



Safeguarding Culture and Heritage Amid Conflict and Displacement

"Culture, Heritage, and Crisis: Safeguarding Culture and Heritage
in the Face of Conflict and Displacement"
Friday, September 26, 2025, at 16:00 CET

Meeting summary

The event focused on cultural heritage and displacement, and featured presentations from Elliot Brown Rivera about climate displacement in Panama, Adel Moussa about Nubian culture preservation, and Najla Abulehia about Palestinian cultural heritage in Gaza. Each panelist shared their experiences and perspectives on maintaining cultural identity in times of displacement. The conversation ended with a Q&A session and discussions about the importance of cultural preservation in the face of environmental changes and displacement, emphasizing the need for community originated solutions.

The panel was moderated by Sara Green, Chair of the ICHNGO Conflict and Displacement Working Group.

Elliot Brown shared the experience of the Gardi Sugdub community in Panama, who were displaced from their original island after more than **10 years** of planning. Around **95%** of the community members who were living on the island had to transition from coastal to mountainous living, upending their traditional lifestyle. The shift from traditional houses, known as "nega" and built with local and sustainable materials, to houses constructed from modern materials is already proving to have a significant impact on their cultural identity.

Adel Moussa discussed the challenges of preserving Nubian culture, **62 years** after their forced displacement. The Nubian community spread across **3 main areas in Egypt**: from Aswan to Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez. While the first and second generations maintained their language, the third generation faces major difficulties. Adel writes children's books in Nubian in an effort to teach the new generations and emphasizes that cultural preservation is everyone's responsibility.

Najla Abulehia, from the **Mayasem Association for Culture and Arts** in Gaza, Palestine, discussed strategies for protecting Palestinian heritage amid the ongoing war. The association works with people from all age groups – mainly children, youngsters and their caregivers –, through theater, music, creative

writing, and visual arts. They have a "Heritage Guardians" team specialized in rescuing artifacts during emergencies and wars.

Island Displacement and Cultural Fragmentation

Elliot discussed the impact of displacement on his community, highlighting how leaving their island home and moving to the mainland has begun to fragment their traditional way of life and spirituality. He explained that the concept of "Nega," which encompasses both home and community, is crucial to their identity, and the new homes built with non-traditional materials have altered their lifestyle. Elliot emphasized the importance of community participation in climate displacement to preserve cultural values and prevent further fragmentation. The community began planning their relocation over ten years ago due to overcrowding and rising sea levels, and partial displacement occurred in 2024.

Cultural Resilience in Displaced Communities

Elliot shared his experience of studying in Panama City and learning how to integrate his ancestral traditions with his scientific education, emphasizing the importance of maintaining cultural identity and resilience in the face of displacement and climate change. Adel discussed how displacement from their village in 1962 affected his community's cultural practices, highlighting the challenges of preserving Nubian culture for younger generations in Cairo. Both panelists stressed the significance of cultural heritage and the need for communities to develop their own solutions, rather than relying on external ones.

Cultural Preservation in Gaza

The event also focused on cultural preservation and identity, particularly in Gaza, with Najla discussing work in maintaining Palestinian cultural heritage through arts and traditions. Adel provided translation support for the Arabic-speaking participants. The discussion explored challenges in preserving culture during conflict and the importance of educating children about Palestinian history and identity.

The conversation ended with an open Q&A session, where panelists were invited to ask each other questions about cultural identity and traditions.

Environmental Adaptation and Cultural Identity

The group discussed the impact of environmental changes on their community, with Elliot explaining that while they moved to an area with autonomous local laws, they remain within their *comarca* and have access to fishing in the Caribbean. Even so, the community is having to adapt from sea-based to land-based livelihoods, from fishing to agriculture. Adel and Dorina noted that this situation is similar to their own community's challenges, and Gustavo asked Adel about the ideal future situation for the Nubian

culture, to which Adel responded that it would involve preserving their cultural identity while adapting to new circumstances.

Nubian Language Preservation Challenges

Adel expressed concerns about the future of Nubian culture due to lack of financial support and challenges in using the Nubian language in his work. He mentioned that while he can speak and understand the language, teaching is difficult due to its complexity. Despite these challenges, Adel and his organization continue to host workshops for learning Nubian, with participants from Egypt and other regions. He believes that making the language accessible to everyone is crucial for its preservation, contrary to his family's belief that it should remain secret.

Cultural Heritage in Displacement Context

The panel discussion highlighted the diverse experiences of displacement and cultural heritage preservation among three individuals: Adel, who has been displaced for 60 years following the Nubian crisis; Elliot, who recently experienced displacement; and Najla, who is currently displaced. The participants discussed the importance of maintaining cultural identity despite displacement, with Martin emphasizing that communities have the solutions and that local families have a very important role to play in preserving cultural heritage. The discussion concluded with Sara noting the need for culture to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals, and the panel's contribution to this conversation.

Key themes that emerged:

- Solutions must come from within communities, not just external aid
- Traditional knowledge and technical expertise need to be integrated
- Environmental changes (coastal to mountainous) require longer adaptation periods
- Language preservation is critical, but challenging across generations
- Communities face resource and funding shortages, but continue working independently despite the challenges

All speakers emphasized that **community strength comes from within** - communities must be active participants in finding solutions, and these solutions must be integrated into larger plans for assistance.

Link to ICHNGO website for more information and video recording of the event:

<https://www.ichngoforum.org/conflict-and-displacement/september-26-safeguarding-culture-and-heritage-amid-conflict-and-displacement/>