



Intangible Cultural Heritage



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Intangible
Cultural
Heritage



Intangible and sustainable

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage recognizes the 'importance of the intangible cultural heritage as a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development'.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development constitutes a plan of action addressing the three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – of sustainable development through 17 Sustainable Development Goals as highly interdependent spheres of action that inform development pathways at all levels, and respecting the three fundamental principles of human rights, equality, and sustainability. Intangible cultural heritage can effectively contribute to sustainable development along each of its three dimensions, as well as to the requirement of peace and security as fundamental prerequisites for sustainable development.

How can the place of intangible cultural heritage in sustainable development best be understood so that its contributions can be recognized and fully realized?



cultural heritage development

The economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, together with peace and security, are not separate spheres of action, but highly interdependent. Achieving these broad objectives requires holistic approaches to policies, given positive synergies across all dimensions. Intangible cultural heritage can effectively contribute to sustainable development along each of the dimensions, and its safeguarding is therefore essential if communities around the globe are ever to realize the future we want for all.

Inclusive social development

Inclusive social development cannot be achieved without sustainable food security, quality health care, access to safe water and sanitation, quality education for all, inclusive social protection systems and gender equality. These goals must be underpinned by inclusive governance and the freedom for people to choose their own value systems.

Human societies have constantly developed and adapted their intangible cultural heritage, including knowledge and practices concerning nature as well as social practices, in order to address fundamental needs and social issues across time and space. Traditional health practices, foodways, water management practices, social gatherings, celebrations and knowledge transmission systems play essential roles for communities to achieve inclusive social development.

Intangible cultural heritage is vital to achieving food security. Traditional foodways and local farming, pastoral, fishing, hunting, food-gathering and food preservation systems can contribute greatly to food and nutrition security. Communities have built up considerable traditional knowledge, founded on a comprehensive approach to their specific rural life and environment. Their techniques are based on the use of diverse crops, plants and animals as well as fine-grained knowledge of their land and natural environment in humid, boreal, arid or temperate locations. They have developed foodways as well as production and conservation systems that are diversified and adapted to these locations and environmental changes. A large number of families worldwide depend on agricultural systems that increase soil fertility, provide a varied diet and deliver adequate nutrition and greater health. The continuous strengthening and viability of these systems are crucial to ensuring food sufficiency and security as well as quality nutrition for many communities around the globe.

Traditional health practices can contribute to well-being and quality health care for all. Communities worldwide have developed a diversity of health-related knowledge and practices, providing effective and affordable therapies, often based on the use of local natural resources. Herbalists for example have been important providers of primary health care to people for millennia. Their traditional knowledge and practices related to medicinal plant use are based on empirical experience in treating patients. In the district of Tanga in Tanzania, for example, healers – including herbalists, midwives and traditional mental health specialists – have specialized knowledge for treating physical and psychological ailments. Such treatments are affordable and accessible, including in isolated rural areas where other medicine is less readily



Food constitutes a central element in celebrations, providing a sense of identity and belonging to the community.



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available. It is vital to ensure the recognition of, respect for and enhancement of this therapeutic knowledge and continue its transmission to future generations, particularly where it may be the health care most available to communities. Where other health care services are available, traditional knowledge and practices, deeply ingrained in the socio-cultural fabric with specific spiritual values, are complementary and extend people's choices.

Traditional practices concerning water management can contribute to equitable access to clean water and sustainable water use, notably in agriculture and other livelihoods.

Throughout history, local communities have proven their capacities to shape sustainable water management practices, guided by deeply held beliefs and traditions, and to achieve access to clean water for all. For example, water management systems in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, are based on complex Mayan perceptions of sacred realms and cultural traditions. The Maya believe that humans form an integral part of the water cycle and contribute to the continued renewal of the resource through their natural bodily fluids. Thus, water is considered a communal resource rather than a commodity, and management of the water supply is a responsibility of the whole community. For many communities, such systems constitute the only access to clean water and it is therefore crucial to continue transmitting them to future generations. Elsewhere, traditional systems remain essential as they reduce the communities' dependency on external water suppliers and remain more affordable for vulnerable families. Recognition of, and respect for, the diversity of water resource management systems and values and their enhancement and continued transmission are key for the development of sustainable solutions to address water-related environmental and development challenges.

Intangible cultural heritage provides living examples of educational content and method.

Communities have constantly found ways to systematize and transmit to future generations their knowledge, life skills and competencies, especially concerning their natural and social environment. Even where formal education systems are in place, much of this knowledge and many traditional methods of transmission are also in active use today. They cut across numerous disciplines and fields: from cosmology and physics to health and the sustainable use of natural resources; from the human life cycle to resolving conflict and tensions; from understanding the self and one's place in society to creating collective memory; from architecture to materials science. A quality education for all must not alienate young generations from this rich resource, connected so strongly to their cultural identity. Quality education must therefore recognize the wealth provided by intangible cultural heritage and harness its educational potential by, on the one hand, integrating it as fully as possible as the content of educational programmes in all relevant disciplines and, on the other hand, seeking to harness the potential of traditional modes and methods of transmitting intangible cultural heritage within education systems.

Intangible cultural heritage can help strengthen social cohesion and inclusion.

Social practices, rituals and festive events structure the lives of communities and groups and can play a key role in strengthening their social fabric in an inclusive way. For example, Frevo, a Brazilian artistic expression including music, dance and crafts, brings together people from all social strata for recreational activities during the Carnival preceding the Catholic Lent. Frevo is the shared heritage of the residents of Recife, providing them a sense of identity and continuity with the past and strengthening community values that transcend differences of gender, colour, class and locality. People from all backgrounds dance together to the rhythms of Frevo music. Numerous social practices, from small gatherings to large-scale celebrations and commemorations, strengthen social links and communities' social cohesion by shaping the shared identity of those who practise them.

Intangible cultural heritage is decisive in creating and transmitting gender roles and identities and therefore critical for gender equality.

It is through intangible cultural heritage that communities pass on their values, norms and expectations related to gender and community members' gender identities are shaped. Moreover, access to and participation in specific expressions of heritage are often determined by those gender norms: the production of traditional crafts, for example, often relies on a specific gender-related division of labour, while performing arts are a privileged place for public expression of gender expectations and roles. As intangible cultural heritage is constantly adapting to social and environmental changes, gender roles also change. The gender relations of communities are in constant negotiation, thus opening opportunities to overcome gender-based discrimination and move towards



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greater gender equality through the practice of intangible cultural heritage. Intangible heritage can play a particularly important role in building confidence and tolerance among multicultural communities whose members may not share the same conceptions of gender, and in providing common spaces for dialogue on how best to achieve gender equality.

Environmental sustainability

Environmental sustainability requires ensuring a stable climate, sustainably managing natural resources and protecting biodiversity. These in turn depend on improved scientific understanding and knowledge sharing about climate change, natural hazards, the space environment and natural resource limits. Strengthening resilience among vulnerable populations in the face of climate change and natural disasters is essential to limiting their human, social and economic costs.

Traditional knowledge, values and practices accumulated and renewed across generations as part of intangible cultural heritage have guided human societies in their interactions with the surrounding natural environment for millennia. Today, the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to environmental sustainability is recognized in many fields such as biodiversity conservation, sustainable natural resource management and natural disaster preparedness and response.

As a living heritage, the body of knowledge, values and practices of intangible cultural heritage related to environment has the capacity to evolve and adapt for a more sustainable use of natural resources when necessary, permitting communities to better face natural disasters and the challenges of climate change.



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Intangible cultural heritage can help protect biodiversity. Indigenous and local communities play a central role in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. In Kenya, for example, Kikuyu women are central to the breeding of food crops and the preservation of seeds. Traditionally, women grow multiple varieties of beans on the same field and conserve multiple seed stocks as a hedge against disease and unpredictable climate. Today, those seed stocks constitute a precious botanical repository of indigenous knowledge, all the more valuable after many decades of impoverishment of the agricultural genetic resources at the national level due to monocropping. Farmers, herders, fishers and traditional healers, among other local knowledge holders, are the custodians of biodiversity.

Intangible cultural heritage can contribute to environmental sustainability. While human activities are consuming natural resources at increasing and unsustainable rates at the global level, many local communities have developed lifestyles and intangible cultural heritage practices that are intricately linked to nature and that respect the environment. The fine-woven mats of Samoa, for example, are used as a form of currency to meet cultural obligations or paraded in ceremonial occasions. Over time, a significant body of traditional ecological knowledge became associated with weaving, including the cultivation of varieties of the pandanus, a palm-like tree that provides the main material for weaving. This knowledge helps Samoans preserve their environment, knowing that it is from nature that so much of their well-being depends. Made from vegetation, woven goods decompose naturally,

The knowledge and practices accumulated through time have been used to make sustainable use of natural resources and minimize the impact of climate change. Intangible cultural heritage may thus help to protect biodiversity and can contribute to environmental sustainability.



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making for a relatively quick process from planting to harvesting, using and discarding, unlike plastics and other environmentally harmful products massively used on a global level.

Local knowledge and practices concerning nature can contribute to the research on environmental sustainability. Traditional fishers hold strategic information that can help address marine biodiversity challenges, for example. They have developed a fine-grained knowledge of fish ecology and behaviour, migrations and habitats, fisheries and fishing practices adapted to the seasons. This knowledge, which is highly detailed, diverse and dynamic, can complement other scientific research on marine biodiversity conservation and restoration. International cooperation between local communities and researchers as well as the sharing of good practices can greatly contribute to achieving environmental sustainability in various fields such as forest preservation, agro-biodiversity conservation and natural resource management.

Knowledge and coping strategies often provide a crucial foundation for community-based resilience to natural disasters and climate change. Local communities, often living in vulnerable and harsh surroundings, are among the first to suffer from climate change and natural hazards. Their knowledge and practices concerning nature and climate – including their ecological understanding, environmental and biodiversity conservation skills and rules, natural resource management systems, natural disaster and weather forecasting systems – constitute a rich repository of strategies to cope with the hazards of their natural environment. Elaborated and adapted constantly to changing circumstances, they are time-tested tools that actively help local communities to reduce the risks related to natural disasters, reconstruct when necessary and adapt to climate change.

Inclusive economic development

Sustainable development depends upon stable, equitable and inclusive economic growth, based on sustainable patterns of production and consumption. Inclusive economic development does not focus only on those identified as poor, but also on vulnerable people in precarious livelihoods and others who are excluded from full participation in economic activity. This requires productive and decent employment, reduction of poverty and inequalities, low-carbon as well as resource-efficient economic growth, and welfare protection. Intangible cultural heritage constitutes an important asset for this transformative change. It constitutes a driving force for economic development, encompassing a diversity of productive activities, with both monetary and non-monetary value, and contributes in particular to strengthening local economies. As a living heritage, it can also constitute an important source of innovation in the face of change and help achieve inclusive economic development at the local and international levels.

Intangible cultural heritage is often essential to sustaining the livelihoods of groups and communities.

Local knowledge, skills and practices, maintained and enhanced through generations, provide subsistence livelihood for many people. Family farmers in Estonia, for example, raise sheep and process wool in harmony with nature and local tradition. This way of life provides them with a source of livelihood and identity. They spin yarn for knitters, create felted woollen items, and make candles and soap from sheep fat. Such subsistence practices are crucial to the well-being of the community and constitute a key defence against poverty at the local level. This is also true elsewhere, for many other practices such as local agricultural practices and natural resource management systems.



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Intangible cultural heritage can generate revenue and decent work for a broad range of people and individuals, including poor and vulnerable ones.

Traditional craftsmanship, for example, is often a main source of cash or barter income for groups, communities and individuals that would otherwise be at the margins of the economic system. It generates income not only for craftspeople and their families, but also for those involved in the transportation and sale of the craft products or the gathering or production of raw materials. These activities generate decent work since they

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are often conducted in the framework of family and community, providing security in the workplace and a sense of belonging; they are seen as honourable work as they are closely linked to the identity of the community. Performing arts, festive events and other expressions of intangible cultural heritage also include community members broadly in economic development, including women and youth.

Intangible cultural heritage, as a living heritage, can be a major source of innovation for development. Communities and groups constantly innovate in the face of change. Intangible cultural heritage is a strategic resource to enable transformative development at the local and global level. New materials can be adapted to respond to old needs, for example, when certain raw materials are scarce or unavailable, while old skills provide answers to new challenges, such as when time-tested systems of cultural transmission are adapted to information and communications technologies.

Communities can also benefit from tourism activities related to intangible cultural heritage. The discovery of the diversity of traditions, festive events, performing arts, skills related to traditional

crafts and other areas of intangible cultural heritage is a powerful lever for attracting tourists at national, regional and international levels. These tourist activities can generate income and stimulate job creation while nourishing the sense of pride in the community, provided that they respect ethics and responsibility principles vis-à-vis the living heritage and the people concerned. In fact, tourism, when it is not respectful of the heritage, can put this heritage at risk, which is the case, for instance, when excessive commercial activities alter its meaning and purpose for the community. It is therefore essential that tourism-related activities, whether carried out by States or by public or private organizations, show due respect of the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and the rights, aspirations and wishes of the people concerned. The latter must remain the main beneficiaries of any tourism related to their own heritage and play a leading role in its management. Ethical and ICH-sensitive tourism should avoid any potential negative impact on this heritage by guiding the behaviour of those involved in tourism activities, including tourists themselves.

Peace and security

Peace and security – including freedom from conflict, discrimination and all forms of violence – are prerequisites for sustainable development. Meeting these imperatives requires respect for human rights, effective systems of justice, inclusive political processes and appropriate systems of conflict prevention and resolution. Peace and security also depend on fair access and control to natural resources by local people, as well as securing land tenure and rights without any form of discrimination or exclusion.

Various practices, representations and expressions of intangible cultural heritage have peace making and peace building at their core, and promote dialogue and mutual understanding. Safeguarding activities themselves can contribute to the construction of peace. Intangible cultural heritage and such safeguarding activities allow communities, States and all development actors to pursue

culturally relevant pathways towards inclusive participation, peaceful cohabitation, dispute prevention or resolution, and sustainable security and peace building.

Many intangible cultural heritage practices have the promotion of peace at their very core.

The Manden Charter of Mali (the constitution of the Mali Empire), institutionalized by Soundiata Keita in 1236, is one example. One of the first human rights charters in the world, it advocates values such as social peace in diversity, the inviolability of the human being, abolition of slavery by razzia and freedom of expression and trade. Continuously transmitted orally since its creation, the words of the Charter and the rituals associated with it are cherished by the Malinke people. Commemorative annual ceremonies of the historic assembly are organized in the Malian village of Kangaba by local and national authorities and, in particular, the traditional authorities, who see the Charter as a source of law and a message of love, peace and fraternity. Around the world, numerous intangible



cultural heritage expressions work to promote and safeguard the values of peace.

Intangible cultural heritage can help to prevent or resolve disputes. Local social practices of dialogue, conflict resolution and reconciliation have a determining role to play in societies around the globe. Created over centuries to respond to specific social and environmental contexts, to help regulate access to shared spaces and natural resources, as well as to enable people to live peacefully together, such systems may be informal or highly elaborated. For example, farmers in the semi-arid Spanish regions of Murcia and Valencia look to communal tribunals to resolve disputes over the distribution of water and the management of irrigation systems, essential for growing the vegetables, fruits and flowers for which the regions are known. The Council of Wise Men of the plain of Murcia and the Water Tribunal of the plain of Valencia meet every Thursday to render verdicts that are known to be equitable and wise, having the legal validity of any other civil court. The members

of the tribunal are farmers, democratically elected or selected by lot, who rely on their knowledge of agriculture, irrigation and local custom to arbitrate competing claims. The continued viability of such intangible cultural heritage social practices is central in the communities' capacities to maintain peace and security by preventing and resolving conflicts in an inclusive way that is accepted by the people concerned.

Intangible cultural heritage can contribute to restoring peace and security. Rituals of peace and reconciliation, for example, have the social power to restore peace between two parties, be they individuals, families or communities. Rituals of peace can be used symbolically to communicate a commitment to nonviolence and to transform relationships. They help people to relate to one another and enable them to get beyond misunderstanding, rivalry, hatred and violence.

The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is also a means to lasting peace and security. When they are inclusive, safeguarding activities related to the intangible cultural heritage are a



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powerful lever to bring together communities, groups and individuals, including indigenous peoples, migrants, immigrants, refugees, people of different ages and genders, people with disabilities, and members of marginalized groups. By their contribution to democratic governance and respect for human rights, intangible heritage safeguarding activities promote the emergence of factors of peace and security such as sharing and transmission of deeply rooted common values, strengthening a sense of collective

identity and self-esteem, as well as creating new opportunities for creative and economic development. Safeguarding activities in post-conflict situations also bring together different parties around a project of reconstruction and sharing a common memory; they promote reconciliation through intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity around the practice of living heritage and thus constitute an effective and sustainable way to restore peace and security within a society.

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Intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.