**CONVENTION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**Expert meeting on** **safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and climate change**

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**Roles and risks**

**RISKS AND ROLES FOR LIVING HERITAGE**

This document maps some of the key roles and risks for intangible cultural heritage in the context of the climate emergency. The well-established ‘dual role’ for intangible cultural heritage in emergencies, as set out in the Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies,[[1]](#endnote-2) also applies to intangible cultural heritage in the context of climate change. On the one hand, intangible cultural heritage is at risk of negative impacts from the effects of climate change while, on the other, intangible cultural heritage has a positive role to play as a source of resilience and recovery in preparing for and limiting the risks and impacts of climate change, and in enhancing climate change mitigation.

Section 1 considers some of the risks posed to intangible cultural heritage from climate change, which include both direct and indirect impacts to intangible cultural heritage practice, resources, and transmission. Section 2 reviews some of the critical positive roles for intangible cultural heritage in the climate emergency, which include identifying, assessing and monitoring climate change and its impacts; preparing for and limiting climate-related impacts; promoting and facilitating societal and environmental adaptation to climate change; managing the processes of climate change adaptation; and contributing directly to the mitigation of carbon emissions.

There are many published case studies, covering every environment and country, that describe the use of intangible cultural heritage or local knowledge systems to monitor or limit the effects of environmental change, natural hazards or the climate emergency, and that model possible strategies for climate change adaptation.[[2]](#endnote-3) But we need an overall structure or framework within which to integrate these individual case studies, and which can then be further refined through the incorporation of new case studies. Although models are available for particular knowledge systems, such as traditional ecological knowledge or Indigenous knowledge, no such framework currently exists for intangible cultural heritage. In particular, we need to understand: a) how threats or losses to intangible cultural heritage take shape over the longer term; and b) the impact of particular emergencies on intangible cultural heritage transmission and viability.

#### 1. Risks for intangible cultural heritage

The threats posed to intangible cultural heritage by climate change and related emergencies are multiple and connected to and compounded by other forms of emergency in complex ways. These threats can range from the immediate and absolute effects of major hazard disasters, resulting in the degradation, disappearance and destruction of places, practices and bearers, through to slower but equally dangerous processes such as habitat loss, increasing precarity of community livelihoods, and both in-migration and out-migration. However, the structured nature and inter-relationships of these risks are poorly understood and modelled.

The exercise and enjoyment of cultural rights and other related human rights guaranteed by international law provide a critical frame for the description and characterisation of climate change risk to intangible cultural heritage and is an important perspective to integrate in the development of the present Guidance Note on intangible cultural heritage and climate change.[[3]](#endnote-4)

**1.1 Loss or transformation of place and displacement**

Because many forms of intangible cultural heritage are profoundly based in place, threats to place are acutely dangerous for its viability.[[4]](#endnote-5) Attachment to place can be threatened either by loss of place, or by displacement of the community. Whether rapid (resulting from sudden-onset hazard disasters) or slow (such as habitat transformation or sea-level rise), the loss or transformation of built structures, spaces for practice and performance, resource environments and habitats, strikes deeply at livelihoods, identity and spirituality, and threatens the capacity of a community to reproduce itself and to ensure the transmission of its intangible cultural heritage to future generations.[[5]](#endnote-6) Displacement of a community and the loss of relevant social, spiritual and material contexts is broadly acknowledged as a paramount threat to the safeguarding and transmission of intangible cultural heritage, along with the impacts to the intangible cultural heritage of those communities hosting displaced communities.[[6]](#endnote-7)

Some of the consequences of loss of place and displacement include the loss of access to other members of the community, to ancestors, to familiar sites, spaces and landscapes, and to the materials required to reproduce intangible cultural heritage.[[7]](#endnote-8) Displacement uncouples communities from their social, material and environmental contexts and safety nets. Additional threats are then posed to intangible cultural heritage in resettlement or refugee locations, as well as through loss of access to markets, or the displacement of those markets. While these threats to intangible cultural heritage appear clear, the precise nature of the impacts of loss of place and displacement and their costs are not well understood. Components of intangible cultural heritage are certainly portable, but we need to understand how that intangible cultural heritage might be compromised or transformed in the process, and the balance between the negative and positive aspects of that transformation.

**1.2 Impacts to resources and livelihoods**

The ongoing transmission of intangible cultural heritage depends upon the wellbeing and cohesion of the bearer community and its sources of livelihood. Climate change-related impacts to the provision of health and education services, infrastructure, and employment, directly threaten communities and their capacity to resource, perform and transmit intangible cultural heritage. Limiting the impact of climate change-related threats to community livelihoods, including subsistence systems, foodstuffs and foodways, wild and domesticated plants and animals, market access and income generation in all its forms, is thus critical for the long-term transmission and viability of intangible cultural heritage.[[8]](#endnote-9)

**1.3 Research, intervention and aid as threats**

Well-intended interventions, including humanitarian aid and the involvement of state agencies and researchers, can pose a further ‘post-disaster’ threat to the integrity and viability of intangible cultural heritage. Disaster managers and humanitarian agencies, often with the support of state policies and research reports, can impact negatively on intangible cultural heritage through the provision of inappropriate assistance (foods, materials for shelter, etc.), the recommendation or implementation of displacement and eviction policies, and the undermining of local knowledge and resilience mechanisms. Specific knowledge of hazards and hazard management strategies derived from intangible cultural heritage is often extracted and used for the instrumental purposes of these external agents; such actions risk decontextualizing that knowledge from the contexts that make it meaningful to communities and that ensure its continued transmission.[[9]](#endnote-10)

**2. Roles for intangible cultural heritage**

Roles for intangible cultural heritage in relation to climate change consist of at least three broad kinds of action: 1) Identifying, assessing, monitoring and modelling climate change and its impacts; 2) Supporting societal and natural adaptation to climate change; and 3) Mitigating carbon emissions.

**2.1 Identifying, assessing, monitoring and modelling climate change and its impacts**

There is considerable scope for increased engagement between climate change impact research and local knowledge systems in identifying, assessing, and monitoring the effects of climate change on landscapes and seascapes at local and sometimes larger scales. Local Indicators of Climate Change Impacts (LICCIs) cover a broad spectrum of observations on local physical systems, including climatic, marine and terrestrial systems, fauna and flora, land cover and processes, and subsistence systems.[[10]](#endnote-11) Challenges remain, principally in relation to translation between qualitative observations and standardised scientific categories, the integration of data from multiple locations and local knowledge systems, and the need to grow the community of practice engaged in up-scaling local observations in a coordinated and systematic way.[[11]](#endnote-12)

There has been extensive discussion of the limits to confidence in weather and hazard prediction grounded in local knowledge systems, particularly given the evidence for changes in the variability of natural systems.[[12]](#endnote-13) Local predictions about storms and cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, and drought etc. are finely attuned to local conditions and local parameters for risk. The challenge lies not in assessing individual statements for accuracy, but rather in understanding how predictions grounded in local knowledge systems operate within each system of knowledge, and how they activate certain kinds of preparedness and response.

**2.2 Supporting societal and natural adaptation to climate change**

Much the largest role for intangible cultural heritage in climate action is its contribution to societal and natural adaptation to climate change, at all temporal scales from rapid-onset emergencies through to slow disasters and deep histories of adaptation. Local knowledge or intangible cultural heritage is engaged at every stage or phase of the emergency cycle, from preparedness through response to recovery, and local or community associations and systems of governance are central to the management at each stage. Amongst the adaptation activities to which intangible cultural heritage contributes are: emergency preparedness and response, early warning systems, water management, subsistence strategies, coastal marine and land management, alternative energy development, and the development and maintenance of sustainable livelihoods.[[13]](#endnote-14)

Preparedness requires an adequate and community-led process of inventorying intangible cultural heritage and bearers, documenting successful long-term adaptations to local environments and risks, and preserving a diversity of livelihood strategies and subsistence regimes. Intangible cultural heritage assists in pre-proofing or safeguarding structures, landscapes and resource areas against known risks, communicating appropriately and effectively about climate risk, and contributing collaboratively to risk reduction and climate change adaptation planning. Intangible cultural heritage also provides communities with the knowledge and skills for safeguarding, by distributing the risk of knowledge loss and ensuring the viability of a range of mechanisms for transmission.

In the response phase, locating knowledge bearers and identifying impacts to key resources, sites and spaces is essential in providing a platform for successful recovery. Intangible cultural heritage, drawn on by individuals, communities and local associations, plays a critical role in the recovery phase. It assists communities, whether they are in situ or displaced, in rebuilding social cohesion, fostering reconciliation and facilitating recovery, providing mutual assistance and social safety nets, distributing food and resources, and providing survivors with the sense of community and psychological support necessary for social integration. Culturally familiar and appropriate ceremonies and routines are a vital step towards recovering confidence and re-asserting a sense of identity; and community memory and assessment of emergency events and strategies informs future responses.

Intangible cultural heritage lies at the heart of community-based resilience and the recovery of livelihoods. Local knowledge of resources, skills and markets is critical to economic recovery, and underpins the all-important recovery of subsistence systems. While resilience is an over-used term, it is currently understood to refer not to restoring communities to their pre-disaster state, which would simply reproduce their earlier precarity, but to changing the basic structures of inequality that produce and reinforce vulnerabilities in the first place.[[14]](#endnote-15)

The fundamental community-based orientation of intangible cultural heritage provides a platform for developing models for community-based climate change adaptation, similar to those deployed in community-based disaster risk reduction. Likewise, the flexibility and dynamism of most intangible cultural heritage positions it well to collaborate and combine with other knowledge systems on an equal basis in meeting the challenges of climate change adaptation.

**2.3 Mitigating carbon emissions**

The scientific definition of mitigation relates solely to reduction in carbon emissions, and not the reduction of impacts from climate change. While UNESCO’s Strategy for Action on Climate Change (SACC) favours raising awareness of climate change and informing strategies for adaptation – ‘changing minds and not the climate’[[15]](#endnote-16) – there is considerable scope for intangible cultural heritage to contribute directly to mitigation. While local communities and Indigenous Peoples are rarely if ever major sources of carbon emissions themselves, the knowledge embedded in local and indigenous fire management regimes, low carbon agricultural heritage systems, and the management of natural carbon sinks can make a significant contribution to greenhouse gas reduction and has considerable potential for up-scaling.[[16]](#endnote-17)

**2.4 Alternative visions of climate change**

Climate change and climate-related hazards can in some cases also present opportunities – and not just threats – for intangible cultural heritage. Emergencies related to climate change are not inevitably or uniformly negative for intangible cultural heritage, but can instead stimulate practice, transmission and safeguarding in novel creative contexts. Where the loss of bearers, resources, places and community cohesion is not overwhelming in scale, emergencies can prompt the revival of interest in certain knowledge and practices, or their modification, or the emergence of entirely new expressions such as memorials or new forms of artisanal production. Emergencies can also promote heightened community and national reflection and discussion of the roles and potential of intangible cultural heritage, and lead to new or improved strategies for safeguarding. In this way, emergencies enable the emergence of new and often more resilient forms or versions of intangible cultural heritage.

**3. Modelling climate change risk for intangible cultural heritage**

Integrating both the positive and negative consequences of these different avenues for threat within an overall framework of climate change risk to intangible cultural heritage is a challenge. The capacity of a community to sustain the inter-generational transmission of its intangible cultural heritage is the basic requirement of viability, and the principal challenge for safeguarding is to support this ‘continuity of knowledge and skill’.[[17]](#endnote-18) Theories of emergency risk and vulnerability are particularly well developed in the field of disaster risk reduction research and policy, and offer a template on which a model or framework for the assessment of climate change risk to intangible cultural heritage might be generated.

Four key questions for modelling the effects of climate change on intangible cultural heritage need to be addressed: 1) How does the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage become vulnerable generally? 2) How is intangible cultural heritage vulnerable to the specific impacts associated with climate change and its compounding effects on other sources of risk? 3) Which safeguarding measures directly address these vulnerabilities? 4) How do these impacts affect the enjoyment of cultural rights and other internationally guaranteed human rights?

The 2003 Convention Secretariat’s 2017 report on ‘Safeguarding and Mobilising Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Context of Natural Hazards’ provides the outlines of one such model. Here, the vulnerability of intangible cultural heritage is understood in terms of the articulation (through expression, practice and performance) of communities, places and material resources, and knowledge. Threats to any of these components, or to the ability to articulate them constitute threats to transmission. In a modification of the formal definition of disaster risk, intangible cultural heritage emergency risk can be defined as a function of the interaction between the threat, understood in all of its dimensions, and the vulnerability of an intangible cultural heritage element, understood in terms of each of its modalities (communities, places and knowledge) and their articulation. A general model of climate change risk, which incorporates threats to all of the components of safeguarding, including practice, transmission, livelihood and place, would be important to design and implement adequate and appropriate safeguarding measures that can contribute effectively to climate change adaptation.

1. Reproduced in Living Heritage Entity 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For examples see Dekens 2007, Shaw et al (eds) 2008, Galloway McLean 2009, Nakashima et al. (eds) 2012, Hiwasaki et al. 2014, Nakashima et al. (eds) 2018, Reyes-García (ed.) 2024; see also the literature review and bibliography appendix, document LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4a. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Bennoune 2020, paragraph 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Adger et al. 2013, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Kim 2011; Henderson and Seekamp 2018; Aktürk and Lerski 2021; Pearson et al. 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Chatelard 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. ICOMOS Climate Change and Heritage Working Group 2019, Table 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. FAO 2015; FAO 2021; Dembedza et al. 2022; Deacon 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Kurin 2007, 12. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Reyes-García (ed.) 2024. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Reyes-García et al. 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Nakashima et al. (eds) 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Wagner (ed.) 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Kelman and Gaillard 2010, 29; Kelman et al. 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. Internal Oversight Service 202, 2.3, para. 42; UNESCO 2017b; 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Morel and Ammerveld 2021, Nikolakis et al. 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 61; see also ICCROM 2018, 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)