**Chengdu International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage   
in Celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of UNESCO’s Convention   
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

**Chengdu, China, 14 to 16 June 2013**

**Round-table 5: Open questions and future directions**

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is strengthened by a shared understanding among the States and the many bearers and practitioners that the importance of intangible cultural heritage does not lie in any given cultural expression or manifestation per se but rather in the wealth of knowledge, skills and values it encompasses. Transmission and sustainability, identity and community participation are central attributes and fundamental values of intangible heritage that powerfully infuse a myriad of knowledge systems, rich with meaning, vibrant in their transmission and essential for human development.

The accumulated knowledge embodied and expressed in the intangible cultural heritage is invaluable to those who depend on these knowledge systems in their daily lives. It is so not only because it relates directly to their modes of living and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, but also because it is often the only source of knowledge they have access to when deprived of access to global education and information systems. Intangible cultural heritage, as a living and adaptive corpus of knowledge, is by nature sustainable, energetic and dynamic, guided by humanism and by a deep respect for the environment and ecological systems. It constitutes a community manual that can successfully be referred to by new initiatives such as the ‘green economy’, by societies in their shift towards climate-resilient agriculture, and by communities in their efforts to create more inclusive and equitable societies.

*Against that realization of the wide reach of intangible cultural heritage, this panel poses some fundamental questions and posits the directions in which we may find answers. Looking towards the future, what will the Convention’s second and third decades look like? What are the pitfalls that should be avoided? And what are the opportunities and avenues that ought to be pursued in greater depth than has thus far been possible?*

**Intangible cultural heritage in sustainable development**

On 5 April 2013, the UN began counting down one thousand days to the target date of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) global action plan. A month ago in Hangzhou, China, the [Hangzhou Declaration, ‘Placing Culture at the Heart of Sustainable Development Policies](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/images/FinalHangzhouDeclaration20130517.pdf),’ was adopted. This declaration will inform the consultations leading to the setting of the post-2015 agenda and the inclusion of culture within new Sustainable Development Goals. It is against this renewed international effort and conviction that the future of the 2003 Convention may be considered.

We now have on our shelves a growing number of cases and studies concerning the application – at local and sub-regional levels – of intangible cultural heritage as a means for communities and societies to strive for sustainable human development. Many of these intangible cultural heritage practices and expressions are intertwined with the questions that arise about the future of the 2003 Convention.

To begin with one example: inequalities plague communities today, both among and within countries. In Peru, the national average for years of schooling among young adults is just under ten years whereas for poor, indigenous women the figure is five years; in China in 2005 the percentage of underweight children in the richer eastern provinces (5.8%) was less than half that of the poorer western provinces (12.5%); in Viet Nam in 2006, only 7% of ethnic minority households had access to improved sanitation, while the rate was 43% for majority households (from ‘[Equity, Inequality and Human Development in a Post-2015 Framework](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/Equity%20Inequality%20Human%20Development%20in%20post-2015%20framework.pdf)’, UNDP Human Development Report Office Research Paper, February 2013). As the wave of ‘Occupy’ movements and ‘Indignant’ movements that swept the globe in 2011 and 2012 demonstrates, social and economic inequalities are a pressing concern in upper-income countries as well, as people everywhere seek to improve their well-being and enhance their human development.

Fortunately, intangible cultural heritage is not like other resources that are inequitably distributed through facts or accidents of history, climate or geography, and whose unequal distribution thus creates and reinforces other inequalities in a perpetual vicious circle. Intangible heritage is, by contrast, a universal resource and thus all the more valuable when and where other resources may be lacking. Hence the profound link between equitable human development and the potential of intangible cultural heritage to transform development outcomes. To do so successfully and in many different contexts requires new methodological tools, and imposes the question: *How can the close relation between intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development be more effectively highlighted and strengthened in the future?*

‘Transforming development requires that all citizens feel vested in the broader goals of society, showing respect and compassion for others and a commitment to building social cohesion’; so stated the Human Development Report 2013, ‘[The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2013/download)’ (UNDP 2013). This requires that States and citizens understand that human development is about more than just enhancing individual capabilities, since these capabilities are embedded in broader social systems whose health requires enhanced social competencies.

Even so, what is still missing is a shared recognition that development programmes and strategies should integrate intangible cultural heritage and the knowledge systems in which it is embedded within their goals, indicators and targets. Without such actions, and the provision of related guidance on human capacity building, the potential of intangible cultural heritage to contribute to sustainable development risks being largely untapped. The integration of intangible heritage is also a key requirement when it comes to designing and implementing effective development initiatives, and bridges must be built between intangible heritage communities and specialists, on the one hand, and sectors as diverse as forests, fisheries, health, education, water and sanitation and rural development on the other hand, even if these latter are sometimes thought of as having little to do with culture or heritage. When such inter-disciplinary activity is encouraged, experience shows that effective and equitable outcomes are more likely to result.

**Climate change mitigation**

Climate change and other global environmental threats will increasingly become serious barriers to further human development. Humans are transforming the Earth’s life support system – the atmosphere, oceans, waterways, forests, ice sheets and biodiversity that allow us to thrive and prosper – in ways that undermine development gains. Within countries, different demographic groups (such as urban or rural, or strata distinguished by income) contribute differently to national CO2 emissions and also bear differential burdens of climate change.

Thus while national income and human development indexes may rise (which helps indicate a progression out of poverty), CO2 emissions also usually rise (which indicates the growing unsustainability in the current patterns of consumption and use of resources such as energy). The impacts of a steady rise in per capita emissions of CO2 will be differently experienced by intangible cultural heritage bearers and practitioners. For those living outside of industrialized and urbanized settlements, their contribution to CO2 and greenhouse gases is usually marginal. Yet their intangible cultural heritage often embodies modes of living that can guide planners looking for practical methods to reduce per capita emissions for a region or province, including for urban and industrial zones.

At the same time, intangible heritage is rich with examples of community-based natural-resource management systems in which access to resources is equitably shared and competing needs mediated. Climate change necessarily means that certain resources that are adequate or even plentiful today will not be so in the future, and as resources diminish the possibility of conflict over them increases.

*What is the place of intangible cultural heritage in mitigating the effects of climate change, for instance by offering time-tested methods of environmental adaptation or community-based institutions for mediating questions of access to resources that may become increasingly scarce?*

**Conflict avoidance and peace-making, and disaster prevention and recovery**

UNESCO promotes the use of science and technology to contribute to both disaster risk reduction and conflict resolution. Recent events testify to the role of culture and heritage, and particularly of intangible cultural heritage, in restoring social balance and rebuilding community cohesion in post-disaster and post-conflict situations: the Haiti earthquake, the floods in Pakistan, the socio-political transitions in the Middle East and North Africa region, and emergency actions in Mali.

The recognition that these events are representative of a larger number of similar events and conditions elsewhere has been reflected in the post-2015 agenda: ‘At least one fifth of humanity lives in countries experiencing significant violence, political conflict, insecurity and societal fragility. Such conditions form a major obstacle to development, with lasting implications for societal well-being. No country affected by violence or fragility has achieved a single MDG target.’ (‘[Realizing the Future We Want for All](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/untt_report.pdf)’, the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda.)

While many conflicts are related to issues of sharing natural resources, in particular fresh water resources, a multi-disciplinary approach that is synchronous with UNESCO’s role in the field of disaster preparedness and mitigation brings intangible cultural heritage to the fore. Found at the locus of community institutions, education, science and communication, intangible cultural heritage allows communities, States and all actors to pursue culturally relevant pathways towards conflict-resolution and reconciliation.

*How can intangible cultural heritage play an even more important role in conflict avoidance, conflict resolution and peace-making, and in the prevention of and recovery from natural disasters, than it has done so far?*

**Developments in international human rights, particularly those of indigenous peoples**

Human social systems and communities – the practitioners and bearers of intangible cultural heritage and knowledge systems – are directly affected by climate and ecosystem changes .The degradation of any one of these erodes the community’s sense of identity and may interrupt the transmission of traditions, practices and knowledge. Hence there are multiple connections across these sectors – most of which are invisible when viewed through a lens that pursues only economic growth. Moreover, the decisions that people make daily can influence a cascade of events that affect community, household and individual vulnerability and/or resilience to climate change.

Most indigenous peoples are situated in areas where the vast majority of the world’s genetic resources are found. Many have cultivated and used biological diversity in a sustainable way for thousands of years. Some of their practices have been proven to enhance and promote biodiversity at the local level and aid in maintaining healthy ecosystems, and that is why the contribution of indigenous and local communities to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity goes far beyond their role as natural resource managers. The recognition of their intangible cultural heritage as a set of time-tested methodologies employed to steward their landscapes for centuries indicates the complementary nature of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and the strengthening of human rights.

Worldwide, distinctive communities have organized themselves around shared disabilities and created vibrant intangible heritage expressing their community identity. In other cases, persons with disabilities have long had specific roles and responsibilities with respect to the intangible heritage of larger communities, for example blind minstrels or musicians in many parts of the world. A powerful new tool for recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities, the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml), entered into force 24 months after the 2003 Convention, but there is yet to be formal cooperation between them.

*The Convention, in its definition of intangible heritage, refers to ‘existing international human rights instruments’, some of which have come into being after the Convention itself. What are the implications for the Convention of recent developments in international human rights such as the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2007* [*United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)*?*

**Gender equality and gender diversity**

The relationship between intangible cultural heritage and gender becomes increasingly germane as the implementation of the 2003 Convention generates a number of safeguarding measures and plans that provide opportunities for dialogue on intangible cultural heritage and gender, notably at the community level. The elaboration of gender-specific roles in intangible cultural heritage brings to the fore perspectives that can be applied with respect for local gender conceptions and for cultural and other human rights.

Prominent amongst these concerns is the importance of gender in the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage (how specific expressions of intangible heritage depend on gender-specific practices and transmission), conceptions of gender and the differences they represent in various practices of intangible heritage, the recognition and encouragement of female and male transmitters of intangible heritage and the resulting empowerment of women and men. Particularly when mainstreamed from the beginning within educational strategies, cultural initiatives that recognise gender diversity within a human rights-based approach may play a particularly important role in building confidence and tolerance among multicultural communities and in providing a common space for dialogue.

*How have concerns with gender equality and gender diversity figured into implementation of the Convention to date and how might they be integrated more centrally in the future?*

**Language: more than a vehicle?**

The Convention acknowledges that language is essential to convey the richness and depth of meaning of intangible cultural heritage. The link between language and intangible cultural heritage is fundamental; indeed systems of knowledge are expressed through a bewildering and wonderful linguistic diversity. There are folk taxonomies and oral traditions that constitute rich hives of intangible cultural heritage. The diversity of languages reflects a deep and often ancient understanding of local environments. When the degradation of the natural environment, and with it of traditional habitats, leads to the erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity, entire means of conservation are lost; conversely, when a language is rarely or no longer spoken, the scientific knowledge it embodies about its local environment is lost – along with its intellectual and conceptual view of the world.

Global concerns for maintaining linguistic diversity will entail a more holistic enquiry into the relationship between the 2003 Convention and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Similarly, only time will tell whether the scope of the 2003 Convention itself will eventually be understood to extend to languages themselves. That the Convention calls attention to the function of language ‘as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage’ (Article 2.2) does not necessarily exclude arguments that a given community may recognize its language itself as constituting intangible heritage as defined in Article 2.1, even if no such argument has yet come before the Committee.

*What is the place of languages in the 2003 Convention and how can the Convention contribute to the promotion and safeguarding of linguistic diversity, even if that is not explicitly its goal?*

**Questions yet to be asked**

The 2003 Convention situates intangible cultural heritage in terms of the needs and wants of local communities. The goals central to human development – sustainable livelihoods and reliable incomes, food security, water security, clean energy, healthy and productive ecosystems, and good governance – are the aspirations of communities practising intangible cultural heritage. Mainstreaming intangible cultural heritage into development programmes and goals takes communities that much closer to governance for sustainable societies, and saves communities (and administrators) from having to make painful choices about which ecosystems to try to preserve in diminished form, and which to abandon.

*What are the questions yet to be asked in order to ensure that the 2003 Convention continues to move in the right direction, realise most effectively the hopes of its framers and justify the confidence that has been placed in it by the people of the world?*