

Economic and Social
Council

ECOSOC

TOPIC A:

“Trafficking of Cultural
Property”

NC
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*“A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in
the soul of its people.”*

-Mahatma Gandhi

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Topic A:

Trafficking of Cultural Property

The Economic and Social Council is at the heart of the United Nations system to advance the three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental. It is the central platform for fostering debate and innovative thinking, forging consensus on ways forward, and coordinating efforts to achieve internationally agreed goals.

Trafficking of cultural goods is illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property, i.e. items being of importance for archaeology, prehistory, history, literature, art or science.

Trafficking in cultural goods can take different forms, ranging from theft from cultural heritage institutions or private collections, through looting of archaeological sites to the displacement of artefacts due to war.

Transnational organized crime is often associated with cross-border activities.

While there is evidence of a substantial amount of looting around the world, actions to combat trafficking in cultural property have so far not matched either the gravity or the extent of the crime.

Most recently, at the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, trafficking in cultural property was recognized as an important aspect to be dealt with.

Regrettably, in many source countries there is continuing evidence of widespread looting, often by organized gangs with clear hierarchical structures whose sole aim is to profit financially. Not only does this fuel transnational organized crime (given that most objects are transported internationally) but it also destroys the historical context of items and the ability to gather knowledge about the past and build an understanding of our collective history. In addition, it has an immeasurable impact on the cultural identities of the source countries.

While the scale of this crime is extensive, the value of trafficking in cultural property is very difficult to quantify. As a highly clandestine crime, and one in which illegal items are invariably mixed with legal ones, it is difficult to distinguish between licit and illicit trade.

This crime is a concern that affects all the countries.

Evidence points to the interconnectedness of transnational organized crime, with networks employing the same routes and modus operandi to move cultural property as they use to move drugs, illicit arms and other materials. Trafficking in cultural property is also becoming an important source for the laundering of the proceeds of crime.

In 1970, in order to reduce the number of the thefts related to the crime in archaeological sites and museums the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property was created.

The Convention has prevention, restitution and cooperation measures. States need to take action in some fields like:

inventories, export certificates, monitoring trade, imposition of penal or administrative sanctions, educational campaigns, recovery and return of cultural property, etc.

Points to address:

- How imports and exports regulation should target illicit trade of cultural goods?
- What can be done in order to safeguard cultural goods in unstable areas?
- What judicial policies can your country propose to combat this crime?
- What initiatives regarding counter-terrorism could be applied to the traffic of cultural property?

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