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

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

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**Terms and concepts**

#### TERMS AND CONCEPTS

This document introduces key concepts in the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and climate change, arranged as a series of propositions. ‘Climate change’ and ‘intangible cultural heritage’ are both relatively new terms and designated fields for action, even if the processes they describe have much deeper histories. Dialogue between these two new fields is even more recent. A necessary first step in considering how the fields might be brought into productive conversation with each other requires some clarity, on both sides, about the definition and scope of key terms. This review of basic definitions has important implications for the way we search for, understand, and integrate a wide range of important sources that might better inform us about the roles and risks for intangible cultural heritage in the context of climate change.

Section 1 introduces core concepts relating to intangible cultural heritage and explores how these might relate to the challenges of climate change adaptation. Section 2 then reviews understandings of climate change and the related concept of climate change adaptation, from the perspective of their potential to engage with questions of culture and heritage.

#### 1. Intangible Cultural Heritage

#### 1.1 Intangible cultural heritage is a broad and open-ended concept.

Intangible cultural heritage is defined in the 2003 Convention as ‘the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage’.[[1]](#endnote-2) The 2003 Convention places particular emphasis on the vertical or inter-generational and spatial transmission of intangible cultural heritage, its dynamism and its relationship to the environment, as the basis for individual and collective identity and continuity, systems of governance and values, sustainable development, and ‘respect for cultural diversity and human creativity’.

The importance of safeguarding is also stressed through the 2003 Convention, understood to include ‘measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage’.[[2]](#endnote-3)

Significantly, intangible cultural heritage encompasses both the knowledge and practices, processes of production and their products, the material spaces and resources, and the forms of communication, governance and transmission required to reproduce a community’s cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage is deliberately universal in conception, including the forms of knowledge and practice particular to urban and professional communities, as well as the historically deeper forms associated with Indigenous or traditional knowledge. It encompasses and embraces all of the practices and aspects associated with the different knowledge systems discussed below (¶2.9) but expands its scope to consider the ways in which they find expression in practice and performance, and their engagement both with environments and space, and with other forms of heritage.[[3]](#endnote-4)

#### 1.2 The dynamism of intangible cultural heritage is essential for adaptation.

Intangible cultural heritage or living heritage is characterised by its dynamism, with an emphasis on living knowledge and practices that draw on the past but address the future.[[4]](#endnote-5) Intangible cultural heritage is not an archive of past knowledge and practices, but a repertoire for present and future action, and a source of inspiration for adaptation.[[5]](#endnote-6) The historical persistence of intangible cultural heritage in changing environmental conditions signals this capacity for adaptation. Rather than being undermined or made irrelevant by changing climatic conditions, elements of intangible cultural heritage are powerfully capable of responding to future scenarios.[[6]](#endnote-7) However, some forms of intangible cultural heritage practised over long periods may also result in negative consequences when conditions alter radically under new and changing circumstances. Further attention to the dynamic processes through which intangible cultural heritage is produced, performed and transmitted will assist practitioners, professionals and States Parties in developing appropriate and effective safeguarding strategies, and in engaging more substantively with strategies for climate change adaptation.

#### 1.3 Adoption and integration of the concept and term of ‘Intangible cultural heritage’ is an ongoing process.

Although the term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ now features widely within policy across the cultural sector, the need for further extension and translation of the term and concept within the climate change sector is indicated by the recent Policymakers Summary for the Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report.[[7]](#endnote-8) While the Summary refers to the critical contribution to climate adaptation solutions of diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous and local forms of knowledge, no specific reference is made to either ‘intangible’ or ‘heritage’.

Twenty years after the 2003 Convention was adopted, neither the term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ nor the acronym ‘ICH’ are commonly used in public discourse or writing beyond the culture sector. In the literature and policy instruments relating specifically to disaster risk reduction and climate change, ‘intangible cultural heritage’ is largely invisible, even though recognisable elements of intangible cultural heritage form the basis of established strategies for community-based disaster risk management or CBDRM. In the broad heritage literature that addresses emergencies or climate change, intangible cultural heritage is referenced most frequently in the phrase ‘tangible and intangible’, often with little further elaboration. Where the term ‘cultural heritage’ is used, it tends to refer to built, monumental or other forms of tangible heritage, and rarely extends to discussion of intangible cultural heritage (see document LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4a). The recent renaming of the Secretariat of the 2003 Convention as the Living Heritage Entity signals a shift in terminology but remains untested in the marketplace of ideas or in public discourse.

#### 1.4 The 2003 Convention and the primacy of communities

The 2003 Convention’s insistence on the primacy and the agency of community is strongly emphasised by comparison with many of the actors involved in planning and implementing interventions in emergencies. There is a growing interest amongst many of these actors in the obvious importance of cultural heritage, and intangible cultural heritage in particular, both for an improved understanding of the communities they represent or work with and as a factor that can significantly limit or enhance risk.[[8]](#endnote-9) The experience and sensitivity of the 2003 Convention’s approach to community empowerment, its insistence on the ‘widest possible participation of the community… with their free, prior and informed consent’,[[9]](#endnote-10) and its commitment to ethical principles and respectful methods, as set out in the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, sets a standard for this form of engagement.[[10]](#endnote-11)

#### 1.5 Reaffirming the indivisibility of tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage.

The ‘deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage’ is acknowledged in the Preamble to the 2003 Convention. While there is broad acknowledgement across the cultural sector that tangible and intangible aspects of heritage are fundamentally indivisible, the distinction between them is constantly at risk of being reinstated through policies, instruments and practices.[[11]](#endnote-12) The claim that ‘all heritage is intangible’ is valid insofar as all forms of tangible and intangible heritage are identified, understood and safeguarded by communities or agencies under the terms of specific social and cultural conditions.[[12]](#endnote-13) But the complementary position also holds: that intangible heritage cannot exist in the absence of the tangible, whether in the form of artefacts, resources or places. Successful modelling of the role of intangible cultural heritage in climate change adaptation will depend upon a nuanced and adequate account of the ways in which the tangible and intangible draw upon and rely on each other in the constitution, practice and transmission of culture and cultural heritage. Within UNESCO, the ongoing conversation amongst Conventions around the indivisibility of tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage provides a necessary platform for the development of policies that might contribute to climate change adaptation. [[13]](#endnote-14)

#### 1.6 Intangible cultural heritage and climate change resilience

The 2003 Convention explicitly promotes recognition and enhancement of knowledge and practices that draw on intangible cultural heritage to reduce exposure to risk from disaster, food security and climate change, and to enhance social cohesion, resilience and recovery.[[14]](#endnote-15) Community-based resilience, which refers to the capacity of the community to accommodate and recover from the impacts of disasters and climate change, is strongly linked to the ability to practice and employ intangible cultural heritage. Successful collaboration in the management of disasters and climate change depends upon respectful integration of bearers and their knowledge within systems and programmes of disaster risk reduction, disaster recovery and climate change adaptation, even where the challenges are novel and not directly addressed by existing knowledge.

#### 2. Climate Change and Climate Change Adaptation

#### 2.1 Climate change is a global process, defined initially through science.

Although unprecedented global warming was detected in the late nineteenth century, the current concept of climate change dates only to the late 1970s, spreading amongst expert communities during the 1980s before gaining popular awareness during the early 2000s. Climate change does not refer to all persistent forms of change in the mean averages or variations of climate states. Instead, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate change as ‘a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods’.[[15]](#endnote-16) Anthropogenic or human-influenced climate change relates to the ongoing transformation in human experience of natural climatic variation.

#### 2.2 Actual human experience of climate change is always local.

Climate change is both a global process, understood largely through modern science, and the human experience of that change, which usually relates to the direct or indirect impacts of that change on specific locations and particular communities.[[16]](#endnote-17) We may have an abstract understanding of climate change as a global phenomenon, but our direct experience of it is likely to be practical and local, and the nature of climate change impacts will vary from one location to the next. Global media acts to communicate and extend our understanding of climate change beyond individual locations, but the local scale of experience of impacts is critical to the formulation of adaptive responses.[[17]](#endnote-18) As a place-based form of knowledge and practice, intangible cultural heritage that relates to particular local environments or to the management of specific impacts thus provides a highly relevant and significant resource for identifying and monitoring climate change impacts and documenting climate change adaptation strategies in the past and planning for future responses.

#### 2.3 Climate change impacts can be experienced either as a hazard emergency or slow onset transformation.

In most instances, our direct experience of climate change reflects either slow-onset changes in local environmental conditions, such as changes to seasonal cycles, plant and animal behaviour, or sea-level rise, or extreme climate-related events or meteorological hazard emergencies, such as flooding, drought, landslides or cyclones. Climate change can modify and exacerbate certain environmental transformations or hazards but the precise links between climate change and the changes in the frequency, intensity or distribution of these related impacts remain uncertain.[[18]](#endnote-19) Some researchers have proposed that climate change may even be linked to changes in non-meteorological hazards, such as volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and earthquakes.[[19]](#endnote-20) From the perspective of human experience, climate change is ‘one contributor to disaster risk amongst many’,[[20]](#endnote-21) acting as a force multiplier on other sources of risk such as poverty or conflict. Our responses to climate change risk need to be integrated within our approaches to risk reduction and management more generally. In particular, understandings of risk must now address the expanded temporal and global scope of risks introduced by climate change, and their capacity to cascade and compound with other sources or drivers of risk.

#### 2.4 Climate change adaptation is our response to climate change impacts.

Climate change adaptation is defined as ‘the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects in order to moderate harm or take advantage of beneficial opportunities’.[[21]](#endnote-22) Like disaster risk reduction, climate change adaptation ‘can be anticipatory or reactive, as well as incremental and/ or transformational.’[[22]](#endnote-23) Adaptation decisions are developed and adopted across a vast range of scales, from intergovernmental conventions through national policies to local, family-level and individual strategies.[[23]](#endnote-24) Central to the process of decision-making at each of these scales are considerations of institutional, national or local culture.[[24]](#endnote-25)

#### 2.5 Culture and history influence adaptive choices.

Climate change science alone cannot provide a total framework for understanding the vast complexity of the inter-related and often historical conditions that promote vulnerability to climate change, which have to be understood and addressed in modelling adaptation pathways at a regional or local level. Instead, culturally and historically informed approaches to risk are critical to successful adaptation policy, and the assumptions underpinning these attitudes need to be understood and integrated into policy.[[25]](#endnote-26) Local histories structure and provide socio-economic and political contexts, barriers and opportunities to a community’s approach to adaptation. Failure to adequately consider or accommodate the cultural, linguistic and historical dimensions of climate change adaptation can undermine the success of an initiative by ignoring the key strengths, vulnerabilities, concerns and aspirations of the communities involved.[[26]](#endnote-27)

#### 2.6 Climate change adaptation will be implemented largely by local or regional entities.

Strategies to combat the effects of the physical processes of climate change may be directed politically at national or global levels but are addressed on the ground largely by local agents.[[27]](#endnote-28) Limits to state knowledge, capacity and reach require regional or local communities, agencies and institutions to do much of the work of implementing climate change adaptation strategies. The knowledge concerns and practices of local communities, embedded in their living heritage, are thus critical to successful climate change adaptation. Best-practice models of the articulation of community-based decision-making and national action plans and policies from fields other than climate change adaptation are of direct relevance to climate change adaptation strategies.

#### 2.7 Emergency planning provides a useful framework for local climate change adaptation.

Over thousands of years, local knowledge has provided a frame for adaptation to both slow and rapid forms of environmental transformation, but planning for emergencies, including disaster risk reduction (DRR), is now a well-developed framework for responding to, recovering from, and preparing for more rapid onset forms of emergency. The focus of DRR planning on mapping and understanding vulnerability integrates a much broader range of contributing political, socio-economic and environmental factors than the specific drivers identified for climate change. XXIX [[28]](#endnote-29) Most communities do not single out climate change as an isolated challenge, but rather identify it as a force multiplier that compounds other challenges and heightens existing vulnerabilities.[[29]](#endnote-30) The strategies developed locally to reduce risk from disasters, which become embedded in the knowledge and practices that constitute the intangible cultural heritage of a community, may also be directly applicable to management of the local effects of hazard drivers such as climate change. [[30]](#endnote-31) Challenges posed to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage by conflict and epidemic disease overlap with the impacts of climate change, and can themselves be linked in some instances to climate change, but are not addressed within the present scope of the Guidance Note.

#### 2.8 Local knowledge is essential to risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

Disasters and emergencies in general unfold locally and strongly reflect local conditions for vulnerability. Knowledge of those vulnerabilities, relating to local environments, resources and networks, is also held locally, embedded within the intangible cultural heritage of individual communities. Effective risk reduction thus depends upon these local systems of knowledge, along with local systems of governance and organisation.[[31]](#endnote-32) Local strategies for the management of risk from non-meteorological hazards, including tectonic events (such as volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, or earthquakes) and human-induced hazards (such as nuclear or chemical accidents), are also relevant to the management of climate change risk. However, rapid-onset hazards, as well as the cumulative effects of slower-onset changes, may occasionally exceed the experience and overwhelm the capacity of local knowledge systems to respond and adapt.

#### 2.9 Local knowledge takes many forms.

Knowledge systems encompass all of the forms of knowledge, practice, belief, value and cosmology that enable a community to safeguard and reproduce itself and its cultural identity. Local knowledge is one form amongst a suite of experiential or local knowledge systems that overlap with each other, all of which are embedded within the wider scope of intangible cultural heritage or living heritage. These include local knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous technical knowledge, traditional knowledge, traditional ecological knowledge, urban knowledge, migrant knowledge, vernacular knowledge, tacit knowledge, endogenous ways of knowing, etc.[[32]](#endnote-33) Attempts to narrowly define or distinguish between these different knowledge systems vary widely. What all of these local knowledge systems share is a position of contrast with state, scientific, academic or other strongly codified knowledge systems.[[33]](#endnote-34) Where the science-based systems claim national or universal relevance, local systems tend to be grounded fundamentally in a specific sense of place or place-based identity; even where their practitioners are mobile, these local systems tend to refer and relate to particular locations, environments and communities.[[34]](#endnote-35) As systems that are often unwritten and may not be codified, these forms of knowledge are not easily quantified or made accessible to climate change science or policymaking. In seeking to extract information for the purposes of climate change adaptation or disaster risk reduction, individual elements of these local knowledge systems are often decontextualised, essentialised and instrumentalised, which can further contribute to their vulnerability and undermine future transmission.

#### 2.10 Climate change adaptation requires knowledge diversity, collaboration and respect.

Climate change presents a particularly complex set of problems, which cannot be understood or resolved from the perspective of a single knowledge system.[[35]](#endnote-36) As the IPCC acknowledges in its most recent Assessment Report, successful climate change adaptation will require collaboration amongst a large range of different, ‘plural’ or ‘diverse’ knowledge systems.[[36]](#endnote-37) Integration of the perspectives of these different knowledge systems is described as a process of ‘braiding’ or weaving’, rather than one of incorporation, hybridization or assimilation within or under the terms of a single dominant system, such as scientific knowledge.[[37]](#endnote-38) This respect for the plurality of knowledge systems must also extend to respect for their ownership and for the right of Indigenous peoples and local communities to represent and explain these systems in their own terms.

**2.11 Local knowledge systems can contribute to climate change mitigation.**

The IPCC definition of mitigation refers solely to actions that limit or reduce emissions of greenhouse gases or the presence of gases in the atmosphere, and not to the reduction of impacts from climate change: ‘Effective mitigation strategies require an understanding of mechanisms that underpin release of emissions, and the technical, policy and societal options for influencing these.’[[38]](#endnote-39) While much of the emphasis on local knowledge systems and climate change has focused on issues of monitoring and adaptation, these knowledge systems are already contributing significantly to climate change mitigation and have the potential to inform up-scaled strategies. Local communities and Indigenous Peoples are rarely if ever major sources of emissions, but the knowledge embedded in local and Indigenous fire management regimes, low carbon agricultural heritage systems, and the management of natural carbon sinks makes a significant contribution to greenhouse gas reduction and has considerable potential for up-scaling. Currently, the leading network for culture-based climate response is the Climate Heritage Network, which advocates for climate justice drawing on the potential of art, culture and heritage.

1. Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022, Art. 2.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022, Art. 2.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The nature of the contrast between intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge is addressed by Lixinski 2013, 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Kurin 2007, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Adger et al. 2013, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. IPCC 2023. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit 2019, paras. 28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022, Art. 1.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. The risk of repeating the opposition between tangible and intangible was noted throughout the early stages of development of the 2003 Convention, as for example at the 2001 Turin International Round Table (Nafziger 2020, 7; see also Luxen 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Smith 2015; Munjeri proposes that ‘the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible’ (2004, 13). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. UNESCO 2023b. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2022, VI.3.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. UNFCC 1992, Article 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Krupnik et al. 2018, 280. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Satterthwaite 2011; Lineman et al. 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. IPCC 2021, A3. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. McGuire 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Kelman et al. 2015, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. IPCC 2023, pp.5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. IPCC 2023, pp.5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Adger et al 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. ‘Culture is important for understanding both mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, and of course plays its part in framing climate change as a phenomenon of concern to society… the identification of risks, decisions about responses, and means of implementation are all mediated by culture’ (Adger et al. 2013, 112). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Adger et al. 2013, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Makondo and Thomas 2018, 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. Eriksen 2021, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Ford, Cameron et al. 2016, 350. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Mercer 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Hiwasaki 2017, 229. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. UNESCO 2017a, Priority 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. UNESCO (n.d.) provides the following definition: ‘Local and indigenous knowledge refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For rural and indigenous peoples, local knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of day-to-day life. This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality. These unique ways of knowing are important facets of the world’s cultural diversity, and provide a foundation for locally-appropriate sustainable development.’ For further discussion of definitions and distinctions between these local knowledge systems, see Raymond et al. 2010; Nakashima et al. 2018, 3; Reyes-Garcia et al. 2019; Orlove et al. 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Note that scientific and local knowledge systems are not entirely distinct from each other (Adger et al. 2013, 112). All expressions of knowledge combine scientific and local aspects: local knowledge systems incorporate elements of scientific knowledge, and scientific knowledge is itself profoundly cultural and inflected by local knowledge systems. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Henderson and Seekamp 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. ‘Scientific research on its own cannot even define the problem of climate change, let alone solve it’ (Orlove et al. 2022, 20); ‘There is no single knowledge system that is capable of addressing the complexity of the climate change problem… there is no single form of collaboration that will address each aspect of climate change in the wide ranges of cultures and landscapes around the world’ (Orlove et al. 2022, 34). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. Orlove et al. 2022, 51-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Tengö et al. 2017; Lazrus et al. 2022; Orlove et al. 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. IPCC Working Group II 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)