



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Intangible
Cultural
Heritage

Living Heritage and Indigenous Peoples



THE CONVENTION
FOR THE SAFEGUARDING
OF THE INTANGIBLE
CULTURAL HERITAGE



INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

– or ‘living heritage’ – is important because it offers communities and individuals a sense of identity and continuity. It can promote social cohesion, respect for cultural diversity and human creativity, as well as help communities and individuals connect with each other.

As the United Nations’ specialised agency for culture, UNESCO is tasked with safeguarding living heritage, and ensuring its transmission to future generations. In 2003, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which encourages and supports countries to take the necessary measures to ensure that communities safeguard their living heritage.





“Safeguarding living heritage is very crucial for indigenous peoples because their heritage is the basis of their identity, the basis of their cultures and, of course, it is the continual transmission of this heritage that is going to strengthen indigenous peoples’ identities and cultures.”

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz,
United Nations Special Rapporteur
on the rights of indigenous peoples

Passing on our living heritage

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE, - or 'living heritage' - is important for all of us. It shapes who we are, what we value and how we see and act in the world today.

Living heritage is dynamic and has the capacity to change and evolve as it is passed on from generation to generation. It underpins our sense of identity and connects us to our past, each other and the wider world.

Indigenous peoples hold a rich diversity of living heritage, including practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that continue to be relevant and provide meaning in everyday life. The practice and transmission of this heritage contributes to the ongoing vitality, strength and wellbeing of communities.

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes the importance of intangible cultural heritage and its contribution to sustainable development and cultural diversity.

It aims to:

- Safeguard living heritage;
- Ensure respect for it;
- Raise awareness of its importance, and;
- Provide frameworks for international cooperation and assistance.

The Convention provides an important opportunity for indigenous peoples to shape the international heritage discourse and ensure that their experiences and needs in safeguarding living heritage are taken into account. Its Preamble recognizes that "communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of the intangible cultural heritage."



UNESCO's Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples guides the Organization's work, in all areas of its mandate that involve or are relevant for indigenous peoples and of potential benefit or risk to them. It ensures that the Organization's policies, planning, programming and implementation uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

For indigenous peoples, there are many ways to get involved in the Convention.

Community-based inventorying

Countries who have ratified the Convention must draw up, in a manner geared to their own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible heritage present in their territory (Article 12). Inventorying involves identifying and defining elements of intangible cultural heritage always with the view to safeguarding.

Community involvement is mandatory and countries must ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations in the inventorying process.



International recognition

The Convention has a number of Lists to help safeguard different aspects of living heritage. All proposals to the Lists of the Convention must be made with the widest possible participation and free, prior and informed consent of the community, groups or, in some cases, individuals concerned.

The List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding aims at mobilizing international cooperation and assistance for stakeholders to undertake appropriate safeguarding measures for intangible cultural heritage elements to keep them alive.

The Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is made up of intangible cultural heritage elements that help demonstrate the diversity of this heritage and raise awareness about its importance.

The Register of Good Safeguarding Practices includes programmes, projects and activities that best reflect the principles and objectives of the Convention.

Technical and financial assistance

Technical and financial help is available to support communities in their safeguarding measures through the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund. This may include the safeguarding of heritage inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List, the preparation of inventories, capacity-building activities or the elaboration of policies and standard-setting frameworks.

Non-governmental organizations

Indigenous non-governmental organizations with recognised competence in intangible cultural heritage can request accreditation by the General Assembly of the Convention to provide advisory services to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Once accredited, NGOs can take part in governing body meetings as observers, offering them an important way to have their voices heard.



Capacity-building programme

UNESCO's network of trained facilitators deliver capacity-building services around the world. The programme provides the skills and knowledge needed to implement the Convention at the country level. It includes focused training on a wide range of topics, such as policy development, elaborating safeguarding plans and community-based inventorying.

See: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/capacity-building>

The Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

were elaborated in the spirit of the Convention and existing international normative instruments protecting human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Among them, they promote:

- Primacy of communities, groups and, when applicable, individuals
- Transparent collaboration and informed consent
- Respect for customary practices governing access
- Cultural diversity

Our heritage, our future

Safeguarding living heritage is important to address some of the most significant challenges of today and build inclusive, resilient and sustainable societies for the future.

INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES are a vehicle of living heritage. Taxonomies and classification systems can sometimes reveal unconventional and insightful ways of understanding the flora and fauna of complex natural environments. At the same time, such knowledge, encased in language, is often transmitted and expressed through a myriad of practices and expressions.

The Kallawayas are itinerant male healers in Bolivia who practice ancestral medical techniques based on a body of related myths, rituals, values and artistic expressions. Their language is crucial for the transmission of this medical and pharmaceutical knowledge through a system of apprenticeship and captures a deep understanding of the local ecosystem. With some 980 species, their botanical pharmacopeia rates as one of the richest in the world.

The disappearance of a language threatens the continued practice and transmission of living heritage and may result in the loss of vital cultural and ecological knowledge.



Andean cosmology of the Kallawayas, Representative List (2008).

COMMUNITY-BASED RESILIENCE

Living heritage contains locally-rooted knowledge that can provide a source of resilience against changing climatic conditions.

Suri Jagek is a Kalasha meteorological and astronomical knowledge system and practice from the Hindu Kush mountain ranges, based on observing the sun, moon, stars and shadows.

The Kalasha have used this complex system of knowledge for centuries to predict weather patterns and plan harvesting and livestock practices. Passed on orally through proverbs, folk stories and songs, Suri Jagek is used, for instance, to calculate times for taking livestock to higher pastures, where it is cooler in the summers months.

Suri Jagek connects the Kalasha identity to their land and is central to daily life.

Traditional systems of governance can reinforce the ability of communities to respond collectively to change and build resilience.



Suri Jagek (observing the sun), traditional meteorological and astronomical practice based on the observation of the sun, moon and stars in reference to the local topography, Urgent Safeguarding List (2018).



QUALITY EDUCATION is important for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Integrating indigenous language and knowledge into education programmes can enhance the intergenerational transmission of living heritage.

The collective memory and identity of the Mapoyo are symbolically referenced in the surrounding landscape of the Orinoco River in Venezuelan Guayana. The hills are believed to embody Mapoyo gods and the origins of life. The Mapoyo oral traditions represent an integrated way of seeing the world and understanding the Mapoyo's place in it.

Recognising the threats to this way of life, the community developed educational tools to strengthen the transmission of their living heritage. Including local content in the classroom reaffirmed the status of the elders as knowledge holders and built awareness and pride among Mapoyo youth about their cultural identity.

A quality education for all should harness the potential of this rich resource for enhancing community self-esteem and understanding the self and one's place in society.



Mapoyo oral tradition and its symbolic reference points within their ancestral territory, Urgent Safeguarding List (2014).

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Living heritage can help protect biodiversity. Many local and indigenous communities have developed lifestyles and practices that are closely linked to nature and that respect the environment.

In Kenya, for example, the Mijikenda attach spiritual and cultural significance to forested settlements called Kayas, where they believe their ancestors lived.

The Kayas contain burial areas and shrines, essential for the enactment of rituals that the Mijikenda perform in communication with the spirits. There are ceremonies for successful harvests and the good health and wellbeing of the people.

The spiritual values attached to the Kayas have helped to protect the forests and their biodiversity. While the Kaya elders are the main custodians of this heritage, each community member has a role to play in protecting the forests.

Such customary institutions provide the basis for local-level decision making about the management of natural resources, which can enhance biodiversity protection.



Traditions and practices associated with the Kayas in the sacred forests of the Mijikenda, Urgent Safeguarding List (2009).



FOR MORE INFORMATION

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/indigenous-peoples>



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