Unit 8

ICH[[1]](#footnote-1) and sustainable development

This unit is about intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and sustainable development, both social and economic. Topics covered in the unit include:

* Understanding the relationship between ICH and sustainable development.
* ICH and social development. 
* ICH and economic development.
* The risks and opportunities associated with income-generating activities.

Relevant entries in Participant’s text Unit 3 include: ‘Commercialization’, ‘De-contextualization’ and ‘Sustainability’.

Examples relevant to this unit can be found in Case studies 14–20.

8.1 ich AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In **Article 2.1**, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[[2]](#footnote-2) makes it clear that for the purposes of the Convention no consideration will be given to ICH that is not compatible with the requirements of sustainable development, among other things.

Sustainable development, as defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Commission, is ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’[[3]](#footnote-3). Sustainable development does not just mean sustainable economic development of the people concerned: it involves the simultaneous pursuit of the interlinked goals of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity,[[4]](#footnote-4) a difficult balancing act in pursuit of a better future.

#### Relationship between sustainable development and ICH

There is a close reciprocal relationship between sustainable development and ICH. The practice of certain ICH elements may contribute to sustainable social and economic development. Sustainable development in a community may also enhance the viability of ICH practices there.

ICH is practised and transmitted by the communities concerned for reasons that include maintaining their sense of identity and continuity, social well-being, control over their natural and social environment and income generation. Much of what is called traditional or indigenous knowledge is, or can be, integrated into modern health care, education and management of the natural and social environment.

Development projects to promote social cohesion, economic development, education or health are usually more likely to be acceptable to local communities, and more likely to succeed, if they are culturally appropriate and informed by local knowledge. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe may also help to ensure the sustainable availability of specific natural resources necessary for the practice of an ICH element.

8.2 ICH SUPPORTING SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

ICH practices are usually appreciated and supported because they express shared values, binding people together and giving them what the Convention calls a sense of identity and continuity. An ICH element may, for example, help to keep the community together by reinforcing identity and a sense of shared history; it may encourage mutually beneficial behaviours within a community such as sharing of goods and services.

In order to be given consideration under the Convention, ICH must be compatible with the requirements of existing international human rights instruments and mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals (Article 2.1). Many practices promote community cohesion within the context of human rights and respect for others, principles promoted by the Convention. There are, however, also ICH practices that, while possibly promoting in-group cohesion, at the same time promote inter-group violence and/or transgress human rights. Such practices are not given any consideration under the Convention and may not be promoted in awareness-raising campaigns at the national level (Operational Directives (ODs), paragraph 102(c)).

#### Reconciliation and conflict resolution

Some ICH practices provide vehicles for reconciliation and conflict resolution. Two examples follow:

* The Otomí-Chichimeca communities in Mexico abide by a number of traditional rules that promote loyalty, community service and peaceful coexistence. The elders in the community undertake conflict resolution and apply sanctions for minor infractions such as plot invasion or property damage, referring unresolved cases or serious criminal offences to the authorities. The application of these traditional rules does not infringe human rights or individual freedoms granted elsewhere in Mexican law.
* In Kakamega, Kenya, an open-air forum was convened in December 2008 to contribute to reconciliation between Luhya subcommunities in Kenya’s Western Province after the violence following the presidential election of December 2007. More than twenty-five communities participated in the event, which resulted in a resumption of trading activities between some of them. At the forum, participants exchanged gifts, shared a locally brewed alcoholic beverage, made references to the murembe or milembe peace tree and sang songs known across communities.[[5]](#footnote-5)

For another example of how ICH can contribute to social development, see Case study 14: in the ‘Literacy through Poetry’ project in Yemen, adults were taught literacy skills using traditional forms of oral poetry.

8.3 MATERIAL BENEFITS FROM ICH PRACTICE

Without any benefit, material or social, few communities would continue practising those elements of their ICH that require significant investments of time, goods or money. Many ICH skills and practices – including, for instance, forms of traditional healing, vernacular architecture, puppetry and mediation – have been transmitted over the generations precisely because they provide economic and other material benefits for the participants as well as social benefits.

#### Managing environmental resources

Traditional knowledge can be used for sustainably managing environmental resources. For example, the irrigation systems of a number of rivers in Spain are managed by water courts, run by farmers who come from the irrigation region and who make decisions according to regulations passed down through the generations.

The element Irrigators’ tribunals of the Spanish Mediterranean coast: the Council of Wise Men of the plain of Murcia and the Water Tribunal of the plain of Valencia was inscribed on the Representative List in 2009: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00171

#### Generating income

In many cases, people have practised and transmitted their ICH without any material reward. But ICH practice has also in some cases been linked to commercial activity. Such activity is, in fact, intrinsic to certain forms of intangible cultural heritage, such as handicrafts and other activities that produce a product for sale or barter.

ICH practice and transmission can be supported financially in different ways, including:

* *Remunerating practitioners for practising their ICH.* Traditional healers, itinerant storytellers, builders and thatchers, for example, are often paid in cash or kind by communities who enjoy the benefits of their storytelling, performance arts, rituals, healing, know-how or mediation practices. Sometimes the support given to ICH practitioners is more comprehensive and ongoing. The Khmer court supported the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, also known as Khmer Classical Dance, for over 1,000 years, remunerating the dancers and providing them with a space to train in the palace. In European courts similar support was given to minstrels and jesters; kings and chiefs in Africa supported local festivities. With the emergence of modern forms of government, the support for ICH practices formerly given by monarchs, sultans, shoguns and other traditional rulers has in many cases been replaced by State support or by the support of local politicians or entrepreneurs. Many traditional forms of theatre attract paying visitors, in the same way as more modern forms that are not considered ICH.
* *Remunerating practitioners for the transmission of the skills or knowledge of the ICH.* Access to knowledge and skills is valuable, and often subject to controls of some kind. Apprentices in various crafts pay their masters in cash or in kind (for example, with free labour) for the transmission of the skills being taught to them. Living Human Treasure systems often introduce these forms of remuneration.
* *Purchasing or bartering the products of ICH practices and skills.* This can involve the sale of traditional handicrafts, musical instruments, furniture or even houses built using traditional skills. While ICH consists in the first place of knowledge, skills and practices rather than products, the sale (or barter) of the resulting products and services (e.g. healing, fortune-telling, food, crafts) has often supported the continued practice and transmission thereof.

The context and importance of financial benefits in the continuation of the ICH practice may shift over time.

For an example of how ICH mays depend on, and can contribute to, income generation see Case study 15, on a Sundanese boys’ circumcision procession in Bandung, Indonesia. This case study shows how new interventions may be needed as the commercial context of ICH practices change.

8.4 NEW INCOME-GENERATION POSSIBILITIES

The Convention does not distinguish between ICH elements that generate income and those that do not (see Article 2.1). Income-generating elements are not excluded from consideration under the Convention – unlike elements that are, for example, not compatible with human rights or sustainable development.

Much ICH would not continue to be viable if there were no direct or indirect remuneration for time and other investments in its practice and transmission. Increasingly, people wish to benefit financially from ICH-related knowledge and skills in new ways – through access to new markets, for example, often outside the community. The promotion of ICH or raising awareness about it may generate new financial or other benefits for the communities concerned.

The Operational Directives recognize this and underline the importance of benefits to the communities concerned as a by-product of the implementation of the Convention (OD 81), and specifically from any awareness-raising activities under it (OD 101(d)). Ensuring that communities benefit economically or in other ways from safeguarding and other activities can motivate them to continue practising their ICH. The ODs also recommend ways to mitigate the undesirable effects of commercialization.

New income-generating possibilities may include:

* using traditional knowledge for new purposes or designs and profiting through benefit-sharing agreements;
* integrating traditional healing and pharmacopoeia into the national health system and profiting through an expanded clientele;
* tourism;
* the sale of handicraft products;
* performing ICH expressions for payment;
* festivals;
* competitions with prizes; and
* sponsorships.

For examples of income-generation possibilities through ICH safeguarding and awareness raising, see Case studies 16, 17, 19 and 20.

8.5 RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

The Convention and its Operational Directives express concern about the possible threats and risks to ICH elements from income-generation pressures, whether or not these elements are inscribed on the Lists of the Convention.

This concern is not unfounded: one of the most significant impacts of listing on the World Heritage List has been a very considerable increase in tourist visits to listed properties. In some cases this has benefited the local economy, in other cases it has mainly benefited large tourist companies located outside the area. Sometimes, increased visitor numbers have enabled better conservation and management of the site, but in other instances, visitors to properties have not been well managed and the significance of the site has been degraded.

#### Threats and risks facing ICH

The threats and risks facing ICH from ill-advised activities are diverse. They may include:

* ‘freezing’ of the ICH (loss of variation, creation of canonical versions and consequent loss of opportunities for creativity and change: see Article 2.1);
* loss or distortion of the function and meaning of the ICH for the communities and groups concerned (Article 2.1; OD 117), or threats to its viability posed by commercial activities and trade (OD 116);
* decontextualization of the ICH (isolation from its usual context: OD 102(a));
* misrepresentation of the ICH and communities (reworking or simplification of the meaning of the ICH for outsiders; representation of the communities concerned as ‘stuck in the past’: OD 102(b));
* misappropriation of the ICH or inequitable benefit acquired in ways unacceptable to the communities concerned by individual community members, the State, tour operators, researchers or other outsiders through exploitation of communally held ICH (ODs 116 and 117); and
* over-exploitation of natural resources (Article 2.1), unsustainable tourism or over-commercialization of the ICH (ODs 102 and 116).

8.6 MITIGATING RISKS

The Convention and its ODs suggest various general ways of mitigating these risks (see Participant’s text, Unit 10). Communities and other stakeholders may also develop specific safeguarding measures to address the threats and risks facing particular elements of their ICH  (see Participant’s text, Unit 9).

Examples of mitigations in the context of new income-generating activities might include:

* Using intellectual property rights, privacy rights or other forms of legal protection to protect the rights of the communities concerned (OD 104).
* Putting on specially adapted performances for outsiders, such as those at festivals or theatres, in parallel with traditional performances within the community.
* Limiting the numbers of outsiders permitted to visit areas where secret or sacred forms of ICH are practised and/or limiting access to documentation about it.
* Training community guides to explain to outsiders about the meaning of the ICH they will be confronted with and how to interact with it.
* Discussing within the community concerned what might constitute acceptable use of ICH elements for commercial purposes and what might not – and trying to keep collectively to agreements reached.

As the Convention and its ODs imply, the ideal scenario is one in which:

* ICH is safeguarded without ‘freezing’ or misrepresentation (OD 102);
* the ICH is enacted and transmitted in a sustainable way, compatible with the sustainable social and economic development of the communities concerned and their environment (Article 2.1);
* the communities concerned are the primary beneficiaries of any commercial activities concerning their ICH and their rights are protected (ODs 116 and 104);
* if outside commercial partners are involved, the interests of ICH practitioners, the commercial sector and (if appropriate) the public administration should be properly balanced (OD 117);
* the communities, groups or individuals concerned are trained ‘in the management of small businesses dealing with intangible cultural heritage’ where needed (OD 107(m));
* commercial activity or awareness-raising supports rather than distorts the meaning and purpose of the ICH for the community concerned (ODs 102 and 117).

1. 1. “ICH” here refers to “intangible cultural heritage” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 2. Frequently referred to as the Intangible Heritage Convention and, for the purpose of this Unit, simply the Convention. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 3. World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission), 1987, *Our Common Future,* Oxford, Oxford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 4. A. M. Hasna, 2007, *‘Dimensions of Sustainability’, Journal of Engineering for Sustainable Development: Energy, Environment, and Health,* Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 47–57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 5. See the ICH Fact Sheets, UNESCO ICH Kit: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/01858-EN.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)