

"Principles and Experiences of Drawing up ICH Inventories in Europe"

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Summary Report from the Discussions

During two days experts from countries, belonging to the so-called electoral groups I and II of the UNESCO member states, met in Tallinn, Estonia, to discuss different issues related to the processes of drawing up ICH inventories in general and in Europe especially. This summary extracts the main points in a thematic way, rather than linking them to the different presentations.

The purpose of inventories: The States Parties need them in order to be able to manage the obligations, which they have undertaken by ratifying the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Inventories therefore need to be adequately set up. However, inventories are definitely no end in themselves, and they represent no safeguarding measures. They are prerequisites and a starting point for real safeguarding measures, which should be the core activity, emanating from the convention. This instrumental role of inventories calls for some caution when preparing the inventorying processes. The information of inventories should of course be sufficiently detailed; on the other hand, overambitious inventory project should be avoided. Sufficiently detailed and manageable inventories should be the advice, keeping a fair balance between resources spent on inventories and on safeguarding measures.

The operational responsibility for inventories. The convention is an agreement between governments, and therefore governmental authorities have the ultimate responsibility for the domestic implementation of the convention. Regarding the actual inventory making, the tendency is that authorities rely on existing institutions: research institutes, archives, museums, documentation centres etc., which already have experience in the field of intangible cultural heritage. In some few cases, new institutions are created to carry out the tasks.

The approach of the inventorying processes. Given the fact that the convention addresses living intangible heritage, the inventories should concentrate on practitioners of ICH. Two, partly opposite tendencies of establishing inventories were identified. The first one represents a strategy of making an inventory of existing inventories. The precondition of

this approach is that there exist institutions that document living intangible cultural heritage. The other approach implies starting more or less all over again, identifying, collecting and documenting living intangible cultural heritage. In principle, neither of the approaches is better than the other. The States Parties must decide independently which strategy will provide the best solution in each case. Many countries in Europe have long-lasting experience in documenting ICH, with comprehensive and diversified collections of historical material. These collections will, of course, continue to be of great importance, both as historical sources for research and as platforms for revitalization initiatives of ICH.

The question of hierarchies and 'authenticity'

During the discussions the notion of 'national ICH' turned up, meaning that some expressions of ICH may better represent or express national values than other expressions, which are expressing 'local' values and having 'local' significance. Some experts pointed out that this way of creating hierarchies of ICH, especially when related to the 'national' level, may be contradictory to the formulations of the convention. The convention, clearly purposely, does not mention 'national ICH' or anything, which may create associations like that. It speaks of "ICH present on its [the state's] territory", clearly underlining a non-hierarchical perspective on ICH, and stating that all ICH should be regarded equal.

In connection to the discussions on 'national' versus 'local' ICH the participants touched upon the notion of 'authenticity' as a criteria of selecting ICH to be included in the inventories. However, voices were raised to avoid the term as a frame of reference for this convention. The term is not mentioned in the convention; again, clearly on purpose. The convention speaks about "ICH ... that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage". The definitional power lies, at least to certain extent, in the hands of "communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals", and the convention grants a high degree of flexibility in establishing the basis, on which the recognition of ICH will rest. If authenticity should be referred to at all, it will be impossible to use the term, meaning "historically correct", simply because the very characteristics of ICH prevent any attempt of establishing a certain fixed point of departure, to which every performance or actualised ICH could be compared. Therefore 'authenticity' - if at all applied to the field of ICH - should be defined in a way that is in compliance with the specific characteristics of ICH.

Involvement of communities.

Throughout the convention “communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals” are referred to as the main actors of ICH. Consequently, the convention stresses the involvement of communities in different stages of the processes of establishing inventories of ICH. Cooperation with the main actors of ICH will therefore be of crucial importance. On the other hand, the governmental authorities bear the legal responsibility of implementing the convention. Both from the presentations and the discussions of the seminar the main message is that the processes of establishing inventories of ICH must represent a fine tuned combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. The governmental authorities must balance the role of and influence by researchers/experts with that of the communities and practitioners. In short, in implementing the convention the authorities must give apt consideration to knowledge *in* ICH, represented by the practitioners. In cases where there might be differences of opinion between experts and practitioners, the convention could be interpreted in a way, which gives priority to the practitioners.

In connection to the issue of involving communities, the seminar touched upon the question: What constitutes a ‘community’ in a European context? The discussion on the topic was not exhaustive. However, from the presentations and the discussions one could discern a pragmatic approach, where the meaning of ‘community’ ranges from geographically distinct and clearly recognized groups of individuals, to nation-wide organisations, representing performers/practitioners of certain expressions of ICH. In a region like Europe, characterised by a considerable degree of mobility, both domestically and between countries, this pragmatic approach might be the only possible way of handling the question of ‘community’. However, this issue needs to be more thoroughly examined, not least by the Intergovernmental Committee of the convention.

The foregrounding of performing arts in European ICH inventories

The convention identifies five domains of ICH: (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; (b) performing arts; (c) social practices, rituals and festive events; (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; (e) traditional craftsmanship. It was pointed out that performing arts seem to dominate the current efforts of drawing up ICH inventories in European countries. Some

few references were made to traditional craftsmanship, but most of the examples were drawn from ICH expressions of music and dance. However, it was also pointed out that the five domains have many overlaps, for instance that vocal music also could be oral expressions, and that social rituals and festive events very often include music and dance expressions. On the other hand, some experts pointed to the fact that for instance EU regulations could have a prohibitive impact on traditional knowledge related to food preparation or ways of hunting and fishing. Others referred to the challenging relation between traditional medical knowledge and current legislation in the medical field.

International cooperation and urgent safeguarding

Most of the presentations represented a domestic perspective on inventory making. That was not unexpected. Still, the discussions foregrounded also a call for a broader perspective, putting more emphasis on international cooperation, even in the processes of inventory making. The convention invites to a high level of international cooperation, and especially regarding assistance to developing countries.

The question of urgent safeguarding of ICH in European countries was touched upon briefly during the concluding discussion. Probably the List of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding will contain ICH from all over the world, including Europe, and not only from developing countries. In principle, all states parties to the convention might benefit from the Fund for urgent safeguarding measures. However, it is to be expected that the majority of European countries will meet their domestic challenges regarding urgent safeguarding measures. European countries should rather consider the Fund as an instrument of granting help to developing countries. On the other hand, it was pointed out that not all European countries are equal, when it comes to economical resources, and that in certain situations, i.e. natural disasters, even some European countries might be in need of international assistance.

Conclusion

The main conclusion to be drawn from the seminar is that States Parties obviously will choose different ways of fulfilling their inventory obligations. The seminar highlighted different principles and strategies, and this – combined with the initial phase of the inventory processes in many countries – made the seminar even more useful, enabling the participants to review and, perhaps, revise some of the preparatory work. Anyway, given

the different histories of including ICH in the cultural policies of different countries, there will be a variety of inventory solutions.

Summarized by Magne Velure, Norway