

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO LIVING HERITAGE: NGO PERSPECTIVES

ICH NGO Forum Symposium, Asunción, Paraguay, 1 December 2024.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

Dr Marilena Alivizatou

m.alivizatou@ucl.ac.uk

My name is Marilena Alivizatou. I'm a cultural heritage researcher and honorary lecturer at University College London and, in that capacity, I've researched and worked with several museums and heritage NGOs around the world in the last two decades. Today, it's an honour to welcome you all to the Symposium as a member of the Organising Team and the Forum's Research Working Group.

It has been a pleasure preparing and planning today's event. I am especially grateful to the other members of the research group, Carley Williams, Jana Ambrozova, Jorijn Neyrinck, Joanne Orr, Martin Andrade-Perez and Valentina Zingari, for a wonderful collaboration over the past 6 months. My sincere thanks also to the colleagues at UNESCO, the Forum's Executive Board and Robert Baron in particular for their support.

Equally, I would like to thank all of you who responded to our call, including today's speakers and panelists. We were genuinely impressed by the range and number of proposals received from around the world and the positive response of Forum members and accredited NGOs to the questions we were keen to explore. We hope that today's presentations and discussions will set forth a new collective research initiative and international dialogue on one of the most important, yet often contentious, topics of the 2003 Convention: the issue of ensuring the participation of communities, groups and individuals in the care and governance of intangible heritage.

Recent international fora in the field, such as the 2022 Mondiacult Declaration of Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development¹, have stressed the need for inclusive policies regarding the participation of local communities and groups in heritage governance. Indeed, it could be argued that in the last decades, participation has become not only a

new catch-phrase, but also near mandatory in heritage-work. While it is undeniable that there cannot be any living heritage without the people who practise and pass it on, the ways in which such communities are involved in actions and decisions about their heritage varies globally, nationally, regionally and locally, and remains an issue of debate.

Personally, I have been fascinated by these debates, aspects of which I examined in my two books: *Intangible Heritage and the Museum* (2012) and *Intangible Heritage and Participation* (2021). Carrying out this research has highlighted the complexities of working with local communities and the entanglements of participatory processes in wider institutional networks and structures. On the one hand, the works of social sciences pioneers, like Robert Chambers' 'Participatory Development' (1983), Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1970) and Orlando Fals Borda's 'Participatory Action Research' (1991) demonstrate the liberating and transformative impact of participatory work on the lives and wellbeing of local communities.

Sherry Arnstein, in her often-cited 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (1969), further reminds us that participation does not take one form but consists of various stages of community involvement in decision-making. These range from non-participation, where local communities are typically on the receiving end of knowledge and information through training and education; to tokenism, which involves the stages of consultation and placation. Arnstein argues that 'participation is power' and that citizen power is enacted through processes of true partnership and direct control of decisions.

On the other hand, researchers and professionals in the field of international development have expressed concerns about the adoption of participation and participatory methods by international organisations or national bodies. They have argued that 'the universally fashionable rhetoric of participation' can become 'a new tyranny', masking an unjustified exercise of power and reinforcing the interests of the already powerful. Drawing on evidence from case-studies in international development, they've asked for more self-reflexivity on the role of participatory facilitators or, in our case cultural mediators, and questioned the efficacy and objectivity of 'participatory methods', equating participation with new forms of social control. As Uma Kothari noted, 'the act or process of inclusion is not always to the benefit of those groups which have previously been excluded' (2001).

The publication of UNESCO's Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage² in 2015, based on international codes of ethics for working with human participants further highlights important values that should inform participatory work 9 (see also Alivizatou 2021, chapter 5): **freedom** (the right of local communities, groups and individuals to choose if they want or not to take part in collective actions and decisions); **beneficence** (the conduct of research or safeguarding actions with the aim of providing direct benefits to local communities and groups); and **justice** (the guarantee of equal opportunities to all regardless of gender, age, religion or ethnic affiliation).

Building on these discussions, our working group identified questions for further examination, which gave shape to our symposium call. Among others, we asked the ICH NGO Forum to think about how community participation is interpreted, integrated and implemented in their work; about how 'communities, groups and individuals' are defined in practice; and about the types, ways, methods and tools of participation that are most relevant in their field.

Based on the proposals we received, we highlighted emerging themes that have structured today's sessions. The first session presents case studies of participatory work on the ground. Speakers have been invited to reflect on how the context of their field sites has shaped their understanding of communities and the methodology used, with the aim of thinking about the positive outcomes, but also complexities of this work. The second session examines the role of NGOs in developing and implementing participatory approaches, considering practical issues of translating international policy into practice, but also the ethical implications of their work. Finally, in our interactive panel discussion, panelists are going to share good practice recommendations emerging from their work and reflect on the challenges they encounter.

To conclude, I would like to remind everyone that we are preparing an e-publication on participatory approaches that will include all proposals received. These will form an important foundation for the regional and thematic focus groups that will be the next step of our research initiative in 2025.

Thank you and all the best for a productive symposium!

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¹ <https://www.unesco.org/en/mondiaucult/2022> (accessed 8/7/2025)

² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/ethics-and-ich-00866> (accessed 8/7/2025)