Reflection on the role of accredited non-governmental organizations within the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

18 April 2019

**Report of the consultation meeting**

1. **Introduction**
2. The reflection process around the role of accredited non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was launched by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage at its twelfth session in 2017 (Decision 12.COM 17[[1]](#footnote-1)). As an initial step, UNESCO organized an electronic consultation from September to October 2018, to gather ideas to define the future of accredited NGOs in the 2003 Convention. In total, thirty-eight States Parties and sixty-eight accredited NGOs took part in this consultation, the preliminary results of which were presented to the thirteenth session of the Committee in 2018. At this same session, the Committee decided to continue the reflection process in 2019 with the organization of a consultation meeting (Decision 13.COM 13[[2]](#footnote-2)).
3. The consultation meeting was held on 18 April 2019 at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. Its purpose was to further the reflection on the definition of the advisory functions to be fulfilled by accredited NGOs in the sense of Article 9 of the 2003 Convention and paragraph 96 of the Operational Directives of the 2003 Convention. In accordance with Decision 13.COM 13, the consultation took place with accredited NGOs, the ICH NGO Forum, the informal ad hoc open-ended working group and States Parties. The meeting was open to all accredited NGOs and all interested Member States, regardless of whether they are Parties to the Convention. The meeting was broadcasted online via audiocast to allow as many States and NGOs as possible to follow the debates. The working document of the meeting[[3]](#footnote-3) was made available on 21 March 2019 on the webpage dedicated to the consultation meeting[[4]](#footnote-4).
4. More than 150 participants, representing 40 States Parties and 66 accredited NGOs, as well as 9 observers, took part in the consultation meeting[[5]](#footnote-5). In order to support the participation of accredited NGOs from all regions, in particular those based in developing countries, financial assistance was provided to sixteen accredited NGOs. Six members of the Steering Committee of the ICH NGO Forum and a representative from Colombia, as Colombia currently chairs the informal ad hoc open-ended working group, were also present. In addition to presentations and interventions by the Secretariat, the ICH NGO Forum and the informal ad hoc open-ended working group, thirty-seven delegates – representing twenty-seven accredited NGOs and ten States Parties – took the floor during the meeting. Furthermore, Ms Marie-Claude Machon-Honoré, Chair of the International Conference of NGOs and NGO-UNESCO Liaison Committee, as an observer, expressed the wish of the Liaison Committee to share interesting ideas and methods to reinforce partnerships.
5. Mr Ernesto Ottone R., UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Culture, opened the consultation meeting and highlighted the broader framework of UNESCO’s strategic transformation, which aims to modernize the Organization, including by strengthening its partnerships with the multiple networks of public and private organizations that contribute to the implementation of cultural conventions. Furthermore, he underlined the potential of the contribution of NGOs to the safeguarding of living heritage as NGOs constitute an important link between the work carried out at the intergovernmental level and the unerring safeguarding efforts undertaken at the grassroots level by the communities of bearers and practitioners.
6. Mr Tim Curtis, Secretary of the 2003 Convention and Chief of the Living Heritage Entity, UNESCO, gave an overview of the current situation vis-à-vis accredited NGOs under the Convention, presented the background of the consultation meeting and introduced some of the key findings from the electronic consultation held in 2018. The survey findings indicated that there is currently no wide consensus among accredited NGOs and States Parties concerning the need to entirely overhaul the NGO accreditation system. However, both accredited NGOs and States Parties acknowledged that a number of areas could be improved, firstly to allow the Committee to benefit from the wealth of experience and expertise NGOs can bring to its debates, and secondly to enable NGOs to fully contribute to the implementation of the Convention at the international and national levels.
7. Based on the findings of the electronic consultation, the debates of the General Assembly of States Parties in 2018 and those of the Committee in 2017 and 2018, the Secretary of the Convention briefly introduced three potential ways forward for the accreditation system of NGOs:

* **Option 1** consists in maintaining the current accreditation system, in which accredited NGOs of all sizes, capacities and interests continue to be involved in the implementation of the Convention. At the same time, adjustments could be sought by broadening the definition of the advisory functions to be fulfilled by accredited NGOs and revising the criteria applied for the quadrennial review of accreditation.
* **Option 2** is based on the premise that a more flexible and simplified accreditation system would allow the Committee to benefit from the expertise of a larger number of NGOs with more diverse profiles and from all regions. It foresees the establishment of an ‘umbrella organization’ responsible for the accreditation system and the coordination of the contribution of NGOs to the work of the Committee.
* **Option 3** is an alternative to the first two options. This would involve the introduction of two types of accreditation for NGOs: one type of accreditation dedicated to providing direct advisory services to the Committee and managed by the Secretariat (option 1) and a second type focused on the implementation of the Convention and managed by an ‘umbrella organization’ (option 2).

1. With these potential options in mind, the meeting aimed to discuss two important questions for the future of the accreditation system: What do States and NGOs expect from the accreditation system? How might the accreditation system be revised to fulfil these expectations? In order to structure the debates, the Secretariat proposed dividing the meeting into two interlinked sessions, introduced by presentations from the Secretariat, the ICH NGO Forum (represented by Ms Naila Ceribašić, International Council for Traditional Music and Mr Jorge Gustavo Caicedo, Intangible Cultural Heritage Encyclopedia) and the informal ad hoc open-ended working group (represented by Ms Daniela Rodriguez Uribe, First Secretary, Permanent Delegation of Colombia to UNESCO).

* **Session 1** focused on the identification of advisory functions, the relevance of the accreditation criteria and of the criteria used in the review of accreditation. In addition, the issue of geographical representation among accredited NGOs was also raised, with regard to the definition of the accreditation criteria.
* **Session 2** provided participants with an opportunity to discuss ways in which the accreditation system could be managed. In addition, participants exchanged ideas on actions that could be implemented to enhance the active participation of NGOs to the work of the governing bodies of the Convention and to the implementation of the Convention.

1. **Summary of the discussions**
2. During the discussions, several participants highlighted the importance of NGOs and States reflecting together on the future of the accreditation system for NGOs, in particular considering the significant role that NGOs could play in the context of the strategic transformation of UNESCO. While taking note of the increasing number of accredited NGOs, which is a testimony to the diversity of intangible cultural heritage, participants discussed the contribution of NGOs not only to the work of the Committee but also to the implementation of the Convention at all levels. As summarized by the Secretariat, the main concern for participants is to reconcile the realization that the accreditation system needs to be inclusive while taking into consideration that dialogue between accredited NGOs and States needs to take place to define what States expect from accredited NGOs and how NGOs can best assist the governing bodies of the Convention.
3. **Concerning the possible establishment of an ‘umbrella organization’**
4. Only a minority of interventions (12.5 per cent) supported the idea of establishing an ‘umbrella organization’ that would oversee the accreditation system of NGOs and coordinate the provision of advisory support by NGOs to the governing bodies (Option 2). In fact, the debates indicated a tendency on the part of participants to favor the improvement of the current accreditation system (Option 1) or, alternatively, to consider the establishment of a hybrid system, in which the accreditation to provide direct advisory services would be improved and strengthened (Options 1 and 3 combined).
5. More specifically, four delegates (two NGOs and two States) feared that the establishment of an ‘umbrella organization’ would lead to unnecessary complications in the accreditation procedure and would negatively impact the diversity of accredited NGOs. Considering the difficulties in creating a new structure, efforts should rather be made to strengthen the existing activities of the ICH NGO Forum. On this issue, the ICH NGO Forum expressed its inclination towards the creation of an ‘umbrella organization’. However, it noted that should this option be retained, the capacities of the ICH NGO Forum would need to be reinforced, possibly with the creation of a dedicated secretariat. Its governance would also need to be strengthened to ensure the representativeness of its Steering Committee.
6. **Concerning the advisory functions of accredited NGOs**
7. The definition of advisory functions was considered as the core issue to be discussed during the meeting and most interventions by NGOs and States addressed this aspect. While three NGOs expressed their wish to see the scope of advisory functions expanded, they also recognized the difficulties in specifically identifying the exact functions that accredited NGOs could fulfil. Two NGOs also considered that advisory functions should remain undefined and that the adverb ‘inter alia’ should therefore remain in the wording of paragraph 96 of the Operational Directives.
8. **General observations**. The Secretariat recalled that the definition of advisory functions to be fulfilled by NGOs could be linked to the ongoing broader reflection on the future of the listing mechanisms, launched by the Committed at its thirteenth session in 2018. In this regard, one NGO reminded participants that while only six NGOs are currently part of the Evaluation Body, the reflection on the listing mechanisms could possibly lead to an increase in this number through the introduction of a pooling or blind referee system in the evaluation of nominations to the Lists. Referring to a distinction made in the working document of the meeting, four NGOs explained that no distinction should be made between the implementation of the Convention at the international level and that at the national and local levels. Instead, the provision of advisory services to the Committee could be distinguished from the implementation of the Convention at all levels. Furthermore, six interventions (four NGOs and two States) stressed that the definition of advisory functions should be based on the specificities, competencies, resources, priorities and mandates of each accredited NGO and that the capacities of NGOs should be fully utilized, whether for advisory services or for the implementation of the Convention at all levels. In order to frame the debates, the Secretariat clarified that interventions seem to describe two different, albeit not incompatible, understandings of the role of NGOs: NGOs as proactive advisors and NGOs as beneficiaries of assistance and activities. In this regard, the Secretariat reminded participants that the *raison d’être* of the accreditation system is to provide the Committee with organizations that could advise it and that the discussion on the definition of advisory functions could therefore focus on this issue.
9. **Different types of accreditation**. Six interventions (four NGOs and two States) expressed the fear that establishing parallel systems of accreditation (one for NGOs providing advisory services to the Committee and one for NGOs contributing to the implementation of the Convention at all levels), as suggested by option 3, would generate confusion and might create a hierarchy among accredited NGOs. The creation of a second type of accreditation was not necessarily considered to be justified, as direct advisory services to the Committee and the contribution to the implementation of the Convention at all levels could both be understood as a form of advice to the Committee. It was further considered that the accreditation system should make equity a primary concern and should rather aim to encourage progression and foster cooperation among NGOs. Another negative implication of the creation of different types of accreditation was the foreseen increase in the workload of the governing bodies due to a potential increase in the number of requests.
10. On the other hand, four interventions (three NGOs and one State) observed that the introduction of two types of accreditation was possible under certain conditions. Considering that hierarchy among accredited NGOs is unavoidable in any given system, two NGOs proposed introducing the possibility for accredited NGOs to express – on a voluntary basis – their availability and ability to provide advisory services to the Committee on specific issues. In this case, NGOs could be requested to provide additional information on their capacities. Another proposal would lead to the creation of different accreditation levels, with the possibility for accredited NGOs to move up and down depending on the type of advisory services delivered.
11. **Proposed additional advisory functions**. A range of advisory functions were suggested in most of the interventions by States and NGOs:

* Implementation of the Convention at all levels (proposed by the ICH NGO Forum, six NGOs and one State).
* Reporting functions (proposed by the ICH NGO Forum, the informal ad hoc open-ended working group, four NGOs and one State): NGOs could contribute to the reporting on the implementation of the Convention through the overall results framework, the periodic reporting mechanism or the monitoring of inscribed elements.
* Sharing of safeguarding experiences in lighter and more accessible ways (proposed by the ICH NGO Forum, three NGOs and one State).
* Advice on statutory matters linked to NGOs, including support to the Secretariat with the management of the accreditation process (proposed by four NGOs).
* Implementation of the capacity-building programme of the Convention (proposed by three NGOs): in this regard, the Secretariat clarified than all capacity-building materials developed by the Secretariat were freely available online and that any organization or individual could make use of them without seeking accreditation.
* Outreach to civil society (proposed by two NGOs).
* Advice to the Committee on specific thematic issues (proposed by two NGOs).
* Laboratory of ideas and inspiring practices (proposed by the ICH NGO Forum).
* Awareness-raising about the Convention (proposed by the ICH NGO Forum).

1. **Concerning the geographical distribution of accredited NGOs**
2. Prior to the meeting, the unbalanced geographical distribution of accredited NGOs had already been identified as one of the major concerns by the General Assembly, the Committee and the Secretariat. Echoing this concern, three States took the floor to reiterate that geographical balance among accredited NGOs is indeed an important challenge, while one State considered that reaching a balance should not be the priority and that the accreditation system should rather aim to ensure the diversity of skills and competencies that are put at the disposal of the Committee. Other speakers argued that the current system is simply more adapted to the needs of certain regions and identified several root causes for the geographical imbalance, such as the lack of financial resources for NGOs in some regions, the diversity of legal systems that may impact the number of NGOs in some countries and language barriers. In addition, two international NGOs remarked that the location of the legal domicile of an NGO may not necessarily reflect the scope of its activities and that several NGOs based in Europe had most of their activities carried out in other regions.
3. In order to address this issue, the informal ad hoc open-ended working group and one NGO advocated for the introduction of incentives with clear benefits laid out for NGOs that may be interested in requesting accreditation. In this regard, six delegates (four NGOs and two States) highlighted the need for initiatives– involving States, NGOs, National Commissions and all relevant stakeholders – to raise awareness about the accreditation system and build the capacities of NGOs active in the safeguarding of living heritage in under-represented regions, as well as to encourage cooperation between accredited NGOs and NGOs that may potentially seek accreditation. Opinions were divided (one intervention for and two against) regarding the relevance of hard measures to impose a more balanced distribution, such as the establishment of a ceiling for the number of accredited NGOs per region or per country.
4. **Concerning the accreditation criteria**
5. Few interventions (four NGOs and one State) addressed the issue of the criteria used for the accreditation and the review of accreditation. Concerning the accreditation of NGOs, one NGO proposed introducing new criteria that assess the competencies of NGOs only for those organizations that wish to provide direct advisory services to the Committee. The possibility of introducing a criterion on the integrity of NGOs – mentioned in the working document of the meeting – was not specifically discussed, although one NGO wondered how the integrity of an organization could be assessed. Regarding the review of accreditation, one State remarked that the review of the legal and ethical situation of each accredited NGO should be assessed and that the evolution of the scope of activities carried out by the NGO since its accreditation should also be evaluated.
6. **Concerning the accreditation and review of the accreditation processes**
7. One State stressed that the priority for States Parties is to maintain the credibility of the accreditation system and therefore to ensure that the accreditation system is managed in such a way that the Committee can benefit from competent and diverse organizations. In this respect, three interventions (two NGOs and one State) emphasized the importance of the accreditation process remaining intergovernmental: the governing bodies of the Convention would continue to oversee the accreditation process with the support of the Secretariat.
8. In terms of processes, two NGOs and one State suggested that States should be consulted in the accreditation process or should at least be asked to provide recommendations. Furthermore, the informal ad hoc open-ended working group voiced a concern expressed by NGOs whose requests were not approved and suggested that feedback should be provided to them. In addition, while two NGOs indicated that both the accreditation and the review of the accreditation processes could be simplified, two other NGOs deemed the review of the accreditation processes adequate as it allows the Committee and NGOs themselves to monitor their contribution and capacities since their accreditation.
9. **Concerning the role of the ICH NGO Forum**
10. One NGO observed that it would be timely to assess the performance of the ICH NGO Forum after nine years of existence. To this end, several speakers pointed to areas where the ICH NGO Forum could play a more active role, such as the coordination of its activities with accredited NGOs, its communication with NGOs and the promotion of the accreditation system in under-represented regions. Furthermore, the ICH NGO Forum and one State noted that the governance of the Forum should be reviewed and reinforced to ensure inclusivity.
11. **Other issues**
12. **Mapping of accredited NGOs**. The informal ad hoc open-ended working group, as well as three NGOs and one State, suggested that a mapping of the fields of competence, expertise and experience of accredited NGOs – for instance including their competencies on specific domains of intangible cultural heritage or on crosscutting issues such as education, emergency situations, ethics or environmental sustainability – could help define the advisory functions that they could fulfil. Such a mapping could be presented on the website of the Convention, which may also facilitate the cooperation of accredited NGOs with States and networking among accredited NGOs.
13. **Contribution to the work of the Committee**. Three NGOs noted that the reflection process should also address the ways in which NGOs could communicate to or advise the Committee. In this regard, digital platforms were mentioned as a possibility to allow a larger number of accredited NGOs to contribute.
14. **Capacity building**. On the one hand, interventions by NGOs underlined the instrumental role that NGOs could play in delivering capacity-building activities, in particular for communities at the national and local levels. On the other hand, several NGOs also expressed their own wish to benefit from assistance – through training activities – in raising their own capacities. The debates seem to indicate that expectations from the accreditation system may need to be clarified through a clearer definition of advisory functions.
15. **Cooperation with States**. The informal ad hoc open-ended working group deemed it necessary for States to improve their cooperation with NGOs and, in particular, to facilitate the involvement of NGOs in the work of the Committee. The ICH NGO Forum supported this position, stressing that such cooperation should be transparent and fair in order to be mutually beneficial. In this regard, the overall results framework could provide a way to measure the contribution of NGOs, thereby demonstrating the evolution and importance of such a contribution.
16. **Code of conduct**. The informal ad hoc open-ended working group underlined the need for a code of conduct by which NGOs shall abide when they become accredited. The ICH NGO Forum confirmed that it is currently developing such a code of conduct.
17. **Conclusion and a way forward**
18. The open nature of the discussions allowed for a wide range of ideas to be expressed by participants on different aspects of the accreditation system. While no clear consensus emerged on the future of the accreditation system, some tendencies could be identified, which may outline a way forward:
    1. For the time being, the proposal to create an umbrella organization did not appear to create a consensus among participants. Interventions rather revolved around various measures and ways of improving the current accreditation system.
    2. Two main roles of NGOs emerged in the discussions: NGOs as advisory organizations to the Committee and NGOs as stakeholders in the implementation of the Convention. This dichotomy underlines the need for the governing bodies to clarify their expectations in relation to the accreditation system, as defined in Article 9 of the Convention.
    3. Corresponding to these two main roles identified, an incipient attempt was made by participants to define the advisory functions that accredited NGOs could fulfil (as summarized in paragraph 15 of the present document). In this regard, it should however be noted that concrete ways in which accredited NGOs would fulfil these functions were not identified.
19. Closing statements were given by seven accredited NGOs, each representing the different members of the Steering Committee of the ICH NGO Forum, the informal ad hoc open-ended working group and the Secretariat. It was agreed that the outcomes of the reflection on the role of accredited NGOs within the 2003 Convention – including the findings of the electronic consultation held in 2018 and the debates of the consultation meeting organized in April 2019 – would be presented to the fourteenth session of the Committee in Bogotá, Colombia, from 9 to 14 December 2019.

1. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/12.COM/17> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/13.COM/13> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-19-NGO-2-EN.docx> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [https://ich.unesco.org/en/ reflection-on-the-role-of-ngos-01037](https://ich.unesco.org/en/%20reflection-on-the-role-of-ngos-01037) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/preliminary-list-of-participants-01039> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)