Unit 6

**Identification and inventorying**

**participant’s text**

This unit is about the identification and inventorying of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – one of the obligations of States Parties under the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.[[1]](#footnote-1) The topics covered include:

* The obligations of States Parties regarding identification and inventorying of the ICH present in their territory.
* The purpose and effects of inventorying the ICH.
* Leeway and restrictions.
* The criteria for including an ICH element in an inventory.
* Access to information about inventoried elements.
* Planning an inventorying project.

Relevant entries in Participant’s text Unit 3 include: ‘Elements of ICH’, ‘Identification and definition’ and ‘Inventorying’.

A model inventorying questionnaire can be found as a Hand-out of this unit.

Examples relevant to this unit can be found in Case studies 5–8.

6.1 IDENTIFICATION AND INVENTORYING: OBLIGATIONS

Each State Party must draw up, ‘in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory’ (Article 12), identifying the elements concerned ‘with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations’ (Article 11(b)).

The preparation of inventories is a responsibility of States Parties under the Convention, but this does not mean that it is necessarily State agencies that prepare them. Some inventorying processes are led by the communities concerned, others are led by various agencies, but in all cases, according to the Convention (see Articles 11(b) and 15), inventories must be drawn up with community participation and consent. Inventories compiled without State intervention must be accepted by the State Party in order to be recognized as inventories under the Convention. 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 create a consultative body or a 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 ICH (and various other activities) (OD 80).

Inventorying has to be an ongoing process because of the large number of ICH elements requiring inventorying in most countries of the world, because of the ever-changing character of the ICH (and its changing state of viability) and because of the necessity to update inventories on a regular basis.

6.2 PURPOSE AND EFFECTS OF INVENTORYING

Inventorying may have various purposes; it is not meant to be an end in itself. In the first place, inventories should be designed to contribute to safeguarding (Article 12), although, safeguarding activities may be undertaken for elements that are not (yet) included in an inventory.

Identification of ICH elements and their inclusion in an inventory will certainly create greater awareness about ICH in general and about specific ICH elements, both outside and within the communities concerned. This may have a positive effect on the viability of the inventoried elements and therefore could contribute to community well-being.

Members of the community may take greater interest and pride in their ICH through the inventorying process and thus become more motivated to engage in the continued enactment and transmission of the elements concerned. The positive recognition given to their ICH through inventorying may also boost the sense of identity and continuity of the communities.

Inventorying processes need to be participative and inclusive. The process of identification and inventorying may thereby help establish good relationships between communities, State agencies on different levels and other stakeholders who may be involved in the management or safeguarding of inventoried elements.

The inventorying process may contribute to safeguarding of the ICH as well as more broadly to sustainable development, good governance, social cohesion and community building.

6.3 Leeway AND restrictions

Although the phrase ‘in a manner geared to its own situation’ (Article 12.1) leaves considerable leeway to the States Parties in drawing up inventories, the Convention and the ODs provide some guidance. They make it clear that inventories:

* Should present elements that were defined and identified with the participation of the communities and groups, and of relevant NGOs (Article 11(b)).
* Should be prepared with the widest possible participation of the communities, groups and individuals concerned (OD 80).
* Should not violate customary practices concerning access to the ICH and any associated places, persons and materials (Article 13(d)(ii)); and should not include information on an element without the consent of the community, group or individual concerned.
* Should be designed in such a way that they may contribute to safeguarding (‘to ensure identification with a view to safeguarding’, Article 12.1). This implies that sufficient detail about viability and threats should be included in an inventory to guide possible safeguarding measures in the future.
* Should be as inclusive as possible of the ICH present in the territory of the State Party concerned (‘*the* intangible cultural heritage present in its territory’ Article 12.1 [emphasis added]).
* Should be regularly updated (Article 12.1) and therefore should be designed in such a way that updating can be easily done.
* Should be regularly reported on: OD 153(a) indicates that the six-yearly periodic reports that States Parties must submit to the Committee (in accordance with Article 29) should provide information about the ‘drawing up of inventories as described in Articles 11 and 12 of the Convention’.

#### Scope and size of inventories

The Convention does not refer to the preparation of one ‘national’ inventory; the ODs (153(a)) refer to ‘inventories’ within a State, thus indicating that there may be a number of inventories within a single State Party. Some States do prepare national inventories, but most federal States may not have ‘national’ inventories and many States have separate inventories for different parts of the country, for different domains, for different communities or for different purposes, or for combinations thereof. When States draw up more than one inventory, there is no requirement that these are organized in an identical manner. However, ideally, a uniform minimum level of detail should be provided to aid in safeguarding.

The scope and size of inventories may vary considerably depending on their aim, available resources and methods of information generation and systematization. Some countries, for example, accommodate both tangible and intangible heritage in the same inventory. Some inventories seek to be comprehensive, while others aim for a representative sample. Some inventories that are being developed are similar to encyclopedias, providing rather general information about the elements they present; others contain detailed information about some or even all the elements included.

#### Organizing the information

When a State Party develops several inventories, for example at national and provincial levels, this sometimes introduces hierarchies between ICH elements. In other cases, inventorying an element makes it seem more important than elements that have not been inventoried. Some countries make it clear that inclusion on national lists is closely linked to current and proposed nominations to the Lists of the Convention. It is, however, against the spirit of the Convention to create hierarchies between ICH elements.

To organize the information, some States Parties use the non-exhaustive set of domains presented in Article 2.2 of the Convention, often with adaptations and/or additions. Some use an alternative classification system developed by experts and/or community representatives. Whatever classification system is used, it is important that it facilitates appropriate access to the information by the communities concerned and by the other stakeholders in the process. In view of the requirement for community involvement, access and consent, classification and access systems for inventories should be easily understood by non-specialists and by the communities themselves, for example by using local terms to name them or by mentioning those names explicitly.

#### Using existing inventories

Some States Parties may consider presenting as their inventories existing registries or lists compiled before they ratified the Convention; in the past, such lists were frequently prepared by anthropologists or ethnologists. This can cause difficulties. When States Parties report about their inventories to the Committee in their six- yearly periodic reports, they are expected to indicate how the communities concerned participated in the identification of the information presented, and how they gave their consent for the information to be included. Such information is not always available for older listings; community consent, if obtained, may not be applicable to new forms of distribution. Older inventories of ICH may require updating not just to include new elements but also to check and, if necessary, adjust existing information, for instance about the level of viability of the elements concerned.

6.4 CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION

The criteria for including elements in an inventory should be clear and transparent. Some inventories use the definition of ICH provided in Article 2.1 of the Convention; others use a definition of ICH that differs in some respects from the one in the Convention. Some existing inventories include elements that are no longer practised, languages, or elements that are not in conformity with generally accepted international human rights instruments. The Convention does not prevent States Parties from using their own definitions of ICH at the national level, for example in inventorying, but any elements nominated to one of the Convention’s Lists must comply with the Convention’s definition of ICH (ODs 1–2).

An inventory of ICH should in principle focus on ICH elements (expressions, practices, skills, knowledge), so it is preferable not to have separate entries for associated instruments, objects, persons or cultural spaces. Special indexes (or search options in electronic databases) can provide information on objects or places for the users of inventories.

#### Excluding certain ICH elements or communities

If States Parties develop criteria for identifying ICH that exclude certain ICH elements which conform to the Convention’s definition of ICH, or exclude certain communities, then these States might not be implementing the Convention in the spirit advocated by the Intergovernmental Committee. Moreover, if the ICH of specific communities is excluded in some way, this may affect a State’s ability to achieve the aims of the Convention (i.e. creating dialogue and understanding among communities and promoting respect for each other’s ICH).

6.5 ACCESS TO INFORMATION ABOUT INVENTORIED ELEMENTS

The Convention requires States Parties to promote access to ICH in a responsible way. According to Article 13:

To ensure the safeguarding, development and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory, each State Party shall …

d) adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures aimed at …

(ii) ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage …

This applies to all ICH-related activities, including inventorying. Customary restrictions on access to ICH practices and knowledge should also be taken into account in regulations that govern access to information about ICH contained in inventories, archives and elsewhere. Some information may need to be omitted from inventories for this reason; documentation of secret or sacred aspects of ICH practice may only have limited access.

It is not difficult to ensure restrictions on access to ICH if communities or groups must consent to the way information and documentation about their ICH is archived and made accessible. Ideally, the communities or groups concerned would be involved as equal partners in the management and control of the documentation and archiving of information about their ICH and in the definition of rules for access to that information.

See Case study 5, on provisions for confidentiality and access for users of the intangible heritage databases managed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

6.6 INVENTORYING AND NOMINATIONS TO THE LISTS OF THE CONVENTION

There is a direct link between inventorying and the preparation of nominations to the Lists of the Convention. The fifth criterion for inscribing elements on both Lists states that only ICH elements that already figure in an inventory in the sense of Article 12 of the Convention may be nominated for inscription (see ODs 1 (U.5) and 2 (R.5)).

Nomination forms require States Parties to demonstrate that the inventory has been drawn up in conformity with the Convention, in particular Article 11(b), which stipulates that ICH shall be identified and defined ‘with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations’ and Article 12 requiring that inventories be ‘regularly updated’.

States Parties are also requested to provided evidence of inclusion of the nominated element on an inventory of the ICH present in the territory/ies of the submitting State/s Party/ies as defined in Articles 11 and 12 of the Convention. Such evidence should include a relevant extract of the inventory/ies in English or French, as well as in the original language if different.

6.7 PLANNING AN INVENTORYING PROJECT

Under the Convention, States Parties are free to organize and present their inventories according to their own circumstances and needs; this also includes the design of the inventories and the definitions or classification systems used therein. There are many different ways in which inventorying can be undertaken and still be compatible with the principles of the Convention. There are many choices when developing an inventorying strategy for a country.

The inventorying process ideally starts with information sessions and discussions with the communities concerned about the purpose, process and benefits of inventorying their ICH. If community members are unwilling to have their element(s) documented and/or inventoried, this should be respected. Community members should be asked to indicate whether there are customary restrictions on access to any ICH elements they wish to inventory or to information about them (see Article 13(d)(ii)).

Information gathering and documentation about a specific ICH element may already have begun some time beforehand, whether initiated by researchers or community members. In some cases, inventorying is undertaken by outside agencies or researchers (with community participation and consent) and in other cases community members develop the inventory themselves. Active community participation in inventorying can include information generation and systematization, managing the inventory and/or access to information. If community capacities for inventorying are not already well developed, capacity building can be built into the process.

Examples of different models of community participation in inventorying processes can be found in Case studies 6–8.

Basic tasks in planning an inventorying project include the following (while ensuring community participation and consent at all stages):

* Identifying, informing and involving the communities concerned and other stakeholders, including relevant NGOs (if any).
* Building consultative mechanisms and trust between stakeholders.
* Determining the purpose(s) and scope of the inventory(ies).
* Finding resources to undertake the project.
* Planning information generation and systematization.
* Planning dissemination, access and updating.

Questions that might arise when designing an inventory:

* Will there be one or more than one inventory?
* If more than one inventory is envisaged, what will be the relationship between the different inventories?
* How will inventories be set up – by administrative entity, by community, by domain or otherwise? If there is more than one inventory, will they be set up along similar lines or not?
* How will the inventorying exercise and its later updating be financed?
* Who will develop the questionnaire(s) for the inventory(ies)?
* What information will be collected on the elements to be inventoried?
* What depth of information will be provided about elements in the inventory(ies)?
* What definition of ICH will be used?
* What system of domains or categories will be used?
* How comprehensive is the inventorying exercise intended to be?
* Who will facilitate the collection and generation of the information?
* How will communities be involved throughout the entire process of generating the information, including information generation and systematization?
* How will relevant non-governmental organizations and institutions be involved in the exercise, if at all?
* Who will control the input of information onto the inventory(ies)?
* Who will manage and control access to the information?
* How will sensitive information be managed to ensure respect for customary restrictions on access?
* How will elements that are shared by more than one community be dealt with?
* How will elements that are also found outside the country be dealt with?
* How will inventories be published or disseminated?
* How will change be accommodated and updating be organized?

6.8 ADVICE ON INVENTORYING FROM UNESCO

The Secretariat of the Convention is often asked to provide advice on how to undertake inventorying. The Secretariat cannot be very helpful here as the Committee fully subscribes to the principle that States Parties should develop inventories in ways geared to their own situations. Useful general information can be found in the kit prepared by the Secretariat and that can be downloaded from the webpage of the Convention. It has a special section on identifying and inventorying ICH.

The Secretariat publicizes descriptions of inventorying processes that are already well under way, not as models to be copied, but as examples for reflection and inspiration.

The website of the Convention also presents a model questionnaire for identifying elements with a view to presenting them in an inventory. The questionnaire was drawn up and then refined by experts attending various meetings organized by UNESCO on the implementation of the Convention. The questions it contains might be used to order information collected with community members or by them for the purpose of inventory-making. There is no obligation whatsoever to use the model questionnaire, which is designed primarily to help inventorying projects ask the right questions and to find inspiration for inventorying ICH in the spirit of the Convention.

The model questionnaire is included as a Hand-out of this unit

For examples of inventorying processes, see Case studies 6–8.

There is a specific 8-10 days training workshop on community-based inventorying. Training materials are available from the Secretariat of the Convention.

1. 1. Frequently referred to as the ‘Intangible Heritage Convention’, the ‘2003 Convention’ and, for the purpose of this unit, simply the ‘Convention’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)