

THE 2003 UNESCO CONVENTION ON THE SAFEGUARDING OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Implications for Uganda





Rituals are an important part of our intangible cultural heritage

Introduction

This Factsheet aims at popularising the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and its importance among relevant civil society organisations e.g. NGOs, education institutions, community-based organisations, individuals and groups and State actors such as Local Government Authorities to increase the levels of knowledge, appreciation of and utilisation of ICH in cultural heritage (elements and structures) and ultimately subscription to the convention of ICH in cultural heritage.

Context and scope of the 2003 Convention

The UNESCO 2003 Convention is an international instrument that gives living cultural expressions the same legal protection and programmatic support enjoyed by nature, landscapes, monuments and sites. This was adopted at the 32nd General Conference of UNESCO in 2003 and ratified at a record speed by 157 States by November 2013, and accredited 156 NGOs to work under its framework. This convention was ratified by Uganda on May 13th, 2009 and entered into force on August 13th, 2009. The treaty complements earlier instruments such as the 1972 Convention

Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage but shifts the focus from protecting Outstanding Universal Values of places to sustaining the knowledge, skills and social practices that communities value.

Accredited NGOs in Uganda

Currently, only six NGOs have been accredited by UNESCO in Uganda. These include Engabu Za Tooro, Gulu Theatre Artists (GUTA), National Council of Traditional Healers and Herbalists Association (NACOTHA), The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), Uganda Community Museums Association (UCOMA) and Pearl Rhythms Foundation.

What the Convention recognises as intangible cultural heritage (ICH)

The Intangible Cultural Heritage, according to the Convention, means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills- as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith- that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognise as part



of their cultural heritage. This is transmitted from generation to generation within communities, created and transformed continuously, in response to their environment and interaction with nature and history. It further stresses four qualifiers:

ICH is *traditional yet contemporary, inclusive, representative* of group identity, and entirely *communitybased*, no practice becomes heritage without the bearers' own recognition.

Domains of ICH

There are five domains (categories) of ICH provided by the UNESCO 2003 Convention and these are;

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language, folklore, and storytelling



- Performing arts like music, dance, games, theatre and opera



- Social practices, rituals and festive events include naming systems, traditional healing rituals and International art festivals



- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, e.g. traditional/herbal medicine, climate change and environmental management, etc.



- Traditional craftsmanship like pottery, wood carving, basketry, barkcloth and textiles.



However, it is important to note that some elements span several domains: birth celebration of twins may mix music, dance, ritual objects and environmental knowledge in one living system.

Safeguarding philosophy

The convention highlights the aspect of safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage if it must stay **relevant** and **adaptable**. Safeguarding is therefore about transmission of knowledge, skills and meaning or communicating heritage from generation to generation. However its crucial to state that the Convention calls for the safeguarding

of only intangible cultural heritage that is relevant to its community providing them with a sense of identity, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another.

Why safeguard ICH?

To strengthen the diverse tangible and intangible conditions that are necessary for its continuous evolution and interpretation by the holding community, as well as for its transmission to future generations, gravitate around the community and meet its needs.



The Madi bow lyre music and dance was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent safeguarding in 2016.



Obligations of States Parties

At national level, Parties must:

- Identify and *inventory* living heritage with community participation;
- Domesticcate the convention through national policies, laws and institutions to monitor and promote it;
- Encourage academic and communitybased research;
- Take other safeguarding measures agreed with communities;
- Submit nominations, with broad community input, to the Convention's three international lists; and
- Manage and contribute to the Convention's international assistance fund.

Benefits of State Parties

- States may request technical help through UNESCO's capacity building programme, which provides longterm training and legislative support.
- States benefit from different international assistance e.g. Provision of experts and practitioners, financial support and creation and operation of infrastructures.

- Collaborations with other member states
- The convention provides advisory services and illuminates the country's ICH elements through the listing system.

Statutory organs and decision-making

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Convention has two such bodies that provide guidance to its implementation, and these include; General Assembly and Intergovernmental Committee.

- *The General Assembly* is the Convention's supreme body; all States Parties sit in it and meet every two years in June.
- *The Intergovernmental Committee* has 24 elected States Parties serving fouryear terms; it meets annually (usually November or December) and normally decides by consensus on inscriptions, bestpractice registers and large assistance grants.
- Additionally, the convention entails of a committee: the UNESCO Secretariat which assists UNESCO in preparation of the documentation, draft agenda for their meetings and ensures implementation of their decisions.



- The Evaluation Body that consists of experts from member states who assess nominations for inscription on UNESCO'S lists and make recommendation of whether or not to be included.

International listing mechanisms and criteria

There are three tools for international visibility and cooperation:

Representative List of the ICH of Humanity

There 88 elements on the representative list from Africa and one element from Uganda- the barkcloth making in Uganda

List of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding

Under this list, we have 35 elements in Africa and five of these elements listed on the ICH in need of urgent safeguarding are from Uganda

Register of Best Safeguarding Practices

There is only one element from Africa and none from Uganda.

A nomination must satisfy five criteria. Three apply to all lists, proof that the element is ICH, evidence of community consent and inclusion in a regularly

updated national inventory, while the Urgent Safeguarding List adds two criteria: demonstrated risk to viability and a coherent safeguarding plan.

Implications for inscribing ICH elements

- Inscription can strengthen transmission, raise community wellbeing, improve mutual respect and advance sustainable development aims such as food security, ecosystem stewardship and livelihoods.
- Listing generates visibility that mobilises funding and tourism, yet the document cautions that over-exposure can commercialise or even damage the very practices it seeks to promote; similar effects have been observed with World Heritage sites.
- Inscribed ICH elements become heritage for entire humanity.

Evaluation findings and persistent challenges

UNESCO's first global evaluation judged the Convention "highly relevant", noting that many States had already embedded its concepts in domestic cultural policy. Weak points include:

- Limited integration into nonculture sectors such as agriculture, health and tourism;



- Chronic underfunding and shortage of skilled staff;
- Uneven understanding of ICH concepts at both government and community level;
- Overreliance on the Representative List while the Urgent Safeguarding List, BestPractice Register and International Assistance Fund remain underused;
- Absence of a monitoring framework with indicators and benchmarks; and
- Restricted NGO voice in policy debates, despite their frontline role in safeguarding.

Key implications for researchers and policymakers

- The Convention shifts heritage governance from experts to communities, framing living traditions as assets for inclusive development.
- Effective implementation therefore demands cross-sector planning, stable local funding and systematic monitoring; areas that still lag behind the Convention's ambitions.
- Strengthening capacity building, diversifying use of all three lists and giving community NGO coalitions a bigger seat at the policy table would help realise the Convention's full potential.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund

This fund is established in accordance with the Financial Regulations of UNESCO provides financial assistance for various activities focused on preserving and promoting living heritage, including community-based inventory, awareness raising and safeguarding in emergency situations. It helps in ensuring that cultural traditions, knowledge and practices are passed on to future generations. These contributions may be made by the state parties, funds appropriated for this purpose by the General Conference of UNESCO, etc.



Overall Results Framework

The overall results framework is the final outcome of a consultative process that originated in a recommendation by UNESCO's internal oversight service. This is a tool used to measure the impact of the 2003 Convention at various levels through clearly identified objectives, indicators and benchmarks, as well as by means of a result-oriented monitoring system.

This framework is composed of two tables: the first one includes the high-level framework, where impacts, expected outcomes and eight thematic areas are identified and a set of twenty-six core indicators are established. The second table presents the core indicators and associated set of eighty-six assessment factors arranged by thematic areas.



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