

Strategic Rationale for Strengthening the Forum's Operational Capacity

A Growing and Evolving Network

The ICH NGO Forum has grown to 317 member organisations representing a wide diversity of regions, disciplines, and approaches to the safeguarding of living heritage. This growth demonstrates the Forum's increasing relevance as a global platform for collaboration, knowledge exchange, mutual support, and civil society engagement within the framework of the UNESCO 2003 Convention.

At the same time, the expansion of the Forum has led to growing expectations from members. There is increasing demand for regular communication, networking opportunities, capacity-building activities, regional engagement, knowledge sharing, advocacy initiatives, and coordinated participation in UNESCO-related processes.

While the Forum has achieved remarkable progress through the dedication of volunteers, the scale and complexity of these responsibilities have reached a point where volunteer effort alone is no longer sufficient to ensure continuity, institutional memory, and sustained development. A network of more than 300 organisations requires a minimum level of organisational capacity to effectively serve its members and pursue its strategic objectives.

A Strategic Choice

The Forum now faces a strategic choice.

One option is to maintain the current volunteer-based model. While this remains viable, it would require accepting more limited ambitions, reduced continuity between annual meetings, and a constrained capacity to respond to the evolving needs of members.

The alternative is to invest in a modest level of operational support that enables the Forum to consolidate its achievements and realise the objectives set out in this Strategic Development Framework.

Without dedicated support, the Forum risks:

- Limited follow-up and implementation of agreed priorities;
- Excessive dependence on a small number of volunteers;
- Reduced organisational continuity and institutional memory;
- Missed opportunities for member engagement, partnerships, fundraising, and visibility;
- Challenges in coordinating activities across a rapidly growing international network;
- Difficulty sustaining long-term strategic planning and organisational development.

The Executive Board believes that the second path offers the strongest foundation for the Forum's future development and long-term effectiveness.

Investing in Sustainable Growth

A modest investment in operational capacity would strengthen the Forum's ability to:

- Deliver greater value to member organisations;
- Improve communication and information sharing;
- Support implementation of strategic priorities and workplans;
- Strengthen regional and international collaboration;
- Enhance visibility and representation within the UNESCO 2003 Convention framework;
- Build partnerships and mobilise additional resources for future development;
- Preserve institutional memory and ensure continuity between leadership transitions.

The objective is not to create a large administrative structure, but rather to establish the minimum level of support necessary for a global network of this size to function effectively and sustainably.

The proposed Coordinator function would help ensure continuity in administration, communications and coordination activities, enabling elected leaders to concentrate on strategic direction, policy issues and member engagement. This would represent a modest but important investment in organisational effectiveness and resilience.

Governance, Accountability and Organisational Maturity

As the Forum develops, strengthening operational capacity must be accompanied by stronger governance and accountability mechanisms. Growth in membership, activities and resources creates new responsibilities that require transparent oversight and sound organisational practices.

The Forum therefore has an opportunity to strengthen its governance framework by ensuring greater accountability, safeguarding its values, promoting transparency in decision-making, and mitigating potential risks associated with future resource mobilisation. Such measures would reinforce member confidence and contribute to the Forum's long-term sustainability.

At the same time, the increasing scale of activities requires broader leadership engagement. Strengthening governance structures would support a more effective distribution of responsibilities, improve regional representation, and reduce reliance on a limited number of individuals. These measures would contribute to a more resilient and representative organisation, capable of responding effectively to the needs of its diverse membership.

Longer-term continuity in leadership and planning would also help preserve institutional memory, facilitate implementation of multi-year priorities, and enable the Forum to pursue strategic objectives more effectively while maintaining democratic accountability.

Strengthening Communication and Member Engagement

Effective communication has become increasingly important as the Forum's membership continues to expand across all regions of the world.

Regular communication, information sharing and engagement with member organisations are essential to maintaining an active and connected network. Enhanced communication capacity would support knowledge exchange, strengthen participation in Forum activities, improve dissemination of opportunities and resources, and foster closer collaboration among members.

Investing in communication and outreach is therefore an investment in the vitality and cohesion of the Forum itself.

Positioning the Forum for the Future

As the principal global network of accredited NGOs working within the framework of the 2003 Convention, the Forum is well positioned to strengthen its role and visibility within the international heritage community.

Developing stronger institutional relationships and exploring opportunities for enhanced cooperation with UNESCO and other partners could create new opportunities for collaboration, capacity building, project participation and international visibility. Establishing a modest but sustainable operational foundation today is an important prerequisite for pursuing such future opportunities.

Proposed Funding Mechanism

To support this transition, the Executive Board proposes the establishment of an annual funding mechanism based on voluntary contributions from member organisations, with the clear understanding that no member will be disadvantaged in any way if they are not able to make such a contribution.

The resources generated would be used primarily to support:

- A part-time Coordinator responsible for ensuring continuity, coordination, communication and implementation of Forum activities; and
- Essential travel and representation costs required to maintain the Forum's international engagement and participation in key meetings and events.

The proposed mechanism remains entirely voluntary and is designed to provide a predictable yet flexible source of support for the Forum's activities, while preserving full equality among members.

Expected Outcome

The proposed approach would provide the Forum with a modest but sustainable operational foundation. It would strengthen organisational resilience, improve the delivery of services to members, and enhance the Forum's ability to contribute effectively to the safeguarding of living heritage at local, national, regional and international levels.

Beyond supporting day-to-day operations, these measures would contribute to the Forum's institutional development by strengthening governance, accountability, communication, leadership continuity and strategic planning. Collectively, they would help ensure that the Forum remains effective, representative and resilient as it continues to grow.

In this way, the Forum would be better positioned to fulfil its mission, implement its strategic priorities, and remain a strong and credible voice for civil society within the global intangible cultural heritage community.

Additional Specific Organisational Development Proposals

In addition to the proposals concerning operational support and voluntary contributions, the Executive Board invites members to consider a number of complementary organisational development measures designed to strengthen governance, communication, representation and long-term sustainability.

Proposal 3: Regulatory and Oversight Committee

Establishment of a Regulatory and Oversight Committee to promote accountability, review financial management, monitor ethical considerations and ensure that any resource mobilisation remains consistent with the Forum's values and principles.

Proposal 4: Expansion of the Executive Board

Expansion of the Executive Board from six to twelve members to improve regional representation, distribute responsibilities more effectively, and strengthen organisational capacity.

Proposal 5: Longer Governance Mandates

Revision of Board and Chairperson terms to increase continuity, strengthen institutional memory and facilitate the implementation of long-term strategic initiatives.

Proposal 6: Communication Committee

Creation of a Communication Committee to support outreach, member engagement, information sharing and implementation of communication activities across the global network.

Proposal 7: Exploration of UNESCO Partnership Status

Exploration of a future application for official NGO partnership status with UNESCO, with a view to strengthening institutional relations, enhancing visibility and creating new opportunities for collaboration.

These proposals represent the next stage in the Forum's organisational evolution and are intended to complement the proposed operational strengthening measures while supporting the Forum's long-term effectiveness and sustainability.