Address by Mechtild Rössler,
On the Protection of European Cultural Heritage from Geo-Hazards
(PROTHEGO) Project
“European World Heritage Sites Affected by Geo-Hazards – Satellite Monitoring Future Challenges”
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Room IV, 09:30 – 09:50

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is my great pleasure to welcome you to UNESCO this morning to discuss the challenges facing Europe’s World Heritage properties due to geo-hazards. I would like to thank the Permanent Delegation of Italy to UNESCO for organizing this workshop on “European World Heritage Sites Affected by Geo-Hazards – Satellite Monitoring Future Challenges” and for presenting the results of the PROTHEGO project here at UNESCO.

- The PROTHEGO project is a striking example of the potential of innovative technologies to support the monitoring and safeguarding of World Heritage properties in Europe from geo-hazards. I am particularly pleased to see that this project resulted in the development of a polygon-based GIS map of all European World Heritage sites.

- In 2010, the World Heritage Committee noted that satellite imagery and other remote sensing techniques were increasingly becoming essential tools for assessing the impact of geo-hazards on World Heritage sites.

- As the only UN agency with a specific mandate in the field of culture, UNESCO aims to use all available tools to not only protect and preserve tangible and intangible cultural heritage, but also to promote better understanding of the role of cultural heritage, cultural diversity and human creativity as a basis for resilience, dialogue and peace.
In this regard, in November 2017 UNESCO’s General Conference adopted an Addendum to the Strategy for the Reinforcement of UNESCO’s Action for the Protection of Culture and the Promotion of Cultural Pluralism in the Event of Armed Conflict, expanding it to include emergencies associated with disasters caused by natural and human-induced hazards.

This reflects the growing exposure of both people and their heritage to these hazards around the world, including in Europe. Since 1979, 19 cultural World Heritage properties located in 13 European countries have been affected by at least one major geo-hazard, which can include earthquakes, landslides and volcanic eruptions. It is interesting to note that an earthquake in the Kotor region of Montenegro led to the very first simultaneous inscription of a site on the World Heritage List and on the List of World Heritage in Danger, back in 1979.

As we know, disasters can have far-ranging consequences, and not just for the built environment. They can lead to the looting and trafficking of precious cultural objects, the loss of traditional knowledge, economic damage to local cultural industries, including tourism, and, more generally, can hamper the ability of affected populations to access and benefit from their cultural resources.

In this context, protecting culture from disasters is not a luxury, but a fundamental component of humanitarian responses and development efforts.

Thankfully, there is now a growing awareness of the dual role of culture – as an enabling factor in risk prevention and as a contributing factor to enhancing resilience. Both tangible and intangible heritage have an active role to play in building the resilience of communities and saving lives and properties from disasters.

Although UNESCO Member States have taken many preventive measures to reduce the vulnerability of cultural heritage to disasters, we still have a long way to go in terms of understanding disaster risks at World Heritage properties. Indeed, recent research conducted by the World Heritage Centre on geological risks, based on open-access risk data, revealed that 76% of all World Heritage
properties are potentially exposed to at least one of five main geological natural hazards, namely earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, volcanic eruptions or severe erosion.

- For these reasons, UNESCO is seeking to integrate a concern for culture into international development and humanitarian policies, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, which recognizes the essential relationship between culture, resilience and disaster risk reduction.

- UNESCO is fully committed to continuing to work with Member States to effectively implement the provisions of the Sendai Framework.

- In closing, I hope that knowledge developed in the framework of the PROTHEGO project, which contributes to the achievement of Priority 1 of the Sendai Framework on “Understanding Disaster Risk”, may be harnessed and scaled-up for the benefit all Member States, as they seek to protect World Heritage properties against geo-hazards.

- Thank you once again to the Permanent Delegation of Italy to UNESCO and the PROTHEGO team. I look forward to your presentation.