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Regional Collaboration for ICH Safeguarding in the Asia-Pacific Context: Overview, Tasks, and Strategies in the Pacific Region

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Abstract

This paper begins with illustrating the vulnerability and resilience of Pacific island countries (PICs) to put intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding in a broader context of sustainable development for the Pacific region. The paper first presents a summarised history of the Pacific World Heritage Programme and the progress of its implementation since the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972. It then outlines the development of the Pacific ICH Programme since the preparatory phase of the ICH Convention, adopted in 2003, to the organisation of multi-stakeholder consultations in seven PICs in 2010 and 2011. The paper identifies two tasks: i) organisation of consultations on ICH safeguarding and ii) elaboration of a mid-term strategy for ICH safeguarding in the Pacific. As a conclusion, the paper presents a strategy to focus on the contribution of Pacific ICH to the achievements of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed goals such as Education for All (EFA). The paper argues that this could be done by building upon on-going good

practices and by strategically highlighting the central role of ICH in achieving sustainable development of communities.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure for me to be here with you today. On behalf of Dr Pongi, Director of the UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to ICHCAP for inviting our Office to this important gathering.

Historically, the Pacific region has a close tie with Asia, dating back to some 6,000 years ago, when the Austronesian people sailed into the Pacific via Taiwan. They were masters of the sea and capable of navigating the Pacific by canoe by observing the stars, moon, winds, birds, and currents. Those who arrived in the Cook Islands and Tahiti moved to New Zealand in several waves—before 1300.

European explorers (Magellan and others) arrived in the Pacific in the 1500s. The next waves of Europeans were whalers, traders, and missionaries. Christianity expanded gradually in the Pacific. The Pacific was colonised and went through two world wars.

In the Pacific, the process of decolonisation progressed more slowly than other regions of the world. Culture played an important role in the process towards independence and nation building. In 1962, Samoa became the first country to become independent among PICs. This was followed by other PICs, and it was 1994 when Palau became independent. As you see, most PICs are relatively young as countries and as a Member States of UNESCO.

UNESCO Office for the Pacific States is located in Apia, which is a capital of Samoa. Our Office is in charge of fourteen PICs, plus Australia and New Zealand as well as Tokelau as an associate member of UNESCO.

Socio-economic Background—Vulnerability and Resilience

The Pacific region spans a quarter of the globe and is extraordinarily diverse. The total population of PICs is around nine million, and out of this, PNG has seven million.

The Pacific is linguistically diverse and a home to 1300 languages. Over 800 languages are spoken by different communities in PNG, some 100 languages in Vanuatu and 80 languages in the Solomon Islands.

Besides the island countries, the Pacific region includes small islands territories of New Zealand, France, USA, and UK. Tokelau is a NZ territory with a resident population just under 1,500. For some territories, referenda are planned to decide on their future status.

Five small islands (Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) are so-called Least Developing Countries (LDC).

These island countries and territories all together constitute the Pacific Community.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is an intergovernmental organisation established in 1971 with the aims of enhancing economic and social well-being of the Pacific Community through regional cooperation. The Pacific Plan 2005 adopted by the PIF states, “We treasure the diversity of the Pacific and seek a future in which its cultures, traditions, and religious beliefs are valued, honoured, and developed”.

Most of the PICs and territories are a cluster of low-laying coral atolls. For example, the highest point of Kiribati is only about three meters above sea level. This geographical character makes the Pacific Community extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones, tsunamis, and climate change. Water is a common issue among the low-laying coral atolls. Recently, the Tuvalu government declared a state of emergency because of severe draught and the shortage of safe drinking water. At the request of Tuvalu, the international community airlifted bottles of water and portable desalinisation units to the country.

The Pacific people used to live in affluence under a subsistence economy to sustain their livelihood. Agriculture (coconuts, bananas, breadfruits, taro, yam, etc.) and fisheries remain important especially in the informal sector of many Pacific islands. On the other hand, cultivating traditional foods has become progressively unattractive for the new generation of Pacific islanders. As the number of people engaging in these sectors is decreasing, the PICs (with the exception of Fiji) depend on imported food, making food security one of the most important issues for the small PICs.

On the other hand, the Pacific has a certain resilience to cope with its

vulnerabilities. This resilience of the Pacific is derived from its culture. In contrast to individualistic identity in the western world, the identity of Pacific people tends to be collective and relational. They have a strong spiritual association with the land that has been traditionally owned by communities under a traditional chiefly system. This chiefly system has been the basis of local governance, providing a traditional safety net and mutual support for the community as an extended family.

Many of you must be familiar with the anthropological literature on the gift-giving traditions in the Pacific. The Kula Ring of the Trobriand Islanders, Stone Disk Money in Yap, and Fine Mat Exchange in Samoa are some well-known examples. Under this system, valuable objects, such as shell ornaments, stone disks, and fine mats are given to others and associated stories are shared. The objective of this practice has been not to obtain immediate rewards but to establish long-term social relationships between a giver and a receiver. While circulating valuables, this gift-giving tradition has created a vast network among Pacific islanders.

This practice is still thriving today. For example, the Samoan tradition called *fa'alavela*, gift-giving for ceremonies, such as weddings, funerals, and title bestowments, has been practiced by resident Samoans with strong support of Samoans living in Australia, New Zealand, and other parts of the world. As you know, in some Pacific nations, remittance flow accounts for more than 20 percent of their GDP. Some scholars point to the gift-giving tradition as the background behind this contemporary phenomenon.

Overview on ICH Safeguarding

Having said this, I would now like to talk about the Pacific's cultural heritage. The Pacific people often describe their environment under three pillars—namely, sky, ocean, and land.

To give a few examples, for sky-related heritage, one can mention catching frigate birds, a unique tradition practiced in Nauru.

As for the ocean, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the Pacific islands is six times as large as their land area. So, naturally, the Pacific has extremely rich heritage associated with the ocean. Examples are traditional navigation systems and traditional fishing knowledge and methods.

Sadly, the legendary Micronesian master navigator, Mau Pailug, passed away on his home island of Satawal in Micronesia in July last year. He was seventy-eight years old. Pailug was known for his ancient navigational skills that were used by Pacific explorers long before western explorers arrived. Working with the Hawaii-based Polynesian Voyaging Society, he navigated the traditional canoe, hokule'a, from Hawaii to Tahiti on its maiden voyage in the 1970s without GPS.

If you look at land-related heritage, the traditional meeting house is an important living heritage as a place for the community life of Pacific islanders. Although the architectural style of these traditional meeting houses are different depending on the Pacific island, they remain important places for local governance in the Pacific where bottom-up integration (through modernising the traditional chiefly system) and integration by the central government based on the western idea of the separation of the three powers has been gradually taking place.

Since the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972, the Pacific has been actively involved in heritage preservation. Being aware of the need for coordinated actions, the PICs have established a practice to formulate a mid-term action plan. The first action plan prepared with a 2009 target has been succeeded by the current action plan covering a period from 2010 to 2015. The Pacific region hosted the World Heritage Committee Meeting in Christchurch in NZ in 2007 under the chairmanship of Mr Te Heuheu, Paramount Chief of the Ngati Tuwharetoa Maori people of New Zealand.

As of July 2011, five sites (East Rennell in the Solomon Islands, Bikini Atoll Nuclear Tests Site in the Marshall Islands, Kuk Early Agricultural Site in PNG, Chief Roi Mata's Domain in Vanuatu) from the PICs and five sites in the Pacific territories (Lagoon of New Caledonia Reef Diversity and Associated Ecosystems in New Caledonia, Rapa Nui National Park in Chile, Henderson Islands in the Pitcairn Island, Volcanoes National Park and Papahānaumokuākea in Hawaii) are inscribed on the World Heritage List. However, the Pacific region is still under-represented on the World Heritage List.

There are several reasons for this persistent challenge for the PICs. One of them seems to be related to the character of the Pacific cultural heritage. The distinct character of the region's heritage was described by the representatives of the PICs themselves at the World Heritage Committee Meeting held in Christchurch in 2007 as "holistic, embracing all life, and... understood through our cultural traditions".

Contact with the outside world, most notably by the introduction of Christianity, through colonisation and as a result of the progressive integration into a cash economy, have made a significant impact on Pacific ICH. Some Pacific culture disappeared, others have been revived. Overall, however, the Pacific culture has withstood such influences, creating a unique combination of traditional and modern systems.

Since 2007, UNESCO has organised regional and national meetings to raise awareness of ICH safeguarding in the Pacific. Such meetings were held first in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Subsequently, these four countries ratified the ICH Convention. Two ICH elements, the Lakalaka, Dances and Sung Speeches of Tonga and the Vanuatu Sand Drawings, which were both former Masterpieces, are now integrated in the ICH Representative List. The Pacific States Parties are busy undertaking nationwide ICH inventory making and working on new nominations.

I took my new assignment at the UNESCO Office in Apia in 2010 and continued to assist Pacific countries in organising national consultations. The consultations brought together stakeholders, including custodians of ICH, traditional chiefs, NGOs, researchers, and academics as well as private sector and national authorities concerned. The consultation had a common structure: the first day for UNESCO presentations on its ICH programme and Convention, the second day for presentations, which was conducted entirely in local languages, on ICH elements by national experts, and the third day for discussions on strategies and action plans.

Thus far consultations have been held in seven PICs with well over two hundred participants in total. The consultations have been held in Palau (February 2010), Samoa (May 2010), the Cook Islands (June 2010), the Solomon Islands (October 2010), Kiribati (February 2011), Nauru (May 2011), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (June 2011).

Besides national consultations, thanks to ICHCAP's support, two networking meetings were held in Fiji and Tonga thus far, bringing together Pacific States Parties to the ICH Convention for sharing information and networking.

The latest good news is the Palau's ratification of the ICH Convention announced in Paris at the UNESCO's General Conference last month. This makes a total of five Pacific states signatories to the ICH Convention. More ratifications

are in the pipeline.

Tasks on ICH Safeguarding in the Pacific

With regard to tasks to be carried out, UNESCO plans to continue to assist in organising national consultations in the remaining PICs—namely, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Niue, and Tuvalu—in the coming years.

At the same time, Pacific countries are planning to prepare a mid-term Pacific Strategy and Action Plan for ICH safeguarding. To have such a regional strategy and action plan is important for the Pacific to take a coordinated action and to foster regional identity. The Council of Pacific Arts, composed of cultural experts of the PICs, plans to take advantage of the eleventh Festival of Pacific Festival of Arts and Culture that will begin in July 2012 in the Solomon Islands to raise awareness of ICH safeguarding and the ICH Convention in the Pacific region.

Strategy for ICH Safeguarding in the Pacific

The Pacific region has been progressively integrated into the world economy, and its sky, ocean, and land have been rapidly industrialised. The Pacific has no time to waste to step up its efforts for ICH safeguarding.



When we talk about a strategy for ICH safeguarding in the Pacific, one must be reminded of the fact that the Pacific is a region where safe drinking water and food security are still the most pressing issues. Under this circumstance, the Pacific countries are putting strategic emphasis on ICH contributing to achieving the MDGs and other internationally agreed upon goals, such as the EFA goals.

Progress Towards the MDGs

	MDG 1 Eliminate Extreme Poverty and Hunger	MDG 2 Achieve Universal Primary Education	MDG 3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women	MDG 4 Reduce Child Mortality	MDG 5 Improve Maternal Health	MDG 6 Combat HIV/ AIDS and Other Diseases	MDG 7 Ensure Environmental Sustainability
Melanesia	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track
Melanesia (excl PNG)	Mixed	Mixed	Off track	On track	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
Fiji	Off track ↓	On track ↑	Mixed	On track ↑	On track ↑	Mixed ↑	On track ↑
PNG	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track
Solomon Is	Mixed	Mixed	Off track	Off track ↓	Off track ↓	Mixed	Off track
Vanuatu	Mixed	Mixed	Off track ↓	On track ↑	Mixed	On track ↑	Off track ↓
Micronesia	Off track	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed
FSM	Off track ↓	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Off track	Mixed ↓	On track
Kiribati	Off track ↓	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed ↑	Off track
Marshall Is	Off track ↓	Mixed	Mixed	On track	On track	Off track ↓	Mixed
Nauru	Insufficient info	Off track	Mixed	Off track	Mixed	Mixed ↑	Off track
Palau	Mixed	On track	On track ↑	On track	On track ↑	On track ↑	On track
Polynesia	Mixed	On track	Mixed	On track	On track	Mixed	On track
Cook Is	On track ↑	On track	On track ↑	On track	On track	On track ↑	Mixed ↓
Niue	On track ↑	On track	On track	On track	On track	On track	Mixed ↓
Samoa	Mixed	On track	Mixed	On track	Mixed ↓	Mixed	On track
Tonga	Mixed	On track	Off track ↓	On track	On track ↑	On track ↑	On track
Tuvalu	Off track ↓	On track	Mixed	On track ↑	On track	Mixed ↑	Mixed
FICs	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track	Off track
FICs (excl PNG)	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	On track	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed

Note: The arrows denote improvement (↑) or regression (↓) from the assessment in the 2010 Pacific Regional MDGs Tracking Report. Given the differences in the dataset and assessment guidelines used in the two Reports, this is provided for indicative purposes only as the assessments are not strictly comparable.

In fact, the final document of the most recent MDG Summit held in September 2010 acknowledges the cultural dimension to attaining the MDGs, which led to the adoption of the UN General Assembly Resolution 65/166 on Culture and Development.

Interestingly, one can find ample examples of demonstrable evidence in this regard. For example, safeguarding the local system of food production as ICH will contribute to enhanced food security, thus contributing to the achievement of

MDG 1 on eradicating extreme poverty and MDG 7 on ensuring environmental sustainability.

Concerning MDG 2, education and intergenerational transmission of knowledge and skills at community and socio-cultural activities held at churches are playing important role in the Pacific as part of non-formal education. These practices have great potential in broadening the education service delivery to contribute to EFA.

At the same time, demand for cultural content, including traditional knowledge, in educational materials is high in the Pacific. There is a big opportunity for Pacific ICH to contribute to attaining quality education.

Another good practice, which is related to MDG 3 on empowering women, is the recognition and qualification of Traditional Knowledge and Skills (TKS) by the Pacific Qualification Authorities. In the Pacific, there are a significant number of people, mostly women, who obtained their skills from their parents and at villages. They have developed strong skills in the areas of the fine mat weaving, tapa (bark cloth) making, and woodcarving, for example. Despite their knowledge and skills, they have had difficulty in getting employment in the formal sector due to the lack of certification and a diploma. The Pacific Qualification Authorities are working together to develop policies and guidelines to help these “skilful but not-qualified” persons, establishing a committee at the national level, and developing a Pacific Register of TKS at the regional level.

Concerning the health-related MDGs, numbers 4 and 5 on the protection of children and mothers, a government officer of the Ministry of Health of Samoa began to explain to me by saying, “The health services of Samoa have been delivered by three sectors: public sector, private sector, and traditional sector”. Samoa passed an act in 2007 that gives qualification to Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) who have successfully completed training to meet certain standards set by the health authority. The strength of TBAs comes from the fact that she is a member of the Women’s Committee of the community. TBAs have important role in the situation where women do not have access to health services provided by the public or private sector. Thanks to this recognition, Samoa is ranked high in the achievement of MDG 5 on maternal health.

As for MDG 8 on partnership, in the Pacific, NGOs such as Voyaging Societies are actively engaged in the environmental and cultural fields. They are willing to

strengthen partnership for ICH safeguarding in the Pacific.

In addition, traditional leaders and village representatives are important partners in the Pacific. They are called *matai* in Samoa and *iroij* in the Marshall Islands, and they go by other names on different islands. As key actors, they help reinforce the synergy between community-based customary laws and practices and government-supported policies and measures. For example, a consultation held by the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs (MISA) of Kiribati was attended by *unimane* or “elders” from seventeen outer islands of Kiribati. These elders are traditional leaders and responsible for overseeing matters relating to community life on each island. Their authority is still strong. The most concrete outcome of this consultation was a document signed by the elders that recommends Kiribati’s ratification of the ICH Convention.

Lastly, ICH safeguarding will make a significant contribution to strengthening intercultural competencies and skills through mutual learning and respect, which is a foundation for creating a global partnership for development.

Conclusion

ICH safeguarding has a critical importance to the Pacific Community, which stands, at the moment, on a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Although the challenges facing the small Pacific islands are indeed formidable, we are confident that the Pacific can achieve its sustainable development by building upon its strength or resilience rooted in its own culture.

Given the number of Pacific islands and territories, sharing information and networking are keys to the success of future cooperation. UNESCO is looking forward to working together with ICHCAP in this regard.

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