**CONVEN****TION FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE  
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

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

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**Online**

**Draft guidance note on living heritage and climate action**

**INTRODUCTION TO THE GUIDANCE NOTE**[[1]](#footnote-2)

**A. Scope of the Guidance Note**

1. This introduction provides high-level context for the Guidance Note on Living Heritage and Climate Action (‘the Guidance Note’), which addresses the relationship between climate change and living heritage from the perspective of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (‘the 2003 Convention’). The Guidance Note is directed broadly to the full range of intangible cultural heritage stakeholders, including practitioners, communities, professionals, heritage institutions and States Parties, as well as stakeholders in the fields of cultural heritage, climate change, emergencies and disaster risk reduction.[[2]](#footnote-3) States Parties to the 2003 Convention have a critical role to play in promoting strategies for enhancing safeguarding living heritage in the context of climate change and mainstreaming climate change into mitigation and/or adaptation strategies and programmes related to living heritage.
2. The Guidance Note has been developed as one of the thematic initiatives launched by the Secretariat of the 2003 Convention in 2021 on intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development. The thematic initiatives align with UNESCO's Draft Medium-Term Strategy for 2022–2029 ([41C/4](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000378083)), the Operational Directives of the Convention ([Chapter VI](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/ICH-Operational_Directives-9.GA-EN.docx)) and the decisions of the Intergovernmental Committee (Decisions [16.COM 5.b](https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/16.COM/5.B), [17.COM 13](https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/17.COM/13) and Decision [18.COM 12](https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/18.COM/12)). The Guidance Note also builds on recent calls for action on the safeguarding of living heritage in the context of climate change, including the [Final Declaration](https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/10/6.MONDIACULT_EN_DRAFT%20FINAL%20DECLARATION_FINAL_1.pdf) of the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT 2022), the [Seoul Vision](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/61291-EN.pdf)for the Future of Safeguarding Living Heritage for Sustainable Development and Peace, the [‘Spirit of Naples’ Call for Action](https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2023/11/UNESCO_CALL_FOR_ACTION_NAPLES.pdf) concerning cultural heritage in the 21st Century, the [Declaration](https://www.ichngoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DECLARATION-ON-THE-SAFEGUARDING-OF-INTANGIBLE-CULTURAL-HERITAGE-FOR-CLIMATE-ACTION-draft.14.28-05-24.pdf) on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Climate Action of the ICH NGO Forum and the [Emirates Declaration on Cultural-based Climate Action](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62fbf293c4912c5514ac3b2a/t/65789ec6b4318b54f27afa6e/1702403782880/Emirates+Declaration+on+Culture+Based+Climate+Action__FINAL.pdf).

**B. Development of the Guidance Note**

1. There are currently few global or international policies, guidelines or tools for culture that adequately address or promote the role of living heritage in the context of climate change. While a large body of literature and numerous instruments relating to climate change and different forms of local and Indigenous knowledge exist, they do not refer specifically to the role of living heritage from the perspective of the 2003 Convention. The 2003 Convention acknowledges the potential role of living heritage to strengthen community-based resilience to natural disasters and climate change in the [Operational Directives](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts-_2022_version-EN_.pdf) (Chapter VI.3.3) and the recently adopted Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies (2020). However, further guidance is needed to engage in and enhance dialogue between the fields of climate change and living heritage.
2. Preparation for this Guidance Note included: a wide-ranging literature review conducted to characterize what is essentially a new field for the 2003 Convention;[[3]](#footnote-4) a questionnaire issued to stakeholders of the 2003 Convention, including national authorities, accredited non-governmental organizations, category 2 centres and contact persons for elements inscribed on the Lists, with the substantial number of responses contributing to the definition of key challenges;[[4]](#footnote-5) and a desk review of policy frameworks that engage with both climate change and living heritage.[[5]](#footnote-6) The dossier of preliminary reports on this process has been subjected to extensive peer review.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**C. Terms and concepts**

1. Living heritage or intangible cultural heritage is defined by 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’.[[7]](#footnote-8) Living heritage encompasses practices along with forms of knowledge, the processes of production and their products, the associated environmental contexts, material spaces and resources, and the modes of governance and communication that communities use to practice their heritage and transmit it between generations or to other communities.[[8]](#footnote-9)
2. The 2003 Convention highlights the central role of communities in all safeguarding actions, emphasizing their primary role in practicing, adapting, and transmitting their living heritage to future generations.[[9]](#footnote-10) Living heritage is inseparable from the social, cultural and economic lives of communities and exists only in its enactment by the communities themselves. Each community determines the value of its own living heritage, and the social and cultural meanings that communities assign to their living heritage provide a foundation for their identity and wellbeing. The 2003 Convention places particular emphasis on the dynamism and flexibility of living heritage, as embedded in the notion of safeguarding, which recognizes the capacity of communities to transmit and recreate their living heritage in response to their environment, their interaction with local places, and their history. The concept of living heritage under the 2003 Convention, which is shaped by communities, dynamic and unrestricted by time and space, and embedded within various contexts, is well-suited to significantly contribute to three key responses to climate change: adaptation, mitigation, and safeguarding.
3. Living heritage presents a comprehensive or holistic concept of cultural practices and forms of knowledge that are recognized by communities as part of their intangible cultural heritage. Living heritage embraces and encompasses the full range of local knowledge systems, including Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous technical knowledge, urban knowledge, tacit knowledge and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). These local knowledge systems, and Indigenous knowledge in particular, have had a long and intensive engagement with science-based approaches to environmental transformation and climate change through programmes such as the UNESCO Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems ([LINKS](https://www.unesco.org/en/links)) programme, the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change ([IIPFCC](https://www.iipfcc.org/)), and the Local Indicators of Climate Change Impacts ([LICCI](https://www.licci.eu/)) project.
4. Climate change is indicated by detectable and persistent change in the average or variability of the climate. In Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) usage, climate change can result from either natural variability or human activity, while the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) addresses that component of climate change that can be linked either directly or indirectly to human activity, and that exceeds natural variability. The impacts of climate change on living heritage are multiple and diverse, consisting of both direct and indirect impacts, operating over a wide range of time scales from slow to rapid. These impacts also contribute to a complex and compounding series of other, non-climate threats and pressures, including conflict, disease, poverty and other forms of emergency, which act together to exacerbate critical risks for the viability of living heritage.
5. Climate change adaptation is defined by the IPCC as ‘the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects in order to moderate harm or take advantage of beneficial opportunities’; it ‘can be anticipatory or reactive, as well as incremental and/or transformational.’[[10]](#footnote-11) At every scale, adaptation decisions are influenced by considerations of institutional, national or local culture: ‘the identification of risks, decisions about responses, and means of implementation are all mediated by culture’.[[11]](#footnote-12) 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.’[[12]](#footnote-13)

**D. Roles and risks for living heritage in the climate emergency**

1. Living heritage has a dual function in all emergencies, including climate change. Living heritage can play an important positive role as a source of resilience, recovery, preparedness and prevention measures to manage and reduce vulnerability and exposure to risks associated with climate change, as well as in the mitigation of carbon emissions. At the same time, the viability of living heritage and its bearers, and the resources they require are also fundamentally at risk from or vulnerable to climate change impacts, either directly or from the multiplier effects of climate change on other conditions for vulnerability. Distinguishing clearly between these roles and risks, and understanding precisely how and when living heritage becomes vulnerable or can be harnessed as a positive force to address climate change-related challenges, are important areas for consideration in designing relevant policies and actions.[[13]](#footnote-14)
2. Living heritage can play a critical positive role in the climate emergency through: identifying, assessing and monitoring climate change; limiting climate-related impacts; promoting and facilitating societal and environmental adaptation to climate change; and contributing directly to the mitigation of carbon emissions. Living heritage also provides a crucial frame for new dialogue and exchange on climate change policy and insights with scientific knowledge systems. Drawing on the knowledge embedded in living heritage, observations of changes in local environments constitute a global monitoring network that covers almost every ecological zone. Profound engagement by communities with their local conditions over long periods of time has generated bodies of knowledge and techniques for identifying, assessing and monitoring change and impact, which are focused on community wellbeing and may be complementary to scientific knowledge. Living heritage informs all aspects of societal adaptation to climate change, as it does for social and environmental transformations more generally. Living heritage provides the means and the frames for identifying risk and preparing to limit impacts. It is a primary resource in the immediate response to emergencies, providing a platform for social, environmental and psychological recovery, the material and immaterial means for assistance and support to those impacted, and the rebuilding of social cohesion in the aftermath of emergency.
3. While climate change is a global phenomenon, its effects are highly variable around the world, and our experiences of its impacts and consequences are mostly local and specific to the conditions and vulnerabilities of particular places and communities. Living heritage that relates to changes in local environments or the site-specific management of impacts thus provides a highly relevant and significant resource for climate change adaptation strategies in the past and present, and for planning future responses. Practical experience of climate change at a local level can relate to localised or regional environmental change and weather extremes, as well as hazard emergencies such as floods, droughts or cyclones. A vast body of local knowledge and experience of these changes and hazards is increasingly informing risk reduction strategies.
4. Adaptation to climate change is both a process of adjustment to limit harm from a changing climate and a chance to identify and take advantage of new opportunities. Both aspects of climate change adaptation can be strongly influenced by living heritage: adaptive choices are influenced and shaped by local culture and history, as well as the values expressed by communities through their living heritage; and policies are largely implemented by local or regional agents operating under particular social and cultural conditions. Living heritage reflects social values, beliefs and worldviews that shape and reaffirm our relationship to the natural world, often fostering respect, custodianship and reciprocity. Creating and supporting the conditions for effective communication and learning from local communities and Indigenous Peoples will be an essential step in climate change adaptation strategies.
5. Climate change mitigation is an area of expanding interest in which living heritage already plays a significant role. Local communities and Indigenous Peoples are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, although they are rarely if ever major sources of emissions. 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.
6. The risks posed to living heritage by climate change and related emergencies range from the catastrophic degradation, destruction and disappearance of places, practices and practitioners to slower but equally dangerous processes such as habitat loss, disruption of knowledge transmission, increasing precarity of community livelihoods, and dislocation of populations. The often inter-connected and compounding nature of these specific risks to living heritage is poorly mapped and modelled. The loss or transformation of habitats, built structures, spaces for practice and resources strikes deeply at livelihoods, identity and spirituality. It threatens the capacity of a community to govern and reproduce itself and to ensure the transmission of its living heritage to future generations. Threats to place present an acute risk to the viability of living heritage, through either the loss of place or the displacement or out-migration of bearers. The displacement of a community and related loss of relevant contexts, regardless of cause and whether rapid or slow, is a paramount threat to living heritage transmission. Living heritage may travel with mobile or displaced communities, but the transformations involved in such processes are not well understood yet.
7. Climate change represents a threat to the stability and sustainability of the local livelihoods that enable community transmission of living heritage. Aspects of livelihoods under threat include subsistence systems, dwellings and habitats, cultural resources and raw materials, foodstuffs and foodways, wild and domesticated plants and animals, market access, diverse economies and income generation in all its forms.
8. Living heritage can also be threatened by responses to climate change and related emergencies. Even well-intended policies and assistance can undermine the practice and viability of living heritage through imposed interventions such as relocation, inappropriate aid and development policy, practice and provision, and the denigration of local knowledge systems or their selective use in formal risk reduction strategies.
9. Measures to integrate climate change issues and living heritage should be led by the communities concerned, assisted where necessary by different stakeholders, including national authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, and the private sector. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the field, and the diversity of stakeholders involved, policy guidance must be flexible in nature to accommodate the varying contexts, communities and types of intangible cultural heritage concerned. More specific guidelines, tools and case studies might then be developed based on the specific needs and contexts identified.

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**Guidance Note on living heritage and climate action**

Climate change is a largely irreversible and often destructive process already inflicting significant damage on the wellbeing and cultural heritage of communities, groups and individuals worldwide. Conventions and institutions charged with safeguarding tangible and intangible heritage face the dual challenge of developing and implementing plans that support communities to safeguard their heritage, while also drawing on that heritage as a resource for adaptation to changing environmental and social conditions, and the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions.

This Guidance Note is in line with the existing processes of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (‘the 2003 Convention’) without imposing new legal obligations on States Parties and does not aim to duplicate the mandate of any other multilateral agreements, frameworks, processes, or instruments. Key principles to be observed in this integration of living heritage and climate change include the 2015 Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, the 2017 UNESCO Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change, the 2018 UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples, and the 2020 Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies.

The Guidance Note suggests a holistic, rights-based approach to safeguarding living heritage for climate action in three key areas:

1. **Promote and enhance the role of living heritage in climate change adaptation**

Living heritage has a critical positive role to play in the adaptation of societies and environments to climate change and the management of its impacts through identifying, assessing and monitoring climate change; limiting climate-related impacts; and promoting and facilitating societal and environmental adaptation to climate change. Stakeholders of the 2003 Convention, particularly communities, are important mediators in climate adaptation processes. Appropriate mechanisms and forums that promote the role of living heritage in climate change adaptation and provide for new dialogue with scientific knowledge systems and exchange on strategies for climate change adaptation are crucial for realizing this potential.

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1. **Promote and enhance the role of living heritage in climate change mitigation**

Climate change mitigation is an important opportunity for local communities and Indigenous Peoples, who are rarely if ever major sources of emissions, to demonstrate the potential contribution of their knowledge and experience. Local and Indigenous fire management regimes, low carbon agricultural heritage systems, and the management of natural carbon sinks are demonstrated forms of mitigation. Stakeholders might wish to further promote the scope for learning from and scaling up this living heritage for mitigation.

1. **Improve measures for safeguarding living heritage in the climate emergency**

Living heritage has been an important source of resilience to both slow transformations in local environments and rapid-onset emergencies, and will prove vital for communities and the safeguarding of their heritage in the climate emergency. Understanding sources of vulnerability to climate change impacts for communities and their living heritage is a pressing priority to equip stakeholders with the knowledge and means to support and strengthen the necessary safeguarding measures.

1. ***Strengthen collaboration and partnerships with key stakeholders***

*The following points are presented to stimulate discussion and reflection, highlighting potential areas for action. On the basis of the Part I discussion, guidance under this section will be drafted for discussion during Part II.*

*Partnerships and synergies should be fostered between living heritage stakeholders, including communities, groups and individuals concerned as primary actors in safeguarding, and relevant institutions and actors relating to climate change.*

* *Strengthen synergies among UNESCO Culture Conventions and stakeholders working on cultural (tangible and intangible) and on natural heritage, as well as the cultural and creative industries;*
* *Address climate change adaptation within an emergency framework, including disaster risk reduction, conflict and pandemic disease;*
* *Deepen engagement amongst living heritage stakeholders, including bearers and practitioners, Indigenous Peoples, researchers, NGOs, institutions and States Parties;*
* *Invest in strategic partnerships both within and beyond the heritage and climate change sectors, including with relevant humanitarian and United Nations organizations;*
* *Develop, where appropriate, regional partnerships.*

1. ***Promote further research and case study development***

*All stakeholders are invited to foster research and case studies, notably those conducted by the communities and groups themselves, aimed at understanding the climate change dimensions of living heritage safeguarding under the 2003 Convention. Key areas for consideration:*

* *The vulnerability of living heritage safeguarding and transmission to climate change impacts;*
* *The interdependence of tangible and intangible forms of heritage in a climate change context;*

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* *The relationship between living heritage and livelihoods in the context of climate change;*
* *The integration of human and cultural rights frameworks into climate action for living heritage;*
* *Cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary research approaches and methodologies*
* *The challenges of climate change impact and possible dislocation to place-based forms of living heritage.*

1. ***Design and implement policy and advocacy***

*States Parties are encouraged to develop policy guidance for stakeholders at all levels on how best to integrate living heritage into strategies, plans and programmes for climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as for safeguarding in the context of the climate emergency.*

* *Adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures to:*
  + *Fully integrate communities, groups and individuals into systems and programmes of disaster risk reduction, disaster recovery and climate change adaptation and mitigation;*
  + *Promote access to knowledge concerning the earth and the climate that is recognized by communities, groups and in some cases individuals as part of their intangible cultural heritage, while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of it;*
* *Establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, with appropriate indicators, on the regional, national or sub-national level, in which communities and/or organizations are fairly represented, to determine the challenges faced by communities, groups and individuals regarding climate change adaptation, mitigation and safeguarding;*
* *Advocate for the role of living heritage in culture and heritage-based climate action, including in international discussions on climate change and in synergy with relevant international organizations, frameworks and mechanisms;*
* *Support the development of community-based observing systems and solutions for climate change mitigation and adaptation, based on living heritage knowledge, innovations and practices.*

1. ***Integrate climate change issues in living heritage safeguarding***

*All stakeholders, including communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals who should have the****primary role****in safeguarding their own intangible cultural heritage, are encouraged to integrate and mainstream climate change awareness into safeguarding plans and measures at all levels.*

* *Identify the roles and risks for living heritage in the climate emergency, including through community-led research, inventories and (if appropriate) nomination files under the Convention;*
* *Collect data and information about the potential impacts of climate change on the safeguarding and transmission of living heritage through monitoring mechanisms and periodic reporting under the Convention;*
* *Integrate into living heritage inventories, as provided for in the 2003 Convention, of information on the potential vulnerability of living heritage to climate change, as well as the mitigation capacity of these elements;*

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* *Inclusion in the safeguarding plans of specific elements measures to address the potential vulnerability of elements to climate change impacts as well as measures to enhance and engage their mitigation capacity;*

1. ***Build capacity through training and advisory services***

*The delivery of training and advisory services should be promoted to enhance capacity and understanding of all stakeholders for implementing holistic, rights-based approaches to safeguarding living heritage for climate action.*

* *Support and facilitate capacity development, networking and sharing of experiences within and among communities, about addressing the impact of the climate emergency on living heritage, as well as its roles in adaptation and mitigation;*
* *Expand the scope of existing training programmes and courses on both climate change and culture to integrate living heritage and climate change perspectives;*
* *Develop training and information courses, ranging from basic principles on living heritage in the context of climate change, addressed to the full range of stakeholders, through to flexible modules that target particular groups and needs;*
* *Foster national forums, networks and alliances, based on strategic alliances between regional UNESCO offices, national heritage, emergency and climate change institutions and agencies, and practitioners and communities;*
* *Enhance education and awareness-raising through the integration of climate change and living heritage topics into formal and non-formal educational programmes at various levels;*
* *Create of online platform / database of case studies and experiences to share information on policies, plans and programmes integrating living heritage and climate change adaptation and mitigation.*

1. This Guidance Note was prepared by the consultant Chris Ballard, in collaboration with the UNESCO Living Heritage Entity and with inputs from the Peer Review Panel on climate change and intangible cultural heritage safeguarding. It is presented as a preliminary draft for the purpose of discussion and review. The content does not necessarily reflect the institutional views of UNESCO and is subject to revisions based on peer feedback. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A series of background documents (LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4a-f) provides further context and detail for the issues addressed in this Introduction and in the Guidance Note. Sources referred to here and elsewhere in the background documents are listed together in LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4a. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4e. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Significant input through the peer review process was received from Ibidun Adelekan, Gül Aktürk, Greg Bankoff, Karima Bennoune, Nigel Crawhall, Ginbert Permejo Cuaton, Harriet Deacon, Sandra Fatorić, James D. Ford, Rahul Goswami, Qunli Han, Kristen Hausler, Lisa Hiwasaki, Cornelius Holtorf, Susan Keitumetse, Lucas Lixinski, Barbara Mínguez García, Victoria Reyes-García, Andrea Richards-Cummins, and Getachew Senishaw. The content of the present Guidance Note and associated materials does not necessarily reflect the views of individual peer reviewers. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Article 2.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4c. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. In this Guidance Note, the term ‘communities’ is understood to refer to ‘communities, groups and where applicable, individuals’, as in the texts of the 2003 Convention. However, differences in context, and in the specificity of the positions and interests of individuals and groups within different communities, including Indigenous Peoples, should be recognized. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. IPCC 2023, 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Adger et al. 2013, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/downloads/faqs/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_FAQ_Chapter_01.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See LHE/24/EXP THEMA-CLIMA/4d. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)