

SPECIALIZED MEETINGS IN THE SOUTHERN CONE



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The organization and professionalization of criminal networks have been seen in recent decades worldwide. The illicit trafficking in cultural property in particular has become one of the most important criminal activities internationally, along with that in weapons and drugs. Entire areas are being systematically looted in an unscrupulous manner. In this context, UNESCO and INTERPOL have decided to unite in order to train public administration officials to confront and combat trafficking in cultural property.

Southern Cone countries have an enormous heritage wealth that is exposed to looting and trafficking. With the exception of Chile, all countries in the region have ratified the 1970 Convention, that is, the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

Despite significant progress in legislation and regulation, there is an urgent need to strengthen the capacities of national authorities and specialized bodies to improve international cooperation and promote tools, knowledge and strategies to put an end to this situation.

The **first meeting on the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural property in the Southern Cone** was held in Buenos Aires (Argentina), on 29-31 October 2012. This was the first cooperation initiative between UNESCO Headquarters, the UNESCO Office in Montevideo and INTERPOL in Buenos Aires.

The aim of the event was to enhance capacities in the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural property by INTERPOL police forces at the national level. It is now particularly important to promote the Convention ratification and effective implementation by a large number of countries.

The goals set and met included:

- To provide training on general aspects of UNESCO conventions concerning illicit trafficking, including the UNIDROIT Convention;

- To provide training on the identification of different types of illicit-trafficking-susceptible property;
- To share special techniques and tools for police use, applicable to laws and organizations working to combat trafficking in cultural property; and,
- To present good practices relative to cultural property restitution and return.

Participants from different countries had the opportunity to share experiences in research procedures, presenting success stories, best practices and challenges they have had to face.

The meeting began with the exhibition of the audiovisual material Culture and Development produced by the Culture Sector at the UNESCO Office in Montevideo, showing the Organization's efforts to protect heritage and cultural expressions through its seven conventions. Then, Edouard Planche, programme specialist of the Cultural Heritage Protection Treaties Section, elaborated on the conventions related to illicit trafficking in cultural property from 1954 to 1970 and on the UNIDROIT Convention.

Archaeologists and anthropologists presented general concepts and issues that are specific to these sciences, illustrating their lectures with case studies on heritage objects looted and restituted.

Meeting participants reviewed the various options for developing databases, inventories, communication tools, protocols and procedures relative to stolen goods. The relationship with museums, galleries and authorities in the field of culture was another issue addressed, highlighting the importance of providing them with specialized training.

They also recognized the importance of this type of meeting between experts, and encouraged to go deeper into the methods used to combat trafficking in cultural property, which are well underway in their countries.

Both UNESCO and INTERPOL expressed their desire to move forward in these cooperative efforts and hold a **second meeting on the fight against illicit trafficking in cultural property in the Southern Cone**. This time, the meeting was held at the National Archives of the city of Asuncion (Paraguay), on 23-25 July 2013.

The event brought together over fifty participants working for public administration and cultural management, national customs authorities and police officers of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

Among the trainers were Captain Javier Morales, expert of the Spanish Heritage Police; Graciela Galeano, Paraguayan INTERPOL expert; Marcelo El Haibe and Fernando Gómez, Argentinean INTERPOL experts; María Luz Endere, UNESCO consultant; and Romina Rodríguez, subinspector of the Chilean Criminal Investigation Department.

Through different modules, meeting participants reviewed international conventions such as the UNESCO Convention

on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (1970) and the UNIDROIT Convention (1995). They discussed research methods on prevention and implementation by police forces, tools and methodologies developed by UNESCO, INTERPOL and Heritage Police, security at museums and archaeological sites, the code of conduct and ethics, and the role of customs and art- market professionals.

There were many reflections made on the need to raise awareness among the youth and the general public. Some working sessions were devoted to the establishment of a network to form a regional knowledge community to implement and strengthen cooperation actions in the future.

Meeting participants referred to the effective implementation of interdisciplinary, institutional and subregional cooperation strategies within the framework of the 1970 UNESCO Convention and the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention.

They expressed their will to further this cooperation initiative and other training actions, concluding that a third meeting should be organized in 2014. They also urged to hold national workshops, taking into account the needs of each country, and to establish an informal network between UNESCO, INTERPOL and meeting participants to continue sharing experiences.

Likewise, UNESCO is developing awareness-raising materials for young people. The idea is to educate and raise awareness among the youth on issues related to illicit trafficking in cultural property. As there is an evident lack of information on this subject, audiovisual materials and comics will be disseminated in the coming months, explaining what the cultural heritage of a nation is, what illicit trafficking in cultural property is, and how to deal with looting.

The outcome of the two meetings sponsored by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) has been very positive. Further efforts will be made to gradually increase the knowledge and tools used to combat illicit trafficking in cultural property, as well as the number of good practices to be shared in the future. With support from UNESCO, INTERPOL and national authorities, the way to combat illicit trafficking is becoming increasingly clearer. 