Chapter III
Strengthening Collaborative Networks through ICH Information Sharing

Involvement and Collaboration of NGOs in Building Information: A View from India

Sudha Gopalakrishnan

Executive Director
Sahapedia

Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the role and functions of non-governmental organisations in fostering intangible cultural heritage. The 2003 Convention promotes the involvement of NGOs from developing countries in the Intergovernmental Committee for implementing intangible heritage (IX. 1 and 2 of the Convention and III.ii of the Operational Directives). The participation of local, national, regional, and domain-specific NGOs through accreditation gives sustenance to the ICH programme while the support of the NGO sector will ensure wider participation and action towards ICH safeguarding globally.

The paper looks at the role of the NGO sector in terms of its involvement, legitimacy, and contribution to policy and implementation relating to intangible heritage. It argues that the active participation of NGOs can minimise the gulf between state and society in making comprehensive, cohesive, and inclusive policy and implementation strategies for intangible cultural heritage. There is an increasing demand for such organisations the world over, since a vibrant

NGO presence is a marker for greater accountability, capacity building and decentralisation in governance, leading to a better system of management.

I. Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

During the past few decades, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has been understood and recognised as a vital aspect of common inheritance the world over. Consequently, over the years, a large number of international and national instruments have been put in place to safeguard this heritage. The policies aimed at revitalising intangible heritage recognise the diversity of ICH expressions across the world in terms of their uniqueness, plurality, and role in affirming universal values of freedom, justice, and harmony.

ICH has a multifaceted existence. The dynamic transference of such heritage through different generations across vast stretches of time does not happen merely through conscious cognitive tools of learning, but through a process of crystallisation through multiple agencies and different temporalities, as it were. Many of the practices, expressions, and objects are handed down to us from an ancient and immediate past and have arisen from the needs of society and were in turn conditioned by society. In our own times, realising the richness and value of this bequest, national and international agencies like UNESCO and its affiliate organisations as well as national governments have come forward with action plans and strategies to revitalise this heritage.

II. The Role of Non-government Organisations ICH Safeguarding

Many countries see the safeguarding of heritage as the prerogative of the government. In addition to governmental initiatives, the involvement of non-government institutions and organisations are critical in the revitalisation of ICH. Heritage interventions have recently shifted their thrust from a state-oriented

patronage model to a public-accountability model. The realisation is getting stronger that unless society owns up its heritage and guarantees support to foster it, it will not be easy to promote and revitalise it. Historically, less attention than deserved has been given to the non-governmental sector in policymaking across the world. The issue of involving representatives of the people as part of democratic process was understood across the world right from ancient times. The argument that governments require specialised skills and decisions could not be left to 'amateurs' was the crux of earlier views, right from Plato and Aristotle in Greece to Kautilya in his *Arthasastra* in India. However, many thinkers and philosophers from John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau have favoured a representative democracy where there is room for the expression of multiple voices and interests.

Across the world, in practice, NGOs have played a key role in safeguarding intangible heritage. Often region-specific and domain-specific, they have helped focus attention on different heritage expressions and have helped sustain them from the threat of disappearance. The efforts of this sector have led to large-scale documentation and sustenance of practices related to all aspects and domains of intangible heritage. Often region-specific and domain-specific, they have helped focus attention on different heritage expressions and have helped sustain them from the threat of disappearance. NGOs rooted in the community empower the practitioner to sustain cultural practices not as passive perpetrators but as active agents in decision making and sustenance. Civil society and NGOs can play a role in developing and preserving historic knowledge in local communities if they undertake innovative actions. For example, documenting oral history through a process of people's involvement is a method how 'memory' may be kept alive. People's narratives are 'intangible heritage' used as a reference and orientation point for cultural action. The arrival of digital audio and video technologies has made it possible to generate documentation and archival material easily. In this case, the involvement of NGOs need to be targeted for capacity building and to create oral historians, curators, and sound and multimedia archivists who would learn the methodology, content management, and technology to create archival repositories of the future. This kind of capacity-building strategy will not only work towards its own sustainability but also create resources for the twenty-first century.

III. Involvement of NGOs at the International Level: 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has put in place a comprehensive strategy to safeguard and revitalise all aspects of ICH. As a natural development of the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore and concepts such as Living Treasures, the definition, role, and functions of the ICH programme developed organically through a series of meetings across the world. The key premises under the UNESCO Convention are to implement non-hierarchical measures to safeguard, revitalise, and disseminate the 'knowledge, skill, and performance' underlying ICH through training and capacity building, documentation and inventorying, and archiving and research as well as through exchanges aimed at mutual understanding.

The Operational Directives of the 2003 UNESCO Convention highlight the procedures for national and international safeguarding mechanisms, such as listing, funding, and community participation in fostering ICH. The revisions to the Operational Directives for implementing the Convention have adopted steps towards increasing community participation. In Clause III.2, the procedures involved in obtaining NGO participation at the international level are discussed, along with criteria for accreditation.

The modalities of accreditation, the procedure of submitting nominations, and the review of NGOs' contribution and commitment have been provided in the Operational Directives of the Convention. The accredited organisations have advisory functions for evaluating

- nomination files for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding;
- the programmes, projects, and activities mentioned in Article 18 of the Convention;
- requests for international assistance; and
- the effects of safeguarding plans for elements inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

IV. Involvement of NGOs at the National Level

In conformity with the measures for safeguarding ICH at the international level, countries are encouraged and urged to involve relevant NGOs in identifying, defining, safeguarding, and disseminating ICH. A consultative body or a coordination mechanism may be created to facilitate the participation of communities, groups, and, where applicable, individuals as well as experts, centres of expertise, and research institutes, mainly for

(a) identifying and defining the different elements of ICH present in their territories;

(b) drawing up inventories;

(c) elaborating and implementing programmes, projects, and activities; and

(d) preparing nomination files for inscription on the lists, in conformity with the relevant paragraphs of Chapter 1 of the present Operational Directives.

V. Experiences of NGO Participation in Revitalising ICH

The call for involving NGOs has given positive signals across countries and undoubtedly has given a boost to ICH safeguarding initiatives. It has come as a call for nations across the world to adopt a focused approach to strengthen participation through decentralising mechanisms. Several countries have responded to the call and have adopted measures to facilitate NGO partnerships in ICH safeguarding processes.

Although information on the exact procedures adopted by different countries is difficult to access, an Internet search on this point has yielded good results. In this context, it is reported that two regional capacity-building workshops on the role of NGOs in implementing the 2003 Convention were organised in Africa (in Libreville and Gabon in September) and in Latin America (in Quito and Ecuador, in October). The workshop for Africa aimed to bring together thirteen African NGOs accredited by the General Assembly of States Parties to act in an advisory capacity

to the Committee or to recommend organisations for accreditation. The objective of the workshop was to provide participants with technical knowledge regarding the role of NGOs in implementing the Convention at both the national and international levels; to create a space for debate and the exchange of experiences, good practices, and challenges; and to reinforce dialogue and cooperation among NGOs at the regional level.

In Senegal, it is reported that several NGOs that were regrouped within the National NGO Council of Support for Development (CONGAD) have helped revitalise its intangible heritage. These NGOs usually act locally in terms of Act 96-06 of 22 March 1996, which devolves to local organisations with elected assemblies the powers previously held by the state to design and implement cultural development programmes. NGO support helped develop a project for revitalising traditional trades and know-how at Ndeme in the Diourbel region, which led to the creation of several salaried jobs in a rural environment (Tambadou, 2003).

There is a staggering variety and multiplicity of intangible heritage in South Asia. It exists in a framework of totality and interconnectedness. The region of South Asia has a long tradition of service and reform through voluntary agencies. Thousands of institutions in the voluntary NGO sector play a crucial role in fostering ICH activities.

In India, communities play a vital role in emphasising the value of ICH in the local context. India is a vast repository in intangible heritage with countless expressions in each of the domains stretching across centuries. From the past, tradition bearers and supporters from within their communities have striven to keep ICH alive in the country, in spite of changed circumstances; any heritage revitalisation in the present context is a vindication of their commitment and efforts. The non-governmental efforts range from inspired and knowledgeable individuals' efforts to collective efforts involving the whole community. Apart from this, a number of institutions such as libraries, archives, universities, and smaller organisations scattered across the country serve to make a large pool of non-governmental efforts at safeguarding intangible heritage. Many of them work through philanthropic contributions from the industrial sector and corporate houses while a large number are self-sustaining and often cash-strapped. Realising the need to strengthen this sector, the government of India, under the Ministry of Culture, has set up the National Culture Fund (NCF) as a trust under the Charitable Endowments Act, 1890. The NCF operates with a corpus fund to

encourage participation of the corporate sector, NGOs, state government, private/public sector, and individuals for promoting, protecting, and preserving India's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible. The NCF actively supports activities related to all aspects of intangible heritage. It is working in active collaboration with important NGOs in the country to encourage and invite collaboration on safeguarding and promoting ICH.

Many notable NGOs, such as the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), primarily devoted to the protection of monuments, have recently included ICH in their mandated activities, following the visibility of the ICH programme. Sahapedia, an organisation started in New Delhi, is an open multilingual encyclopaedic web resource on Indian culture and heritage. Sahapedia aims to foster knowledge, encourage engagement, and generate action towards understanding and revitalising the diversity of Indian culture. By following a participatory mode of content generation, Sahapedia opens its doors to contributors from all over South Asia and the world and encourages contributors to engage in civil conversation on their own topics of interest. The mission is to provide a unique single-window access to India's multifaceted culture and history, mainly through a participatory mode of content creation. It seeks to do so by providing a web resource that will bring people from different disciplines with different skills into conversation with one another and serve both as a community-created educational resource and as a platform for action in the area of Indian heritage. As a project on culture, Sahapedia will provide information on various cultural forms and practices, and it invites enthusiasts to contribute content on little-known aspects of culture. As an educational project, Sahapedia is a valuable tool for educators as well as students at various levels of their academic career. Such a resource on Indian history and culture does not exist on the Internet at present.

VI. Challenges for the NGO Sector

While NGOs play a great role in linking with community efforts, often there are few facilitating mechanisms for the sector's operational efficacy. Often there is mistrust and fear of non-accountability regarding such institutions. However,

national legislations need to play an enabling role for facilitating the functioning of such organisations by implementing effective measures to strengthen inclusiveness with accountability.

As an example of the challenges faced in gathering support, I would like to cite a case from India in which I was involved. The first UNESCO Masterpiece Proclamation from India was done through Margi, an NGO working for the revitalisation of classical dances and theatre of India. The preparation of the dossier for proclaiming Kutiyattam, the Sanskrit theatre of India, as Masterpiece was wrought with great difficulties. The procedures were less known and information was poor. Though small in number, the community of actors had never worked together, and the lack of opportunities and support naturally led to insecurities and competition within this community. At the outset, there were some misgivings in terms of the benefits of such a proclamation, but once the announcement came through, the state and the community greeted it with great enthusiasm and the members of the community came together for the first time to address the issue of revitalisation. In spite of financial constraints, there was a renewed energy for the artists in applying themselves to creative projects. The three major schools of Kutiyattam took steps for revitalising the art by creating new productions, reviving earlier plays, and developing new choreographies. In the case of the second proclamation, the patrons and practitioners of Vedic Chanting again were grouped into unorganised and disparate bodies, but they came together for the common cause of rejuvenating it. Many schools of chanting made their own action plans for the rejuvenation of their own respective schools and decided to have more interaction in the future to support each other. This unity within the community perhaps became the greatest advantage of the UNESCO recognition.

To sum up, NGOs play a great role in people-centred action to strengthen ICH in national and international environments. A cohesive strategy to democratise the process by integrating state and NGO sectors is being proposed here as the key to effective safeguarding interventions of ICH.