

are. It may become easier afterwards to convince public bodies to work alongside cultural associations or individual practitioners, arguing they could then better understand and fulfil their duty regarding national and international ICH legal instruments.

Reports on ICH at a national level are excellent tools for NGOs to share with other NGOs involved in the 2003 Convention. It serves as a counterbalance and/or a complement to States periodic reports as well as good comparison information regarding ICH administration over the world, including the role given to/taken by NGOs on safeguarding actions. NGO-forum could be used, among other capacities, for sharing this kind of national information, highlighting relevant collaborative action, or structuring deployment among them. A great variety of NGOs accredited by the 2003 Convention appears in that sense as a positive linkage, useful for sharing a diversity of sources of information.

See [www.patrimoine-immateriel.qc.ca](http://www.patrimoine-immateriel.qc.ca) to download the report “État des lieux du patrimoine immatériel”.

## ICH NGOs in the East African Region: Contributions and Prospects

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### Abstract

Across the East African region, intangible cultural heritage is situated and ICH-oriented NGOs evolve in a challenging environment, where the promotion and preservation of the region’s diverse and rich intangible heritage is considered a low priority, and generally unhelpful for meeting these countries’ considerable development challenges.

As a result of the negative connotations given to culture—due to a variety of factors, both historical, religious and social—and, therefore, to the very limited resources that are made available for its preservation in all its forms, few NGOs are active in this field, and their activities are both fragmented and poorly resourced.

Nevertheless their numbers are increasing, their range of activities is widening, and coordination mechanisms (including with their respective governments) are emerging. This gives hope for a future where NGOs active in the ICH field will be in a better position to make the important contribution that is sought of them.

## I. The Context

In tackling this subject, it is important first of all to briefly describe the economic, cultural, and historical context, as this directly informs the role and record of ICH NGOs in the region.

There is sometimes a tendency to generalize African realities, especially when seen or written about by external observers. Yet the continent is extremely diverse, and writing about the East African region (with a combined population of 150 million) is in itself a challenge. The region is culturally quite diverse, although each country shares (to some extent) a similar colonial experience, whose consequences are still quite visible today.

In Uganda alone, for instance, there are more than sixty-five ethnic groups recognized by the national constitution and there are more than forty-five languages spoken. Some of these languages are quite dissimilar, and some Ugandans are unable to understand each other, unless they use the national language, which, because of colonialism, is English.

In addition to cultural diversity, one common characteristic across the region has been the inability of these countries to develop economically in anything but the same way as Korea has achieved. In Uganda, there is a saying in certain circles that Koreans were poorer than Ugandans just before independence, yet now we see Korea having a programme of assistance for Uganda, and the difference in GNP per capita between the two countries has widened enormously (US\$551 for Uganda and US\$22,590 for Korea).

There are many reasons for this state of affairs (civil strife, reliance on raw materials for exports, low investments in education and infrastructure, etc.), but the purpose of this paper is not to delve into this. Rather, what is relevant to our discussion is that poverty is widespread (with a quarter of the population in extreme or chronic poverty, surviving on the equivalent of US\$1 or less) and that priorities for households, communities, and governments in the region is not the preservation of cultural heritage, but rather what to bring to the table in terms of food or essential services like primary school education and basic health care.

The point about government priorities is important because, throughout the region, governments are central to the economy and social decisions—this is also a legacy of colonialism. So the fact that, with a rapidly growing population and

pressing day-to-day needs, governments do not accord priority to the culture sector is reflected in other sectors, including the business and the NGO sectors. In Uganda, for instance, the national budget provides for the entire culture sector, with only 0.03 per cent of the available budgetary resources. Governments do spend a large proportion of their resources on the education sector, but again, culture hardly features. It is, for instance, only recently that the teaching in English was abandoned in primary schools, where English still dominates. Culture studies are nowhere to be seen.

In spite of this, one must acknowledge that governments have provided a legal framework, through their countries' national constitutions, national cultural policies, and ratification of international instruments—such as the /UNESCO conventions. All these can be used to elicit the necessary political support for ICH-related work.

Finally, colonialism was accompanied in the region by the introduction of Christian religions, mostly through foreign missionaries. These labelled the African beliefs and practices they found before them as pagan and satanic. With time, and because of their influence (most people in the region are now Christian), these churches nurtured a negative attitude towards this aspect of the African heritage. With these new religions and missionary orders, also came a type of education that not only ignored local cultural traditions and knowledge but also actively denigrated them, including oral literature and other indigenous forms of expression that were swiftly replaced by Western curricula and other educational practices.

The consequences of all these factors is that many East Africans find themselves in a dilemma: while they may cherish their cultural roots and the cultural diversity in which they live, the education they have access to tells them to “develop” and that they should leave their culture behind, as primitive or at least, not useful. While there may be exceptions, culture, including the intangible heritage, is therefore mostly seen as unimportant, if not negative to move forward as communities and nations.

A final point on NGOs: these have developed rapidly in the region in the last few years, but (as an organizational form) they are not indigenous to East Africa and its context. NGOs are overwhelmingly external donor funded and they quite easily change their priorities and agenda with donor trends. With regard to culture, as this is not an international donor priority, this is also not an important preoccupation of NGOs, which are mostly involved in service delivery and, to a

lesser extent, in human rights work.

Within civil society, it can also be observed that other organizational forms are more prevalent, especially community-based and faith-based organizations that have a much stronger connection with rural dwellers than NGOs (mostly based in the cities).

## II. Areas of Engagement

Given this background, it is not surprising that very few NGOs are involved in the cultural sector, let alone in the promotion and preservation of the intangible heritage. In the particular case of Uganda, we find a handful of NGOs involved in the following:

- Activities linked to the protection of ICH elements: An organization in western Uganda called Engabu za Tooro has, for instance, been active in promoting a cultural naming practice, which has recently been inscribed on the list of ICH in need of urgent safeguarding. A small civil society group in northern Uganda is also partnering with the government to preserve the ICH of their ethnic community.
- Activities linked to the performing arts: one NGO—Bayimba—has successfully attracted financial support to stage regular festivals, highlighting local (and not necessarily fashionable) forms of cultural expression.
- Activities in relation to traditional governance systems: World Voices Uganda, a local NGO, has worked with community groups in one region of the country to restore the function of traditional courts in dealing with conflicts, thus enabling local residents to have access to a justice system that is effective, affordable and linked to a system of values that is culturally understood (rather than the colonial-inspired state judiciary system).
- Heritage education: the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) works with sixty secondary schools where it supports Heritage Education Clubs and where teachers are trained and equipped with materials to support these clubs. CCFU is also engaging the Ministry of Education so that heritage education features in the school curriculum.

Activities linked to oral traditions and expressions have also been supported by CCFU through, for instance, a language competition for ethnic minority groups whose languages have hitherto been poorly recorded or not recorded at all, as a way to preserve them. So far thirteen such minority groups have responded to the call. Two other local NGOs—the Kogere Foundation and the Nebbi Cultural Troupe—have promoted cultural forms of expression that incorporate cultural values to transmit important heritage preservation messages, especially to the youth.

Activities linked to cultural tourism and knowledge concerning nature and the universe have also attracted the attention of a few NGOs. This has included developing a cultural trail or circuit for tourists in areas inhabited by another minority group the Batwa (or “pygmies”, originally living in forests that have now become national parks) and the Uganda Community Tourism Association (that supports local communities to showcase to tourists various aspects of their heritage, tangible and intangible). There is also one project supported by an international NGO, Flora and Fauna International: this Cultural Values Project helps the Uganda Wildlife Authority (the governmental body in charge of national parks) and the communities neighbouring these parks to negotiate ways to sustainably preserve their heritage, such as shrines and other cultural sites, including those located in the parks. Other NGOs support the preservation of another important aspect of local knowledge: herbal medicine through plants and other natural products (PROMETRA—the Association to Promote Traditional African Medicine and THETA—the Association of Herbal Healers and Herbalists).

Community museums: There is in Uganda a growing group of community museums. There are now thirty such initiatives by local communities to preserve the tangible and intangible aspects of their local cultural heritage and to make this available to the public through small museums. These museums have been helped to establish their association, the Uganda Community Museums Association.

Finally, research on the intangible aspect of the national heritage is important. CCFU has undertaken the documentation of various aspects of this heritage through case study work, for instance on governance and culture and on using the positive aspects of culture to deal with the crisis of HIV and AIDS.

There are also some regional NGOs in East Africa that are involved in heritage development, including networks such as Arterial. Others include training and advocacy-focused NGOs, such as the Centre for Heritage Development in Africa

and Culture and Development East Africa. These also provide platforms for information and resource mobilization.

### III. Challenges

These activities cannot mask the considerable challenges that NGOs involved in ICH face.

For a start, such NGOs in the region are very few in numbers. They do not constitute a movement, let alone a network of citizens' organizations with a passion for heritage preservation. Their efforts are, therefore, fragmented, without sufficient coordination locally and nationally.

The few NGOs in existence in the ICH sector are also largely donor-dependent. This presents problems with regard to agenda-setting, ownership of activities, and their sustainability (given the short timeframes of most donor agreements with NGOs).

While NGO activities are mostly donor-funded, they currently receive little support from their respective governments, in part because governments are still seen as the prime actors in the culture sphere—and are not 'used' to such collaboration; the official resources for the culture sectors are also so limited that resources for NGO collaboration are even scarcer.

NGOs also suffer from limited experience, partly because they are young organizations, partly because the context—where culture and heritage are often considered unimportant or irrelevant to development challenges—offers few opportunities for learning.

Finally, as noted above, NGOs evolve in an educational context where western curricula still dominate at the expense of indigenous knowledge, where foreign diplomas are prized as opposed to local language and literature, and innovation based on local traditional skills and knowledge.

### IV. Prospects

In spite of these challenges, there is reason to have a measure of optimism for the future, with regard to NGO involvement in ICH-related matters.

The first point is that many of the activities described above have only been existence for a few years. Prior to this, there was practically no involvement by NGOs at all. This indicates a growing, though still limited, involvement by NGOs in the cultural sector and, to a certain extent, in ICH-related issues.

The second is that there are attempts by governments and NGOs to work together. This is partly due to the recognition by the relevant government departments that their resources and reach are likely to remain limited for the foreseeable future and that NGOs can complement their activities. Recent funding by UNESCO to safeguard the ICH in three different parts of Uganda has, for instance, opened the door to government-NGO field cooperation.

The growth of the tourism sector (Uganda has now joined the other East African countries—Kenya and Tanzania—as important destinations for world tourism) is another potential opportunity. While most tourists still come to the region to visit the national parks and other elements of the natural environment, cultural tourism is starting to be recognized as an important adjunct to "classical tourism". Some NGOs are starting to realize that tourism can provide new avenues for their work in ICH.

The final point is more intangible. As East African countries are increasingly ruled by post-colonial generations, there are signs that local solutions are being sought to local problems—sooner or later the roots of these solutions will be sought in ICH—a reason, after all, for preserving our intangible cultural heritage in the first place.