

All On Board to Tackle Climate Change

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has been a success story. Although criticized at its outset, to the point that a number of countries refused to adopt it in 2003 and still stubbornly resist ratification (ie Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand), this Convention has over the past 20 years gained the trust and support of 181 countries around the world and has demonstrated its efficiency in safeguarding living heritage. Even more importantly, it has become a vital agent of cultural diversity, of sustainable development, of adaptation to populations in emergency situations (natural disasters, armed conflict, forced migration) and peace in the world. Let us hope that these countries that prize themselves as champions of such values will finally come on board and use the Convention to push forward the agenda of a new moral economy for the 21st century. These countries must realize that living heritage is not just about entertainment, preserving traditional practices and nourishing ethnic identities, but about dealing with very serious social, economic, and especially environmental issues. Intangible cultural heritage is indeed an efficient tool for meeting social obligations and serving the greater good.

In my mind, one of the great challenges of the 21st century will be the adaptation to the negative effects of climate change, such as droughts, floods, hurricanes, armed conflicts, forced migrations, displaced populations, starvation, etc. Indeed, the increased frequency of floods, cyclones, mud slides, heat waves, forest fires, and drought attributed to climate change is impacting the livelihoods of populations throughout the world. It appears to be increasingly certain this situation will expand over time. These natural disasters are threatening the existence of many intangible cultural heritage practices. Traditional agricultural practices are being discontinued because of lack of water, forest fires are threatening traditional forest exploitation, and fishermen are having to look for new fishing grounds because of the changes in water temperature and ocean currents. The impact of disasters on elements of intangible cultural heritage itself is poorly understood and less thoroughly documented than for tangible heritage (such as buildings) which is much more readily identified, enumerated and evaluated.

But, at the same time, living heritage can be used effectively to help populations overcome the disruptive effects of natural disasters. Examples of the uses of living heritage in disasters include: local knowledge of environments; local practices that serve to mitigate the impact of a disaster; local traditions describing previous disasters and how to deal with them; rituals and festivals to provide psychological therapy and restore hope in the future; and reinvigorating local crafts and tourism to generate often much needed income. Indeed, intangible cultural heritage can play a critical role in the mitigation of disasters at every stage of the emergency management cycle, from preparedness through to response and recovery. While some existing elements of intangible cultural heritage can be mobilized by communities to address both short- and long-term effects of disasters (e.g., basic physical needs, spiritual needs, resilience and recovery), these elements need to be understood within their broader social and cultural contexts and not extracted simply for instrumental purposes.

State Parties and other stakeholders should undertake research to better understand this dual role intangible cultural heritage can play in the context of emergencies: intangible cultural heritage can be directly affected and threatened while it can also be a source of resilience and recovery in mitigating many of the negative effects of an emergency in favour of rebuilding social cohesion, fostering reconciliation and facilitating recovery for communities confronted with situations of emergency. NGOs can also contribute by sharing their diverse experiences from the field to nourish conversations and thinking on the safeguarding as well as the mobilization of living heritage in disasters caused by climate and environmental changes. They can provide a wide range of disaster situations presented (flooding, fires, drought) from different geographical regions (mountainous areas, coasts, deserts, nordic regions, tropical zones) by practitioners and scholars from different fields (folklore, anthropology, ecology, geography, law, economics, etc.).

The countries that have not yet signed the Convention could contribute greatly to these challenges and many others by joining the ever-increasing number of signatory states that are acting collectively in a concerted effort through the Convention.

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