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# Why Safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage?

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## Successful Results of the 2003 Convention

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which was adopted at the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003, is now, after ten years, considered a great success, bringing many positive results to so many countries. This Convention achieved entry into force only three years later in 2006 when Romania became the thirtieth country to ratify this important instrument.

The initial years, until 2008, were a period of preparation and organization to implement the Convention. The Intergovernmental Committee was organized, and the Operational Directives were formulated.

The first inscription on the Representative and Urgent Safeguarding lists occurred at the Fourth Intergovernmental Committee meeting in Abu Dhabi in 2009. As of that time, 116 countries were States Parties to the Convention, and just this year this number has gone to 155. No other convention has shown such a rapid success in terms of ratification and participation by UNESCO Member States.

This success can be seen also in the process and speed of its implementation by

Member States, who are eager to inscribe their ICH elements on the Representative List, altogether almost 300 elements thus far.

As of today, 93 Member States have inscribed 257 elements on the Representative List and 31 elements on the Urgent Safeguarding List, and 10 projects on the Register of Best Practices.

The impact of the Convention on cultural heritage policy of the Member States has also been remarkable. Many countries have made new laws or have amended existing laws and rules regarding cultural heritage.

As the Convention has broadened the concept of ICH, which may include all the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that have been traditionally preserved and transmitted, Member States, who are expected to implement this Convention and carry out the responsibilities of safeguarding, had to reform related laws and establish organizations to accommodate the new paradigm and requirements of this Convention.

Many countries had some laws to support the practitioners of songs, dances, music instruments, and crafts but not to protect the artifacts, art work itself, or festivals.

A few countries have legal systems to protect oral traditions and expressions, traditional knowledge, and skills comprehensively. So every Member State of this Convention has been challenged to respond and adapt to the new system and framework of safeguarding that includes inventorying, documenting, promoting, and transmitting, activities that have been ordered by the Convention 2003.

This Convention has fulfilled UNESCO's standard-setting role in the area of cultural heritage and successfully brought about an international legal instrument for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

The term ICH is spreading like a gospel and good news and getting more visibility in mass media and in everyday language.

However, the most significant contribution of this Convention and its safeguarding system may be in the increasing consciousness of the importance and value of traditional culture.

The institution of inscribing elements on the Representative and Urgent Safeguarding lists has forced Member States to establish a national list of important ICH and to make inventory of existing and disappearing ICH elements according to the five domains categorized by the Convention and its Operational Directives.

Since 2009, ICHCAP has surveyed the status of safeguarding ICH in the Member States of the Asia-Pacific region and found that most countries have just recently started making inventories and that the inventoried elements are often limited to crafts and performing arts while oral traditions, social practices, and traditional knowledge and skills have been left out.

In this phase of inventorying, questions have been raised, "Do we need to inventory every existing ICH element in every domain, or do we need to safeguard and promote only important and significant elements?"

And in the case of making a list of important ICH, the question is, "What elements especially deserve safeguarding or promoting and for what reason should they be safeguarded?"

In some countries, ICH has been called non-material heritage or spiritual and intellectual heritage. In my country, Korea, ICH is literally translated as "formless heritage." Japan uses the same words.

As ICH has no visible form and material entity, it does not have a fixed or a static form. ICH has an evolving character as its appearance and contents are always changing, adjusting to the social and historical context.

Traditional culture and customs have not been always appreciated or positively received by younger generations. Sometimes these customs were criticized as obstacles to renovation and development. With this reservation, some countries hesitated to ratify the Convention until now.

So here arises the crucial question, "What real value and benefit has each element of ICH maintained and for what purpose should these ICH elements be safeguarded?"

The answer to this question will provide enough reasons and aims of our safeguarding and promoting activities.

## Reasons and Aims of Safeguarding ICH

If we are intending to assess the value of traditional culture and estimate the benefits of our cultural heritage, we are soon faced with the difficulty of identifying what is the essential character of our traditional culture and what cultural elements are the decisive components of a very complex and multi-dimensional culture.

World Conference on Cultural Policies (MONDIACULT, Mexico City, 1982)

gave a very broad definition of culture as “The whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value system, traditions, and beliefs.”

As culture is so organic and complex, an analytical value judgment on each element of cultural heritage might overlook the holistic essence of the traditional culture and society.

So assessing ICH in one society or a community should be approached holistically and with the contextual interpretations.

And the ICH element cannot be observed and evaluated separately from tangible cultural heritage because they are two sides of the same coin.

About the question, for what purpose should ICH be safeguarded, the Convention gives some answers and explains the reason to make ICH visible and viable.

I would like to underline three points that have been mentioned in the Convention but also need to be interpreted through some more deepened theoretical discourse and also verified through practical and historical experiences.

1. First of all, the soul and function of ICH has been described by the Convention as providing communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity. Nobody will deny that the national, communal, or ethnic identity can be secured best through the ICH that exists in language, food, social customs, and beliefs.

In the colonial era, the traditional cultural heritage of the colonized countries was suppressed or deprived, so that they might lose or throw away their national identities and accommodate the enforced new culture of the colonial masters.

After a long period of colonial occupation, some countries in Asia and Africa completely lost their traditional languages, foods, and customs. Even in a short period of colonization and foreign rule, their traditional heritage was damaged and distorted.

So after independence and liberation from imperial masters, the claims and movements to recover their lost and damaged traditional culture have arisen as the way of consolidating their national identities. This has also been the case in former Soviet countries in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

In this contemporary time of intensified globalization, both developed and

developing countries are becoming multi-cultural societies through massive migration of technicians and laborers. However, those minorities who left their motherland to live in a foreign country as diaspora are changing their nationalities but not their cultural identities, as culture is an essential element of their existence.

So safeguarding ICH is always a necessary condition in securing the national, communal, or ethnic identity and continuity of individuals, no matter where the people are located.

2. Second, the Convention takes note of another effect of ICH—promoting human creativity. ICH is either maintained or constantly recreated by the community and people who are concerned with enriching cultural diversity and human creativity.

So ICH is a resource for creative human development. Already in the 1970s, reflecting voices from developing countries, development researchers and scholars formulated the concept of ‘endogenous development,’ which proved to be more effective and sustainable than exogenous models. That means the internal cultural factors in the developing countries have played a bigger role than the external foreign aid and technology. Those countries with rich cultural heritage were more successful in qualitative human development, as they were provided with resources and energy for creative development.

I have already acknowledged the great contribution of the Korean writing system, Hangul, to the substantial development of information technology, computers, and smart phones.

The nexus between culture and development has been emphasized already in the intensive discussions of the World Commission on Culture and Development held by UNESCO during the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1997).

The action program of the decade was concerned with promoting greater consideration of the cultural dimension in development processes and stimulating creative attitudes and activities linked to economic, social, scientific, and technical developments.

“Our Creative Diversity” was the 1995 report of the World Commission, which provided key elements for the analysis of culture in relation to development and suggested new forms of stimulating creativity to keep the multi-cultural society united and developed.

However, about the concrete ways that the specific ICH contribute to the creative

development, we need some more solid studies, and we have to find exemplary cases among the historical experiences of different countries.

3. Third, the Convention declares obviously its purposes and its interests in the sorts of ICH.

Article 2 says, “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.”

It means that the Convention will not be interested in safeguarding every ICH element but solely such ICH elements that are compatible with the principles of human rights, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable development.

This passage in Article 2 shows that the main concern of this Convention is to safeguard and promote the visibility and viability of ICH that is compatible with those values and goals.

Human rights, peace, and sustainable development are inseparably inter-connected. And the holistic concept of sustainable development nowadays contains human rights and peace as indispensable elements.

The three pillars of sustainable development—social cohesion, economic growth, and environmental preservation—are not to be achieved without a guarantee of human rights and peace.

So, now the question is how much can ICH safeguarding contribute to achieving sustainable development. There are innumerable experiences and examples showing the nexus between contemporary sustainable development and traditional culture, knowledge, skills, customs, and values.

The wisdom of our ancestors and value systems of traditional society, which have permeated into the prevailing ICH, have helped solve the serious problem of land degradation, water shortages, and environmental management for forests, rivers, and seas.

Sometimes indigenous knowledge and traditional customs bring valuable insights to critical issues such as ecological challenges, biodiversity, and climate changes.

ICHCAP published a field survey report that was carried out by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. The field workers’ project in Vanuatu was initiated some thirty years ago, and it is regarded as a good model for community participation in cultural heritage

management. Voluntary field workers were sent to local communities to organize and record important rituals, practices, and indigenous knowledge to transmit and safeguard this traditional cultural heritage.

I was also very inspired to read the following from the report:

People need to be made aware of practical examples of the contemporary use and applicability of traditional knowledge in today’s world. Traditional knowledge like spawning migration routes, aggregation sites, and lunar periodicity of fish and crabs for example are critical to the management of resources.... It is important for people working in the environmental, resource management, and developmental fields to understand the value and applicability of traditional knowledge in contemporary society and not to continue to perpetuate the myth that western scientific knowledge is somehow superior to Pacific knowledge.

Traditional medicine, like acupuncture, acupressure, herbal medicine, and healing customs with hands and simple fruits, are practiced internationally and are gradually becoming more and more recognized for their effectiveness.

“In Mozambique, when bitten by mosquitos, people rub onion on their skin. In Cameroon, when people have stomach problems, they eat a grain called ‘bitter cola’ to heal themselves. There are hundreds of traditional ways to heal and maintain health.

In this regard, Convention has stated, “The existence of ICH itself is a guarantee of sustainable development” (Resolution to Adopt the Convention). The Operational Directives emphasized that awareness must be raised about the importance of ICH as a means to sustainable development.

### Priority Tasks of Implementing Convention

Safeguarding ICH is an enormous task and unlimited work that cannot be done in a year or short period.

As defined in the Convention, ICH is so broad a concept, implying all the practices, representatives, expressions, knowledge, and skills of the communities, groups, and individuals, we are confronted with the difficult and confusing question, what parts of ICH among many domains and countless elements should be safeguarded first and

who is responsible for them.

The Convention has ordered the States Parties to ensure safeguarding by identifying ICH through inventorying within five domains and taking necessary measures like documentation, protection, promotion, transmission, and revitalization.

And as a way effectively safeguarding ICH and raising awareness, the Convention established the listing system and has encouraged the Member States to nominate their ICH elements for inscription on the Representative, Urgent Safeguarding, and Best Practice Lists. This has contributed a great deal to strengthen the visibility and viability of ICH.

However, among the three lists established by this Convention, most states prefer to nominate their important elements for inscription on the Representative List. Only a few states have submitted nominations to inscribe elements on the Urgent Safeguarding List. There is a great imbalance between the two lists.

Although the Convention organized some assistance measures for this Urgent Safeguarding List, many states are hesitating to nominate ICH elements that are in danger of disappearing and in need of urgent safeguarding, fearing that such a listing will damage national prestige.

It is alarming that many countries are so concerned and enthusiastic about the Representative List, yet they are neglecting the urgent tasks of safeguarding ICH in danger of disappearance and deterioration.

Maybe the concept of “Urgent Safeguarding: is the concern—that it will create a sense of marginalization. If this could be changed to “Priority Safeguarding List”, then perhaps the Convention’s major purpose of protecting the valuable ICH in danger could be achieved.

In this regard, the opinions and voices of the custodians in the communities and scientific experts on judging the priority tasks and priority elements to be safeguarded must be respected and reflected before the political or bureaucratic decision making.

It is the matter of national policy and strategy to decide on what domains and elements the country’s energy and efforts should be concentrated on to fulfill the purpose of safeguarding invaluable ICH that is significant in defining national identity, creativity, and sustainable development.

ICHCAP, with the specialized mandate of information and networking under the auspices of UNESCO, has conducted the Field Survey on the Safeguarding Efforts in

the Asia-Pacific Region since 2009 and has received status reports from twenty-four countries of five sub-regions.

Aside from the general safeguarding systems and policies and different sorts of inventories, these reports provide information on the main entities in charge of ICH as well as the degree of community involvement. Some of the participating states were not yet States Parties of the Convention 2003.

I cannot go into details of these reports, but we can read into what the states and communities perceive as pending issues and what constitutes urgent safeguarding tasks for sustainable and creative development of their countries and communities.

For example, in Pacific island countries—Fiji, Papua New Guinea, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Palau, and Vanuatu—traditional knowledge and practice of voyaging, navigation, construction, and weaving are common elements in need of urgent safeguarding and transmitting tasks for their sustainable existence. The art and skills of navigation by using knowledge related to stars, weather, and sea conditions is at the risk of being lost forever, unless the bearers and their intellectual property rights are protected, and their knowledge and skills are transmitted to young generations.

In Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Mongolia share some commonalities in their historical background and geographical environment. All of them are post-communist countries that were under the Soviet system for different periods. They share the traditional culture shaped by a nomadic pastoral lifestyle that offers a variety of cultural similarities.

They are urgently concerned about keeping the rich tradition of epic singing and oral stories because these heritage elements are on the verge of disappearance.

In this regard, the sub-regional meetings of Central Asian countries have facilitated a forum and opportunity for representatives of the region to exchange and learn from each other’s experiences in safeguarding ICH elements that share common factors, challenges, and advantages.

In Southeast Asian countries, where some thirty to fifty different indigenous ethnic people are dwelling among dominant groups, ICH safeguarding for the sake of identity and continuity of the minority communities is the common task to be tackled, and with a great sense of urgency.

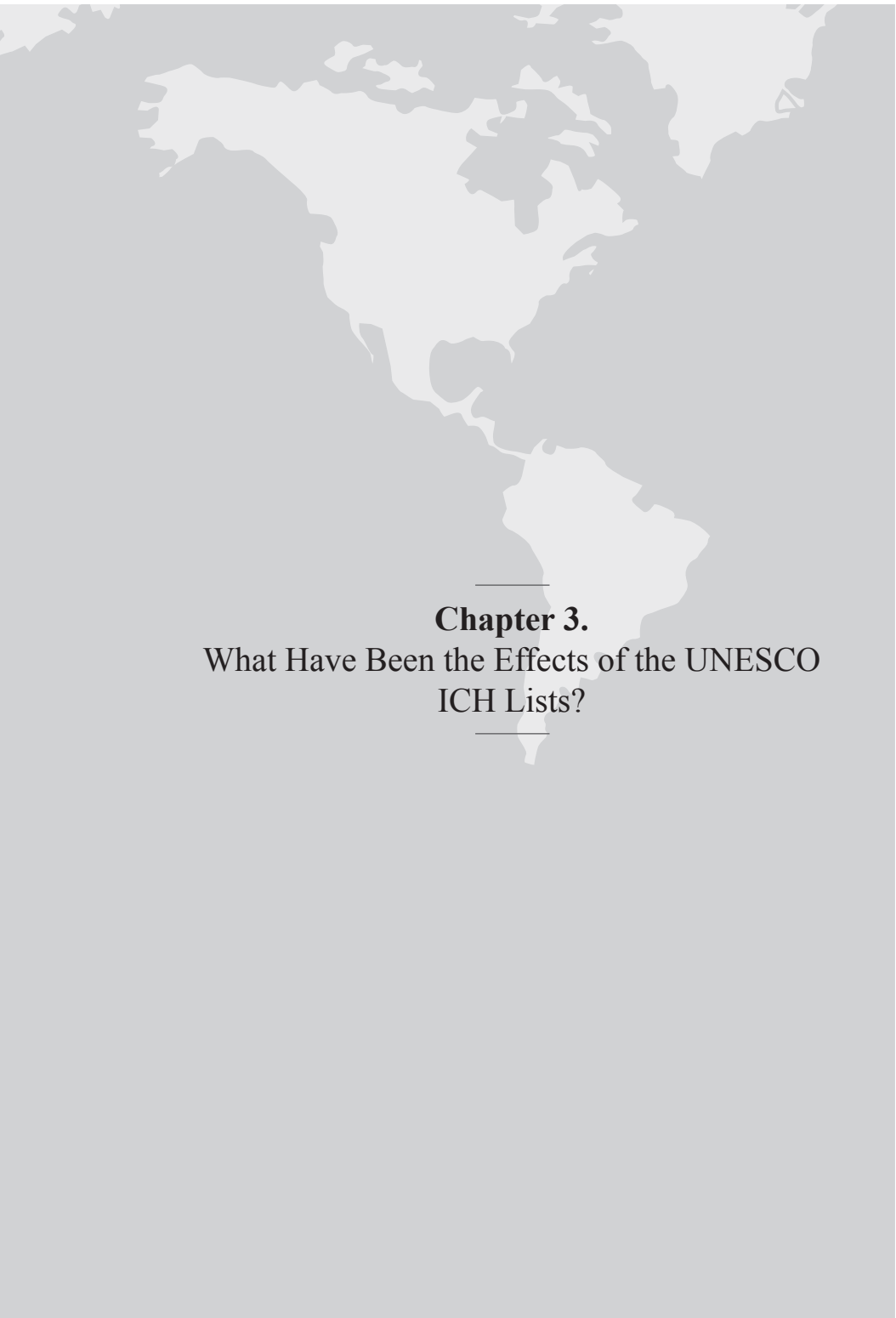
Ten years of implementing the Convention has brought enough stimulation, awareness, and motivation for safeguarding ICH and has laid a good foundation for

national and community involvement as well as international cooperation.

But real success and practical results in safeguarding and revitalizing ICH can be expected only when States Parties are determined to be involved with implementing the Convention within a specific national strategy and policy on the priority tasks that are shared by all ICH stakeholders of, government, civil society, and communal organizations.

I hope this vision and dream can be realized in next ten years with our strong solidarity and common efforts on which we are now going to discuss during this international conference commemorating the ten year anniversary of the Convention 2003.

Thank you.



**Chapter 3.**  
What Have Been the Effects of the UNESCO  
ICH Lists?