Living 
Heritage 
and 
Education 

THE CONVENTION 
FOR THE SAFEGUARDING 
OF THE INTANGIBLE 
CULTURAL HERITAGE
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE – or ‘living heritage’ – is inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. It includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and the knowledge and skills related to craftsmanship. It is continuously recreated as it is transmitted from generation to generation, and evolves in response to our environment.

Living heritage is important because it offers communities and individuals a sense of identity and continuity. It can promote social cohesion, respect for cultural diversity and human creativity, as well as help communities build resilient, peaceful and inclusive societies.

As the United Nations specialized agency for culture, UNESCO is tasked with safeguarding living heritage and ensuring its transmission to future generations. In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which encourages and supports countries to take the necessary measures to ensure that communities can safeguard their living heritage.
Intergenerational transmission is key to safeguarding

The creative process of intergenerational transmission is at the centre of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding. It is a dynamic, interactive process through which intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated.

Modes and methods of transmission that are recognized by communities can be strengthened in education programmes. In this regard, education institutions can foster respect for intangible cultural heritage and provide new spaces to ensure its transmission to future generations.

The transmission of intangible cultural heritage in itself is a form of informal education that happens within communities. As such, it can provide both learning content and methods.

Education can play a valuable role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes the transmission of intangible cultural heritage ‘through formal and non-formal education’ as a key safeguarding measure.

The Convention calls on States Parties to ensure recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of intangible cultural heritage through education programmes. These can include:

- programmes in formal learning environments such as in primary, secondary and post-secondary schools.
- non-formal opportunities such as short courses, community learning and capacity-building activities.

Since 2017, the Living Heritage Entity at UNESCO has been working together with the UNESCO Education Sector, Field Offices and Education Institutes to implement projects, activities and other initiatives related to ‘Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in formal and non-formal education’.

“Young people are yearning to reconnect with their heritage. They don’t necessarily know how to do it, and schools are a useful mechanism to allow this to take place.”

John De Coninck, from the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda
Living heritage improves education relevance

Incorporating intangible cultural heritage in education can reconnect schools with their surrounding communities. It can foster respect and appreciation for cultural diversity and strengthen a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

Approaches to integrating living heritage

INITIATIVES TO BRING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE into classrooms and non-formal education spaces can take different approaches depending on the local context, needs and educational level. In cases where it is possible, intangible cultural heritage can be included in curricula.

Students can learn with intangible cultural heritage when it is integrated in different subjects. For instance, in Indonesia students are taught about batik, a type of handcrafted textile, through subjects such as chemistry (focus on the natural dyes used in batik), history (background and culture), and the arts.

When learning about intangible cultural heritage, students learn to respect and reflect on their own living heritage as well as the living heritage of others. In Mexico, for example, a guide for teachers of indigenous education includes lessons on personal and community identity.

While all approaches have the potential to strengthen the transmission of intangible cultural heritage in general, in some cases, the focus may be on the transmission of specific skills or knowledge, such as an extracurricular activity where traditional instruments are taught.

APPROACHES TO INTEGRATING LIVING HERITAGE IN EDUCATION should take into account training and support for teachers and non-formal educators. They can help create a conducive learning environment for integrating living heritage and facilitate the involvement of community members and bearers in learning activities. Teachers are essential to the success of all initiatives.

Teacher training

Reconnecting schools and communities

Incorporating intangible cultural heritage in education can reconnect schools with their surrounding communities. It can foster respect and appreciation for cultural diversity and strengthen a sense of belonging and social cohesion.

“When you produce education materials with communities, the children see themselves and their grandparents in the materials. That is a source of pleasure. It provides the opportunity for the survival of the heritage into the future.”

Nigel Encalada,
Director of Belize’s Institute for Social and Cultural Research of the National Institute of Culture and History

INTEGRATING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE in education represents a broader, social approach to safeguarding that can have many positive benefits. It can provide content and methods for education programmes to improve the relevance of education and learning outcomes.

Living heritage is an incredibly rich resource for countries to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 since it includes appreciation of cultural diversity and how culture can contribute to sustainable development.

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GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION
Integrating intangible cultural heritage can foster respect for diversity and a sense of interconnectedness between communities, countries and populations, which are core values at the heart of global citizenship education.

In Uganda, heritage education clubs at secondary schools promote cultural diversity through extracurricular activities including cultural exhibitions, performances at school events and more. The clubs encourage students and teachers to learn to live together despite their different beliefs and practices.

The Heritage education clubs are a project of the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda, a non-governmental organization accredited under the Convention.

TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING
Through technical and vocational education and training institutions, young people and adults can harness the heritage from their communities to develop skills for employment while strengthening the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

Çini are handmade glazed tiles and ceramics in Turkey. One way that the traditional craftsmanship, knowledge and skills are passed on is through vocational schools of higher education where it is possible to obtain a two-year degree on the art of çini. These vocational schools equip young people with relevant skills, creativity and design knowledge to provide job opportunities.

Traditional craftsmanship of Çini-making is inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2016).

EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Education for sustainable development uses local knowledge, including intangible cultural heritage, as a resource for integrating sustainable development issues in teaching and learning.

In Southern Africa, the ‘Advanced regional training programme in education for sustainable development’ recognizes that intangible cultural heritage related to knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe can be especially relevant to teaching sustainable development principles in a way that is culturally resonant with students. Teacher educators are carrying out change projects that are integrating traditional or indigenous knowledge in teacher training.

The Advanced regional training programme in education for sustainable development (2018-2022) is a UNESCO project funded by Sweden.

MOTHER TONGUE AND MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION
The Convention recognizes language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage. Through language, knowledge and skills for practicing intangible cultural heritage are passed from one generation to the next. For this reason, mother tongue and multilingual education plays an important role in supporting the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

In El Salvador, the small number and advanced age of Náhuat speakers seriously threaten the continuity of oral traditions. A project engaged students and teachers in community-based inventorying of local narratives, encouraging dialogue between younger and older generations of Náhuat speakers.

Titajtakezakan. Speaking across time, oral tradition and use of information and communication technologies (2017-2018) was an International Assistance project funded by the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund.
FOR MORE INFORMATION
Need help getting started?

Contact ICH-capacity@unesco.org for more information on how to safeguard living heritage in formal and non-formal education.