NGOs, the mediator of communication and information flow between communities and the states: The case of Inter-city Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network (ICCN)

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**Introduction**

A decade ago, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (hereafter referred to as the Convention) was adopted. Since then, one hundred fifty six NGOs have been accredited, so far, to provide advisory services to the intergovernmental committee and to contribute to the implementation of the convention in grassroots level. The role of NGOs in the implementation of the Convention is indisputable, as it is clearly indicated in a recent report by the secretariat on item 14.b of the Provisional Agenda (ITH/13/8.COM/14.b).

However, the variety of accredited NGOs and its lack of opportunities to act in advisory capacity to the intergovernmental committee were questioned during the 7th Committee Meeting. Many NGOs play their roles in very diverse methods and in very different fields. In this paper, I would like to focus on NGOs’ pivotal position as the great informative or communicative mediator, and present the case of the Inter-city Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network (ICCN) as an example.

**Brief introduction of the Inter-city Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network (ICCN) and its mission**

The Inter-City Intangible Cultural Cooperation Network (ICCN) was established as a platform for the worldwide collaboration of mayors and local authorities for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage as a vital component of sustainable development. It is based on the belief that the states and the international society, like UNESCO, play an important role in the ICH area, likewise local communities and local governments have the crucial responsibility to safeguard and to transmit its local ICH.

The initiative for the establishment of the ICCN was started at the First International Round Table of Mayors on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Gangneung city, Republic of Korea in 2004. Following to this, the participants of the 2008 Round Table of Mayors unanimously agreed to establish the ICCN and officially put this organization into operation. In 2012, the ICCN was accredited to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the UNESCO.

Since its establishment, the ICCN is the only international organization of forty local governments and twenty five cultural organizations from thirty five states (2013), whose mission, as proclaimed in the 2004 Gangneung Declaration, is to explore creative and effective policies for the safeguarding of local intangible cultural heritage and its inseparable relation to the sustainable local development. Furthermore, it aims to make cultural peace based on mutual understanding formed through intercultural dialogue.

The ICCN organizes the General Assembly (formerly known as the Round Table of Mayors), Thematic Workshops, and Joint Festivals bi-annually in a rotation among member cities. Youth Forums, ICCN Exchange Programs and other events in Gangneung city and other ICCN member cities are also organized in cooperation with the members.

The meetings, workshops and youth forums of the ICCN have been organized focusing on the themes related to the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage as it is the pivotal mission of the ICCN. Through meetings and workshops, mayors of local governments and experts discuss and share knowledge and experience in the field of safeguarding the ICH via case studies. Youth forums, which started from 2010, are also an open venue where young people are encouraged to raise their voices and express their insights about ICH issues.

The ICCN joint festival was initiated with the belief on the crucial role of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in sustainable local development. The ICCN is trying to maximize local cultural identity and to inspire the local’s creativity through its Intangible Cultural Heritage. Eventually, this cultural identity and creativity will lead to sustainable local development and put the local people of that city (of cities) in a leading role in the coming future. The first 'ICCN Joint Festival' was held in Gangneung, Korea, in 2012.

**NGOs, the great informative or communicative mediator between the communities and the states**

NGOs are undoubtedly the closest actors of local communities as the bearers of ICH, and are also working closely with the state(s) in safeguarding activities. Many NGOs are doing various activities in different fields of ICH, both locally and internationally. However, it does not mean that every NGO has full understanding of or the capacity in the implementation of the convention. Meanwhile, according to the recent evaluation result on the implementation status of the Convention and its impact (ITH/13/8.COM/14.b), it reported that many accredited NGOs show an excellent understanding of the Convention and have relevant expertise, they communicate to both the state and the committee, are informed of the international and local policies on the ICH, and to include the needs of the local communities in the policies by communicating with them. For a close look on the role of NGOs in this aspect, the case of ICCN will be examined.

The ICCN organizes workshops and sessions related to the major issues of the Convention every year. The ICCN has invited many local NGOs from various local communities around the world that deal with specific ICH area(s) to attend its annual meetings to share experiences and knowledge in the field. Most recently, the sixth ICCN Thematic Workshop was held in Dubrovnik, Croatia from October 2 to 6, 2013. Mayors, representatives and youth participants from twenty six cities in twenty three states, and representatives and experts from eight cultural institutions participated in this event. The fact which is worth noting is the local participation. Along with the international participants, there were approximately a hundred local participants, including twenty five presenters from local NGOs, institutions, and professors from the host city, Dubrovnik. They are the ones, the active actors and bearers, who are closely working with their local intangible cultures such as the different ways of lace making (listed in 2009), diverse versions of local mythology, traditional boat making, restoration of cultural heritage after the war, and so on. Some are representatives from local governments, governmental institutions and the Ministry of Cultures.

During the meeting, local participants shared their experiences and challenges with their local partners, state partners and international participants. They got a chance to learn the relevant international discussions going on that are related to the implementation of the Convention from international experts, and obtain other aspects from cases in different countries. That was the moment that the ICCN workshop in Dubrovnik became the informative medium to mobilize communities’ participation in the implementation of the Convention by providing relevant information and knowledge and drawing attention to the issues. These activities not only help the local NGOs, particularly those with limited access to the Convention, to build their capacity but also to foster the communication flow among international partners. ICCN’s workshops and meetings have created an open forum where NGOs, international and local, can raise their voices on local policies based on their open communication with local governments.

NGOs as mediators between the local communities and the states are also well-shown in the ICCN festivals. The festival is a creative result of the collaborative effort of ICCN members, experts, and NGOs all around the world. It consists of performances, exhibitions, and workshops. The festival is a model that realizes the goals of the Convention of awareness rising on importance of intangible culture, proving its value as a source of sustainable development, need of community involvement, power of international cooperation, and realization of cultural peace. After the first ICCN Festival, it was shown that the festival enabled local communities to bring their ICH out to the public and enriched ICH bearers both culturally and economically. Also, it served as an educational medium through which the young generations could improve their understanding ICH, with the local public officers and cultural organizations enhancing their global capacity in safeguarding and promotion of ICH.

However, it faced two inevitable challenges. One was that not all ICH bearers could participate in international festivals due to obstacles in language and logistics, and another was that it was difficult to demonstrate ICH in a balanced way between commercialization, or distortion to fit in the international festival frame, and demonstration of its core value. To answer this inevitable questions, it should be discussed what was seen from the last festival organized by the ICCN.

For the First ICCN Festival in Gangneung, Republic of Korea, twenty two states of the world participated with their intangible cultural heritages such as traditional arts, crafts, games, and foods. It included some of ICCN’s UNESCO representative list, featuring Slovacko Verbunk of Czech Republic (2008), Hudhud chants of Phillipines (2008), Sicilian puppet theatre of Italy (2008), Zoorkhanei rituals (2010) and table of Nouruz (2009) of Iran, Gangneung Danoje Festival (2008) and Jeongseon Arirang (2012) of Korea, Batik of Indonesia (2009), and other six more inscriptions. More local intangible cultures from diverse regions also demonstrated its attractiveness to the public through staged performances, exhibitions and workshops.

Among the participants, it was easy to notice who came with the partnership of local NGOs and communities, representatively Artesol of Brazil and Yiswind of China. Artesol, an accredited NGO and an ICCN associate member, joined the ICCN Festival with the performance of Bumba Meu Boi, a Brazilian folk theatrical tradition that is a tale with music, costumes and a bull, and organized an exhibition of traditional crafts. Another is Yiswind of China, which is also an ICCN associate member. They organized the workshop of Chinese Calligraphy and paper cutting (2009).

Most of local ICHs are bound to the surrounding environment. That is why it was easy to fail in delivering its core value without a full background context, and why it was so difficult to raise awareness among the public locally and internationally. In such situation with the public coming from a completely different cultural background, the process of mediating between ICH bearers and the public, the role of the two NGOs mentioned above – Artesol of Brazil and Yiswind of China, were pivotal and very successful, for they had abundant experiences in local and international context. They helped ICH bearers to not only overcome the language barriers, but also deliver the core value and meaning with local context in a balanced way that suited to the international public in the frame of the festival.

Therefore, NGOs must be the key actors in facilitating ICH bearers in cultural events, as the window and voice of local communities, and the great advisors with full sense and knowledge of expertise on the spirit of the Convention and international capacity, as shown at the ICCN Festival.

**Conclusion**

I would like conclude this paper with an introduction on 2014 ICCN event. Next year, the ICCN Conference and the Second ICCN Festival will be held from October 8 to 12 in the city of Azure - Isfahan, Iran. The city is the academic, agricultural, industrial and more importantly the cultural centre of Iran. During the Festival, Zoorkhanei rituals (traditional Athletics) (2010), Carpet Weaving (2010) rooted in this city, other UNESCO inscriptions and diverse local ICH from home and abroad will be demonstrated in the Persian Garden, UNESCO World Heritage Site (listed in 2011). The second ICCN Festival in Isfahan has 7 themes as the following: Visual Arts, Local Traditional Games and Sports, Folk Music, Handicrafts, Performance Arts such as indigenous and ritualistic arts, Architecture and Decorative Arts, and Customs and Traditions. The ICCN Conference is comprised of two days of meetings for the members and participants, including ICCN GA, some thematic sessions and women’s forum, and cultural events. Theme of the year and details are in the process of discussion.

I hope more NGOs will join us to realize the goal of the Convention through the ICCN Festival by sharing your cultures, raising public awareness and building special supportive relationship with your local communities and governments. The ICCN believes that the ICCN Festivals and Conferences will be the right place where you NGOs contribute to implementing the Convention in a way of the great mediator. The ICCN and the host city, Isfahan are ready to welcome you!