

*Martín Andrade-Pérez. Researcher at the Erigaie Foundation (Colombia), guest researcher at the Meertens Institute (The Netherlands)*

From the Erigaie Foundation, a Colombian NGO accredited to provide services to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, we began to work on the idea of intangible heritage by making the first inventory for a Colombian region in 2005. Our organization has a long history working with indigenous communities and archaeology since the 1980s, expanding its focus to cultural heritage in the last two decades. But since 2005, the 2003 Convention has been at the core of our projects, not only by creating safeguarding plans or nominations to the national and international lists, but also by including intangible heritage in projects related to built heritage, sustainable development, environment, and many others.

The implementation of the convention in Colombia, in 2008, made intangible cultural heritage acquire an important role in the development of cultural policies in Colombia. Even though in Colombia there was already an enormous tradition of working with communities and of research on cultural traditions, the Convention managed to put ICH on the public policy agenda, generating an important reflection that was developed in roundtables, meetings, workshops and capacity building activities. The convention thus had a strong influence on the definition of the new heritage law (2008) and, with the formulation of a special policy for ICH (2009), the country ratified that the UNESCO Convention is a great opportunity to give voice to little-known communities.

At that moment, the convention opened for us an enormous door to reflect on methodologies, since the implementation of the Convention generated a discussion on the way in which ICH should be approached. The Convention brought us, then, the challenge of thinking and creating new work methodologies permanently.

But that meant many more things. New, more participative methodologies mean a different way of relating to people, showing that knowledge is not necessarily in academia or in NGOs, but in the communities that carry ICH. This also means greater visibility for these communities, with the advantages and risks that this implies. But also, this search for new methodologies promoted by the convention has made us part of new networks with people around the world who, like us, are interested in ICH and the well-being of communities.

In our case, these reflections have also helped to understand that most of the time, research or inventories by themselves lose meaning if they are not accompanied by safeguarding objectives that guarantee the viability of ICH. And even, in many cases, safeguarding by itself loses meaning

if it is not related to improvements in the quality of life of the communities or to the resolution of other types of problems.

That is why today the Convention is evolving and taking the next step, in which the safeguarding of ICH is directly linked to real problems of the communities, in particular to the Sustainable Development Goals. The Convention has managed to show that ICH has an important role in sustainable development, which means that traditional knowledge must play an important role in our future and, even, that sustainable development must arise from the cultural identity of the communities. For my professional work, this has pushed me to think better about those links of ICH with issues such as environmental problems, armed conflicts, urban dynamics, gender gaps or educational systems.

Finally, as I have witnessed the implementation of the convention at different levels, I have also seen that, like all conventions, the 2003 Convention has several advantages, but it can also lead to problems if not implemented properly. These risks have opened the door for me to permanently see the convention with critical eyes, maintaining a healthy critical reflection on it, which implies, without a doubt, a permanent critical evaluation of my own work. That's where the role of NGOs and civil society becomes even more important for the Convention. And happily, the Convention has a space for this participation.

The future of the Convention looks bright and challenging. More and more people and organizations around the world are getting involved with the Convention. The importance of ICH for well-being and for sustainable development is more acknowledged every day. Let's celebrate and build together the next 20 years!

Martín Andrade-Pérez  
Fundación Erigaie  
Colombia