



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Intangible
Cultural
Heritage

NGO

ITH/18/NGO/1
Paris, 6 September 2018
Original: English

Reflection on the role of accredited non-governmental organizations within the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

7 September to 19 October 2018

Electronic consultation / Background note

The aim of this electronic consultation is to solicit experiences and observations concerning the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the implementation of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (thereinafter referred to as ‘the Convention’) under the current accreditation system and gather ideas on:

- *potential advisory functions that accredited NGOs could fulfil for the governing bodies of the Convention (General Assembly of States Parties and the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage),*
- *potential functions that accredited NGOs could fulfil in the implementation of the 2003 Convention at the national level,*
- *the evolution of the accreditation system of NGOs, and*
- *the role of the ICH NGO Forum.*

At the request of the Intergovernmental Committee, the informal ad hoc working group of the Intergovernmental Committee and UNESCO are initiating, in cooperation with the ICH NGO Forum, a reflection on the possible ways in which the participation of NGOs under the Convention could be further enhanced and how this would be reflected in the accreditation and renewal mechanisms of NGOs (Decisions [12.COM 13](https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/12.COM/13)¹ and [12.COM 17](https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/12.COM/17)²). This electronic consultation from September to October 2018 represents the first step in the reflection process that is foreseen to lead up to the fourteenth session of the Intergovernmental Committee in December 2019.

I. Current situation of accredited non-governmental organizations

Brief background on the current accreditation system

Article 9 of the Convention requires that the Committee propose to the General Assembly the accreditation of non-governmental organizations with recognized competence in the field of intangible cultural heritage to act in an advisory capacity to the Committee. The current accreditation system of NGOs was established at the second session of the General Assembly of States Parties in 2008. Since then, five cycles of accreditation (2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018) and two cycles of reviewing the accreditation status of NGOs (2015 and 2017) have taken place. Over eight years, a total of 231 NGOs were accredited, 55 of which saw their accreditation terminated after the quadrennial review by the Intergovernmental Committee of their contribution and commitment to the implementation of the Convention.

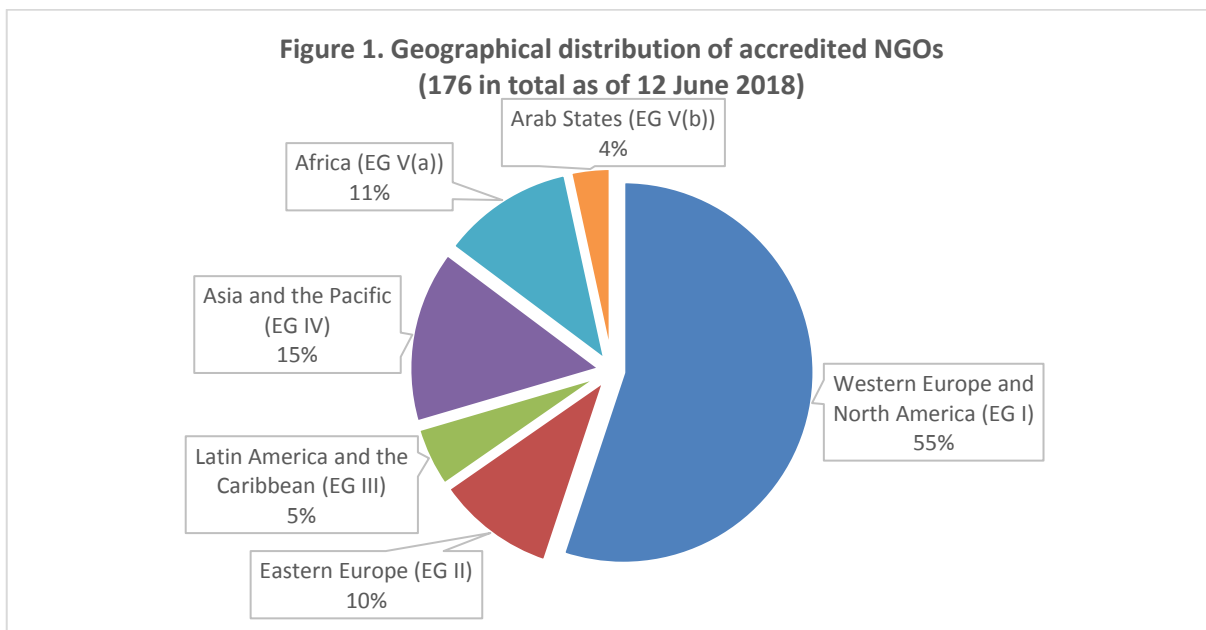
¹ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/12.COM/13>

² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/12.COM/17>

Profile of accredited non-governmental organizations

As of June 2018, there are 176 NGOs accredited to provide advisory services to the Committee. The geographical representation of these NGOs is as follows:

- Western Europe and North America (Group I): 97;
- Eastern Europe (Group II): 18;
- Latin America and the Caribbean (Group III): 9;
- Asia and the Pacific (Group IV): 26;
- Africa [Group V(a)]: 20; and
- Arab States [Group V(b)]: 6, as also illustrated below:



Role of non-governmental organizations in the Convention and Operational Directives

The [Convention](#)³ encourages State Parties to work with ‘communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations’ in its inventorying efforts (Article 11(b)). Beyond, the [Operational Directives](#)⁴ foresee a number of ways in which NGOs may be involved in the safeguarding of living heritage at the national and international levels. These include:

- the participation in the evaluation of nominations to the Lists of the Convention, proposals to the Register of Good Safeguarding practices and International Assistance requests, as well as of the effects of safeguarding plans for elements inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (Paragraphs 27 and 96 of the Operational Directives) ;
- the implementation of the Convention at the national level (Article 15 of the Convention);
- the contribution to the preparation of States’ periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention at the national level and on the status of elements inscribed on the Lists of the Convention (Paragraphs 151, 157 and 160 of the Operational Directives);
- the development of scientific studies aimed at understanding the contributions of intangible cultural heritage to sustainable development and its importance as a resource for dealing with development problems (Paragraph 175 of the Operational Directives).

³ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

⁴ https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/ICH-Operational_Directives-7.GA-PDF-EN.pdf

In addition, several decisions of the Intergovernmental Committee specifically refer to the role of NGOs, for instance concerning the issue of ethical concerns in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage ([Decision 10.COM 15.a](#)⁵).

II. Challenges for the participation of NGOs in the implementation of the Convention at the international level

While the important role of NGOs in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage has been underlined by the governing bodies of the Convention, as well as in the 2013 evaluation of the Convention carried out by UNESCO's Internal Oversight Service ([Document IOS/EVS/PI/129 REV](#)⁶), the specific ways in which NGOs can be involved in the life of the Convention at the international level have not been clearly and extensively defined. Both States and NGOs have on several occasions regretted the lack of opportunities for NGOs to leverage their expertise, their experience and their reach among communities, in the work of the governing bodies of the Convention. Stemming from this realization, the Secretariat has identified the following several challenges that seem to impede the involvement of non-governmental organizations:

Which advisory functions?

Despite the provisions of the Operational Directives and in particular the mention of advisory functions to the Committee (Paragraph 96), the actual participation of NGOs in the work of the Committee has so far been limited to the work of the Evaluation Body, in the sense of paragraph 27 of the Operational Directives, involving only six NGOs, each elected from each of the Electoral Groups of UNESCO. In other words, the Committee has not yet elaborated on what other advisory functions – mentioned as *inter alia* – it wishes to request of the accredited NGOs. This in turn means that, for the majority of the accredited NGOs, they have not been concretely involved with the work of the Committee, notwithstanding their enthusiasm to contribute to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Which NGOs?

Based on the experience accumulated in the past eight years, there seems to be at least two types of accredited NGOs. On the one hand, there are a certain number of NGOs that are willing and able to participate in the evaluation or monitoring of various mechanisms of the Convention. On the other hand, there are a number of organizations whose primary focus and expertise relate to the operational safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in various contexts, without necessarily wishing or having the competence to participate in the statutory work of the Committee, such as evaluation and monitoring. The current accreditation system does not fully tap into the potential of either type of NGOs, even though they could play a significant role in advocating for the 2003 Convention at different levels.

How to identify relevant NGOs?

The current mechanism, especially the criteria used, for evaluating the accreditation and renewal of NGOs may need to be revised if the Convention were to grow further and to involve partners with diverse profiles. A weakness in the current system partly relates to the asymmetry seen in the criteria; while accreditation requests are evaluated against administrative and legal status of the organizations together with the description of their activities, renewals are conditional on the contribution of the NGOs to the statutory activities of the Committee and the activities carried out at the bilateral, sub-regional, regional or international levels. In other words, the basis for examining renewals of accredited NGOs is not the same as that used for their accreditation.

⁵ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/decisions/10.COM/15.A>

⁶ <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/IOS-EVS-PI-129-REV.-EN.pdf>

How to coordinate the participation of NGOs?

The accredited NGOs are invited to participate into a consortium called the ICH NGO-Forum, which was established in 2010 to provide a platform for NGOs accredited under the 2003 Convention. In terms of its structure, an important milestone was reached in 2015 with the appointment of a steering committee of six persons, one from each of the six regions corresponding to the Electoral Groups of UNESCO, who act as contact persons for the NGOs and for the activities of the Forum in their respective regions. The ICH NGO-Forum has also started to undertake thematic activities, with a focus, for example, on sustainable development and intangible cultural heritage or on the ethical conduct of NGOs, which are closely aligned with the development of the Convention. Their activities are reported during the Convention's Intergovernmental Committee meeting and, in recent years, its members have met for plenary sessions on the margins of the Committee meeting. While the ICH NGO-Forum faces a number of challenges, notably in terms of its own financial and operational sustainability, the consortium might present assets for the implementation of the Convention through its various activities at the local, regional and international levels.

NGOs from which region?

The imbalance in terms of the geographical representation of the accredited NGOs has been a persistent problem, with a heavy representation of organizations from Western Europe on the one hand and only six accreditations from the Arab region on the other. In other regions, large numbers of NGOs are known to be active in the field of intangible cultural heritage, but the actual number of submissions for accreditation requests has been moderate. In addition to the General Assembly's encouragement for such qualified NGOs to request accreditation, especially from countries and regions that have less representation and participation (Resolutions [6.GA 8](#)⁷ and [7.GA 11](#)⁸), it is important to explore practical methods to redress such disparity.

Who to ensure the continuity of the accreditation system?

For both the accreditation and the renewal mechanisms, the Secretariat collectively reviews each file against the criteria set out in the Operational Directives, helps the organizations to provide any missing information, if necessary, prepares recommendations to the Committee and transmits the decisions of the Committee to the organizations. The volume of work has become considerable since 2015, when the Committee started to review the contributions and commitments of the advisory organizations. For instance, a total of 101 accredited NGOs are expected to submit their quadrennial report in 2019 on their work in the past four years so that the Committee could decide on maintaining or terminating their accreditation.

III. Way forward

In light of the challenges mentioned above, it becomes clear that the ways in which accredited NGOs can provide advisory services to the Committee needs to be re-thought. With this in mind, the questionnaire addressed to States Parties and accredited NGOs (Document ITH/18/NGO/2) aims to gather ideas to define the future of accredited NGOs in the life of the 2003 Convention. Comments and suggestions will feed the reflection on the advisory functions that accredited NGOs will fulfil in the future and on the necessary changes that need to be implemented to facilitate these advisory functions.

⁷ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/6.GA/8>

⁸ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/Decisions/7.GA/11>