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

**Expert meeting on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts**

**16 – 17 June 2025 (Part I)**

**UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**18 – 19 September 2025 (Part II)**

**Online**

**Background**

1. **Introduction**
2. The world’s urban population is increasing at an exponential rate, making urbanization one of the most transformative global trends. It is rapidly shaping the way humans live and interact, presenting urban planners with many human, environmental and spatial challenges, as well as opportunities. This is the case not only in cities, but in their surrounding areas such as semi-rural or peri-urban, smaller, and evolving urban clusters. In many of these environments, multiple communities converge with different cultures and backgrounds, enacting a diverse range of cultural expressions and practices that co-exist. In other words, urban heritage needs to be considered not only in terms of its built or material forms, but through the living uses and practices in cities and how they are situated in urban spaces.
3. At the same time, a common challenge across borders is the lack of dedicated strategies that recognize and safeguard intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts. In response to this need, the governing bodies of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has launched a thematic initiative (along with two other themes) on the topic of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts (Resolution [9.GA 6](https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/9.GA/6) as well as 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 [18.COM 12](https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/18.COM/12)). Most recently, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Decision [19.COM 11](https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/19.COM/11)) has invited the Secretariat of the 2003 Convention to organize an expert meeting with a view to develop a guidance note to support the efforts of States Parties and other stakeholders in this field.
4. These thematic initiatives align with global efforts advocating for culture’s role in fostering peace, innovation, development and well-being, notably at the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development – [MONDIACULT 2022](https://www.unesco.org/en/mondiacult2022), and the meetings of the Group of Twenty ([G20](https://www.unesco.org/en/g20)) and the Group of Seven ([G7](https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-welcomes-g7-declaration-culture-ministers)). Recently, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the ‘[Pact for the Future](https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/272/22/pdf/n2427222.pdf)’, which calls on States to, inter alia, ensure that culture can contribute to more effective, inclusive, equitable and sustainable development, as well as integrate culture into their economic, social and environmental policies. Building on this momentum, the thematic initiatives of the 2003 Convention seek to provide guidance for stakeholders of the Convention on integrating living heritage in social, environmental and economic policies for a more inclusive and sustainable future.
5. The present document[[1]](#footnote-1) seeks to outline main issues succinctly to support the expert consultation on the topic of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts. As part of the preparation, an online survey was also undertaken (see also document [LHE/25/EXP THEMA-URBAN/INF.3](https://ich.unesco.org/en/expert-meeting-on-urban-contexts-01405) for survey results).
6. **Intangible cultural heritage for sustainable urban development**
7. **Sustainable urban development** can be defined as ‘the spatial manifestation of urban development processes that creates a built environment with norms, institutions and governance systems enabling, individuals, household and communities to maximize their potential and optimize a vast range of services’ ([UN Habitat](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/groupb_unhabitat_suscities.pdf)). In other words, sustainable cities are planned, built, and managed to maintain environmental quality, support socioeconomic development, and safeguard the quality of life, needs and livelihoods of their present and future populations.
8. In terms of process, **urban planning** includes the design and regulation of the uses of spaces and their physical forms (built and natural), encompassing proposed economic functions, resource and environmental conservation strategies and zoning areas (residential, industrial, commercial, cultural, leisure). Most urban planning focuses on functional, socioeconomic and environmental structures, without targeting in-depth questions of how spatial organization and management can impact communities’ intangible cultural heritage, and which actions are required to ensure that cities facilitate the ongoing transmission of intangible cultural heritage as a crucial component of social well-being.
* Traditional knowledge and cultural practices related to local flora and fauna and ecosystems, for instance, can contribute to the sustainability of the ecological structure of cities (which are related to the connectivity of natural areas and corridors, risk management, rural development and environmental sustainability).
* The functional structure of cities is key for the transmission and viability of intangible cultural heritage. Examples of this include transportation and mobility systems (circulation in cities), public spaces, public services and utilities, as well as other urban facilities of the built environment (roads, railways and other transport hubs, waterways, pedestrian lanes and other spatial connectors).
* Similarly, the socioeconomic structure of cities (which relates to planning for greater economic efficiency in terms of productivity, employment, housing, attractiveness of the city as a destination for investment, amongst others) can contribute to ensuring social inclusion and reduced inequality; for example, through equal access to health and education and fair income irrespective of age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other statuses, which are key drivers of well-being and quality of life in cities.
* The historical and built heritage structure may be treated as an imperative element in the structuring of an urban plan, notably with regard to gazetted historical monuments or districts which bring significant social and economic value to cities.
1. Urban planning affects all dimensions and characteristics of cities. It shapes, to various degrees, how people live and use the space around them. As such, urban planning can have a direct impact on sustainable development, if uses of space and resources are proposed in ways that lead to more equitable socio-economic impacts, and the durable use of resources.
* It is important to understand that while intangible cultural heritage is fragile in the face of inadequate or unsuitable urban planning provisions, it has the potential to contribute positively to the function of the city.
* Urban planning can facilitate the safeguarding of living heritage by considering communities’ and practitioner needs in terms of spatial organization.
* Given how intangible cultural heritage can contribute to greater social cohesion and well-being as well as to livelihoods, it is essential that communities’ views and participation is sought in urban planning processes.
1. **Frameworks related to sustainable urban development**

2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. For the purposes of the 2003 Convention, **intangible cultural heritage** (or living heritage) covers a range of domains, including oral expressions such as poetry and song, performing arts such as dance and theatre, social practices, including rituals and festive events, and crafts and knowledge related to nature and the universe, encompassing agricultural practices and fisheries. These forms of knowledge and practice are typically enacted and transmitted by communities, groups or individuals (hereafter “communities”), which they consider as part of their living heritage.
2. Chapter VI of the 2003 Convention’s Operational Directives (Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development at the national level) requires States Parties to acknowledge the dynamic nature of intangible cultural heritage in both urban and rural contexts, while endeavouring to recognize the importance and strengthen the role of intangible cultural heritage as a driver and guarantee of sustainable development (paragraph 170). This also includes the key role of intangible cultural heritage in other aspects of sustainable development in urban contexts, such as food security, water management systems, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability amongst others.

Other UNESCO frameworks and programmes

1. The Recommendation on the [Historic Urban Landscape](https://whc.unesco.org/en/hul/) (UNESCO, 2011; hereafter ‘HUL Recommendation’) under the 1972 World Heritage Convention proposes a vision in which urban development and heritage conservation complement each other. With a focus on the protection of historic areas, the Recommendation recalls the need to safeguard urban heritage, including both tangible and intangible aspects, to achieve a balance between urban growth and quality of life, improve the productive and sustainable use of urban spaces and promote social and economic development. As a point of clear synergy with the 2003 Convention, the HUL Recommendation highlights the need to promote community participation in decision-making, yet it does not mention the contribution of the intangible cultural heritage into urban planning or the need to integrate it in the urban planning processes.
2. The [UNESCO Creative Cities Network](https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities) was created in 2004 to promote cooperation with and among cities that have identified creativity as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. The 350 cities around the world which currently make up this network work together towards a common objective placing creativity and cultural industries at the heart of their development plans at the local level and cooperation actively at the international level. The network represents eight creative fields: architecture, crafts and folk art, design, film, gastronomy, literature, media arts and music. It should be noted that, in many cases, these cities have living heritage at the centre of their creative and cultural industries.

Other UN frameworks

1. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities recalls the importance of safeguarding cultural heritage for sustainable development. In this regard, countries have committed to ‘making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’ and, specifically, within this goal, Target 11.4 aims to ‘strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage’. Under this overall international framework, the New Urban Agenda (2016) aims to make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable and notably calls for the inclusion of ‘culture as a priority component of urban plans and strategic development policies that safeguard the tangible and intangible cultural heritage and landscape’ and to ‘protect them from the potential disruptive impacts of urban development’. Furthermore, this agenda shares a vision of ‘cities for all’, referring to the equal use and enjoyment of cities and human settlements, echoing the principles previously laid out in the World Charter for the Right to the City, a civil society initiative that emphasizes the promotion of human rights, equity and the participation of all stakeholders in shaping urban spaces. In addition, several UN frameworks and guidelines make reference to the importance of culture and cultural heritage and their spatial dimensions – such as ‘[Urban Planning for City Leaders](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/UN%20Habitat%20UPCL%2014-02624%20-%20Combine.pdf)’ (UN Habitat, 2014); the [International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/IG-UTP_English.pdf) (UN Habitat, 2015) and ‘[Our City Plans](https://ourcityplans.org/)’ (UN Habitat, 2024).
2. **Considerations for incorporating intangible cultural heritage in urban planning**
3. Some **benefits** for incorporating intangible cultural heritage into urban planning include a strengthened sense of identity and belonging to a community or place; a means of sustainable livelihood, the protection of local economies; and strengthened inter-generational communication through the practice of intangible cultural heritage. Other benefits may include enhanced intra and inter-community tolerance, including increased respect for cultural diversity and mutual understanding, and in some cases environmental protection, climate change adaptation and risk preparedness against disasters, as it relates to specific knowledge, traditions and practices of communities with ecological or environmental understanding or coping mechanisms.
4. Inversely, the **threats** to the living heritage of communities living in fast-evolving urban contexts are numerous and varied. The most significant of these is the intervention or physical modification of public spaces in which intangible cultural heritage practices are traditionally expressed (such as markets, bazaars for local trade and craftsmanship), which can have direct and visible consequences. Economic engagement of communities in urban contexts brings out specific threats to the practice of intangible cultural heritage, such as over-commercialization and decontexualization. Other overarching threats can include population mobility, fragmented social structures, rapidly changing lifestyles and waning interest in living heritage among youth, and the displacement of communities due to gentrification and rising costs, among other factors.
5. In terms of **challenges**, while there is growing understanding and recognition of intangible cultural heritage amongst urban planners, the lack of awareness among decision-makers as to how to identify the needs and benefits of intangible cultural heritage remains a critical issue. In general, intangible cultural heritage is not given prominent consideration in urban planning, except in contexts where it has the potential for income generation, such as tourism. Other challenges include fostering effective coordination between the cultural and urban planning sectors, as well as balancing the need for new infrastructure/amenities with the protection of existing cultural precincts, public spaces and buildings that are conducive to the practice and transmission of traditions, knowledge and practices of communities, alongside the demands of profit-driven investment.
6. In terms of **key planning areas or domains** where the integration of intangible cultural heritage into urban plans would be relevant, the following can be noted: historical and built heritage areas, public spaces, public facilities, and ecological and transport corridors.
7. **Key actors and stakeholders**
8. Urban planning approaches, strategies and regulations vary significantly between cities, regions, and countries. Depending on the scale of an urban plan, national authorities at different levels may be involved (with mandates that span housing, the environment, infrastructure, transport and urban development, among others). Smaller plans for urban areas - often referred to as ‘master plans’ within broader urban planning strategies - usually involve more localised agencies and leaders and may also involve private investment associated with specific urban development or regeneration processes.
9. With regards to urban planning that risks altering residential areas or public spaces, communities tend to form organised groups to advocate for their interests. In some cases, non-governmental organizations, associations or specialised agencies may represent less-established groups (such as migrant communities) or voice their concerns about planning decisions that may impact specific practices, places of worship or activities. In addition, academic institutions and technical specialists - such as urban planners, engineers, architects, economists, sociologists, anthropologists and geographers and intangible cultural heritage experts - provide multidisciplinary advice and support on matters concerning urban planning and development processes. They often conduct technical studies to inform planning, policy and decision-making, handle planning applications for regulatory requirements, prepare design briefs, and evaluate the socioeconomic impacts of urban plans.
10. **Examples of methodologies, tools and case studies**
11. In parallel with the thematic initiative at hand, a notable recent development has been the development of a capacity-building approach, collaboratively created by an expert in intangible cultural heritage and an urban planning specialist. This training programme focuses on the relationship between safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable urban development, explores synergies with key policy frameworks in the areas of heritage and urban development, and provides a selection of practical tools for the effective integration of living heritage within urban contexts.
12. This approach was developed in the context of a regional project entitled ‘**Latin America and the Caribbean: Strengthening Capacities for Resilient Communities through Sustainable Tourism and Heritage Safeguarding**’, which involves ten countries from the region. The capacity-building approach, relying on intersectoral collaboration, is being reviewed by country expert teams through an online training course that was organized in the first half of 2025. This process draws on the teams’ dual expertise, which combines intangible cultural heritage and urban development at the national level. Based on their input, the training materials are currently being finalized (accessible through the [dedicated webpage](https://ich.unesco.org/en/events/training-of-trainers-on-living-heritage-and-sustainable-urban-development-01026)) and the approach is being rolled out across the participating countries in close collaboration with the Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination and the Central American Integration System (CECC/SICA).
13. The training materials include the following set of case studies (available in English and Spanish for the time being) which may provide insights when preparing the guidance note on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding in urban contexts:

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| **Case study 1** | Singapore master plan (Singapore) | [English](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Case_study_%28CS%29_1._Singapore_EN.docx) | [Spanish](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Estudio_de_caso_%28EC%29_1._Singapur_ES.docx) |
| **Case study 2** | Territorial plan 2022-2025 ‘Bogotá Reverdece’ (Bogotá, Colombia) | [English](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Case_study_%28CS%29_2._Bogota%2C_Colombia_EN.docx) | [Spanish](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Estudio_de_caso_%28EC%29_2._Bogot%C3%A1%2C_Colombia_ES.docx) |
| **Case study 3** | Bo-Kaap local spatial development framework (Cape Town, South Africa) | [English](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Case_study_%28CS%29_3._Cape_Town%2C_South_Africa_EN.docx) | [Spanish](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Estudio_de_caso_%28EC%29_3._Ciudad_del_Cabo%2C_Sud%C3%A1frica_ES.docx) |
| **Case study 4** | Conservation management plan (As-Salt, Jordan) | [English](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Case_study_%28CS%29_4._As-Salt%2C_Jordan_EN.docx) | [Spanish](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/Estudio_de_caso_%28EC%29_4._As-Salt%2C_Jordania_ES.docx) |

1. The background information that formed the basis for this document was collated by Ms Maria Claudia Lopez (Colombia) and Mr Fernando Granados (Mexico), who benefitted from advice and comments from the following experts: Emily Drania Drani, Gabriela Lopez, Hani Hayajneh, Hanna Schreiber, Julia Rey Perez, Kelvin Kah Eng, Luc Maes, Lui Tam, Marlene Phillips and Ruth Wanjuku. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)