

Isfahan Statement on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and Building Resilience to Climate Change

*Sub-regional Expert Meeting on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and Building
resilience to Climate Change and Its Impacts in Western and Central Asia*

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Recalling that the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible cultural heritage states that this heritage, which is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment and their interaction with nature and includes the domain of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, is a guarantor of sustainable development;

Recalling the wider legal context in which this treaty is situated, in particular the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 and UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity of 2001;

Recalling the call set out in the Final Declaration of the UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development (MONDIACULT, 2022) for a systemic anchoring of culture in public policies, through the adaptation of development strategies and frameworks at the sub-regional, national and local levels as an enabler and driver of resilience and environmental sustainability;

Recalling the Seoul Vision for the Future of Safeguarding Living Heritage for Sustainable Development and Peace (2023) that recognizes the central role that intangible cultural heritage can play in tackling the pressing global environmental challenges facing our lives and the planet, by providing time-tested solutions and shaping and reaffirming our relationship to the natural world, including through fostering values of respect, custodianship and reciprocity towards nature;

Recalling also the Final Declaration of the International Conference on Combating Sand and Dust Storms, held on 9-10 September 2023 in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran, which underscores that a better understanding of climate change and its challenges needs robust collaboration and focus at all levels, inter alia through utilizing the capacities and potentials of intangible cultural heritage as an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral element within the wider UN framework;

Taking into consideration the importance placed by the United Nations and its member States on the global challenge posed by climate change as evidenced in the Climate Ambition Summit held on 20 September 2023 alongside the UN General Assembly meeting which included among its ambitions to demonstrate that tangible and ambitious action to credibly cut emissions and deliver climate justice was possible and practical and inspire others to follow;

Noting that the ambition of reducing climate change and mitigating and adapting to its impacts is intimately connected with each country's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, and that there exists a close relationship between safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and fulfilling the SDGs across a number of governmental sectors;

Noting also that while the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992) has recognized that traditional knowledge can play a vital role in climate change adaptation, this has not yet been fully explored within that treaty's mechanisms and related instruments;

Further noting that safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is an interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral activity that implicates a number of UN agencies' work in the fields of health, education, responsible consumption and food security as well as climate change itself and can therefore provide a vital synergy in this multidimensional picture that includes sustainability as a major goal;

Recognizing that the impacts of climate change, such as flooding, droughts, decrease in soil fertility, wildfires, rapid glacier melt, avalanches, mudflows, land erosion, rock falls, landslides, dust storms, hurricanes, cyclones and rising sea-levels, threaten the continued practice of many intangible cultural heritage elements due to the loss of essential natural resources and an erosion of the relevance of traditional knowledge about nature;

Acknowledging that these impacts of climate change on intangible cultural heritage and related communities are not only environmental but also have social, economic and psychological dimensions that include, inter alia, the destruction of traditional livelihoods, the loss of intangible cultural heritage and its transmission, the displacement of populations, an increase in diseases such as malaria and tick-borne encephalitis and severe psychological impacts which are felt especially strongly by women, children and other vulnerable groups;

Recognizing that subsistence farmers and hunting and fishing, agricultural, horticultural, pastoral and nomadic communities and tribal peoples, which constitutes a significant proportion of the holders of traditional ecological knowledge, innovations and practices in the West and Central Asia region, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and resultant loss of their intangible cultural heritage while, at the same time, their ways of life contribute largely to the preservation of the natural environment and its resources;

In view of the fact that the impacts of climate change on the intangible cultural heritage of the Western and Central Asia region are not well documented and that the opportunity to

harness the potential of intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding to respond to and mitigate these has not as yet been sufficiently explored in this sub-region;

Considering the global role of non-governmental organizations and the importance of their activities among indigenous peoples with centuries-old ecological knowledge and who have a specific role in the production, conservation, maintenance, viability and reconstruction of intangible cultural heritage, who are among the most remote and vulnerable communities,

This sub-regional Expert Meeting makes the following recommendations:

All governments, non-governmental stakeholders and UNESCO should seek to,

Develop a policy and legislative framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage that takes climate change and its impacts into account, incorporating traditional management and dispute settlement practices, and incorporate the safeguarding strategy for intangible cultural heritage into the national climate adaptation plan.

Strengthen access to bio-cultural information for agencies working in vulnerable mountain regions and areas inhabited by indigenous farming and pastoral communities and require all environmental, development and heritage agencies working in these areas to have a strong Community Engagement Component to their project.

Ensure the active participation of local cultural communities in projects undertaken with regard to intangible cultural heritage and Climate Change, as equal partners and fully engaged in the decision-making process, incorporating traditional local councils and other similar social institutions.

Address the absence of reliable data on the climate change impacts on ICH elements through gathering more reliable data and conducting research on the impacts of climate change on ICH elements and communities, in particular through surveys of intangible cultural elements in affected regions, the nature of these impacts and their role in responding to them, as well as surveys of traditional social institutions and their place in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage elements and preventing climate change, mitigating its impacts or adapting to these.

As a safeguarding measure, promote indigenous knowledge systems concerning the climate and the natural environment, including adaptations to changing climatic conditions, using an effective Education and Communication strategy and methodology.

Identify challenges to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage elements and traditional ways of life posed by climate change through a consultative process involving local communities, and apply improvements based on this process. As a part of this, to identify, document and support traditional methods of water harvesting, conservation and management and traditional agricultural, food production and pest control systems.

Avoid top-down approaches that ignore local communities' needs and views and find opportunities to engage with governmental agencies in their planned interventions in

vulnerable areas to demonstrate effective ways of involving local communities in large-scale projects and interventions and the need for a collaborative effort involving diverse individuals, communities, groups, and governmental bodies.

Avoid 'quick fix solutions' by supporting local communities to increase their resilience through reinvigorating traditional self-organization strategies through harnessing intangible cultural heritage alongside 'modern' scientific knowledge and technological responses in order to find an appropriate balance between the two.

Provide financial support to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to undertake fieldwork, research projects and educational, social and economic activities related to intangible cultural heritage in the face of present or foreseen impacts of climate change in order to support community-based adaptation to new conditions, thus leveraging the unique range of on-the-ground experience and expertise of such organizations and their key role in representing bearer communities as useful partners of governments.

Strengthen the technical and financial the potential of NGOs, with a view to their more active participation in the decision-making process on issues of adaptation and mitigation of global climate change to save intangible cultural heritage.

Encourage the greater involvement of NGOs in identifying, documenting, researching, protecting, promoting, enhancing and transferring intangible cultural heritage in order to gather more reliable data on the role of this heritage in preventing, mitigating and adapting to climate change and its impacts.

Support NGOs in familiarizing the public about possible climate change impacts in different regions on the basis of scientific hypotheses and involving the general public in developing ways of adapting to global climate change and mitigating their consequences based on scientific data and traditional knowledge and in the decision-making process on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Support the expansion of the participation of public experts in the development and implementation of research programmes in the field of safeguarding and conservation of intangible cultural heritage under climate change conditions, in cooperation with domestic and foreign research institutes.

Under the auspices of the Tehran ICH Centre in cooperation with ICHCAP,

Undertake an independent study aimed at assessing the efficiency of community-level engagement in projects aimed at preventing climate change, mitigating its impacts or adapting to these, in particular in mountainous and desert regions.

Conduct the mapping and/or survey of the intangible cultural heritage of selected areas (both urban and rural) in the countries under examination, placing a particular emphasis on the vulnerability of the intangible cultural heritage elements and their bearers to the impacts of climate change, the role of the intangible cultural heritage elements in preventing climate change, mitigating its impacts or adapting to these.

Hold one webinar per country annually or biannually to present its concerns, considerations and strategies related to climate change and its impacts for selected aspects of intangible cultural heritage.

Organize a joint webinar in cooperation with ICHCAP and the Persian Garden Institute every two years, hosted alternately by each of the two Category 2 Centres, in order to pursue this topic or develop other topics of mutual interest and importance.

Establish an expert group comprising 3-5 experts, a coordinator and representatives from Tehran ICH Centre and ICHCAP to identify persons with known expertise in networking in this area.

Set the vision, goals, work schedule and deliverables of the follow-up project on intangible cultural heritage and Climate Change in West and Central Asia, design and agree on a project roadmap (step-by-step), work schedule and expected outputs/outcomes. In addition, agree on the Terms of Reference for Country Focal Points to the follow-up project.

Establish an Observatory on intangible cultural heritage and Climate Change with hubs situated in remote areas, supported by an Action Plan to be specified and with involvement of non-governmental actors and, in particular, local community representatives. Within this framework, create a website in which articles and reports regarding ICH and climate change, such as those presented during this meeting, can be uploaded and inform relevant government officials, UNESCO and the ICH NGO Forum about this website.

Identify and share, in close consultation and cooperation with regional countries and UNESCO'S Living Heritage Unit, instances of good safeguarding measures as examples of how local communities have surmounted challenges faced by the impacts of climate change in Western and Central Asia and allowed them to transmit their living heritage, its practice and knowledge to future generations and to use intangible cultural heritage to build wider national and regional resilience in the face of natural disasters.

Identify, in close cooperation with the countries of the sub-region, ICHCAP and UNESCO'S Living Heritage Unit, relevant non-governmental actors working in the area of intangible cultural heritage and climate change and to establish a sub-regional network of relevant NGOs and non-governmental experts in this area.

Conduct capacity-building courses for journalists in intangible cultural heritage and Climate Change in the sub-region, through training, in close cooperation with the countries of the sub-region, ICHCAP and relevant non-governmental actors located in Iran (Islamic Republic of) and the countries of the sub-region, in order to raise awareness, advocate for solutions and find ways of overcoming the climate crisis in West and Central Asia, in the spirit of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible cultural heritage.