CASE STUDY 47

Documenting the Fimibana theatre (Country X)

#### Notes to the facilitator

The Fimibana theatre is a fictitious example of an element in Country X (see the case study on the inventorying system in that country). Participants can be reminded that the inventorying process in Country X was initially very research-driven and lacked proper community consultation processes.

The Fimibana case can be used to elicit some discussion among workshop participants about the following issues:

* Documentation is an important step in the inventorying process. Not all documentation (audio-visual or written) will always be included in the inventory itself, but it may be archived alongside the inventory. It is very important for communities concerned to be able to access the inventory and any associated documentation about their ICH elements, for safeguarding and awareness raising.
* Documentation of ICH elements by outside researchers for inventorying purposes often happens in the absence of consultation with communities concerned about what needs to be documented and how this documentation can be used for safeguarding. This can mean that the documentation and inventorying process does not aid in safeguarding the element.
* Communities concerned can and should play an important role in determining what aspects of their ICH should be documented for safeguarding purposes and what information about their ICH should be included in an inventory.

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This is a fictitious example – any resemblance to ICH elements in an existing country is coincidental.

#### Questions to consider:

1. What threats to viability does the Fimibana ICH element face?
2. Why was the initial documentation process for the national inventory not very successful in addressing these threats?
3. In what ways did the inventorying process finally contribute to safeguarding the Fimibana theatre art in Country X?

#### Introduction

Fimibana, a traditional theatre performance, is staged in a rural part of Country X at a special festival every year to welcome the spring, and as thanksgiving for the previous year’s harvest. In 2010 it was included in the National Inventory of ICH (NICHI) in Country X.

Currently there are about 50 Fimibana actors who perform at the annual harvest festival, coordinated by a Fimibana Festival Committee elected from their number. Out of about 30 available plays, four or five are performed throughout the night at the festival. Fimibana performers learn dialogues and songs from printed texts of these plays, but also consult additional notes explaining how the plays should be performed, for example what actions an actor will need to perform in a specific scene, when to raise or lower a sword, and what costumes to wear. (Although there is a low literacy rate in the rural areas of Country X, these actors, and young people in this community can generally read and write.) The existence of the explanatory texts is helpful for the actors when they perform plays that they have never seen themselves. One of the features of the Fimibana theatre form is the extravagant and beautiful costumes; actors have to be assisted by dressers who help them to put the costumes on correctly. Dressers also follow explanatory texts to understand who should wear what.

#### Community members wish to safeguard fimibana

Most actors are farmers in their daily lives and do not have much time for practice and preparation nowadays, especially as climate change has reduced the agricultural potential of the district in which they live. Young people in the area are losing interest in performing the plays. Faced with this problem, the Festival Committee met in 2012 to discuss how audiovisual documentation (which had been done as part of the inventorying process) might help actors to practice the plays, and raise awareness among young people about the festival.

In the inventorying process, researchers from the capital city had initially recorded on video many hours of harvest festival performances. This was useful in raising awareness about the festival in the capital city and in rural villages, as some of the footage was shown on television.

However, Fimibana actors themselves did not find watching these video recordings very useful in learning the dialogue and songs for the plays. First, they found it difficult to access the NICHI video archive in the capital city, and once they had received copies of the tapes, they found it tedious to search through the video tapes for the correct section of the dialogues. Second, senior actors were worried that any mistakes recorded on video might be repeated if the videos were used for learning the plays rather than the written texts. Junior actors found it difficult to distinguish between appropriate variations in the various performances of a play, and incorrect versions. Senior actors traditionally passed down advice and suggestions during informal activities such as socializing after work. Using the video recordings for learning the plays disrupted these traditional means of transmission – both the use of the written text and the seeking of informal advice. The Festival Committee thus felt that other strategies were needed to help performers practice their plays. Instead of using the videotapes of the performances, therefore, actors coordinated informal practice sessions in the months before the festival, sharing ideas and motivating each other.

The Festival Committee decided that video documentation could be useful in another way: documenting the proper way of dressing and making-up Fimibana actors. In the normal course of events, it took years to learn how costumes should be worn, hair done and make-up applied as the festival happens only once a year. Actors are reluctant to spend the time to put on their performance clothes or to do a full make-up session when there will be no performance. Dressing and make-up skills are more difficult to transmit in written form than dialogue and songs; photographs could only show what a finished hairdo should look like, and how actors should look. In the inventorying process, researchers, who had not consulted the practitioners and other tradition bearers, had not thought to document anything other than the performance. The Festival Committee therefore decided they would try and document on video how to do the special hairstyles, how actors should put on their robes, and in what order their dressing preparation should be done.

#### Community-led documentation assists in safeguarding

After consultation with the NICHI management, the Festival Committee raised money for audiovisual documentation training for young community members through a development budget. They asked young people in the community to film the dressing and making-up of Fimibana actors during the next festival. This footage was added to the NICHI archive as part of the updating process, and copies were also kept in the local community library for easy access. The video tapes were carefully catalogued to enable easy searching. They were then used to show junior dressers how the dressing should be done. Junior dressers were able to watch this being done many more times than usual in a given year, although they still needed to do the tasks themselves many times under guidance from a senior dresser. This improved the skills of junior dressers. The documentation process also raised awareness among young film-makers about the plays and their importance to the community. Thereby, the Fimibana group of actors gained some keen new recruits in performance and dressing tasks, and their harvest festival was better attended the following year.