

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO LIVING HERITAGE: NGO PERSPECTIVES

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ICH AND CULTURAL SELF-DETERMINATION

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New vistas for sustainable safeguarding open up through ICH participatory approaches when communities, groups and individuals are able to determine how their traditions are safeguarded. Participatory initiatives should be a first stage leading to community self-determination and full agency, enabling ICH programs to endure beyond the initial inventorying and programming set in motion by an ICH specialist. While the 2003 ICH Convention mandates the participation of communities, groups and individuals, outsider “experts” continue to have an outside role in originating, framing, developing and directing safeguarding programs. Expertise provided by an ICH specialist provides community members with resources and skills that draw from their training, research and experiences with multiple safeguarding situations. However, formally credentialed experts are not the only ones with relevant expertise. Expertise resides both with those with such credentials and community based experts who possess local knowledge.

The contributions to this volume vividly demonstrate mutual engagement among specialists and community members engaging local expertise. Collaborations should prioritize a community’s epistemic authority for interpreting their own traditions, agency in shaping safeguarding and ownership of traditions. Interactions among specialists and community members should be dialogical. Dialogism is an open, ongoing process that engages multiple voices, resists fixed meanings (Bakhtin 1981) and involves “encounters and collisions of ideas” (Fernandes, Carvalho and Campos (2012, 96). Authority should be shared and potentially yielded over the course of a project (Baron 2016). During a project there may be contestation and negotiation of authority, with shifting power dynamics (Baron 2021, 91-94; Cadaval 2016). Since an ICH specialist’s involvement in a safeguarding project typically diminishes over time and is more often than not finite, there need to be pathways for community driven sustainability created from the onset of a project.

A turn to dialogism and participation in the late 20th century ignited a movement to share authority traditionally held by scholars and cultural specialists with the communities whose cultural practices they study and represent. Top down, extractive academic research and cultural programs increasingly shifted to approaches that include the sharing of representative and interpretive authority, collaborative program development, incorporation of Indigenous methodologies, stakeholder participation in policy making, participatory action research, mutually constructed modes of presentation, co-curation, co-authorship of publications and co-production of media productions (Alivizatou 2022, Baron 2021). ICH bearers and their communities now frequently expect or demand authority for developing and implementing projects. And they may take charge of projects involving ICH from the onset of these initiatives, without the involvement of outside experts. Communities are now documenting their traditions with their own resources through smart phones and other affordable recording technology. They present their traditions on social media and other platforms. And there are many hundreds of community based NGOs partly or entirely devoted to ICH by another name such as folklore, folklife or heritage. Of course, ICH lives not only in organizations and communities associated with the UNESCO ICH Convention. In fact, most are not.

Many formally credentialed ICH specialists engage in safeguarding projects within their own communities. They are both insiders and outsiders, participants and observers, possessing local knowledge as well as academic training and experiences in multiple cultural situations. Their breadth of ICH expertise affords them perspectives on how ICH is safeguarded and practiced beyond their own cultural group. They know their community's ICH through their own life experiences, familial ties and relationships with friends and neighbors. However, their positionality is distinct from community based ICH practitioners who have lived much or all of their lives within a specific community. And, since communities are internally differentiated according to multiple factors, everyone is both an insider and outsider within their own community. Kirin Narayan, in her article "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist" states that the "loci along which we are aligned with and set apart from those we study are multiple and in flux", with "factors" which include "education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contacts" (1993, 671).

As authority shifts to communities it is useful to identify the roles of ICH specialists that enable safeguarding and local agency. ICH specialists, whether outsiders or insiders/outsideers act as catalysts to set in motion ICH initiatives, especially in situations where traditions are no longer widely practiced. They initiate, facilitate, coordinate and provide expertise both technical and programmatic. To ensure the perpetuation of ICH safeguarding practices they should be taught, mentored and modeled to community members, enabling them to carry them out through their own agency after the ICH specialists diminishes or ends their involvement in a project.

As cultural brokers, ICH specialists connect communities to resources that include funding sources (for which they help develop grant applications) the media, school systems, government cultural entities, cultural institutions, archives and national inventorying programs. They teach about the use of digital technologies, including technical dimensions of documentation such as audio, video and still photography practices. In engaging with documentation, cultural practitioners model and teach integrated approaches to inventorying/documentation, securing informed consent and placing documented materials in archives which securely protect them for future generations to utilize for maintaining and renewing their ICH. Curatorial and museum installation practices are taught and mentored and, for the presentation of performing traditions, good practices in sound reinforcement, lighting, stage management and effective, participatory modes of presentation can be modelled, taught and demonstrated.

ICH specialists develop formal and informal education programs including apprenticeships, workshops and classes that foster the transmission of ICH, curricula incorporating ICH and school programs where students will research the traditions of their families, friends and neighbors. ICH specialists assist in the marketing of traditional crafts and promotion of traditional artists of all kinds. Sustainable tourism projects are initiated which provide opportunities to practice and present traditions while maintaining the integrity of ICH adapted for tourists. And ICH specialists help create community based NGOs, with training in financial management, governance and organizational development.

These practices are included in the current and potential toolkits of ICH specialists. Many were identified in the mapping project to identify ICH competencies carried out by the

ICH NGO Forum Steering Committee (now known as the Executive Board) in 2021-22 (2022, 8) with further identification continuing in the second phase of the mapping project in 2025. The various technical skills and practices outlined above are, in most cases, not acquired by ICH specialists through academic training or other means. The final report for the first phase of the mapping project outlined systematic methods of professional development and technical assistance to teach these practices among NGOs.

These methods should be taught to community members, by cultural specialists from NGOs and other means. The final report stressed that technical assistance/professional development is best carried out on a peer-to-peer basis. It can be undertaken through face-to-face interaction, through digital means or electronic media. While technical assistance/professional development, such as by Global Facilitators, is frequently provided in a single visit, ideally it should entail mentoring relationships that extend beyond an initial consultancy, with one or more follow-up sessions. Through extended mentoring relationships a specific project can be undertaken with expert guidance. When extended over time, mentoring can involve carrying out a specific project, with the mentor guiding its progress and providing evaluation over its course.

Technical assistance/professional development need not only occur at a site of the organization or individual receiving the assistance. It can involve experiences attending an event and the observation and learning in situ of cultural practices carried out by the mentor and their organization. Sharing and transmitting expertise through technical assistance/professional development can involve a variety of modalities: workshops or series of workshops, courses taught over a series of sessions with an assigned project, videos, podcasts, listervs with posts sharing experiences with particular practices and “ ‘spark sessions’ or ‘speed dating’ where each presenter would be given a few minutes to provide a brief account of a particular practice that they have undertaken. (Baron, Berte, Blake, Caicedo, Nikolov, Sakr and Turgeon [2022], 21).

ICH programs serve the particular and shared interests of both the ICH specialist as a cultural broker and the communities they serve. For the specialists, and the institutions they represent, these activities contribute to professional advancement, apply and advance scholarship, tend to involve remuneration, build expertise and contribute to the organizational health and public service of the NGO government entity or educational

institution with which a specialist is affiliated (Baron 2021,75-76). ICH programs serve the interests of bearers, communities and groups by advancing the recognition of their traditions, affording opportunities for practicing their ICH, and enabling artists whose work exists in a market economy to be better equipped to make a living (Bauman, Sawin and Carpenter 1992, 72-73) Both the ICH specialist and communities share a paramount interest in the sustaining of treasured cultural practices. They also share interests in educating audiences about traditions, the display of cultural competence and the validation of traditions (Baron 2021, 72-74).

The interests of the ICH specialist and the communities and groups they serve may diverge when it comes to the interpretation of ICH. Interpretation based upon empirical academic research often differs from local interpretations based upon beliefs about cultural practices and historical events. Local interpretation contains narrative truths which have a validity that, while distinct from the results of academic research, warrant respect, recognition and representation (Lindahl 2012, 153). Ideological divergences may also occur. While the principle of enabling community self-representation and interpretation should be respected, interpretation by communities embodying extremist or racist perspectives can put cultural specialists and community members at odds. It presents moral and ethical challenges for the ICH specialist.

The term 'community' is used loosely in ICH discourse. It lacks definition in the UNESCO participation mandate and Operational Directives. Unfortunately, an expansive approach to community presented in UNESCO's 2006 Expert Report on Community Involvement has been overlooked. It defined community as 'networks of people whose sense of identity or connectedness emerges from a shared historical relationship that is rooted in the practice and transmission of, or engagement with, their ICH' (UNESCO Cultural Sector, Division of Cultural Heritage, Intangible Heritage Section 2006, 5). Ellen Hertz sees this definition as a 'move away from fixist notions of communities or groups' (2015, 35)

Participatory approaches should deal with communities holistically, which means including those missing from national ICH inventories and the UNESCO representative lists. There is a lack of representation, for example, of refugee, immigrant and LGBTQ+ communities in national inventories and lists as well as UNESCO lists. Since the nominations for the UNESCO lists are submitted by national governments, they embody

concern for the imaging of national identity, politics whether raw or veiled and, at times, ethnonationalism. Free, to various extents, from these constraints, NGOs can boldly embrace in a totalizing, inclusive way the variety of communities in their constituencies.

The 2003 UNESCO ICH Convention is generating unprecedented documentation and safeguarding on a global scale. It is continuing a centuries-old project to sustain valued traditions carried out by folklorists, who through the public folklore movement that began in the late 20th century broadened their approach to what was subsequently alternatively labelled ICH to include emergent traditions, living heritage and the totality of groups that share a common identity (Baron 2016). The participatory and dialogic turns profoundly affected how public folklore and other fields of cultural practice engage with communities, turning to collaboration, participatory partnerships, dialogical relationships and cultural self-determination from top down, extractive, colonialist approaches. Created as the twenty first century was beginning, the ICH movement adopted a participatory imperative as an animating principal while relying heavily on experts. In the twenty first century we see communities, groups and individuals increasingly expecting to take charge of documenting, representing, presenting and sustaining their own traditions. This development means that ICH specialists in NGOs, academe and government are obliged to reflect upon and reassess in an ongoing manner our roles as agents of safeguarding. Participation needs to be fully inclusive and build agency for communities. We need to reassess how we initiate and frame ICH projects, implement new methods for mentoring and teaching technical and research skills, create appropriate terms of engagement with communities, groups and individuals and know the right time to diminish and yield our authority.

The presentations in this volume provide penetrating, critical case studies of participatory safeguarding that are, in the aggregate, global in scope. They demonstrate how NGOs are in the vanguard of developing creative approaches to participation. And they contain refreshingly candid assessments of successes and challenges in community engagement. As President of the ICH NGO Forum for 2024 I took great pride in this outstanding event. It was made possible through the conceptualization, vision and tireless efforts of Marilena Alivizatou along with leaders of the Forum's Working Group Research - Jorijn Neyrnick,

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