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Sustainable development: protection of global climate for  
present and future generations of humankind

**Letter dated 28 June 2019 from the Permanent Representative of  
Greece to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General**

As you have already been informed, Greece, being a repository of a wealth of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, undertook the initiative to host in Athens, on 21 and 22 June 2019, the international scientific conference on the theme "Impacts of climate change on cultural heritage: facing the challenge", with the participation of prominent scientists, diplomats, representatives of international organizations and institutions and relevant stakeholders.

The Government of the Hellenic Republic aimed, through this successful initiative, to further sensitize the international community and explore a framework of viable solutions and concrete actions regarding monitoring, protecting and strengthening the resilience of the world's cultural and natural heritage against the destructive perspectives of climate change, and thus contributing to the goals of the climate summit to be held in 2019.

The main outcome of the conference is the unanimously adopted workplan of actions (see annex), that lays out three areas of action, namely, research, infrastructure and education, and includes specific actions and measures to be widely communicated and embraced.


It is our belief that as a way forward, the conference's scientific conclusions need to be further backed by strong international state support. To this end, and in collaboration with the United Nations, the Government of the Hellenic Republic wishes to organize in Athens, in due time, a high-level meeting where States Members of the United Nations will have the opportunity to address the issue and put forth their political will for more relevant actions, in a document of a declaratory nature.

In view of the above, I would be grateful if you could circulate the present letter, and its annex, as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 20 (d).

(Signed) Maria Theofili  
Ambassador  
Permanent Representative of Greece

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**Annex to the letter dated 28 June 2019 from the Permanent Representative of Greece to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General**

**Explanatory note and outcome of the international scientific conference on the theme "Impacts of climate change on cultural heritage: facing the challenge" (Athens, Greece, 21–22 June 2019)**

## **I. Introduction**

On 21 and 22 June 2019, the Government of the Hellenic Republic, organized an international scientific conference on the theme "Impacts of climate change on cultural heritage: facing the challenge". The conference was held in Athens (Zappeio Megaro), with the participation, from 43 countries, of prominent scientists, diplomats, representatives of international organizations and institutions, and important stakeholders dealing with climate change and its impacts on the world's cultural and natural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

The principal aim of the conference was to focus on exploring a framework of viable solutions and concrete actions regarding monitoring, protecting and strengthening the resilience of the world's cultural and natural heritage through best practices and cooperation projects to combat the destructive perspectives of climate change.

With this initiative, the Hellenic Republic aimed to raise awareness and encourage global action on this important issue and thus contribute to the goals of the climate summit to be held in 2019.

## **II. Identification of the problem**

The current climate change, the expected changes in the intensity and frequency of natural phenomena and the synergy of the above are expected to affect our cultural heritage worldwide, such as historical monuments directly exposed to the environment and collections exhibited in museum venues. Floods, earthquakes, fires, strong winds and the long-term impact of adverse climate conditions may even completely destroy natural and cultural heritage sites. Until today, there has not been a comprehensive approach that puts emphasis on the need to establish a mechanism with the purpose of coordinating, in close collaboration with existing international bodies and structures, all necessary actions related to the protection of cultural heritage from the impact of climate change and making appropriate recommendations.

World heritage cultural sites were designed for specific local climates which unfortunately are now being modified by human intervention. Moreover, increasing sea levels threaten numerous coastal sites. The migration of pests can also have an adverse impact on the conservation of monuments. But aside from these principal physical threats, climate change will also have a tremendous social and cultural impact, with communities changing the way they live, work, worship and socialize in buildings, sites and landscapes, possibly leading to migration and the abandonment of their tangible heritage altogether.

Lessons learned from several sites worldwide show the relevance of designing and implementing appropriate decisions and suggestions from the climate-related

<sup>1</sup> For more information: <https://ccich.gr>

applied research community. Research at all levels would also have to be promoted in collaboration with the various bodies involved in climate change work, specializing in cultural heritage where the level of involvement of the scientific climate community, in close collaboration with the cultural heritage community, should be reinforced.

Climate change is having an impact on all aspects of the world's cultural heritage. Protecting and ensuring the sustainable management of these sites has therefore become an intergovernmental priority of the highest order.

Briefly, the main discussions of the Conference were divided into the following two broad themes:

(a) **Climate change and its impacts on cultural heritage.** Human-made climate change impacts on monuments, cultural landscapes, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, case studies and analyses: e.g. extreme weather events (floods, landslides, fires, etc.), sea level rises and wave activity in coastal monuments, erosion caused by extreme temperature changes, chemical erosion, the economic and social aspects of impacts and reports;

(b) **Best practices and policy responses.** These include identifying best practices and policy responses for the protection of cultural heritage from the effects of climate change by presenting best practices, successful examples and modern technologies from Greece and around the world; examining institutional frameworks, mitigation and adaptation strategies, and means of implementing policies and measures; raising awareness; and education.

Several case studies and experiences from many sites and monuments were presented at the Conference (Acropolis, Dilos, Dion and Knossos from Greece; Gubbio from Italy; and several sites and monuments from the Mediterranean and from Albania, Armenia, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic and Malta). They all included the use of innovative technologies, the design of research and monitoring protocols, the planning of adaptation strategies and the development of means of implementation.

### III. Conclusions of the Conference

Conference participants concluded that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and a common concern of humankind, increasingly affecting cultural and natural heritage in many parts of the world. In this context, they underlined that it is essential for all actors and stakeholders to understand that they have a common responsibility to protect cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, as it reflects the lives of peoples, their values and their history and identity, and its loss would severely harm the collective memory of humanity.

In concluding, the participants unanimously adopted the workplan of actions, based on the scientific approaches presented during the Conference and reflecting the respective interactive discussions. The adopted workplan of actions is as follows:

(a) **Research:** the creation of a strategy that furnishes better tools for our understanding of the threats, as well as a more efficient mitigation of the effects of climate change. This will include:

(i) **Measure 1.1.** Improve the quality of information on the impacts of climate change on cultural heritage monuments and sites by installing detailed recording and monitoring systems for environmental threats to materials and the socioeconomic effects in various parts of the world;

- (ii) **Measure 1.2.** Create a vulnerability index for individual monuments and sites and for groups of them, including those that might be affected in the future by extreme weather events in a destabilized climate environment worldwide;
  - (b) **Infrastructure:** the creation of a strategy to help efforts to mitigate the effects of climate change on cultural heritage. This will include:
    - (i) **Measure 2.1.** Create a repository of good practice for actions, site management and risk management plans for the prevention of the impacts of climate change, to be used by the relevant services for the protection of cultural heritage;
    - (ii) **Measure 2.2.** Create actions that ensure interdisciplinary cooperation in order to investigate and implement methodologies for the development of effective sustainable adaptation strategies for the climate-derived threats to heritage;
    - (iii) **Measure 2.3.** Design increased readiness action programmes for emergencies;
    - (iv) **Measure 2.4.** Create risk assessment maps for specific threats based on climatic projections;
    - (v) **Measure 2.5.** Develop the appropriate investment programmes for protection against extreme weather events;
  - (c) **Education:** the formulation of an education policy that will advise educational institutions and other stakeholders on the appropriate content for such programmes for the better coordination of education efforts. This will include:
    - (i) **Measure 3.1.** Educating children: Integrate into the educational material of primary and secondary education the impacts of climate change on cultural heritage;
    - (ii) **Measure 3.2.** Educating the public: Inform the public about the effects of climate change on heritage through programmes and actions in museums, archaeological sites and schools. The traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems shall be included in the curricula;
    - (iii) **Measure 3.3.** Training seminars for decision-makers, management authorities and services on climate change risk management and prevention.
- At the end of the Conference, the Hellenic Government welcomed its conclusions and expressed the wish that its outcome will enhance international cooperation for the protection of cultural and natural heritage from the impacts of climate change.