Unit 8

Intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development

Participant's text

This unit is about intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and sustainable development. The subjects covered in the unit are:

* Culture in the post-2015 international debate and in the United Nations' ‘Transforming our world: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’;
* Intangible cultural heritage as a guarantee of sustainable development;
* The issue of how to align commercial activities with ICH safeguarding activities – some thoughts on the risks to ICH viability and how to mitigate them;
* Moving towards a mutual relationship between ICH safeguarding and development policies.

Some of the key concepts from the Convention that are used in this unit are explained in the Participant's Text for Unit 3, which is devoted to key concepts from the Convention such as ‘sustainable development’, ‘intellectual property’, ‘threats and risks to safeguarding ICH’, ‘commercialization’ and ‘decontextualization’.

8.1 Introduction

The concept of ‘sustainable development’ lies at the heart of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the preamble to which acknowledges ‘the importance of intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development’. Article 2.1 of the Convention, which sets out the definition of intangible cultural heritage, stipulates, ‘consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.’

This role of ‘guarantee of sustainable development’ is carried out largely through the social and cultural purposes that the groups or communities assign to their intangible cultural heritage. ICH can, for example, contribute to social cohesion or to intellectual or spiritual well-being, to education, to food security, to income generation, and even to health. In this way, the intangible cultural heritage of each group or community contributes, via the social and cultural role it plays, to development itself. Preserving and safeguarding a community's living heritage thus promotes development, which takes into account the identity, values and aspirations of that same community.

Economic considerations are often cited as being matters of primary importance during debates regarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development. It is true that local economies can reap benefits from the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, thanks to the development initiatives launched through cultural tourism, museums and handicrafts. However, when safeguarding activities and commercial activities overlap, the challenge is to ensure that the commercial aspect does not eclipse the cultural nature of the intangible cultural heritage. In other words, though the economy is of course an essential regulatory factor in cultural systems, this can become problematic when the rules of the global market economy become imposed upon cultural systems, or when the notion of development is limited solely to economic considerations without taking into account environmental, social and cultural factors. This leads us to the matter of the threats to intangible cultural heritage.

It is encouraging to note that the international community, in its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has taken into consideration three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – as spheres of action that are both highly interdependent and important for sustainable development. The Agenda focuses on respect for human rights, which means cultural rights are also included. The Agenda also recognizes – unlike the previous program (2000-2015) – the importance of taking cultural diversity into account and the significant role cultures play as contributors to and catalysts for sustainable development. Furthermore, cultural development depends upon the actions undertaken in support of sustainable development, since these can create either favourable or unfavourable conditions for cultural development.

Thus, the relationship between ICH and sustainable development can be symbolized by the image of a snake biting its tail. If the world is unable to move towards truly sustainable development, ICH will remain at risk, but if ICH is not safeguarded, it will be impossible to make sustainable development a reality.

8.2 Culture in the debate and international development commitments

For many years, the close connection between culture and development – and particularly between intangible cultural heritage and development – has been the subject of countless debates from a range of perspectives. Just like the concept of culture, the concept of development has evolved, and if, a few decades ago, the connection between the two concepts seemed more like a contradiction, today the opposite seems to be true.

There are several reasons why culture is so often missing from international sustainable development commitments. One example is the notion put forward by some that too much focus on cultural diversity and keeping traditions alive could cause social conflicts or impede democratic and economic development. It is important to note, though, that cultural diversity helps to enhance individuals' abilities and to combat poverty. A second, more pragmatic reason is the lack of indicators of culture's contribution to economic development. Significant progress has been made in this area, such as the launch of the UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators (CDIS), the Gross National Happiness Index put forward by Bhutan[[1]](#footnote-1) and the Equitable and Sustainable Well-being Index developed by Italy[[2]](#footnote-2).

Several dates ought to be mentioned in order to fully understand how international discourse and action regarding the connection between culture and development have evolved. As an organization within the United Nations system with a specific mandate on culture, UNESCO has been a key player in this evolution. Other agencies have also made major commitments, and, little by little, through its General Assembly the entire United Nations system has explicitly acknowledged the connection between culture and development (the commitments pertaining to the United Nations system as a whole are shown in boxes):

**1982:** UNESCO organizes the **World Conference on Cultural Policies (MONDIACULT).** One of the Conference's major achievements is expanding the concept of culture, defining it as ‘the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group’. Culture encompasses not only literature and the arts but also ways of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions and beliefs. MONDIACULT highlights the definitive connection between culture and development.

**1992:** At the request of the United Nations system, UNESCO launches the **World Decade for Cultural Development** to promote the inclusion of a cultural dimension in national and international development policies. This initiative leads to the development of standard-setting instruments and demonstrators at international level.

**That same year**, the **United Nations Conference on Environment and Development** (Rio de Janeiro, 1992) marks an important milestone in the way in which the environment and development are perceived and understood. The Conference recognizes the traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and other local communities, and requests that States recognize their identities, their cultures and their interests, and grant them all the support necessary in order for them to participate effectively in the achievement of sustainable development objectives. The notion of ‘sustainable development’ was consistent with the definition proposed by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, according to which sustainable development is ‘a development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**1996:** UNESCO publishes a report entitled ‘Our Creative Diversity’, drawn up by the World Commission for Culture and Development, which was established by UNESCO and the UN. This report marks a milestone because it set out new objectives for international cooperation and breaks with the prevailing notion, which assigned culture a marginal position. It argues that development encompasses not only access to goods and services, but also the opportunities given to individuals – no matter where they live – to pursue a rich, satisfying existence whose value is recognized and appreciated. The report calls for an international program to overhaul classic development strategies.

**1998:** UNESCO organizes the **Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development (Stockholm).** The Conference sets out a new world agenda for cultural development policies, calling for the implementation of international cooperation mechanisms as well as national initiatives in collaboration with civil society, which was to play a key role.

**2000:** The General Assembly adopts the **Millennium Declaration** and the **Millennium Development Goals (MDG)**. The leaders of the global community set out a common vision of development based upon the fundamental principles of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility. However, **culture is left out** this important commitment, a gap only acknowledged later by the United Nations General Assembly (cf. commitments made after 2005).

**2001:** Adoption of the **UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity**. The Universal Declaration advances the realization of the objectives set out in the Stockholm Action Plan, establishes a global consensus through its unanimous adoption, and sets out concrete strategies intended to incorporate culture into development policies and programs.

**2003:** Adoption of the **Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.** The Convention encourages international cooperation to support the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, which communities continually recreate as their environment evolves and which represents a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development (preamble). Consideration is given solely to such heritage as meets the requirements of sustainable development (Article 2).

**2004:** **UNDP Human Development Report entitled ‘Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World’.** This report shows to what extent the world has become a place of diversity and inequality. It argues that poverty, in its many forms, is often linked to a lack of access to opportunities and knowledge – a problem which affects social, ethnic and religious minorities most of all. It calls for the adoption of multicultural policies, which respect diversity and contribute to making societies more inclusive.

**2005: Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.** The Convention recognizes that culture is a cornerstone of sustainable development (Article 13) and establishes a legal framework and operational mechanisms with a view to promoting the development of a dynamic cultural sector in developing countries through international development cooperation (Art. 14-18).

The United Nations General Assembly adopts the **Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit on the MDG**, which acknowledges the diversity of the world and recognizes that all cultures contribute to the enrichment of humankind (paragraph 14).

**2006:** The **MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F) Culture and Development Thematic Window** represents a major innovative and experimental investment in large-scale projects pertaining to the role of culture in development, within the framework of which national programs are to be granted financial support totalling US$ 95 million.

**2010** The **Outcome Document of the 2010 United Nations Millennium Summit on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly**, explicitly recognizes the contribution of culture to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to development itself (paragraphs 16 and 66).

**2011:** The United Nations General Assembly adopts **Resolution 66/208 ‘Culture and Development’** and reaffirms that culture is an important factor in social inclusion and in the fight against poverty, providing for economic growth and ownership of development activities.

**2012: The Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development** marks an important milestone as it begins a participatory process to establish a set of sustainable development objectives. Based on this conference's findings, the United Nations publishes the report ‘Realizing the Future We Want for All’, which has been used as a basis for discussing the issues facing the post-2015 development program.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The report offers a highly complex prognosis for the future of the planet, which takes into account the interplay of a wide range of factors, particularly cultural ones. It recognizes a certain number of challenges, which have become more urgent since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and did not feature explicitly or were not taken sufficiently into account within the framework of the MDGs. These include ensuring peace and security and respecting human rights and cultural diversity. The report proposes a new development scheme, systematically highlighting the importance of culture in transforming globalization into a positive force.

**2013:** A few months after Rio+20, in May 2013, UNESCO organizes an **international congress on culture and sustainable development in Hangzhou (China)** which calls for culture to be brought to the heart of public policy. The Declaration, which follows on from this congress, calls upon governments, civil society and the private sector to make use of the power of culture when dealing with the planet's most pressing development challenges, such as environmental sustainability, poverty and social inclusion.

**That same year**, UNESCO organizes the **International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage, in Chengdu (China)**, to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Convention. At the Conference, UNESCO calls upon the international community to continue its efforts to ‘renew its commitment to the Convention's fundamental premise that intangible cultural heritage is a guarantee of sustainable development’ ([document ITH/13/EXP/8](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/ITH-13-EXP-8-EN.docx)).

**2015:** In September 2015, the long and lively post-2015 international debates culminate in the adoption by the General Assembly of the document ‘[Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7891Transforming%20Our%20World.pdf)’. The outcome document is an action plan, which covers the three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – of sustainable development and divides them into 17 sustainable development objectives. They are treated as highly interdependent spheres of action, which guide the paths of development on all levels, while respecting the three fundamental principles of human rights, equality and sustainability. As emphasized by the outcome document, the sustainable development objectives ‘are integrated and indivisible, and balance the three crucial dimensions of sustainable development’. Furthermore, the document acknowledges ‘the natural and cultural diversity of the world’, that ‘all cultures and civilizations can contribute to sustainable development and are crucial catalysts for sustainable development’ and that ‘sustainable development cannot be realized without peace and security’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda marked an essential milestone in the recognition of the contributions of culture in general and of intangible cultural heritage in particular, not only in terms of income generation and protecting the environment, but also in terms of enhancing the cultural aspect of community development.

*For more information:*

* *Hangzhou (China) International Congress on Culture and Sustainable Development website: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/culture-and-development/hangzhou-congress/*
* *Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund website:* [*http://www.mdgfund.org/*](http://www.mdgfund.org/)
* *'Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' is available to view in PDF format in English at:* [*https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld*](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld)

8.3 INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE as a guarantee of SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

It has been stated above that the concept of ‘sustainable development’ lies at the heart of the Convention, as it acknowledges ‘the importance of intangible cultural heritage, a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development’. However, how can intangible cultural heritage's role in sustainable development be better understood so that its contribution be recognized and fully realized?

This question is explored in a UNESCO brochure, which explains how intangible cultural heritage can contribute effectively to sustainable development within each of the dimensions set out by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – economic, social and environmental – as well as the need for peace and security, which represents an important fourth dimension.

With regard to inclusive social development, the brochure addresses the contribution of intangible cultural heritage through sustainable food security, quality health services, access to drinking water and sanitation services, quality education for all, inclusive social protection systems and gender equality. It also emphasizes the importance of inclusive governance and the freedom of peoples to choose their own value system.

On the matter of environmental sustainability, the text addresses and illustrates the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to the protection of biodiversity and the role of local knowledge and practices within the framework of environmental sustainability research, as well as the role of communities' knowledge and adaptation strategies, which often form the basis of their resilience in the face of natural catastrophes and climate change.

As regards inclusive economic development, the brochure presents intangible cultural heritage as an often crucial factor in supporting the livelihoods of groups and communities. The booklet also shows how intangible cultural heritage can generate income and decent jobs for a large number of people, including the poorest and most vulnerable. The text then goes on to discuss intangible cultural heritage's potential, as a form of living heritage, can constitute a major source of innovation for development, and the way in which communities can benefit from tourism activities linked to intangible cultural heritage.

Several examples are used to illustrate how intangible cultural heritage can contribute to peace and security – a prerequisite for sustainable development. The booklet mentions the values of peace that lie at the heart of many intangible cultural heritage practices and explains how intangible cultural heritage can help prevent and resolve disagreements. Lastly, the brochure looks at the way in which ICH can contribute to restoring peace and security, and at how it constitutes a means of making that peace and security sustainable.

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is, therefore, crucial if communities the world over are to makes the changes ‘needed to shift the world on to a sustainable path’. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage helps to improve communities' social and cultural well-being and generates innovative and culture-specific responses to the various challenges of development.

8.4 Aligning commercial activities with ICH safeguarding activities

The introduction to this document briefly addressed the challenges, which arise when safeguarding activities and commercial activities overlap, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that the commercial aspect does not eclipse the cultural nature of intangible cultural heritage. Within the framework of safeguarding strategies that involve income-generating activities, the issue of risks to ICH viability is a recurring problem tackled by the organs of the Convention – an issue to which we ought to pay particular attention.

#### New income-generating activities within the safeguarding framework

Commercial activities derived from certain forms of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the trade of cultural goods and services related to intangible cultural heritage, can generate income for their practitioners. This income can help to improve the living standards of communities who possess and practice this heritage, as well as strengthening the local economy and improving social cohesion (Operational Directives 116).

There is no doubt that a great deal of ICH would no longer be viable were there no remuneration provided, directly or indirectly, for the time devoted to activities linked to practicing and transmitting it. Nowadays, heritage bearers and practitioners are increasingly obliged to seek financial profit from their ICH-related knowledge and skills by, for example, gaining access to new markets outside of their community. The new income-generating opportunities available include:

* use of traditional knowledge for new purposes and the income generated through profit-sharing arrangements;
* inclusion of traditional healing methods and pharmacopeia in the national health system and the income generated by a wider range of customers;
* tourism;
* sale of handcrafted products;
* ICH performances with admission fees;
* festivals;
* contests with prizes; and
* sponsorship.

*Examples of income-generating opportunities linked to ICH safeguarding and awareness-raising activities can be found in Case studies 16, 17, 19 and 20.*

#### Risks involved in income-generating activities

However, these activities and this trade must not endanger the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, and all necessary steps must be taken to ensure that the communities involved are the primary beneficiaries (Operational Directives 116).

The threats and risks to ICH that are linked to commercial activities are diverse. They can take the form of:

* ICH ‘freezing’ (lack of variation, creation of standardized canonical versions, subsequent loss of opportunities for creativity and change);
* loss or distortion of the purpose and meaning of the ICH for the communities and groups involved, or threats posed to its viability by commercial and other activities;
* decontextualization of the ICH (removing from its usual environment);
* false representation of the ICH and communities: changing or simplifying the meaning of the ICH for the benefit of foreigners; presenting the communities concerned as ‘stuck in the past’;
* misappropriation of the ICH or unjust reward inappropriately obtained in the eyes of the communities concerned by individual members of the community, the State, tour operators, researchers or other outside persons through exploitation of the ICH held in common; and
* overexploitation of natural resources, unsustainable tourism or excessive commercialization of the ICH.

#### Mitigating the risks

The Convention and its Operational Directives suggest several fairly general measures for mitigating these risks (cf. Participant's Text Unit 10). Communities and other actors may also develop specific safeguarding measures to curb the threats and risks faced by certain elements of their ICH (cf. Participant's Text Unit 9).

Examples of ways to mitigate risks involved in new income-generating activities include:

According to the Operational Directives:

* Using intellectual property rights, privacy rights or other forms of legal protection to protect the rights of the communities involved (Operational Directives 104);
* Ensuring that the communities involved are the primary beneficiaries of all commercial activities involving their ICH (Operational Directives 116);
* Implementing measures and policies with a view to training the communities, groups or individuals concerned ‘in the management of small businesses dealing with intangible cultural heritage’ where this is deemed necessary (Operational Directives 107 (m)); and
* When external partners (associated with commercial or tourism activities, for example) are involved, finding a proper balance between the interests of the ICH practitioners, the commercial party and (if need be) the public administration. (Operational Directives 117).

Other examples:

* Discussing within the community concerned what should and should not be considered appropriate use of the ICH for commercial purposes and trying to abide by the agreements reached;
* Organizing performances specifically designed for foreigners, like those shown at festivals or in theatres, alongside traditional performances within the community;
* Limiting the number of external individuals permitted to visit the locations where secret or sacred forms of ICH are practiced, and/or limiting access to documents related to these practices; and
* Training members of the community to be guides, who can explain to foreigners the meaning of the ICH they are visiting or viewing and how they ought to interact with it.

Particular attention must be paid to the way in which income-generating activities could affect the nature and viability of the intangible cultural heritage, particularly those examples of intangible cultural heritage that manifest themselves through rituals, social practices or knowledge regarding the natural world and the universe. It is vital to ensure that the use of intangible cultural heritage for commercial purposes does not change its meaning nor its purpose for the community involved.

8.5 Moving towards a mutual relationship between ICH safeguarding and development policies

The role of the State is important in ensuring that the contribution of ICH to sustainable development in all its dimensions – economic, social and environmental – be recognized and fully realized. The State must first acknowledge the importance of the ICH and then strengthen the role of the ICH within the different dimensions of sustainable development. This should be done in a mutual fashion, i.e. by incorporating the ICH safeguarding into development policies and by incorporating the principles and objectives of sustainable development into safeguarding policies. Thus, the State must ensure the involvement of local communities, whilst making sure that they are the primary beneficiaries of any projects and that those projects do not have any harmful impact upon the ICH involved, such as decontextualization, denaturing, misappropriation or exploitation of skills or crafts.

In order to do this, further consideration should be given to the ways in which legal protection measures can be implemented, particularly intellectual property rights. It is also important that development programs be incorporated into the framework of inclusion policies for the various populations and elements that make up society.

This is reflected in one of the conclusions of the eighth session of the Intergovernmental Committee (2013). The Committee also decided to include within the same chapter the guidelines pertaining not only to the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to the creative economy and issues regarding commercialization, but also those pertaining to the connections between safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development at the national level. It is for this reason that the Committee recommended, ‘that a new chapter of the Operational Directives on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development at the national level be drawn up’.

A category VI expert meeting on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development at the national level was held in 2014 in Istanbul, Turkey, to draw up a preliminary draft of the Operational Directives. The Committee took note of the findings of this meeting during its ninth session in November 2014. The Committee will review this new chapter of the Operational Directives in order to be able to submit it for adoption at the sixth session of the General Assembly in June 2016 (decision 9.COM 13.b).

1. . For more information, visit the following website: <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/>See also the 2013 World Happiness Report: <http://unsdsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/WorldHappinessReport2013_online.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . For more information on this subject, go to the following website (in English and Italian): <http://www.misuredelbenessere.it/index.php?id=51> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. . World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), 1987, Our Common Future, Oxford, Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . ‘Realizing the Future We Want for All’ offers a highly complex prognosis for the future of the planet: the need for a new development scheme; reducing poverty and inequality; attempting to achieve equal access to knowledge; anticipating population growth; assessing the growing environmental impact, insecurity and violence as obstacles to social well-being and governability deficits. The report shows the need for a radical move towards sustainable consumption and production models, which will allow globalization to become a positive force. The report can be accessed at the following address: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/untt_report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. . The full document can be accessed at the following address: <http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/L.1&referer=/english/&Lang=E> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)