

# Significance and Prospects of NGO Networks in the Field of ICH

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## Preamble

First, allow me to express my thanks and honour for being invited to make this keynote speech. This is the second time I have come to Korea at ICHCAP's kind invitation. My contact with colleagues from this and other countries in the Asia-Pacific Region has left me feeling more an ally than a mere sympathizer of their work.

We live in an era of globalization, not only of the economy, information and communication, but also of solidarity towards building a better world for ourselves and for future generations. I hope this meeting will be a landmark in our joint efforts to make our contributions to the cultural communities with which we presently work and our role as advisors to the Intergovernmental Committee more effective, in terms of our joint mission of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Huge geographical distances and cultural differences separate our countries, a fact that is immediately evident in the linguistic diversity present in this room. Use of the English language facilitates our communication and, in addition, we

can understand each other thanks to the efficient collaboration of the interpreters, even though we are so very much aware of how much subtlety is inevitably lost in translation. My thanks, therefore, to our backstage partners.

## I. NGOs in the Contemporary Public Sphere

The participation of civil society in formulating and implementing public policies has become a basic premise in the management of institutions committed to consolidating democracy and cultivating an ethic of social responsibility at national, international, and multilateral level.

This ethical commitment to local social agents is the catalyst for particular forms of knowledge and kinds of experience. Kinds of experience that are not confined to accepting the myriad facts of everyday life and professional circumstances as inevitable, nor content with relying on commonplace explanations for them or with interpreting them exclusively in terms of conventional academic paradigms. This knowledge, which some authors qualify as applied, is built on technical and multidisciplinary academic parameters; undoubtedly. However, it has the peculiarity of being energized by concrete and often urgent demands. I am talking about a form of understanding that is developed hand-in-hand with political and social processes in which local agents are engaged and that is committed to empowering their strategies in response to the conditions in which they live. This commitment is, for me, what makes this form of knowledge and professional practice different from others.

NGOs show considerable diversity in terms of their objectives and operating conditions. In a survey conducted in Brazil for WIPO, I came across more than three hundred organizations campaigning on issues linked to the rights of the working class, indigenous groups, and people of African descent. Some of these NGOs were involved with questions related exclusively to one or a few ethnic groups while others had broader objectives. However, the vast majority operated on the basis of well-defined local connections and paid little or no attention to questions—like those addressed in this forum—located beyond the fragmentary realities with which, and within which, they were operating. As we all know, the same scenario occurs in other countries.

The NGOs—at least the kind specifically of interest to this forum—perform a very special role in nations where democracy has not been fully consolidated. These institutions are usually created by the voluntary work of individuals committed to improving the living conditions of local communities and groups, to strengthening respect for their values and ways of life, and to increasing their access to full citizenship. NGOs are not usually the legitimate spokespeople for the populations and social groups with whom and for whom they work. However, they can be strategically helpful in the construction of as direct as possible accesses to the public sphere and to the market economy,<sup>1</sup> as far as they perform their role in a transparent and, above all, independent way.

NGOs have been active in many parts of the world since the 1980s. In the early 1990s, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations had already recognized their importance in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of socio-environmental development programmes. Agenda 21,<sup>2</sup> for example, states that these organizations “play a vital role in the shaping and implementation of participatory democracy” and that their independence (my emphasis) from local political contexts is a “precondition of real participation” in the activities it advocates.

However, little would have been achieved in this process without important legal and administrative changes in institutional systems, enabling the formal establishment of partnerships and intellectual collaboration and the transfer of substantial volumes of public and private resources to third sector organizations.

## II. NGOs Participation in the ICH Convention

During the implementation of the 2003 Convention—which I had the opportunity and honour to participate in drafting—collaboration with NGOs was a point of agreement and indeed continues to be so today. Nevertheless, there is still work to do from our side before we can be fully prepared to take this responsibility, working in the best interest of cultural communities.

<sup>1</sup> See ARANTES, A. Beyond tradition. In: ARIZPE, L. and AMESCUA, C. (Eds) *Anthropological perspectives on intangible cultural heritage*. New York: Springer, 2013, p.39-55. ISBN 978-3-319-00854-7.

<sup>2</sup> Agenda 21, approved at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 1992. , Item 27.1

The agenda of this timely meeting organized by ICHCAP raises relevant questions from that perspective. Here I wish to highlight two of them as a starting point for the work that we shall develop in the later sessions. One refers to networking as a social practice; the other, to interpreting more broadly the responsibility given to us by the ICH Convention.

To date, the Intergovernmental Committee of the ICH Convention has accredited 178 non-governmental organizations, 98 of which are active in the Asia-Pacific Region. Therefore, you represent over half<sup>3</sup> of this universe! It is possible—and, thus, I hope—that the history and experience accumulated by your organizations is echoed in my earlier remarks, especially in terms of our ethical commitment to ICH holder communities, groups, and individuals. However, as I suggested earlier, significant differences inevitably exist among our organizations concerning their objectives and work methods, the profile of their target populations, the human and financial resources available to each of them and the political conditions in which they work, among other issues. These differences lie at the bottom of the weak connectivity of our NGO network.

I believe that many of us have been frustrated in attempting to establish long-lasting professional relationships with other accredited NGOs, despite the valuable initiatives of the Secretariat of the ICH Convention, along with the contribution of professional organizations and experts, not to mention the UNESCO Category 2 Centres, particularly those established in the Asia-Pacific Region.<sup>4</sup> These initiatives deserve our recognition and gratitude, since all of them have been vital to structuring the socio-political space required for our participation in the implementation of the ICH Convention.

3 Considering 84 NGOs in activity in 20 States Party to the Convention belonging to Group IV, plus 14 in States that are not parties to the Convention, namely Australia, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and Timor Leste. (<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich>, consulted on June 20, 2014)

4 This forum has been meeting on the eve of the Intergovernmental Committee Meetings since 2010. See the statements approved at each of these meetings at <http://www.ichngoforum.org/documents-2/>. I refer to the NGO Forum and the communication platforms, respectively <http://www.ichngoforum.org> and <http://ngoforum.pbworks.com>, as well as to the Researchers Forum, which met in Paris in 2012 and Tokyo in 2013, sponsored by the Maison des Cultures du Monde and the IRCI (International Research Centre for ICH) based in Japan. (See The First ICH-Researchers Forum: the implementation of UNESCO's 2003 Convention. Final report. Osaka: IRCI, 2012 and 2013 IRCI Meeting on ICH—Evaluating the inscription criteria for the two lists of UNESCO's ICH Convention. Osaka: IRCI, 2013. In the Asia-Pacific region, which is one of most active—if not the most—in terms of the work of bringing together NGOs committed to strengthening the safeguarding of ICH, reference should also be made to CRIHAP (International Training Centre for ICH) based in China, and especially to ICHCAP, the host for the present meeting.

However, the diversity of our experience and the difficulties that we continuously face in the search for the financial, technical, and political resources needed to carry on our projects are forces that work to distance ourselves from each other. For that reason, I believe that it is time for us to create an attractor: a system of coordinated and convergent forces that not only enables contacts and occasional exchanges between participants, but also proactively promotes the practice of networking, nourished by a stimulated exchange of information and by effective collaboration geared towards specific shared objectives. This asks not only for virtual but also face-to-face interaction between individuals, directed towards designing, implementing and evaluating specific projects of common interest.

Before we jump to conclusions of any sort, allow me to give you a concrete example of what I mean by this idea of constructing what I call “a networking attractor” by quickly describing the trajectory of ArteSol, the Brazilian civil society organization that I represent at this meeting.

ArteSol (<http://www.artesol.org.br/site/english/>) is a non-governmental social organization created in 1998 with the aim of contributing to the safeguarding of traditional craftwork in areas of Brazil with low human development indices. With the support of diverse partners, it has implemented around a hundred projects in seventeen of the country's twenty-six federal states. These projects have benefitted approximately five thousand people, producers of artefacts of various kinds and their family members.

The actions developed by this organization set out from the principle that intangible cultural heritage in general, and traditional craftwork in particular, is a resource of special significance in terms of the history, worldviews, and ways of life of their practitioners. These resources are potentially available to most, if not all, members of cultural communities, allowing for differences in gender, age, and other forms of social differentiation, which organize their practice and transmission. Their holders often use them as an important component of family income. For these reasons, we believe that the safeguarding and development of this knowhow, when sustainable, can contribute decisively to improving the living conditions of artisans and their families as well as boosting their self-esteem and promoting access to citizenship rights.

The social technology developed by ArteSol<sup>5</sup> contributed effectively to safeguarding expressions of intangible cultural heritage at risk in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> Three of them form today part of Brazil's Cultural Heritage, officially protected by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN). This approach also contributes significantly to regional sustainable development, as can be illustrated by the Polo Veredas Project.<sup>7</sup>

During its first decade of activity, the main goals of ArteSol were:

- (1) to contribute to the self-knowledge of the communities it worked with;
- (2) to strengthen and promote the knowhow of the craftspeople;
- (3) to assist in the formation of associations;
- (4) to collaborate in the redesigning of products—where necessary—respecting traditional taste and techniques;
- (5) to contribute to price formation and the establishment of as direct as possible relations between artisans and the market; and
- (6) to promote access to citizenship rights.

Although ArteSol continues to implement this approach as communities continue to be included in its programmes, the creation of a network (<http://www.artesol.org.br/rede>) has become its main goal since 2012. This particular topic directly concerns the present meeting's objectives.

The aim of ArteSol Network is to develop a specific website, a virtual space for interaction, allowing direct contact between associations, cooperatives, masters, and artisans and their commercial partners—i.e., promoting connectivity between agents belonging to the productive chain of traditional craftwork, many of whom have participated in our activities since 1998. In the near future, it aims to include stores, support institutions, and government programmes through a communication plan that will provide ready access to contacts and information.

It is important to emphasise that this is not a sales site. On the contrary, one of its key objectives has been to strengthen the autonomy of artisans in selling their

products and to advise them on how to deal with the market economy, in line with fair trade principles. Based on some very positive results, our vision is for the network to become an effective tool in the development of traditional craftwork in Brazil.

I trust that this example helps explain what I mean when I refer to a space for interaction that favours the effective articulation of partners towards common objectives.

The second theme I wish to explore here relates to the wider significance of our involvement in safeguarding ICH. The way I understand it, the 2003 Convention demands something broader and deeper than giving advice on matters concerning the inclusion of cultural elements on the Urgent Safeguarding List, on the Representative List and the evaluation of financial assistance requests, or acting as members of the Consultative Body. We all know that there are controversies surrounding the utility of these lists as well as around the meaning of the term 'representative' in the name given to one of them. However, the implementation of these policy instruments—besides their positive practical effects - have produced a rich repository of examples, problems and solutions concerning the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. I believe, furthermore, that the Convention aims not merely to protect selected cultural elements, but to take as its effective object—anthropologically speaking - the production of cultural diversity, which by definition involves the people who conceive such singular expressions of creativity and the social contexts where they bloom and are nurtured.

The adoption of this a broad understanding of the ICH Convention's scope is made explicit in its text, for example, when it assigns to each State Party the responsibility to “take the necessary measures to ensure the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory” (Art.11,a; my emphasis). This task is not limited to the cultural items listed - or to be listed—by the Convention; most definitely, it does not refer to context-free items of cultural practice. On the contrary, the action-tools specifically pointed at in relation to the safeguarding of heritage at national level are inventories, which by definition refer to systems of cultural elements as well as to the social conditions in which they are formed, and historically transformed.

We know, from first principles, that social practices neither take place, nor can be safeguarded, in isolation from each other, or from the living conditions of the

5 Visit ArteSol site <http://www.artesol.org.br/site/english/> for further information on this social technology.

6 Examples are lace making techniques in Divina Pastora (Sergipe state), viola de cocho instruments in Corumbá and Ladário (Mato Grosso do Sul state) and earthenware cooking dishes in Goiabeiras (Espírito Santo state). See <http://www.artesol.org.br/site/english/>, ArteSol website for details.

7 Ibid.

people who bear or hold them.<sup>8</sup> I can add to that, from experience, that the social components of such contexts can be catalysers of convergent actions, unleashing more extensive social and cultural processes within particular social fields than those that could be designed for the continuity of isolated cultural practices.

I therefore defend the view that we should not concentrate our efforts exclusively on our role as advisers to the Intergovernmental Committee in matters concerning lists or projects of States Parties, or of being one of its members. NGOs can and should do so. They should also, however, apply—and multiply—their material means, intellectual resources and creative energies by working at local level, with the communities that they have been working with along their trajectories, and to whom they (the institutions) and we (the experts) owe a significant intellectual and moral debt.

### III. Concluding Remarks

The Convention is undoubtedly an innovative instrument in the context of heritage policies, but not simply because it invites non-governmental organizations to take part in its activities as advisers. This role is in fact set out in Article IX of UNESCO's Constitution, adopted in 1995 at the twenty-eighth Session of the General Conference.<sup>9</sup>

Its innovative—and perhaps revolutionary—contribution to the field of cultural preservation resides, in my view, first in admitting that ICH is an object with a subject, as we can gather from Art.2,1 which states that ICH comprises the social practices “that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (my emphasis). Secondly, it innovates by establishing NGOs as partners to cultural communities when in Article 11.b it elaborates on the States Parties' task of identifying the objects that these

communities wish to safeguard, and of planning how to do so. This article implicitly recognizes that NGOs—or at least those designated ‘relevant’—are capable of establishing a productive, technically skilled, and ethically guided dialogue as well as collaboration with ICH holders. Hence, my argument that such recognition stimulates social and political investments that can multiply the effects of safeguarding action plans at local level, and makes us legitimate agents of that endeavour.

Our experience of working with heritage holder communities, as well as acting as IGC advisers and participating in the diverse fora created in this field, provides lessons and raises questions concerning issues that are good to think about as well as prospects for joint future action, which it may be worth fighting for. I am positive that the intellectual exchanges and collaboration in concrete projects that we can develop together will strengthen our capacity to meet—with intellectual proficiency, autonomy and critical engagement—the expectations of both the Convention's governing bodies and the holders of ICH.

<sup>8</sup> I tackle this question in ARANTES, A. Heritage as culture. In: KONO, T. (Ed.). *Intangible cultural heritage and intellectual property: communities, cultural diversity and sustainable development*. Antwerp: Intersentia, 2009. p. 51-76. ISBN 978-90-5095-758-8.

<sup>9</sup> Directives concerning UNESCO's partnership with nongovernmental organizations. Approved by the General Conference at its 28th session (records available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001018/101803e.pdf> and amended at its 31st, 34th and 36th sessions. Available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002161/216192e.pdf?#page=151>