrinal Texts and Ethical Principles, the 1954 Hague Convention and its Protocols, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, other relevant UNESCO conventions, policies and strategies, and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to ensure coherence and complementarity.

### 3.5. Participation of Community and Other Stakeholders

Preparedness and emergency response shall be guided by inclusive governance processes that respect and engage local custodians, knowledge holders, rights-holders, duty-bearers, and affected heritage communities as equal partners throughout the decision-making and response processes. Their voices, values and skills shall meaningfully inform actions at different stages.

### 3.6. Learning from Crises, Sharing Information and Experiences

Preparedness and emergency response activities shall include the systematic documentation of the entire crisis or emergency management process, enabling the resulting knowledge and experiences to be shared after the event. Lessons learned from past emergencies shall be embedded in institutional practices, documentation, training, and preparedness planning, in order to continuously strengthen resilience and improve future response capacities.

## Article 4 – Risk Monitoring

The protection of cultural heritage requires the anticipation and understanding of evolving risks before they escalate into emergencies. A systematic and coordinated monitoring mechanism provides the necessary foundation for preparedness by ensuring that warning signals are detected, interpreted, and acted upon in a timely and informed manner.

Such an approach enables institutions, professionals, and communities to strengthen their readiness and to mobilize rapid, well-coordinated responses.

### 4.1. Shared Responsibility

The continuous monitoring of risks to cultural heritage shall be a shared responsibility across all ISCs, WGs and NCs. This responsibility shall be carried out in a coordinated and continuous manner to ensure institutional readiness.

#### 4.2. Expert Contributions

Each ICOMOS National Committee (NC) and International Scientific Committee (ISC) shall contribute to the identification and documentation of risks to heritage, based on their respective field of expertise.

#### 4.3. Knowledge Base

This shared system shall establish and maintain a robust institutional knowledge base, ensuring the dissemination of timely, credible, and actionable alerts. It shall strengthen preparedness and enable effective and coordinated emergency interventions to safeguard cultural heritage at risk.

#### 4.4. Support in Emergencies

ICOMOS can provide support for emergency preparedness and action planning for cultural heritage, as appropriate and within relevant international frameworks. Such support may be extended in acute or escalating emergency situations and may include technical guidance, capacity building, and the mobilization of expert networks, consistent with ICOMOS' mandate.

### Article 5 - Mobilization of Expertise

5.1. In the event of a crisis affecting cultural heritage, and upon a request for support from the competent authorities of the affected country or territory, or from relevant national, international, or partner organizations, ICOMOS shall establish an institutional coordination mechanism to enable the mobilization of the expertise and capacities of its International Scientific Committees (ISCs), Working Groups (WGs), and National Committees (NCs).

5.2. The purpose of this mechanism is to ensure a timely, coordinated, and effective emergency response for the protection of cultural heritage, in line with the mandate, ethical principles, and institutional capacities of ICOMOS. Any mobilization of expertise shall be carried out within clearly defined scopes of work, roles, and responsibilities, and in accordance with established coordination procedures.

5.3. For the purposes of this Charter, emergency response teams refer to ad hoc, multidisciplinary groupings of expert members of ICOMOS acting on a voluntary basis and mobilized through its institutional coordination mechanism. Drawing on the expertise of the International Scientific Committees, Working Groups, and National Committees, these groupings are established in response to specific requests and contexts. They operate under terms of reference defined on a case-by-case basis, tailored to the nature of each emergency and the requested scope of action, and do not constitute permanent operational units of ICOMOS.

5.4. National Committees shall act as focal points for coordination at the national level, while International Scientific Committees shall ensure the rapid activation of interdisciplinary expertise in accordance with the requested support. In addition, ISCs shall collectively contribute expertise, as required, in areas including risk communication, damage and risk assessment, hazard-specific mitigation measures, documentation, on-site emergency interventions, and legal and community engagement practices.

5.5. Emergency missions shall operate in coordination with relevant partners and internationally

recognized humanitarian coordination frameworks, as well as with appropriate national or regional coordination structures, according to context. Such activities shall be undertaken in collaboration with the National Committee and heritage professionals of the affected country or territory.

- 5.6. All actions shall respect the cultural context, and shall be conducted with due sensitivity, confidentiality, and attention to security considerations relevant to the crisis. Actions shall be implemented in partnership with relevant actors, while upholding local authority, sovereignty, and agency.
- 5.7. All ICOMOS work in disaster situations shall incorporate planning for the safety of operations and personnel. Mission experts shall take into account relevant State Party technical guidance, security and travel advice, and insurance requirements.

## Article 6 - Ethics, Accountability, and Institutional Learning

- 6.1. All emergency actions shall be guided by transparency, impartiality, cultural sensitivity, and accountability, and shall be conducted within the ethical framework of ICOMOS, with due regard to confidentiality, security, and context-specific sensitivities, particularly in situations of conflict or heightened risk.
- 6.2. Lessons learned from emergencies shall be systematically integrated into training, capacity building, guidelines, and strategies, to ensure that ICOMOS strengthens its collective capacity to act responsibly, effectively and in a timely manner, and contributes to future preparedness.

## Article 7 - Preparedness

- 7.1. Upon request by the relevant authorities of a country or territory, ICOMOS International Scientific Committees Working Groups, and National Committees shall provide technical expertise and support, within their respective mandates and capacities, for the development of emergency preparedness and response plans for selected cultural heritage assets at risk. Such support may include, but is not limited to, risk assessment, documentation, prioritization of interventions, and guidance on protective measures.
- 7.2. Such technical expertise and support may include thorough preparedness planning, training activities, emergency response simulation exercises, and the production and dissemination of technical guidelines.
- 7.3. Preparedness measures shall include proactive community engagement initiatives and respect for traditional and Indigenous knowledge systems, as appropriate to the context.
- 7.4. Preparedness activities shall, at a minimum, support the identification of priority heritage assets at risk, basic documentation and contact lists, clearly defined emergency roles and responsibilities, and context-appropriate response procedures, even where comprehensive plans are not yet feasible.

## Article 8 - Considerations for Emergency Response

- 8.1. All emergency response actions by ICOMOS shall be undertaken only with the prior consent of, and in close collaboration with, the relevant responsible authorities and the affected communities, in order to respect local ownership and governance structures.
- 8.2. All emergency response actions shall prioritize human safety while protecting cultural heritage and shall be carried out in a culturally sensitive and ethically responsible manner, in close cooperation with affected communities and local custodians.
- 8.3. Emergency response may include contextual analysis, rapid damage assessment, stabilization, salvage, documentation, protective measures, and the establishment of safe conditions for both heritage and people. These actions shall be implemented promptly, with continuous monitoring and preliminary assessment of damage and needs, in order to minimize further harm and develop options for subsequent conservation and restoration efforts.
- 8.4. ICOMOS experts shall provide technical guidance, advice, and coordination support to civil protection agencies, humanitarian actors, and local authorities, among others, as required, ensuring that cultural heritage considerations are fully integrated into broader emergency operations and planning.

## Article 9 – Transition to Recovery

- 9.1. Emergency response shall facilitate a smooth transition to short- and long-term recovery. This transition should be guided by respect for authenticity, integrity, and the collective memory of affected communities.
- 9.2. Emergency response teams, as defined under Article 5, shall provide documentation, condition assessments, and technical advice to support recovery planning, without constraining long-term design or policy decisions that fall within the jurisdiction of national and local authorities.
- 9.3. ICOMOS shall encourage cooperation among heritage professionals, affected communities, and responsible authorities to ensure that cultural heritage values inform recovery strategies that support resilience, dignity, and cultural continuity.

## Article 10 – Monitoring and Review

This Charter shall be reviewed every six years by the Board and the ICOMOS Advisory Committee, in consultation with the expert bodies concerned. The review shall be supported by a transparent monitoring mechanism that evaluates interventions against clearly defined performance indicators, including timeliness, community impact, and sustainability. The review process shall integrate lessons learned and feedback into preparedness strategies, ensuring continuous improvement and institutional accountability. In the event of extraordinary disasters or global crises—such as large-scale armed conflicts, pandemics, or major climate-related disasters—that significantly affect cultural heritage, the review schedule may be adjusted to enable earlier assessment and necessary revisions.

## Acknowledgments

The ICOMOS Charter on Preparedness for Emergency Response to Cultural Heritage was drafted by the Triennial Scientific Plan Taskforce, composed of members of the ICOMOS International Committee on Risk Preparedness (ICORP), in collaboration with the President and Vice President of the ICOMOS Advisory Committee.

The Taskforce included the following members of the ICORP Board: Zeynep Gül Ünal (President); Kai Weise (Secretary General); Alex Yen, Bijan Rouhani, Chris Marrion, and Xavier Romão (Vice Presidents); together with Kerime Danis (President, Advisory Committee), Nancy Pollock-Ellwand (Vice President, Advisory Committee), and Verónica Casanovas González (Advisory Committee Liaison - Scientific Council Officer). The Taskforce also acknowledges the valuable support of Zeynep Ece Atabay throughout the drafting process. The Taskforce wishes to acknowledge the significant contributions of Dinu Bumbaru and Rohit Jigyasu, both former Presidents of ICORP, and expresses its sincere appreciation to Teresa Patrício, President of ICOMOS, whose leadership and encouragement following the endorsement of the TSP 2024–2027 were instrumental in initiating and advancing the drafting of this Charter.

## Terminological and Conceptual References on Disaster Risk Management

The following institutional and terminological references related to Disaster Risk Management / Disaster Risk Reduction (DRM/DRR) are provided as supporting resources to facilitate the understanding of the official terminology and conceptual framework used throughout this document.

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