



Background Note on the Problem of Imbalance in Geographical Representation of Accredited NGOs under the 2003 Convention

This short paper provides an overview of what is a non-governmental organization (NGO) and the challenge of getting a balanced representation of accredited NGOs under the 2003 Convention. It is a background for starting an ICH NGO Forum working group on how we can overcome the ongoing imbalance. The note was made by the Finnish Folk Music Institute in July 2020, and endorsed by the ICH NGO Forum Steering Committee.

1. Definition of NGO

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are organizations which are independent of governmental involvement. The United Nations use the term for organizations which are neither governments nor member states, and gives them observer status at its assemblies and meetings.

UNESCO has built up over the years a valuable network of cooperation in its fields of competence with NGOs representing civil society. Since UNESCO is not a funding institution, this partnership is essentially of an intellectual nature. The Directives Concerning UNESCO's Partnership with Non-governmental Organizations (available as part K in the Basic Texts 2020, define UNESCO's official partnership with NGOs, and define NGOs as international, regional, national or local NGOs. Any organization may qualify as an NGO which may become a partner of UNESCO, providing that it has not been established by intergovernmental agreement, or by a government, and that its purposes, functions, structure and operation are non-governmental, democratic and non-profit-making in character (Art. 1). The provisions of the Directives are designed to lay the foundations for a mutual partnership between UNESCO and the competent NGOs representing civil society for the preparation and the execution of its programme, and thus increase international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture, communication and information. In addition, they "should promote the emergence of new organizations that are representative of civil society in those regions of the world where such organizations, for historical, cultural or geographical reasons, are isolated or weak, and help to include them in the partnership" (Preamble, para. 3).

2. Definition and roles of NGOs in the 2003 Convention

According to the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Intergovernmental Committee proposes to the General Assembly the accreditation of NGOs with recognized competence in the field of the intangible cultural heritage to act in an advisory capacity to the Committee (Art. 9). In addition to the six accredited NGOs as members in the Evaluation Body (Operational Directives, para. 96), each State Party is expected to involve relevant non-governmental organizations to participate in the implementation of the Convention on

the national level (Art. 11, ODs 90). What kind of NGOs can apply to be accredited under the 2003 Convention is defined in ODs 91.

3. The Problem of imbalance in geographical representation of accredited NGOs under the 2003 Convention

UNESCO has six regional electoral groups for geographical representation in elections (see the Basic Texts 2020, Appendix 2, I). By the time of 14.COM in 2019, the 2003 Convention was ratified by 178 State Parties. The 24 State Parties of the Intergovernmental Committee are elected by the States Parties at General Assembly according to the principles of equitable geographical representation and rotation. The seats in the Committee are distributed in proportion to the number of States Parties from each electoral group (see the bar charts below).

By the time of 14.COM in 2019, 176 NGOs were accredited to perform advisory functions for the Committee. Their geographical representation is as follows: Group I: 97; Group II: 17; Group III: 10; Group IV: 26; Group V(a): 20 and Group V(b): 6 (see the bar charts below). Nineteen accredited NGOs did not get their status renewed, and 35 new NGOs were recommended to the General Assembly to be accredited to act in an advisory capacity to the Committee.

The unbalanced geographical distribution of accredited NGOs was identified as one of the major concerns by the General Assembly, the Committee and the Secretariat when the reflection process on the advisory role of accredited NGOs started at 12.COM in 2017. The concern on the unbalanced geographical distribution has been pointed out in numerous working documents of the governing bodies. The Committee and the General Assembly repeatedly encouraged “NGOs from under-represented Electoral Groups that meet the criteria for accreditation to submit their requests for accreditation at the earliest opportunity so as to improve the geographical distribution of accredited NGOs and invited States Parties from those Electoral Groups to make this call widely known among NGOs operating within their territories” (Decisions/7.GA/11 -; see also Decisions/14.COM/17). In decision 14.COM 15, the encouragement also included “States Parties, the ICH NGO Forum, accredited non-governmental organizations, category 2 centres and UNESCO Chairs to organize capacity-building activities for newly accredited non-governmental organizations and for non-governmental organizations that may be interested in seeking accreditation in the future, with a particular focus on non-governmental organizations based in under-represented regions” (Decisions/14.COM/15).

The results of the reflection process on the advisory role of accredited NGOs, including the [working document](#) and [report of the consultation meeting](#) held on 18 April 2019 at UNESCO Headquarters was discussed at 14.COM (LHE/19/14.COM/15). The process of the Secretariat and the informal ad hoc working group, in consultation with accredited NGOs and the ICH NGO Forum, has given reflections on the possible ways in which the participation of NGOs under the 2003 Convention could be further enhanced in the implementation of the Convention, and how this could be reflected in the accreditation and renewal mechanisms of NGOs.

The open nature of the reflection allowed for a wide range of opinions and ideas to be expressed and explored by States Parties and accredited NGOs on different aspects of the accreditation system, and new advisory functions for accredited NGOs were proposed:

- Advice to the Committee on specific thematic issues;
- Direct reporting and monitoring functions for the Committee, for instance under the periodic reporting mechanism or for the monitoring of elements inscribed on the Lists of the Convention;
- Advice on statutory matters linked to NGOs;

- Implementation of the Convention at the local, national and international levels, including contribution to the implementation of capacity-building activities;
- Reporting functions at the national level (periodic reporting mechanism);
- Sharing of safeguarding experiences in lighter and more accessible ways; • Outreach to civil society and awareness-raising about the Convention;
- Laboratory of ideas and inspiring practices, including research on thematic issues focusing on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and on the links between intangible cultural heritage and other connected fields.

These points were further elaborated in the Bylaws adopted by the ICH NGO Forum during the 14.COM. Art. 3 of the Bylaws states that the ICH NGO Forum, inter alia, shall:

(a) serve as a forum for the exchange of information and ideas about safeguarding ICH; (b) act as a platform for networking and cooperation among ICH NGOs; (c) foster ethical principles and participation of civil society for the safeguarding of ICH; (d) provide resources, reports and information about safeguarding practices to UNESCO, States Parties, communities, practitioners and other ICH stakeholders; (e) support ICH NGOs in advancing their cooperation with governmental and intergovernmental entities (such as National Commissions for UNESCO, regional offices of UNESCO, Category 2 centers), especially as regards implementation of the principles of community agency and community-based, participatory, bottom-up approaches; (f) contribute to the capacity-building programme and to experience-sharing on good safeguarding practices, including through the publication of the journal #HeritageAlive; (g) advise the Intergovernmental Committee on specific thematic issues, and participate in reporting and monitoring on inscribed ICH elements and safeguarding practices.

Concerning the geographical distribution of accredited NGOs, only a few participants in the reflection process supported the possibility of limiting the number of accredited NGOs in over-represented regions through the establishment of a ceiling. There was a comment from international NGOs, that the legal domicile of an NGO may not necessarily reflect the scope of its activities and that several NGOs based in Europe had most of their activities carried out in other regions. The 16 accredited NGOs with “international” designation as a part of their name, are distributed as follows: Group I: 10, Group II: 1, Group III: 0, Group IV: 3, Group V(a): 2 and Group V(b): 0.

Instead of limiting the number of accredited NGOs, “the implementation of ‘soft measures’ was encouraged to foster the accreditation of NGOs based in under-represented regions. These could include awareness-raising initiatives through the wider network of entities associated with UNESCO, and capacity-building actions by the Secretariat, accredited NGOs and a network of experts” (LHE/19/14.COM/15, para. 16).

Moreover, as it was stated, “the Committee may consider it to be helpful to identify thematic areas of interest, in which targeted efforts could be made to identify active NGOs. In this regard, the need for initiatives – involving States, NGOs, National Commissions, Category 2 Centres, UNESCO Chairs and all relevant stakeholders – to raise awareness about the accreditation system and build the capacities of NGOs active in the safeguarding of living heritage in under-represented regions, as well as to encourage cooperation between accredited NGOs and NGOs that may potentially seek accreditation, was highlighted” (ibid., para. 17).

In decision 14.COM 15, the Committee acknowledged “the important role and untapped potential of the ICH NGO Forum and accredited NGOs in providing support to the implementation of the Convention”. It further requested that the Secretariat gather relevant information from accredited NGOs in order to develop a mapping of their domains of competence, taking into consideration their capacities. The Committee also “encouraged States Parties, the ICH NGO Forum, accredited

NGOs, category 2 centres and UNESCO Chairs to organize capacity-building activities for newly accredited NGOs and for NGOs that may be interested in seeking accreditation in the future, with a particular focus on NGOs based in under-represented regions” (ibid.). Finally, it decided to include as a separate agenda item the “Report of the NGOs Forum”, on an experimental basis, at its fifteenth session. The Secretariat is to report on the outcomes of the consultation process to the eighth session of the General Assembly in 2020.

4. ICH NGO Forum and New Working Groups

In the NGO ICH Forum Report of their Pre-14.COM and 14.COM Activities in 2019, the regional group discussions on “Regional capacity-building needs, opportunities and challenges” concluded: “Participants agreed that the ICH NGO Forum has to find ways towards more balanced representation of ICH NGOs from six regions of the world, and each regional group discussed and proposed ways of how to overcome this ongoing imbalance”. (<http://www.ichngoforum.org/documents/>).

Similarly, in the Forum’s intervention 14.COM 15 (Reflection on the participation of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of the Convention, Bogotá, 14 December 2019) the issue of geographical imbalance is addressed as follows: “We completely share the concern of the General Assembly, the Committee and the Secretariat regarding ‘the unbalanced geographical distribution of accredited NGOs’ (para. 16). We also agree that the way out is ‘to foster the accreditation of NGOs based in under-represented regions’. On how to accomplish this, we are of the opinion that capacity-building workshops in such regions would be of crucial importance, as pointed out in our intervention on the agenda item 7. Therefore, we very much appreciate the proposed draft decision, paragraph 6, related to the organization of capacity-building activities”.