

**Draft Declaration on the Safeguarding, Promotion and Mobilization of Intangible
Cultural Heritage in the Face of Climate Change**

Preamble

Meeting in the city of Kasane (Botswana), from 4 to 9 December 2023, on the occasion of the eighteenth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the celebrations marking the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the participants of the ICH NGO Forum adopt the following Declaration of principles and recommendations to safeguard, promote, mobilize and incentivize intangible cultural heritage in the face of climate change, in support of recent work done e.g. in East Africa¹.

Background

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) represents a landmark effort to safeguard the rich tapestry of human traditions and practices that are passed down through generations. Founded in 2009, ICH NGO Forum brings together 217 accredited NGOs (ANGOs) working across the world and with a myriad of different competencies in the field of safeguarding ICH. Its activities are carried out with the participation of communities and supporting the communities, groups, and individuals who practice, perform and transmit ICH. The Forum's membership ranges from community-based organizations, to larger NGOs which support national - and international - level implementation of the 2003 Convention and engage in policy development. As such, it brings to the Convention extensive and highly diverse safeguarding experiences and expertise which place it in a privileged position for providing the advisory services to the Committee as set out in Article 9 of the Convention. The ICH NGO Forum, with its diverse and extensive network, plays an

increasingly crucial role in the implementation and advancement of the Convention's objectives.

This Declaration is part of a series of measures and actions undertaken by the ICH NGO Forum over the course of the past five years to safeguard ICH in situations of crises. Members of the ICH NGO Forum participated in an expert meeting on ICH in disasters organized by the Living Heritage Entity at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 21 and 22 May 2019. The recommendations of this expert meeting led to the endorsement of the operational principles and modalities by the Intergovernmental Committee at its fourteenth session in Bogota, Colombia, December 2019 (Decision 14.COM 13) and adopted by the General Assembly at its eighth session in September 2020 (Resolution 8.GA 9). The six operational principles and the thirteen modalities are aimed at guiding State Parties and other stakeholders in engaging ICH in various types of emergency situations caused by natural disasters and/or armed conflict. In the context of emergencies, intangible cultural heritage can itself be directly threatened and therefore must be protected and preserved, but it can also be used and mobilized in an active manner to effectively help communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies. To explore further the safeguarding and uses of ICH in emergency situations, specifically related to climate change, the ICH NGO Forum organized a symposium entitled "Living Heritage, Climate Change and the Environment" at the Seventeenth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Rabat (Morocco) on 27 November 2022. Based on various case studies, the ten papers presented at the symposium and the 120 participants discussed the many ways in which ICH can be a source of resilience and recovery in mitigating the negative effects of an emergency in favor of rebuilding social cohesion, fostering reconciliation and facilitating recovery for communities confronted with

disasters caused by climate change. The ICH NGO Forum also created a fund to assist accredited NGOs in emergency situations. A working group was created in September of 2023 to pursue research and advocacy in the uses of ICH to deal with climatic disasters, including the drafting of the current declaration. The Declaration was finalized during a workshop organized by the working group on 5 December 2023 during the eighteenth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Context

Recognizing the profound and growing threat posed by climate change and disasters, including floods, cyclones, mudslides, heatwaves, forest fires, and drought, to the rich tapestry of intangible cultural heritage practices worldwide;

Acknowledging the adverse impacts of these disasters, which include the discontinuation of traditional agricultural practices due to water scarcity, threats to forest resulting from commercial exploitation and forest fires, and the displacement of fisheries and riparian communities due to shifts in water temperature and ocean currents, all of which undermine the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage and the bearers' of living traditions;

Concerned by the prevailing inadequate understanding and documentation of the effects of disasters on intangible cultural heritage, in stark contrast to the well-documented impacts on tangible heritage, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive research and documentation in this vital area ;

Recognizing the imperative for a global, collaborative and inter-disciplinary response driven by climate change that transcends borders and man-made divisions;

Emphasizing the need for a Declaration to consciously and steadfastly address and mitigate the profound and growing threats to intangible cultural heritage arising from disasters caused by climate change, harmful commercial exploitation of natural resources, and socio-political marginalization and obliteration of indigenous and local knowledge;

Affirming the urgency of decolonizing knowledge by recognizing the power dynamics arising from differences in worldviews and the existence of multiple ontologies or ecologies of knowledges;

Highlighting the importance of integrating indigenous and local knowledge within climate change discourse, as these communities possess invaluable insights and practices for environmental resilience;

Recognizing the vital role of “living heritage practices” as essential tools to strengthen the resilience of climate-change victims and to attain cognitive justice for them, by valuing and preserving the cultural practices and knowledge systems of affected communities;

Identifying actions of safeguarding, promoting, and mobilizing living heritage practices appropriate to the three main phases in an emergency management cycle of preparedness, response and recovery, acknowledging that each phase can vary in duration and may overlap with other phases.

Acknowledging the deep connection between indigenous ritual practices and the concepts of bio-divinity, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and respecting these profound relationships with nature and the environment;

Also acknowledging traditional ecological knowledge, including local knowledge and practices which help preserve biodiversity;

Affirming that victims of climate change are active agents who utilize their heritage elements to assert themselves, resettle, and integrate into receiving communities;

Reaffirming the crucial role of embedding cultural values into climate change policies to safeguard the material and immaterial values of vulnerable populations;

Recognizing that the epistemological diversity of the world is as immense as its cultural diversity, and that the recognition of such diversity must be at the core of global efforts.

Taking into account reports that highlight culture as the expression of peoples and communities, constituting thereby an imperative for their sustainability and the diversity of cultural ecosystems offering a reservoir of creative, innovative and sustainable solutions, which is driven by civil society and increasingly supported by local governments, national policies and the private sector.

Purpose and Scope

1. This Declaration aims to protect and promote intangible cultural heritage practices in the face of disasters caused by climate change, the harmful

commercial exploitation of natural resources, and socio-political marginalization and obliteration of indigenous and local knowledge.

2. The Declaration applies to all States, intergovernmental organizations, and civil society entities committed to preserving and promoting intangible cultural heritage.

Definitions

1. For the purpose of this Declaration, “intangible cultural heritage” refers to practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and instruments, as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith, that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.
2. ‘Climate change’ⁱⁱ, as defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), refers to a long-term alteration in the state of the climate. This change can be identified through statistical analysis by observing shifts in the average and variability of various climate properties. It can persist for decades or even longer and may result from natural processes or external factors like solar variations, volcanic eruptions, and human-induced alterations to the atmosphere or land use. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adds that climate change can be directly or indirectly attributed to human activities that modify the global atmospheric composition and goes beyond the natural variability in climate observed over similar time periods. This definition distinguishes between climate change caused by human actions and natural climate variability.

3. "Living heritage practices" denote the cultural practices and knowledge systems that are actively transmitted from generation to generation, providing a sense of identity, continuity, and resilience to communities.
4. 'Local and Indigenous Knowledge'ⁱⁱⁱ, as defined by the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), refers to the cumulative body of knowledge, practices, innovations, and cultural insights held and transmitted by local and indigenous communities over generations. This knowledge is deeply rooted in their traditional ways of life and is closely tied to their environments, ecosystems, and cultural heritage.
5. '**Traditional ecological knowledge**' (TEK) describes indigenous and other traditional knowledge of local resources. TEK refers to "a cumulative body of knowledge, belief, and practice, evolving by accumulation and handed down generations through traditional songs, stories and beliefs. It is concerned with the relationship of living beings (including human) with their traditional groups and with their environment." Indigenous knowledge is not a universal concept among various societies, but is referred to a system of knowledge traditions or practices that are heavily dependent on "place". Such knowledge is used in natural resource management as a substitute for baseline environmental data in cases where there is little recorded scientific data, or may complement Western scientific methods of ecological management.
6. 'Integration of knowledge' refers to the conscious and methodical putting together of knowledge types. In the early stages of the process, a focus is required to identify and evaluate the different knowledges involved and how they might be relevant, inclusive and equitable. This involves ensuring that experts engaging in the process have sufficient depth of experience directly relevant to the problem to be addressed^{iv}. It may also require determining the type of

knowledge different stake-holders can bring to the integration table (e.g. indigenous or scientific perspectives), as well as the type of content they have to offer (e.g. whether they have particular expertise, such as ecological or economic) that can help to improve understanding of the inter-related human and social aspects of a system or problem.

7. 'Cognitive justice' is the reinstatement of 'marginalized knowledges' by a celebration of diversity as opportunity and creative resource. Cognitive justice, in the sense of epistemic justice, starts from the premise that the epistemological diversity of the world is immense, as immense as its cultural diversity.
8. 'Bio-divinity' refers to a cultural heritage, embedded in centuries of traditions of indigenous communities, which connects their lifestyles and spirituality with nature. This coexistence with nature is manifest in architecture, food, dress, faith, rituals, and festivals, through indigenous knowledge and spiritual wisdom of Bio-divinity.
9. 'Ecology of knowledges' is essentially a science of the relationship existing between humans and their bodies of knowledge. It is a line of thought coming from Sociology, which responds to the challenges of an "alternative globalization", based on:

- Co-presence of different agents in the process of building present societies;
- Possibility of building a global social justice by nurturing a cognitive justice that acknowledges the existence of a plurality of knowledges, beyond scientific, and, the idea of inter-knowledge.

Recommendation 1: Protection and Promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. States and relevant stakeholders shall take all necessary measures to raise awareness and safeguard intangible cultural heritage practices from the adverse impacts of disasters.
2. States shall promote and support the documentation and inter-disciplinary research of the effects of climate change and disasters on intangible cultural heritage, recognizing the need to enhance understanding in this domain by bringing together natural sciences and engineering with humanities and social sciences..

Recommendation 2 : Decolonization of Knowledge

States and relevant stakeholders shall acknowledge the importance of decolonizing knowledge, recognizing the existence of multiple ontologies and of multiple ecologies of knowledges.

Recommendation 3 : Integrating Indigenous and local Knowledge with Scientific Knowledge

States and relevant stakeholders shall actively engage ‘traditional ecological knowledge’, including indigenous and local communities, and incorporate their knowledge in climate change discourse, by identifying how they might be relevant, inclusive and equitable during the decision making process towards environmental resilience strategies (see endnote)^v.

Recommendation 4 : Use of Living Heritage Practices

States and relevant stakeholders shall promote the use of living heritage practices as tools to strengthen the resilience of climate-change victims, as a leverage for biodiversity

and mitigation of the effects of climate change and to achieve cognitive justice for them (see endnote)^{vi} .

Recommendation 5 : Role of Bio-divinity

States and relevant stakeholders shall acknowledge and respect the role of bio-divinity within indigenous practices, recognizing its intrinsic value in preserving the environment (see endnote)^{vii}).

Recommendation 6 : Active Agency of Victims

States and relevant stakeholders shall recognize and support the active agency of victims of climate change, enabling them to utilize their indigenous and local knowledge for self-empowerment, resettlement, and integration.

Recommendation 7 : Cultural Values in Policies

States shall embed cultural values into climate change policies to preserve the material and immaterial values of vulnerable populations.

Recommendation 8 : Epistemological Diversity

States and relevant stakeholders shall acknowledge the immense epistemological diversity of the world and shall promote the recognition of this diversity as a core element of global efforts in the formulation of alternative forms of sociability.

Recommendation 9: Inclusion of civil society organizations in Cultural Policy Making

States shall implement a more systemic inclusion of civil society organizations, more particularly accredited NGOs to the Convention, in the elaboration and implementation of cultural policies, as well as more robust public- private

partnerships and related governance to effectively anchor ICH in sustainable development policies in sustained ways.

Recommendation 10: Implementation and Monitoring

Article 11 of the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage encourages states and stakeholders to establish various mechanisms for protecting and promoting intangible cultural heritage in the face of disasters. These mechanisms include maintaining national inventories, conducting risk assessments, implementing early warning systems, capacity building, creating emergency response plans, engaging communities, documenting and archiving heritage, raising awareness and educating the public, collaborating with indigenous knowledge, allocating resources, monitoring and reporting on heritage status, establishing legal frameworks, and fostering international cooperation. These mechanisms collectively should provide a comprehensive approach to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage during disasters, in line with the convention's principles.

We, the undersigned members of the ICH NGO FORUM, recognizing the urgency and importance of protecting, promoting and mobilizing intangible cultural heritage in the face of climate change, hereby adopt this Declaration on this 6th day of December 2023.

[Signatures]

The participants of the Annual General Meeting of the ICH NGO Forum therefore address the following Declaration of principles and recommendations to State Parties, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, national and local authorities and all institutions and specialists in a position to contribute through legislation, policies,

planning processes and management to better safeguard, promote and mobilize intangible cultural heritage in the face of environmental disasters.

Sl.No	Name	Email	Organization	State Party
1.	Lubna Marium	kanchendzonga@gmail.com	Shadhona - Center for Advancement of Southasian Culture [en] House 5, Road 27, Block J Banani, 1213 Dhaka, BANGLADESH URL: http://www.shadhona.org Tel.: 8801713040814	BANGLADESH
2.	Chantal Bisschop	chantal.bisschop@cagnet.be	Werkplaats immaterieel erfgoed Workshop intangible heritage Flanders [en] Atelier patrimoine immatériel Flandres [fr] Sint-Jakobsstraat 36, 8000 Brugge, BELGIUM URL: http://werkplaatsimmaterieelerfgoed.be/ URL: http://www.immaterieelerfgoed.be Tel.: +32 473 38 19 07	BELGIUM
3.	Hazim Osmanović	kudpuracic.ba@gmail.com	Society for Digitization of Traditional Cultural Heritage - Society for DTCH Dobric bb 88220 Široki Brijeg BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA URL: https://www.drustvozadtkb.org	BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

4.	Laurier Turgeon	Laurier.Turgeon@hst.ulaval.ca	L'Association canadienne d'ethnologie et de folklore The Folklore Studies Association of Canada [en] CELAT, Pavillon De Koninck 1030 Avenue des Sciences humaines Université Laval, QUÉBEC, QC G1V 0A6, CANADA URL: http://www.acef-fsac.ulaval.ca/ Tel.: 1 418 656 5510 ; 1 418 254 3907	CANADA
5.	Giovanny Arteaga	arteagagiovanny1@gmail.com	Fundación Mundo Espiral Mundo Espiral Foundation [en] Carrera 32 Número 16 - 41 Edificio Torre 32 - 402 COLOMBIA URL: http://fundacionmundoespiral.blogspot.com Tel.: +57-2-7375740	COLOMBIA
6.	Jingying Wang	jingying@link.cuhk.edu.hk		HONG KONG
7.	Ananya Bhattacharya Madhura Dutta	ananya@banglanatak.com madhura@banglanatak.com	Contact Base, 188/89 Prince Anwar Shah Road Kolkata 700045, INDIA URL: http://www.banglanatak.com Tel.: +91 33 40 04 74 83	INDIA
8.	Sekou Berte SEKOU BERTE	sekou.berte@fulbrightmail.org malicultureareas@gmail.com	Agence du patrimoine culturel du Mali - SARL Mali Cultural Heritage Agency [en] Bamako-Senou E/505/1807 V BP E04 MALI Tel.: 00 223 207 269 07; 00 223 764 889 12; 00 223 664 779 33	MALI
9.	mohamed med lemine	beidjeu@gmail.com	Association mauritanienne pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel - AMS - PCI Tevgragh Zeina Lot 791, NOUAKCHOTT MAURITANIA Tel.: 222 36 28 40 10 ; 222 22 68 40 10	MAURITANIA

10.	Susanne Verburg	s.verburg@immaterieelerfgoed.nl	Kenniscentrum Erfgoed Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage Hoeflerlaan 4, 6816 SG Arnhem, NETHERLANDS URL: http://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl Tel.: +31 026-3576113	Immaterieel Nederland [en]	NETHERLANDS
11.	Liliane de Geus	lilianedegeus7171@gmail.com	Fundashon Boneriano Bonaire An Historical Cultural Foundation FUHIKUBO [en], Kaya Irlandia 12, Bonaire CARIBBEAN NETHERLANDS URL: http://www.fuhikubo.org www.intangibleculturalheritagebonaire.com Tel.: (+599) 9 5657171	Historiko Kultural FUHIKUBO	NETHERLANDS
12.	Dr. Jet Bakels Wetenschappelijk Medewerker Kennisontwikkeling	j.bakels@immaterieelerfgoed.nl	Postbus 649, 6800 AP Arnhem Hoeflerlaan 4, 6816 SG Arnhem +31 (0)6 - 3060 1469 +31 (0)26 - 3576 113 www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl		NETHERLANDS
13.	Irina Ruiz Figueroa	info@acampadoc.com	Fundación INDICRI Calle Rufina, #1017 0739 La Villa de Los Santos, PANAMÁ www.indicri.org Tel.: +507 6210 3128		PANAMA
14.	Mrs Hanhee HAHM	hanheeh@jbnu.ac.kr	The Center for Intangible Culture Studies - CICS [en], 285, Gwonsamdeuk-ro Dukjin-gu, Jeonju-si, Jeonbuk, REPUBLIC OF KOREA URL: http://www.ichpedia.org URL: http://www.miniung20.org Tel.: +82 632774098		REPUBLIC OF KOREA

15.	Barbra Babweteera <barbrababweteera@gmail.com> Barbra Babweteera	ccfu@crossculturalfoundation.or.ug barbrababweteera@gmail.com	The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda - CCFU Makerere Hill, off Batavia Road P.O. Box 25517. Kampala, UGANDA URL: http://www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug Tel.: +256 393 294 675/7	UGANDA
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ⁱ <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/ichpub.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/glossary/>

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Local and Indigenous Knowledge' encompasses a wide range of subjects, including but not limited to traditional ecological knowledge, agricultural practices, healthcare, resource management, navigation, and various aspects of cultural expression. It is characterized by its holistic nature, as it integrates social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions, offering a unique and sustainable approach to understanding and interacting with the world. This knowledge is often orally transmitted, with the wisdom of elders playing a crucial role in its preservation and transfer to younger generations. UNESCO recognizes the significance of Local and Indigenous Knowledge as a valuable resource for sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation, and the promotion of cultural diversity. It is essential for maintaining the well-being of local and indigenous communities and for enriching the global understanding of the diverse ways in which humans relate to their surroundings.

^{iv} (Fazey et al., 2006b)

^v After the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, traditional timber construction techniques were promptly utilized for housing recovery projects, as the Building Standard Law in Japan had already incorporated them prior to the disasters. The use of traditional techniques ensured the engagement of local communities in the decision-making process and boosted the recovery of local economies.

^{vi} How ICH in the Netherlands (and beyond) can work as a leverage for biodiversity and mitigate the effects of climate change:

- Bees. Fieldwork in the Netherlands shows how many beekeepers shift their focus from yielding honey to planting trees and flowers to offer food for bees and other insects and thus contribute to a biodiverse and sustainable future.
- Birds. Bird catchers shifted their goal from catching birds for money and meat to cooperation with scientists that monitor migratory birds; thus citizen scientists and universally trained scientists work together to understand bird behavior in a changing world.
- Water. Cooperation in project Water Cycle Stories investigating and documenting how three island communities make use of traditional water systems, focusing on Bonaire, Caribbean, is another example.
- Water and Land. Project Water and Land in cooperation with CAG/Belgium focusing on the role and function of hedges and hedge braiding in the Netherlands and cactus hedges in Bonaire. See <https://cagnet.be/page/water-en-land...> Website, podcast, films.
- Publication <https://bluepapers.nl/index.php/bp/issue/view/3>

^{vii} Living heritages associated with a deep-rooted spiritual relationship with nature represent a significant share of South Asia's common cultural heritage manifested through local communities' lifestyle, traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, rituals, festivals, art, and architecture, all of which also significantly contribute to biodiversity protection and conservation.

Arunachal Pradesh, a state in North Eastern India, has a large population of diverse indigenous communities who nurture a respectful coexistence with nature for centuries, reflected in their optimal utilization of natural resources for subsistence, minimalism, and veneration of nature as the source of life.

One of the indigenous communities, the Apatani community inhabits the Ziro Valley, endowed with beautiful pine clad lush green hills, intersected by the Subansiri River. The community's agricultural system is extensive even without the use of any farm animals or machines. They have a unique tradition of rice-fish cultivation in the same agricultural fields, demonstrating rich indigenous knowledge and techniques of sustainable agriculture. They are well-known for achieving extremely high and stable productivity, efficient land management systems, and ways of preserving and conserving the ecology through generations. Associated with their natural landscape conservation practices are the 'sacred groves', which are patches of relic vegetation found outside the villages, harboring rare, endangered and threatened plant species, which have been left undisturbed since ancient times. Ranging from a few trees to a few hectares, these are associated with the traditional religious and cultural belief systems of the community who protect the groves for generations. It is a valuable practice of nature conservation by the Apatanis based on an inherent symbiotic link between religion and ecology. The sacred groves help in environmental sustainability through natural methods of soil replenishment and ground water conservation.

The Apatani Cultural Landscape has been nominated in the Tentative List of UNESCO World Heritage Site. (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5893/>)