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Culture, broadly defined as the beliefs, traditions, and artistic works of a group, is proving to be an integral part in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction. Photo Credit: High Atlas Foundation

The Role Of Culture In Post-Disaster Recovery Efforts – OpEd

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By Fionette King

More than 200 million people are affected by natural disasters each year, causing significant damage in densely populated

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By Sushant Sareen The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designated terrori

areas. Only since the 1970s have comprehensive international disaster response frameworks been developed largely in response to the growing number of natural disasters. This is leading governments and organizations to develop robust post-disaster recovery strategies such as the [Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015](#) and its successor [the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030](#). The World Bank, European commission and the UN have also signed a joint post-crises declaration. However even with international efforts and collaboration, culture has been given little consideration.

Natural disasters wreak havoc on both the tangible and intangible aspects of societies, taking down physical infrastructures as well as morale. They not only destroy lives but can also erase culture, heritage, landmarks, and traditions. Culture, broadly defined as the beliefs, traditions, and artistic works of a group, is proving to be an integral part in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction.

As stated by policy maker [Ahmed Eiweida](#), “Cities are not just a collection of buildings, but are the people, their stories, and how they interact with each other through their cultural identity and sense of place.” In the case of post-earthquake Morocco, placing an emphasis on cultural expression and its diminishing forms may prove to be an effective method of dealing with post-disaster trauma and strengthening cross-cultural connection.

Culture is integral in rebuilding efforts after disaster because it gives a sense of [meaning](#) to the structures and systems of cities. Along with supporting the reconciliation process through the restoration of cultural landmarks (i.e. monuments, religious sites, etc.) culture strengthens a community’s sense of self and belonging. Multiple case studies of countries suffering post natural disaster and conflict destruction have seen culture used as a means of encouraging intercultural dialogue.

In [Indonesia](#), for example, decades of separatist conflict and a devastating tsunami led the government to implement a post-disaster reconstruction strategy worth over six billion USD.

st Masood Azhar and his organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are once again emerging



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Reconstruction leaders partnered with local theater groups to perform plays that encouraged dialogue on post-conflict and tsunami reconstruction processes. These plays were performed in refugee shelters in the native regional language and promoted discussion on disaster recovery themes.

Morocco, in a similar vein, has suffered a massive environmental catastrophe with the **2023 earthquake** killing over 2,800 people and destroying historic intercultural landmarks. Parts of the 1,000 year old Medina in Marrakech, the 12th century Kutubiyya Mosque, the minaret of the Kharbouch Mosque, and many other sites were severely damaged. The High Atlas Mountains, hardest hit by the earthquake, are home to a rich tapestry of rural and indigenous Amazigh communities known for their diverse culinary traditions, crafts, dance, and more.

The High Atlas Foundation, a non-profit sustainable development organization located in Marrakech, has been serving the High Atlas region for many years holding psycho-social and cooperative building workshops to empower locals. Leaders of these group psycho-social programs have remarked on the power of traditional performance in the healing process aiding villagers in processing trauma and discovering a sense of togetherness through traditional dance, music, and poetry. After the earthquake, many native Amazigh groups were hesitant to perform their traditional song and dance due to the grief of the earthquake. The presence of psychosocial leaders in Amazigh villages has placed in them the desire to continue these performances. As many attendees of psycho-social programs are without years of formal education, performance gives them an outlet to express themselves and their heritage.

“Our main mission is to give them hope that better days are yet to come,” expresses a HAF psycho-social leader. In addition to emphasizing the creative arts, facilitators encourage attendees to lean on facets of culture such as religion and language. Given the deep history and connection to spirituality in Morocco, participants are more likely to feel moved and inspired by religious texts such as the Quran as opposed to other methods.



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Implementing meditation practices that foster emotion also serves to emulate daily prayers and reflection. In addition to religion, facilitators appeal to attendees in a personal and impactful manner by using the native Tamazight language to explain concepts. Utilizing this aspect of village culture unites participants and makes topics more contextually understandable.

Along with having a culturally plural identity, Morocco has a large and fast growing youth population that is progressively declining in its engagement in cultural traditions. These cultural traditions, such as storytelling (Hikayat), dance (Ahwach), and women's poetry recitation work to pass down Morocco's intercultural history of peace and coexistence. In the midst of great loss, these traditions can be used to bring younger generations a sense of place and belonging. Additionally, culture poses new socio-economic opportunities that allow youth to enter the cultural and creative industries. The current presence of argan oil and carpet cooperatives demonstrate the use of traditional design and production to further economic sustainability. The Moroccan government has recognized the cultural and creative industries as a sturdy path to economic development, investing in the culture department and supporting artists through intellectual property rights, legal frameworks, and low associated tax levels.

While reconstructing physical infrastructures and buildings post-disaster, it is vital to preserve and highlight culture by employing participatory development methods. Despite extensive efforts by government and international bodies to support the post-earthquake community, there has been limited focus on the use of cultural expression as a means of dealing with trauma. By integrating cultural expression into post-disaster recovery efforts, Morocco can promote social cohesion, emotional healing and sustainable development. This approach not only helps communities recover from trauma, but also strengthens the nation's diverse cultural fabric and promotes the longevity of declining forms of cultural expression.

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