

## **Future Activities of the ICH NGO Forum**

### **Introduction**

As we know, the ICH NGO Forum is a membership organization that serves as the official representative of the NGOs accredited to the 2003 Convention. NGO accreditation is based on Article 9(1) of the Convention, which allows for the accreditation of NGOs “to act in an advisory capacity to the Committee”. One of the priorities of the Steering Committee over the next few years will be to work with the Forum membership to find ways to develop and expand this role, which is currently rather limited. This will involve overcoming vocal resistance from some States Parties, primarily through building trust and demonstrating the added value that engaging with NGOs (both nationally and internationally) can bring to the process of implementing the Convention.

NGOs possess uniquely extensive, direct on-the-ground experience of safeguarding ICH within local contexts in close collaboration with bearer communities and mediating among various types of stakeholders. They represent a third sphere apart from government (including intergovernmental entities) and the corporate sector, positioning them directly within civil society. In contrast with the situation of sister international NGOs such as ICOMOS and ICOM, the ICH arena has been centred around the States Parties and UNESCO Secretariat rather than NGOs acting independently. We would like to see a realignment of our position within the world of ICH safeguarding to one that is comparable to that of other international NGOs accredited to international heritage treaties.

### **Increasing the participation of NGOs from under-represented regions**

The imbalance in membership of the Forum in terms of the regional groupings of UNESCO continues to be challenging, with a preponderance of

accredited NGOs coming from North America and Western Europe. It remains a major priority for the Steering Committee and all the Forum's members to find ways to increase the participation in the Forum of NGOs from all regions through increasing the number of accredited NGOs from under-represented regions. It looks forward to the recommendations of the the Working Group for more Balanced Geographical Representation of Accredited NGOs. Obviously, conducting regional capacity-building workshops and information sessions should be a central means of achieving this. These can be both targeted at non-accredited NGOs along with those already accredited in order to develop their capacities for reaching out to and encouraging other NGOs in their respective countries to become accredited. Beyond this, promoting the Forum and providing more information about the process of accreditation through multiple channels is also necessary.

### **Participation in statutory meetings**

In addition to increasing the number of accredited NGOs from under-represented regions, it is also very important to encourage as high a level of participation as possible in the statutory meetings of the Convention – this will involve, among other things, widely disseminating information about the availability of and application procedures for financial assistance to NGOs, in particular those based in under-represented regions. Moreover, sharing information on how NGOs can be candidates for leadership roles within the Forum as well as membership of the Evaluation Body is also important for increasing the participation of NGOs from around the world in the Forum itself and in the intergovernmental process.

### **Improving communications with Forum members**

Clearly, holding last year's 15.COM meeting and the associated activities of the Forum online made them much more accessible to many NGOs and resulted in much greater participation. Although increased participation is part of a longer trend, this certainly suggests that some form of hybrid approach to holding our meetings in the future may well become a norm that can make them more widely accessible.

Today, most NGOs regard the Forum as the central place to network, present their work, acquire information, and share ideas about skills in the safeguarding of ICH. All newly accredited NGOs received a letter at the start

of this year in order to introduce the Forum and its activities, to present the website and to encourage their participation in the Forum. This is important to make all our members feel they belong and have a right to participate in the Forum's governance as well as in its activities.

However, we still need to make greater efforts to encourage NGOs from all regions to take an active part in all our activities: In the upcoming year, the Steering Committee needs to develop, in consultation with the membership, new and better ways to make the Forum more inclusive and accessible to all member NGOs. We expect to improve communications strategies and information-sharing at both global and regional levels during 2022. One possibility might involve contracting with a marketing consultant. The interviews we have conducted for the mapping project have also been a great opportunity for us to talk with many of you and, in some cases, to meet you for the first time. These were conducted on a regional basis, and the regional-level discussion will continue during 2022, through online meetings and also, we hope, capacity-building activities.

### **Working groups**

Another area in which the Steering Committee will continue to develop its efforts is in increasing the effectiveness of the Working Groups, putting into practice newly-proposed organizational arrangements and information-sharing. We look forward to the establishment of consistent governance procedures and annual reports from every working group. The working groups have untapped potential to magnify the work of the Forum and engage our membership more extensively and inclusively. As much as the Working Groups should keep a degree of autonomy, their work also needs to respond to the priorities of the Forum as articulated by the Steering Committee in consultation with the membership, in order to make the Forum as a whole more relevant to the process of implementing the 2003 Committee. One way of achieving this is through setting up ad hoc Working Groups (as we did this year on Article 21) to address issues of particular strategic importance. Aligning the Working Groups' activities more closely with the Forum's priorities is one of the most effective means we have of demonstrating our value to the Intergovernmental Committee, and to fulfil the advisory role that the Convention has accorded to us.

### **Working with ICOMOS and other similar bodies**

The Steering Committee hopes during 2022 to continue its dialogue with ICOMOS over mutually important issues, in order to find areas of mutual

engagement, interest and support. Since ICOMOS is a member of the Forum and some of our own members also have a presence in ICOMOS, we are particularly well-placed to inform ICOMOS' activities with regard to safeguarding ICH. While we welcome the recent recognition by ICOMOS that documenting and safeguarding ICH is integral to the conservation of monuments and to historic preservation generally, in our dialogue with ICOMOS we have underscored our common concerns, the distinctiveness of our approaches to heritage safeguarding and management, and the need to maintain the particular niches we occupy in heritage safeguarding. These include approaches towards the involvement of ICH bearers and their communities in the safeguarding and management of ICH, the importance of the Ethical Principles developed for the Convention and even the understanding we have as to what 'safeguarding' itself involves (quite distinct from traditional conservation approaches). Through this dialogue we feel that we can ensure that fundamental principles and approaches of the 2003 Convention, as well as ones that are of crucial importance to us as members of civil society working in this area, are incorporated into the work of the members of ICOMOS.

This reminds us of the importance of the ICH NGO Forum reaching out to other similar international NGOs (such as ICOM and ICOMOS) and to the intergovernmental committees of other treaties (such as the World Heritage Committee, the Committee of the 2005 UNESCO Convention and even the Convention on Biological Diversity). We should seek to find a voice in their deliberations where they relate to ICH and its safeguarding.

### **The mapping project - raising the profile of the Forum**

The mapping project on the expertise and domains of competencies of the accredited NGOs is a continuing activity through 2022, which the Steering Committee will finalise and bring to fruition early next year. In addition to the (very interesting) results of the online survey and the interviews conducted by Steering Committee members during October to December, which form the basis for our report, we will also be preparing infographics for all the 65 NGOs that were interviewed. Along with the results conveyed in our report on the survey, the professionally designed, visually appealing infographics will serve as powerful tools to introduce States Parties, the Secretariat, other NGOs and other stakeholders to the wide range (and depth) of expertise, competencies and areas of activity we enjoy. This is very important since one of the most valuable aspects of the ICH NGO Forum as an advisory body to the Committee is this depth and diversity – with 193 members in 2021 – which no

other civil society body can offer in the field of ICH safeguarding. It is therefore incumbent upon the Steering Committee in the next year to capitalise on this opportunity to promote the Forum's capacities with States Parties (in particular), the Secretariat and other stakeholders so that our added value is better recognized and our role in implementing the Convention at the intergovernmental level is expanded and better defined.

### **Expanding the roles and capacity of the Forum**

Our NGO community is an unparalleled resource for this purpose, built on the great diversity among accredited NGOs which are engaged daily on the ground around the world working with heritage bearers and other stakeholders. One of the challenges facing the Steering Committee, then, is to find ways to demonstrate this value that NGOs bring to the table, working towards a clearer and more formalized role. However, having greater prominence must not be won at the cost of the independence of NGOs and of the Forum, which should always play a key role in shining a critical light on the intergovernmental and governmental processes.

Beyond the outcomes of the mapping survey, the Steering Committee will also follow closely and participate in all intergovernmental meetings (such as the follow-up on the Open-ended Intergovernmental Working Group on the listing mechanism to be held in January 2022) and seek to have as strong a presence as we can in these meetings. This can, and should, include demanding an NGO seat with active speaking rights at all intergovernmental meetings of the 2003 Convention and coordinating the 'voice' at the Forum from this seat once it is established.

Our presence as 50% of the membership of the Evaluation Body of the Convention remains an extremely important expression of the potential of NGOs accredited to the Convention to contribute in a real and effective manner to its implementation at the international level. We need to continue to be active in the Evaluation Body and to encourage as many candidates as possible from the regions whose seats are to be filled in a given year. This is one of the most effective ways we have to demonstrate our importance in the intergovernmental process.

In order to meet the challenges that an expanded advisory role will bring, the Steering Committee will work on reviewing its organizational structure and capacity. This will include the need for the Working Groups to collaborate more closely with the Steering Committee than has been the case. To this end, we will recommend new guidelines for Working Group elections,

leadership succession and relationships with the Steering Committee. The explosive growth of ICH in the last decade has greatly strained the capacity of the Secretariat, and they look to the Forum to carry out new and expanded functions. This would require substantial organizational development of the Forum, which could be accomplished through a process of facilitated strategic planning. We anticipate actively pursuing adequate funding to support planning, expanded functions and new activities, including exploring possibilities for paid administrative staff. Additionally, offering a donated stable virtual space to the Forum of accredited NGOs' will grant invaluable opportunities for organization to be able to hold on-going capacity-building programmes, training and mutual shared experience sessions in and across regional groups.