



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage

# **GUIDANCE NOTE FOR INVENTORYING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

**UNDER THE 2003 CONVENTION FOR THE  
SAFEGUARDING OF THE INTANGIBLE  
CULTURAL HERITAGE**

## Section A: Introduction

### 1. Context and purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to States Parties, non-governmental organizations and communities on the process of inventorying intangible cultural heritage and the preparation of inventories of elements of intangible cultural heritage. It is intended neither as a step-by-step guide nor as a checklist, but rather as a list of issues to be considered prior to and during the inventorying process. For users, this guidance note can be considered as complementary to existing documents already developed by the Secretariat, such as nominations forms to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.<sup>1</sup>

The guiding principles and recommendations contained in this note are meant to inspire States Parties when drawing up new inventories of intangible cultural heritage or revising existing ones. They underline that the process of inventorying is as, if not more, important than the output, i.e. the inventory itself. The note also seeks to clarify the importance of inventorying as a prerequisite for the nomination of elements to the Lists of the Convention, more specifically in response to a decision of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2015 ([Decision 10.COM 10](#)).<sup>2</sup>

### 2. What the Convention says about inventorying

Chapter III of the Convention, especially articles 11(b) and 12.1, introduces the obligation to draw up inventories of intangible cultural heritage.

#### III. Safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage at the national level

##### Article 11 – Role of States Parties

Each State Party shall:

- (a) take the necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory;
- (b) among the safeguarding measures referred to in Article 2, paragraph 3, identify and define the various elements of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory, with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations.

<sup>1</sup> The main sources for this note are: the Basic Texts of the Convention, including the Ethical Principles for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage; summary records of Committee sessions; reports of the advisory bodies of the Committee; decisions of the Committee and a number of documents prepared by the Secretariat under the responsibility of the Committee. These documents can all be found on the website of the Convention.

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity and clarity, hereafter the expression:

- 'Committee' stands for the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage;
- 'Convention' or '2003 Convention' stands for the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage;
- 'communities, groups and – in some cases/where appropriate - individuals' is usually abbreviated to communities;
- 'identify and define' is abbreviated to identify - as in Article 2.3, and as is becoming standard practice in Committee documents;
- 'Article' stands for an article of the Convention;
- 'OD' stands for Operational Directive(s);
- 'Urgent Safeguarding List' stands for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding;
- 'Representative List' stands for the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity;
- 'Register of Good Safeguarding Practices' refers to the register of programmes, projects and activities that best reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention, as described in Article 18.

### Article 12 – Inventories

1. To ensure identification with a view to safeguarding, each State Party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory. These inventories shall be regularly updated.
2. When each State Party periodically submits its report to the Committee, in accordance with Article 29, it shall provide relevant information on such inventories.

### 3. Leeway

States Parties can draw up their inventories ‘in a manner geared to their own situation’. This means that they are free to organize and present their inventories according to their own circumstances and needs. This includes the number and design of the inventories, the criteria for inclusion, and the definitions or classification systems used therein. It also includes the ways in which communities, groups or individuals are identified and the manner in which they are involved in identifying and documenting their intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, States Parties can also adapt to their specific situation the way in which inventory entries are updated. Under the 2003 Convention, there is no single model or template for inventories, nor for identifying intangible cultural heritage or the communities concerned. However, the Convention provides some general principles to guide States Parties in their inventorying efforts (see paragraph 4 below).

### 4. Eight guiding principles

The Convention and the Operational Directives, together with a number of Committee documents, provide explicit guidance on a set of guiding principles or requirements for inventories that States Parties wish to present at the international level as official inventories covering the intangible cultural heritage present in their territory. Such inventories:

1. should be based on procedures that were agreed upon with the communities, groups or, where appropriate, individuals concerned, while their consent is required before the start of inventorying processes, and for major decisions during these processes (Article 15; Ethical Principle 4; Committee documents);
  - see paragraph 20: *Community Consent*
2. should present intangible cultural heritage elements that were identified with the participation of the communities and groups concerned, and of relevant non-governmental organizations (Article 11(b), Ethical Principle 1);
  - see paragraphs 21-24: *Community Involvement*
3. should aim to be inclusive (Article 11(b));
  - see paragraphs 25-26: *Inclusive Inventorying*
4. should contain substantial information about the inventoried elements (Article 12.1);
  - see paragraphs 27-28: *Substantial Information*
5. should be designed in such a way that they contribute to the purposes of the Convention, safeguarding in the first place (Article 12.1);
  - see paragraphs 29-30: *Purposes of Inventorying*
6. should be regularly updated (Article 12.1), with the participation of the communities, groups and individuals concerned (Article 15);
  - see paragraphs 31-32: *Updating*

7. should be reported about in the six-yearly periodic reports that States Parties have to submit to the Committee (Article 12.2);
  - see paragraph 33: *Reporting about inventorying*
8. should respect customary practices concerning access to intangible cultural heritage (Article 13(d)(ii)).
  - see paragraphs 34-35: *Access*

These guiding principles have been confirmed and reformulated several times in the working documents and decisions of the Committee. Section B of this note presents issues to be considered in the preparatory phase of the inventorying process, while Section C sets out the eight guiding principles provided above. Section D focuses on criteria used in the inventorying process and section E on recommendations and thoughts expressed by the Committee and its advisory bodies on other relevant issues.

## **5. Link between inventories and listing**

Although inventorying at the national level and listing at the international level have different purposes and scales, there is a direct link between them.

The fifth criterion for inscription on both Lists of the Convention states that elements nominated for inscription must figure in an inventory drawn up in conformity with Articles 11 and 12 of the Convention. These are criterion U.5 (OD 1) for the Urgent Safeguarding List and criterion R.5 (OD 2) for the Representative List. In order to meet these criteria, States Parties must fill in the boxes in section 5 (Inclusion of the element in an inventory) of nomination form ICH-01 or ICH-02.

## **6. Information on inventorying and inventories required in nomination forms**

At its tenth session (Windhoek, Namibia, 30 November to 4 December 2015), the Committee requested that the Secretariat prepare a set of guidelines on inventories for States Parties. These guidelines are intended to synthesize the past decisions and recommendations of the Committee and its advisory bodies while taking into account the freedom States Parties have in drawing up their inventories ([Decision 10.COM 10](#)).

Nomination forms request technical details such as: (1) the name of the inventory; (2) the name of the agency (institution, etc.) responsible for the inventory; (3) the method and frequency of updating; (4) the reference number and name of the element concerned in the inventory; (5) the date of the inclusion of the element in the inventory, as well as; (6) a substantial explanation of how the inventorying took place with the participation of the communities groups and individuals concerned. Finally, documentary evidence is requested in the form of pages copied from the inventory confirming the technical details and that inventorying was carried out in conformity with Articles 11 and 12.

## **7. Inadequate information about inventorying and inventories in nomination forms**

Inadequate answers to the questions in section 5 of the nomination forms have often led to the Committee not inscribing an element on either List of the Convention, or referring a nomination. The Committee's motivation is sometimes formulated rather broadly, for instance as a lack of adequate evidence of conformity with Articles 11 and 12 of the Convention. Usually the Committee is more specific, mentioning for instance:

- insufficient or lacking information about the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations in the inventorying process;
- insufficient or lacking information about the frequency and modalities of updating the information contained in the inventory;
- contradictory information about key aspects of nominated elements in the nomination file and inventory entry. Although the Committee accepts that minor differences may be present, these need to be explained;
- absent or insufficient technical information; and
- the absence of any information about inclusion in an inventory.

It is during the examination of the periodic reports of the States Parties that the Committee has the opportunity to fully examine the inventorying processes carried out by States Parties and the inventories (see paragraph 31).

## Section B: Preparing for inventorying

### 8. Planning policies for inventorying

Whoever is involved in preparing the inventories, and whoever takes the initiative to inventory intangible cultural heritage, it is ultimately the prerogative and responsibility of States Parties to the Convention to recognize one or more inventories as official inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present within their borders. Inventorying under the Convention is inevitably both a top-down and a bottom-up process; States Parties need to find a balance between both approaches.

States Parties are encouraged, in line with Articles 11(a), 13(a) and 13(b), as well as OD 80 and 90, to establish competent bodies or consultative mechanisms to facilitate wide participation in the discussion, among other things, of general intangible cultural heritage policies and safeguarding measures, including the drawing up of inventories. Participants should include communities, relevant non-governmental organizations and experts, as well as representatives from centres of expertise or research institutes.

### 9. Ethical Principles

Among the *Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* adopted by the Committee at its tenth session in 2015, the following should inspire States Parties when designing and implementing inventorying strategies. These principles can also serve as an inspiration when working with communities, organizations or institutions involved in the inventorying process:

- ‘Communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals should have the primary role in safeguarding their own intangible cultural heritage’ (Ethical Principle 1);
- ‘All interactions with the communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals who create, safeguard, maintain and transmit intangible cultural heritage should be characterized by transparent collaboration, dialogue, negotiation and consultation, and contingent upon their free, prior and informed consent.’ (Ethical Principle 4);
- ‘The dynamic and living nature of intangible cultural heritage should be continuously respected [...]’ (Ethical Principle 8);
- ‘Cultural diversity and the identities of communities, groups and individuals should be fully respected [...]’ (Ethical Principle 11).

## 10. 'Inventories' versus 'Lists'

Under the Convention, the term 'inventories' is reserved for compilations of intangible cultural heritage practised in States Parties (Article 12.1), while the term 'Lists' is reserved for the two international Lists of the Convention (Articles 16 and 17) and the term 'Register' concerns the equally international Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (Article 18, OD 42-46). States Parties are strongly advised to follow this naming convention. This will avoid confusion between the different mechanisms of inventorying at the national level and listing at the international level.

## 11. Developing new inventories

Inventorying is an open and evolving process; approaches are best developed over time in response to monitoring and evaluation results. At the start of a new inventorying project, it makes sense to first develop a preliminary mechanism and test it on a restricted scale. It is important to note that inventories of intangible cultural heritage will always remain a work-in-progress, if only due to the ever-evolving nature of that heritage.

Drawing up an inventory or inventories from scratch typically involves four main phases: (1) planning; (2) gathering information/documentation; (3) systematizing/analysing and archiving the information collected and (4) drafting and publishing inventory entries. Annex 1 to this note lists some of the questions that may arise during the planning phase. From the beginning, it is important to avoid any possible negative effects of inventorying, such as the creation of hierarchies between elements, or the over-commercialization, canonization or standardization of elements.

In inventorying processes directed at drawing up one single inventory for all the intangible cultural heritage present in a country, it may not be feasible to involve all the communities that may be concerned in the first phase. The involvement and consent of such communities is, however, required in all the later phases. In inventories with a more limited scope, it may be possible to involve representatives of the community(ies) concerned from phase 1.

If several inventories of intangible cultural heritage are developed in a country, these need not follow the same approaches or outlines, have exactly the same purposes, or be prepared following the same approach. In their inventorying systems, States Parties may, for instance, wish to include inventories that were started at the local level, or by individual communities, if they meet the relevant criteria and if the relevant stakeholders agree.

## 12. Documentation

In the context of inventorying intangible cultural heritage, documentation can take different forms. These range from data collection by means of a simple form to the extensive recording and retrieval of data. Annex 2 presents a possible outline for collecting data with a view to identifying elements of intangible cultural heritage for inventorying purposes.

Extensive documentation may be followed by the archiving of the data collected, such as completed forms, notes, transcriptions, recordings, photographs and manuscripts. Communities and groups often have their own forms of documentation such as songbooks or sacred texts, weaving samplers or pattern books, or icons and images that constitute recordings of intangible cultural heritage expressions and knowledge.

The data collected could be preserved and deposited in community centres, local archives, museums or libraries, so they can be consulted by the communities concerned. Some of this

information may be disseminated through databases, articles, websites, or social media. Inventory entries may refer to these materials.

### **13. Adjusting existing systems**

Most States Parties already had one or more data sets (such as registers, lists, inventories and so on) of intangible cultural heritage before they ratified the Convention. Some of these date back to long before the adoption of the 2003 Convention. Not all older inventories of intangible cultural heritage are in line with the spirit of the 2003 Convention. Some, for instance, focus on elements of intangible cultural heritage that are considered to have outstanding value and/or to be authentic or original, whereas the Convention emphasizes the living, ever-changing nature of heritage and does not promote the idea of externally imposed hierarchy. Other existing inventories may have been drawn up with minimal or no community participation.

States may choose to bring existing inventories (called lists, registers, or otherwise) into conformity with Articles 11 and 12, to better align them with the objectives of the Convention. They might do so by updating them in intensive collaboration with the communities concerned. However, they may also wish to make a fresh start, with one or more completely new inventories.

### **14. Inventories and other heritage inventorying mechanisms at the national level**

In many States Parties, other ongoing processes may be in place for the inventorying of tangible cultural and/or natural heritage and/or movable heritage, which may be directly or indirectly linked with intangible cultural heritage. Different governmental agencies or organizations usually lead these processes, and they may follow a different methodology from the one considered for inventorying living heritage. However, considering that the definition of intangible cultural heritage provided by the Convention (Article 2.1) includes spaces and objects associated with intangible cultural heritage, institutions concerned should consider the relationships between an inventory of intangible cultural heritage and such existing inventories that focus on other types of cultural heritage (see paragraph 41). These institutions should seek to strengthen collaboration with entities responsible for other heritage inventorying processes.

### **15. Between inventories (in States Parties) and listing (at the international level)**

In view of the large – and ever-growing – number of elements of intangible cultural heritage inventoried at the national level, listing at the international level will only be an option for a relatively tiny proportion of such elements. Therefore, major decisions about inventorying processes and inventories should not be influenced by any possible future listing of inventoried elements at the international level. Inventorying in States Parties occurs for reasons that differ from the logic and objectives of international listing.

States Parties may develop ‘tentative registers’ of elements that they select from their inventories and that they intend to propose for international listing in the near future. However, such registers are not a requirement under the Convention. States should ensure that the

creation of such registers neither creates tensions between communities nor introduces any hierarchy between elements of intangible cultural heritage.<sup>3</sup>

## 16. Responsibilities in the inventorying process

The preparation of inventories is the responsibility of States Parties under the Convention. However, this does not mean that State agencies must necessarily prepare them. Some inventorying processes are led by the communities concerned, while others are led by various agencies. Yet in all cases, according to the Convention (see Articles 11(b) and 15), inventories must be drawn up with the community's participation and consent. In order to be recognized as inventories under the Convention, inventories compiled without any State intervention must be accepted by the State Party. Article 20 of the Convention explicitly mentions that International Assistance may be granted for, among other things, 'the preparation of inventories in the sense of Articles 11 and 12'.

States Parties are encouraged to establish a consultative body or coordination mechanism to facilitate the participation of communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals (as well as experts, centres of expertise and research institutes) in the identification and inventorying of their intangible cultural heritage and various other activities (OD 80).

## 17. Identifying communities

The Convention leaves it up to States Parties to decide on the most adequate way to work with communities and other stakeholders in developing ways of identifying and documenting intangible cultural heritage. A first task is therefore to identify the communities that create, maintain and transmit intangible cultural heritage and who recognize it as their heritage. To achieve this, States Parties have adopted two main approaches. These might be summarized as *community first* and *heritage first*, respectively.

- *Community first*: the relevant authorities identify specific ethno-linguistic, indigenous, local, occupational, mainstream, minority or other communities and then start working with them on the identification and documentation of their intangible cultural heritage.
- *Heritage first*: the relevant authorities use various mechanisms to identify one or more intangible cultural heritage elements that one or more communities might recognize as their cultural heritage. After this, people or groups of people who identify with that element of intangible cultural heritage are recognized as the community(ies) concerned.

Whichever approach is followed, the spirit of the Convention requires that communities be identified with great care, to avoid their misrepresentation and any conflicts between communities or groups. It is of the utmost importance that communities themselves agree to their identification and association with the relevant intangible cultural heritage element(s).

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<sup>3</sup> Having such a register may help avoid unfounded expectations of listing at the international level. If the tentative register is well-balanced and carefully considered, it could prevent or reduce tensions between communities and groups. It could also help to inform other States Parties about the intentions of the State and may thereby promote international cooperation concerning shared elements. To achieve a similar aim, the Secretariat has set up an online platform to help publicize information about the listing of shared intangible cultural heritage (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/mechanism-to-encourage-multinational-files-00560>).



## 18. Diversity within communities

Intangible cultural heritage communities are not monolithic or homogeneous, but stratified by age, gender and other factors. Therefore, tradition bearers and other community representatives with different views and from different backgrounds should be able to make their voices heard in inventorying processes. Different members of communities concerned by specific elements of intangible cultural heritage may have different roles: some may be deeply involved while others may participate less actively, as members of an appreciative and knowledgeable audience, or they may simply identify with the element without even being passively involved. Moreover, not all members of a community necessarily share a single vision of their intangible cultural heritage, or have the same aspirations for it.

Descriptions in inventories should reflect the diversity of opinions within a community, not flatten them. In that way, justice will also be done to the dynamic character of intangible cultural heritage.

## 19. Non-governmental organizations

In line with Article 11(b) and OD 90, relevant non-governmental organizations should assist communities in identifying and documenting their intangible cultural heritage and support them in their engagement with the authorities. This of course refers to any relevant non-governmental organization, not just those accredited at the international level to provide advisory services to the Committee. This also concerns other civil society organizations and initiatives, especially in countries with a limited number of registered non-governmental organizations.

Non-governmental organization representatives and – as the Committee has emphasized several times – experts from research institutes and centres of expertise may play the role of interlocutors or brokers between State authorities and local communities in inventorying and other safeguarding activities. Such actors may serve as resource persons who assist community members in conducting interviews, identifying intangible cultural heritage and filling out inventory forms, or they might train community members to do so themselves. They may also act as consultants to both government bodies and communities on the methodologies and approaches to be used in the inventory or documentation process.

## Section C: Meeting the guiding principles

### Guiding principle 1: Community consent

#### 20. Consent from communities

According to the definition provided in the Convention (Article 2.1), intangible cultural heritage must be recognized by the communities, groups or individuals concerned. Nobody else can decide for them whether or not a given expression or practice belongs to their heritage.

If the community(ies) concerned do not agree to their intangible cultural heritage – or part of it – being inventoried, this should be respected. Inventory systems should put procedures in place so that communities themselves can propose elements of their intangible cultural heritage for inclusion on an inventory. There should also be a mechanism in place to allow communities to have elements withdrawn from an inventory, if they so wish.

The free, prior and informed consent of communities, groups and/or individuals should be sought at various stages of the inventorying process. First of all, they must give their consent

to the principle of having some or all of their intangible cultural heritage inventoried, then to the way in which the process will be conducted, how the information collected will be archived, which materials will be included in the inventory and how they will be updated. It is possible to seek and express this consent in various ways. In procedures to collect consent, the voices of men and women, and – whenever relevant – people of different ages should be sought.

## **Guiding principle 2: Community involvement**

### **21. Participation in inventorying**

The Committee, in the spirit of Articles 11(b) and 15, requests, in various documents, that States Parties ensure the ‘widest possible’ or ‘broad’ participation of the communities concerned in inventorying their own intangible cultural heritage.

The actual depth of community involvement varies significantly from country to country. However, broad community participation should include the following steps:

- fully informing the community concerned before and during the inventorying process;
- obtaining the consent of the community(ies) concerned for each major step in the inventorying processes;
- ensuring data collection is conducted by the community, or at least including practitioners and other community experts as equal partners in documentation teams;
- taking decisions about the archiving of and access to data collected; and
- establishing and implementing inventory monitoring and follow-up mechanisms, including the updating of inventory entries.

It is essential to clearly define responsibilities while allowing for flexibility to take into account the local context.

### **22. Active participation**

The Committee welcomes innovative methods of community participation, whereby community members document their own intangible cultural heritage, or play a key role in the inventorying process.

Sometimes communities may not have the human or technical resources to collect the data required to inventory their intangible cultural heritage on their own. In this case, the State, and/or mandated agencies, institutions and organizations can help them inventory their living heritage, for instance through capacity-building projects (in the spirit of OD 82). In many States Parties, inventorying training workshops have already been organized through self-funded initiatives or within the framework of the UNESCO global capacity-building programme on the basics of community-based inventorying.

Depending on their contexts, in addition to non-governmental organizations States Parties could encourage the participation of other civil society organizations, cultural associations, neighbourhood organizations, women’s groups, indigenous rights organizations and/or rural and urban development groups in inventorying intangible cultural heritage.

In a small number of States Parties, participatory online inventories give communities direct access to enter new inventory entries, add details to existing inventory entries and update them.

**23. Community participation: gender and age**

In line with Ethical Principle 11, States Parties are expected to ensure that inventorying processes take into account the voices of men and women and people of different ages, origins and backgrounds and with different roles in society. This is not only to take full advantage of the diverse perspectives that may exist in society, but also to reflect the living, ever-changing character of intangible cultural heritage. Inventorying entries for individual elements of intangible cultural heritage could also describe the various roles of people of different genders and ages in enacting, transmitting, managing and safeguarding inventoried elements. The Committee pays much attention to such questions when examining proposals and requests from States Parties.

**24. Dealing with inequality**

When there seems to be an unequal allocation of roles in the practice and transmission of intangible cultural heritage elements, it is important to discuss whether or not this is discriminatory with the community concerned during the inventorying process, as well as how participants feel about it. If a performance, practice or ritual involves different roles depending on sex, age, status, ethnicity and so on, this is not necessarily discriminatory. The situation is different, however, if role allocations create tension, reinforce the domination of one group over another, or create a disadvantage for some. In the inventorying exercise, it is important to consider the wider social and cultural context of the element of intangible cultural heritage in question and the ways in which it contributes to social benefit, as well as (in some cases) to reinforcing social tensions or inequalities.

**Guiding principle 3: Inclusive inventorying****25. Inclusiveness**

Although inventorying is an ongoing task, and inventories of intangible cultural heritage will never be fully complete, inventorying processes developed in States Parties should in principle aim to incorporate all the intangible cultural heritage of all communities present on the territory of the State concerned. This means that the intangible cultural heritage of, for instance, minority, less privileged, indigenous, local, dispersed, nomadic, or immigrant groups should not be excluded from inventories, explicitly or in practice.

The principle of inclusiveness also implies that it should be possible to inventory all kinds of intangible cultural heritage, not just those that are viable or fit into specific domains. Both elements that are at risk and more viable elements should be inventoried. They could be included in the same inventory or in different sections of inventories. Some States Parties list elements whose viability is threatened on separate inventories. Since inventories are developed with a view to safeguarding, it is preferable not to leave an element of intangible cultural heritage out of an inventory when its viability is reduced. Rather, safeguarding measures should be developed and implemented for such elements, where the communities concerned wish to do so.

**26. Compatibility of elements with the definition of intangible cultural heritage**

Following Article 2.1, the Committee does not take intangible cultural heritage elements into account, for listing or any other purposes at the international level, that are incompatible with international human rights instruments, or with the requirements of mutual respect (including gender equality) or sustainable development. At the national level, however, States Parties

and communities do sometimes decide to include such elements in their inventories, for various reasons. It is preferable to include such elements in an inventory on a preliminary basis, while discussions are initiated with and within the community(ies) concerned on how the practice or expression in question could be safeguarded and developed in the future. This is often a sensitive area and States may need to develop clear policies or procedures to avoid tensions within society.

#### **Guiding principle 4: Substantial information**

#### **27. Identifying elements of intangible cultural heritage**

Inventories should be more than mere presentations of the names of elements, indexes or simple repertoires; yet they should not be scientific treatises either. Rather, they should *identify* each element in an easily accessible way. This means *providing an actual description of its essential characteristics*, including:

- the name of the element in the language of the community concerned and – if necessary – a more explanatory name for the general public, translated if necessary into another language;
- the name of the community(ies), group(s) and, if applicable, individuals concerned and their geographic location;
- details about the present-day practice and transmission of the element, including its preparation and organization;<sup>4</sup>
- its present-day function and value for the community(ies) concerned;
- its state of viability and, if applicable, any threats and risks to that viability;
- information concerning when the entry was collected and processed and how this was conducted with the participation and consent of the community(ies) concerned;
- the date of inclusion in the inventory and when it was most recently updated.

Inventories should contain an introductory part providing information about the element's scope, purposes, community involvement, and other procedures, and about their place in ongoing intangible cultural heritage policies and inventorying processes in the State.

#### **28. Length of inventory entries**

It is advisable to keep the information included in the inventory relatively brief. Any important additional information collected during a documentation process and that will not be included in the entry can be archived outside the inventory, in a readily accessible way. This has various advantages:

- inventories are easier to use;
- practitioners and other tradition bearers can prepare inventory entries more easily;
- multilingual presentations of inventory entries will be easier to prepare;
- regular updating becomes easier as it is only necessary to update the information contained in the inventory. Any information preserved outside the inventory but referred to in it may stay as it is, although it may of course be supplemented by new materials, thus providing insight into developments over time; and

<sup>4</sup> When considered relevant and not detrimental to the evolution of the practice concerned, information about the roles of different groups or individuals, distinguished where relevant by gender and age, may be included, while reflecting the possible variations in the practice and transmission of the element.

- it may reduce the risk of communities losing control over secret information (such as knowledge about medical remedies) to which they might later wish to apply some protection, such as using intellectual property rights.

A limited but balanced selection of photos and other illustrative materials is useful to complement the written description of the element.

### **Guiding principle 5: Purposes of inventorying**

#### **29. Safeguarding**

In line with Article 12 of the Convention, inventories should identify elements with a view to safeguarding and other objectives of the Convention and – possibly – to objectives related to heritage policies within the States Parties. The specific circumstances of each State Party will determine which objectives other than safeguarding will be prioritized. In order to serve as a baseline for safeguarding actions, inventory entries should provide information about the viability of inventoried elements and about any possible threats and risks to that viability. Past or ongoing safeguarding measures can be mentioned briefly. When entries are updated, information on viability should be checked and adapted if necessary.

Inventories may be useful tools for determining which intangible cultural heritage elements to select for safeguarding, together with the communities concerned. Once one or more elements have been selected for safeguarding, additional data collection and analysis may be necessary.

An element of intangible cultural heritage does not have to be inventoried to be safeguarded. In the past, communities may have taken measures to safeguard their living heritage, well before any inventorying process began – or they may be doing so now. When an element is at risk, safeguarding measures may need to be developed urgently, before there is time to include it in an inventory. For inventory entries for elements that are not at risk, the inclusion of safeguarding measures should be encouraged but not required.

#### **30. Other objectives**

Other possible objectives of inventories include (see Article 1): raising awareness about the intangible cultural heritage present in the State, and increasing respect for its diversity and the creativity involved; promoting peaceful relations, mutual understanding, and cooperation between communities and groups; contributing to the sustainable development of the communities concerned and promoting international cooperation.

Raising awareness, in particular, is one of the most prominent objectives that the inventorying process can fulfil. This highlights the importance of the process over the final product and underlines the need to involve communities and institutions as broadly as possible to disseminate the principles of the 2003 Convention and sensitize communities to the benefits of inventorying and the public to the relevance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage both for itself and for sustainable development.

Giving prominence to intangible cultural heritage through inventorying can boost a community's sense of identity and continuity and may increase the value they accord to their intangible cultural heritage. Substantial community participation in inventorying may confirm or reinforce their sense of ownership over the intangible cultural heritage concerned and

empower community members to take the lead in developing and implementing safeguarding measures that may follow inventorying.

The objectives of the different inventories being prepared in the State need not be identical for each inventory and for each group.

## **Guiding principle 6: Updating**

### **31. Periodical updating**

Periodically updating official inventories of intangible cultural heritage is a firm obligation of States Parties (Article 12.2). Updating is vital in view of the fact that intangible cultural heritage constantly evolves and that threats to its viability can emerge rapidly. States Parties are free to determine the exact modalities and frequency of the updating.

First of all, updating means periodically revising inventory entries with the involvement of the communities concerned. The inclusion of new elements in an inventory is not updating but rather an extension of an inventory. Adapting the design of an existing inventory, or existing inventorying process, for instance after a monitoring and evaluation process, should be called a revision rather than updating.

During the updating process, particular attention should be paid to any changes in the viability of inventoried elements and in the composition of the community concerned. The effects of the safeguarding efforts – if any – and of inclusion in the inventory should also be taken into consideration. Updating may include replacing or adding photos, audio-visual materials and references to publications and links.

Even if inventory entries are short, updating can be a huge task to undertake if many elements have been inventoried. Thus, it is advisable to update inventory entries in a staggered fashion rather than all at the same time, and to allow a periodicity of several years. Not all inventories, or intangible cultural heritage elements, will likely require the same frequency of updating.

### **32. Community participation in updating**

Since its ninth session in 2014, the Committee has emphasized that updating should take place with the participation of the communities concerned. This requirement was reflected in the form that States Parties have to complete to meet their six-yearly reporting obligation (see paragraph 33).

Interactive digital platforms for inventories can enable community members who have internet access to adapt, renew or add information concerning their intangible cultural heritage.

## **Guiding principle 7: Reporting**

### **33. Inventorying and reporting obligation**

In accordance with Article 29 and OD 152-164, every six years States Parties are obliged to submit to the Committee a report on the legislative, regulatory, and other measures taken for the implementation of the Convention. To meet this obligation, they must complete Form ICH-10, section B.2 of which requests detailed information about inventorying processes and inventories.

Section B.2 of Form ICH-10 requests considerably more information about inventorying processes and inventories than section 5 of the nomination forms. For instance, it contains additional questions about: (i) the ordering principles used to structure inventories; (ii) the

format and approach of inventories; (iii) the criteria for inclusion; (iv) whether viability is taken into account; (v) the participation of non-governmental organizations in the identification of the intangible cultural heritage and ‘the ways in which communities are involved in identifying and defining intangible cultural heritage to be included in the inventory(ies), and in their preparation **and updating**’ (emphasis added).

At every ordinary session, the Committee discusses a document, prepared by the Secretariat, which summarizes the newly submitted periodical reports. These reports always include a section about the ways in which States Parties fulfil their inventorying obligations.

### **Guiding principle 8: Access to information and inventories**

#### **34. Limiting access to respect traditional practices**

Communities and groups concerned should have the possibility, if they wish, to restrict or regulate access to information about practices, expressions or knowledge that is contained in inventories, archives, and other publicly accessible places, and to related objects and spaces. In this way, justice will be done to their stewardship over their intangible cultural heritage and States Parties will meet the strong recommendation contained in Article 13(d)(ii) of the Convention that asks them to endeavour to ‘ensur[e] access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage.’

For this reason, it may be necessary to omit some information from inventory entries completely and the description of secret or sacred aspects of intangible cultural heritage practices may need to be limited. The best way to ensure the observance of customary practices regulating access to intangible cultural heritage is through effective community participation, the adequate representation of different community views and compliance with agreed procedures for obtaining consent.

#### **35. Considerations of language**

Both the communities concerned and the general population in the State should be able to consult intangible cultural heritage inventories. This requires some consideration of language: it is important to avoid the use of specialist jargon as far as possible, and where it has to be used it should be clearly explained. Under the Convention, inventories are not set up for research purposes.

Inventory entries concerning the intangible cultural heritage of communities whose mother tongue is not an official or widely-spoken language in the State should preferably be presented both in an official language and in the language of the community concerned. Ideally, inventoried entries should also be presented in a language of international communication, either at the regional or global level. If the length of individual inventory entries is limited to no more than a handful of pages, it will be feasible to prepare multilingual entries.

## **Section D: Inventorying criteria and classification system**

#### **36. Criteria for inclusion**

States Parties are free to develop criteria for the inclusion of elements of intangible cultural heritage in their inventories. The criteria should be clear, in line with the spirit of the Convention, and not large in number.

Overly strict or complicated criteria may unwittingly exclude elements that conform to the Convention's definition. This would contradict the idea that inventories should be inclusive, and could affect a State's ability to achieve certain objectives of the Convention, for instance creating dialogue and understanding among communities and promoting respect for the intangible cultural heritage of all communities and groups living in the State.

A large number of criteria might be difficult to administer and assess, and could also hinder the participation of community members and other relevant stakeholders in the process. In fact, the two most indispensable criteria are: (i) the recognition of the practices, expressions, knowledge or skills to be inventoried as intangible cultural heritage and (ii) the participation of the communities concerned in the inventorying process combined with their consent to the inclusion of the element(s) in question.

### **37. Criteria: compliance with the definition of intangible cultural heritage**

A commonly used criterion is compliance with a definition of intangible cultural heritage; the definition used in Article 2 of the Convention is frequently referenced.

The Convention does not prevent States Parties from using their own definitions of intangible cultural heritage in inventorying. However, according to OD 170, States Parties are asked to focus their safeguarding efforts solely on intangible cultural heritage that is in full compliance with the Convention's definition. Compliance with this definition is required both for inscription on one of the Lists of the Convention and to receive International Assistance for safeguarding.

### **38. Criteria: compliance with the spirit of the Convention**

Criteria that focus on intangible cultural heritage elements of outstanding value or antiquity, authenticity, size or scope are against the spirit of the Convention. The Convention, inspired by the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), considers the fundamental equality of cultures as an overarching principle. 'In this sense, the fundamental value being celebrated is that of diversity itself to which the world's [intangible cultural heritage] contributes' ([IOS Evaluation of UNESCO's Standard-setting Work of the Culture Sector. Part I – 2003 Convention](#), paragraph 45).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the cultural expressions and practices of different communities and groups are also considered as equal in value and importance. Criteria that differentiate between specific elements of intangible cultural heritage (whether inscribed on the Lists of the Convention or on any national inventories or otherwise) on the basis of an externally-imposed value system are inappropriate. Such criteria should rather take into consideration the internal value system of the communities concerned.

### **39. Criteria: 'transmitted from generation to generation'**

The term 'generation', as used in the expression 'transmitted from generation to generation' in the definition of intangible cultural heritage in Article 2.1, was never defined and consequently there is no guidance on how long practices need to have been practised to be considered as elements of intangible cultural heritage under the Convention. In some cases, it is difficult to establish for how long a tradition has been practised, particularly in communities whose first language has no tradition of being used in written form. It is also clear that one cannot apply the same criterion to a practice that takes place once every 25 years as to traditional children's

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<sup>5</sup> [https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/IOS-EVS-PI-129\\_REV.-EN.pdf](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/IOS-EVS-PI-129_REV.-EN.pdf)



games. Since the community itself should decide which practices are rooted firmly enough in their society to provide them with a sense of identity and continuity, imposing a uniform, external age limit seems to contradict the Convention.

Communities or other stakeholders should not hesitate to propose elements of intangible cultural heritage that have been successfully revitalized after an interruption to the chain of practice and transmission for inclusion in inventories.

#### **40. Size and scope of elements**

It is not always easy to define the scope and size of intangible cultural heritage elements for tasks such as inventorying or safeguarding. Different implementation contexts may affect the appropriate scale or scope of elements, which might not always need to be the same when inventorying, developing safeguarding plans, or proposing elements for listing at the international level.

A weaving tradition of one small community could be presented as a separate element of intangible cultural heritage or as part of a larger range of weaving traditions in that area, for example. Is a musical tradition part of a broader theatre tradition among the same community, or a separate element? There are no absolute answers to such questions, but practitioners and other tradition bearers should have the first and last word in determining whether the size and scope of an element is specific enough to correspond to something they recognize as part of their heritage, and inclusive enough to be considered an element for inventorying purposes.

#### **41. Classification system**

States Parties are free to determine the ordering principles of their inventories. Classification systems that can be easily understood by persons without a specialized academic background will contribute to the broadest possible access to the inventory by the communities concerned and the public at large.

Inventories are often organized according to intangible cultural heritage domains or territories, as well as to ethno-linguistic groups, specific themes or a combination thereof. Many inventories follow or adapt the five domains mentioned as examples in Article 2.2 of the Convention, adding one or more domains that are relevant in the local context.<sup>6</sup>

There is indeed no obligation to follow the domains presented in Article 2.2 blindly, or to order inventories by domain. In fact, organizing inventories by domain is often difficult as many elements of intangible cultural heritage could be classified under two or more domains. Some inventories present elements in alphabetical or chronological order. It is expected that, as the inventory grows, an internal structure will be introduced. Other inventories simply present the different fields on which people can search an online database.

Inventories that cover both tangible and intangible cultural heritage should clearly distinguish between these types of heritage since the inventorying process for intangible cultural heritage must comply with Articles 11 and 12. It is usually not necessary to have separate entries for instruments, objects, persons or cultural spaces associated with intangible cultural heritage

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of additional domains found in official inventories are: sporting practices; traditional games; cuisine; habitat; traditional occupations; pilgrimages; customary law; traditional metallurgical knowledge; epics, sayings and proverbs; languages; traditional technologies; pastoral and nomadic knowledge and traditional systems of self-government. Some of these domains may not necessarily fit with the definition of the Convention. For instance, languages are only covered for their role as vehicles of intangible cultural heritage.

unless they are treated in their own right as tangible heritage. Lists of Living Human Treasures, however useful they may be at the national level, are not lists of intangible cultural heritage elements. As such, they cannot be considered as inventories of intangible cultural heritage at the international level.

## **Section E: Recommendations on other aspects**

### **42. One or more inventories**

While Article 12 speaks about the obligation to draw up ‘one or more inventories’, OD 153(a) may suggest that having more than one inventory of intangible cultural heritage is the standard situation. States Parties, with relevant stakeholders including community representatives, are free to determine how many new inventories will be developed and/or existing ones adapted. Most States Parties have more than one ‘official’ inventory, and Federal States often have separate inventories for different regions, provinces or communities.

Many States have layered systems. These typically consist of large numbers of inventories at the local level, from which elements are chosen for inclusion in one or fewer inventories at an intermediate (for instance provincial) level, and then in one or two inventories at the national level. In such layered systems, it is difficult but important to promote the equality of all inventoried elements, or the absence of a hierarchy between them. States are however encouraged to take into consideration the internal value system of communities concerned, which may apply a hierarchy among their own practices.

When States draw up more than one inventory, there is no requirement to organize them in an identical manner. Nevertheless, if they are to be considered as official inventories under the Convention, they should meet the guiding principles presented in paragraph 4 of this document.

### **43. National inventories**

Some States prepare a national inventory that could – in principle - cover all the intangible cultural heritage present in the country. Others prepare several inventories, among which a national inventory may be reserved for elements that span the whole territory, or that highlight heritage of special importance for national identity (this latter approach is not encouraged).

The Convention does not refer to ‘national’ inventories, as it recognizes the importance of leaving States the freedom to make their own decisions about inventorying systems, but it also promotes the acknowledgment of cultural diversity. In fact, the Convention aims as much to promote cultural diversity within States as between States. The Committee warns against the idea that intangible cultural heritage elements are aspects of ‘national identity’. Over-emphasizing a ‘national culture’ can lead to the rejection or marginalization of non-mainstream intangible cultural heritage and associated communities. It can also reduce the understanding and appreciation of differences between communities and groups.

### **44. Stewardship and ownership over intangible cultural heritage**

While the Convention does not affect existing intellectual property rights or create new ones over intangible cultural heritage, it does recognize a form of moral stewardship: the communities, groups and individuals who recognize an intangible cultural heritage element as part of their cultural heritage are implicitly considered as its custodians or stewards. The

Operational Directives and Ethical Principles confirm this view of communities, groups and individuals as stewards of their intangible cultural heritage, and as those who should benefit from its practice and transmission.

#### **45. Intellectual Property Rights**

The Convention itself does not cover intellectual property rights (Article 3(b)). However, inventorying can indeed help communities to discuss and engage with their heritage, and to assert their stewardship claims over it. In most States placing an element on an inventory does not establish any legal rights (including intellectual property rights) over it. This is a sensible approach because inventory entries need to be frequently updated and are primarily intended to assist with safeguarding.

To avoid the misappropriation of intangible cultural heritage, States Parties are encouraged to ensure that the rights of communities, groups and individuals are duly protected, for example through the application of intellectual property rights, privacy rights and other appropriate forms of legal protection. Therefore, inventories should not disclose detailed technical content that may enable a misappropriation or misuse by third parties. In some cases, the inclusion of an element of intangible cultural heritage on an inventory (or a database of traditional knowledge) can help communities to prevent third parties from registering rights over it, but this should be done in consultation with intellectual property offices in the country concerned.

#### **46. Shared elements and size of communities**

Elements that are practised by different communities living in the same State Party and that are recognized by tradition bearers as very similar or the same practice can be presented in an inventory as one element shared by different communities, or separately for each community or region involved. The principles used in the inventory or inventories will normally indicate an appropriate solution, to be applied with the consent of the communities concerned.

It may be relevant to include information about the size of a community, or the number of people directly involved in a practice. However, large or small numbers – or a low frequency – should not be a reason to not inventory specific elements, if the community concerned agrees that they are suitable for inclusion in an inventory, and if they are clearly defined elements belonging to clearly defined communities. Inventories should aim to include the same type of basic information for all elements and to ensure that the length of individual inventory entries does not deviate greatly from an average standard.

#### **47. Inventorying shared elements when international cooperation is possible**

The Committee acknowledges the sovereign right of each State Party to decide whether to act on its own or work with other States in safeguarding – including inventorying – shared intangible cultural heritage. Nevertheless, States Parties, contiguous or not, are encouraged to engage in dialogue and to cooperate as much as possible regarding shared elements of intangible cultural heritage, both for the benefit of the community(ies) concerned and to promote safeguarding across borders.

International cooperation on shared heritage may start with involving the community(ies) concerned in the inventorying process. Close coordination between the States concerned and the active participation of the respective communities could help in identifying, documenting and preparing inventory entries for shared heritage. Where the same element is known by

different names in different areas or communities, it is neither necessary nor desirable to encourage uniformity in naming: subtitles and extensions to names may be used instead. Inventorying should not contribute to standardization or uniformization; it should simply describe the local practice.<sup>7</sup>

#### **48. Inventorying shared elements when international cooperation is not possible**

When international cooperation is not possible at the State level, States Parties should exercise care when inventorying and safeguarding aspects of the shared intangible cultural heritage present on their territory. The existence of the same or a very similar element elsewhere may be briefly acknowledged. However, in the spirit of mutual respect and understanding that underlies the Convention, States should ensure that the inventories for which they are responsible avoid describing practices and actions within other States. Inventories should also refrain from using language that might inadvertently impede dialogue or cooperation between States.

#### **49. Shared heritage and inventorying at the national level**

International cooperation for safeguarding is at the core of the Convention. One opportunity for such international cooperation established in the Operational Directives (OD 13) and frequently encouraged by the decisions of the Committee and the recommendations of its evaluation bodies is the inscription on a multi-national basis of intangible cultural heritage found on the territories of two or more States Parties. For instance, the Committee encouraged States Parties ‘to submit multinational nominations on elements shared by different communities, groups and individuals in order to facilitate dialogue between cultures and communities’.

The question of consistency is particularly acute for multinational nominations, where the evaluating bodies seek to recognize the same nominated element in the various inventories provided by the participating States Parties. In that sense, it is not necessary for each inventory to refer to the element using the same name or to contain the same information about the element because the timing of the inventorying may vary from State to State. Nevertheless, the evaluation bodies consider it to be crucial that, when the inventories in question are updated, the States concerned by the multinational nomination be able to cooperate among themselves and to bring the information to the same level, including, where appropriate, mentioning the situation in other countries.

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<sup>7</sup> OD 87 suggests a special form of international cooperation concerning documentation: ‘States Parties that possess documentation concerning an element of intangible cultural heritage present on the territory of another State Party are encouraged to share such documentation with that other State, which shall make that information available to the communities, groups and, where applicable, individuals concerned, as well as to experts, centres of expertise and research institutes’.

**ANNEX 1****Some key questions to address in the planning phase of inventorying processes:**

- What consultative mechanisms will be used or created?
- How will the communities whose intangible cultural heritage will be inventoried, and their representatives, be identified and informed, and how will they be involved in the planning activities?
- How will the communities be involved in the documentation process and in the production of inventory entries related to their intangible cultural heritage?
- When and how will their consent be sought?
- Whose capacities need to be strengthened?
- Which other stakeholders, in addition to the relevant non-governmental organizations, (if any) will be involved?
- What will be the purposes of the inventorying exercise?
- How can the possible negative effects of documentation and of the dissemination of inventory entries (such as standardization, canonization, freezing, misappropriation) on the viability of intangible cultural heritage be avoided?
- Will there be more than one inventory?
- What will the scope of the inventory(ies) be?
- What ordering principles will be used?
- Which criteria for inclusion will be applied?
- How will the size and scope of the elements be determined?
- How much information will be included about each element?
- How will shared intangible cultural heritage be inventoried?
- Which organization(s) or institution(s) will be responsible for the coordination or implementation of the inventory process(es)?
- Will inventories of intangible cultural heritage initiated by communities, institutions or lower authorities, if any, be integrated into the national inventorying exercise?
- How will the dissemination of and access to the inventory(ies) be organized?
- How will the inventory(ies) be monitored and updated?
- What costs will be involved and how will the inventorying system be financed?

## **ANNEX 2**

### **Possible outline for collecting data for identifying elements of intangible cultural heritage**

#### **1. Identification of the element**

- 1.1. Name of the element, as used by the community or group concerned
- 1.2. Short, maximally informative title (including indication of domain(s))
- 1.3. Community(ies)/group(s) that recognize the element as part of their cultural heritage
- 1.4. Physical location(s) of the element
- 1.5. Short description

#### **2. Characteristics of the element**

- 2.1. Associated tangible elements – if any
- 2.2. Associated intangible elements – if any
- 2.3. Modes of transmission
- 2.4. Customary practices governing access to the element or to aspects of it
- 2.5. Language(s), register(s), speech level(s) involved
- 2.6. Origin according to the community

#### **3. Individuals, groups and organizations involved with the element**

- 3.1. Practitioners(s)/performer(s): roles, age, gender, social status, and/or professional category, etc.
- 3.2. Other tradition bearers (individuals/groups and their roles)
- 3.3. Other participants (e.g. holders/custodians)
- 3.4. Organizations concerned (non-governmental organizations and others)

#### **4. State of the element: viability**

- 4.1. Threats to the enactment – if any
- 4.2. Threats to the transmission – if any
- 4.3. Availability of associated tangible elements and resources
- 4.4. Viability of associated intangible elements
- 4.5. Safeguarding measures in place – if any

#### **5. Data gathering/documentation and preparation of inventory entries**

- 5.1. Consent of community/group/individuals concerned for data collection with a view to inventorying
- 5.2. Restrictions, if any, on use of data collected
- 5.3. Community involvement in data collection
- 5.4. Date(s) and place(s) of data gathering
- 5.5. Persons/groups, including community representatives, who compiled the inventory entry
- 5.6. Date of community consent to include the entry on an inventory.

#### **6. Modalities for updating the information contained in the inventory entry**

#### **7. References to literature, discography, audiovisual materials or archives**