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Government Mechanism for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage 
Some major Directions and Experiences from Viet Nam

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1. Context
The Government of Viet Nam views the identification, protection and promotion of intangible 
cultural heritage as vital in the present period of rapid socio-economic transformation. The 
Government also aims to ensure that the country's diverse culture with 54 ethnic groups play a 
role in promoting social and economic development.

Beside the positive impacts by the globalization and modernization in the present time, the rapid 
socio-economic mechanism changes lead to the changing of cultures and are threatening to 
eliminate various items of intangible cultural heritage, and thus, leading to the elimination of 
the cultural diversity of the world in general and of Vietnam as well. In response to these threats, 
Vietnam has created a government mechanism for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage with 
various major directions and gained notable experiences as follows:

2. Legal framework:

- On the 29th June 2001, the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 
  adopted the Law on Cultural Heritage, in which, the whole chapter III is dedicated to 
  intangible cultural heritage. The Law acknowledges that Cultural Heritage has played a 
  significant role in the national development and preservation of the Vietnamese people. It 
  defined: “The State's policies shall encourage work to collect, compile, translate, 
  inventory, classify and preserve works of literature, art, science, oral tradition and 
  folklore of the multi-ethnic Vietnamese community. These shall be disseminated 
  domestically as well as through foreign cultural exchange.” (Chapter III, Article 23).

- Further actions for intangible heritage protection were promoted in the “Decree on the 
  Detailed Regulations to Implement some Articles of the Law on Cultural Heritage” 
  (passed on November 11th 2002 by the Government of Vietnam). Chapter II, Article 7 
  defines “The State shall protect and promote the values of intangible cultural heritage 
  through the following means:
  - Organizing the implementation of the projects on nationwide research, collection, 
    inventory, classification of intangible cultural heritage;
  - Conducting regular and periodical collection, inventory, classification of intangible 
    cultural heritage;
  - Increasing public awareness of traditional cultural values.
  - Increasing the tasks of transmission skills to the younger generations, dissemination, 
    publication, performance and revitalization various forms of intangible cultural heritage, 
    putting priority to those expressions that are in need of urgent protection;
- Investing budgets to the activities of safeguarding and promoting ICH, preventing the risks of deterioration and loss of intangible cultural heritage;
- Expanding the socialization in the protection and promotion of intangible cultural heritage;
- Providing free-of-charge evaluation, operational guidelines and support for archiving and preserving intangible cultural heritage at the request of organizations and/or individuals that possess intangible cultural heritage;

• Among the features that compose the ICH, the human being or the cultural carriers, especially the ICH bearers and custodians are the core and most important. One of the most effective ways to achieve the sustainable safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage would be to guarantee that the bearers of that heritage are recognized for their excellence, and to ensure that they are able to practice and document their knowledge and skills and transmit them to young artists.

Therefore, the State shall accord the honor and adopt treatment policies to artisans and artists through the following measures:
- Conferring and conferring posthumously, orders, decorations, medals, State Titles of honor and other forms of honor to artisans and artists who hold, preserve and spread traditional arts and professional know-how which are part of the typical intangible cultural heritage in accordance with the provisions of law;
- Adopting the policy of facilitating and covering part of the costs for activities of creation, performance, display, presentation and product consumption to the artisans and artists who hold, preserve and spread traditional arts and professional know-how which are part of the typical intangible cultural heritage;
- Providing monthly allowances and other preferences to the artisans and artists who are honored with State Title but have low income, difficult circumstances and those living in difficult areas and particularly difficult areas in accordance with the provisions of law.

3. **Institutions and Organizations involving** in the safeguard and Promotion of Cultural Heritage in general, Intangible Cultural Heritage in particular:

• **Ministry of Culture and Information:**

  The Ministry of Culture and Information bears the primary responsibility within the Government for implementing state management of cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) and is responsible for:
  1. Preservation and protection of cultural heritage;
  2. Implementation of measures to prevent damage to cultural heritage;
  3. Development and implementation of strategies, plans, frameworks, and policies to further the work of protecting and promoting cultural heritage;
  4. Issuance and implementation of legal regulations regarding cultural heritage;
  5. Organization and guidance of activities to protect and promote cultural heritage; communication, dissemination and legal education concerning cultural heritage;
  6. Organization and management of research activities; training and preparation of specialized staff on cultural heritage;
7. Mobilization, management and use of resources to protect and promote cultural heritage;
8. Organization and provision of incentives and rewards in protection and promotion of cultural heritage;
9. Organization and management of international cooperation in protection and promotion of cultural heritage;
10. Inspection and control of the implementation of the law, settlement of petitions and complaints, and treatment of violations of the law on cultural heritage.

- **Under the Ministry of Culture and Information:**
  There are institutions directly involving in safeguarding and managing ICH, such as: Department of cultural Heritage; Institute of Culture and Information; Research Institute of Musicology; Various museums in Vietnam...

- **Other professional institutes and organizations** from different branches also do the documentation, collection and research on intangible cultural heritage. They are: the Vietnam Institute of Folklore Studies (belonging to the National Centre for Social Science and Humanity); the Han – Nom Research Institute, the Association of Vietnamese Folklorists; Departments of Culture and Information of 64 state – level cities and provinces through out the country, etc…

- The Ministry of Culture and Information established the “Vietnam Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage” in 2001 (hereafter called the Committee for ICH. The Committee is chaired by the Director of the Department of National Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture and Information and provides advice to the Minister on the documentation, recognition, transmission and revitalization of intangibles cultural heritage. The members have technical expertise as well as heritage managerial capacity at a senior level.

Then, on April 23, 2004, the **Vietnam Cultural Heritage Association** was established under the control of the State and protection of the Ministry of Culture and Information. This shows the expansion of the involvement of public sectors to the safeguarding and promoting of intangible cultural heritage.

**4. Some concrete examples of activities and experiences gained:**

Pursuant to the Law on Cultural Heritage of Vietnam and the guidance in the Decree, since 2001, a National Targets Program for cultural heritage management has been conducted. Hundreds of projects have been actively implemented by various governmental as well as private organizations or institutions and gained remarkable results. However, most of these projects are for researches, collections and documentations (An ICH data bank has been set up at the Institute of Culture and Information and at the Research Institute of Musicology).

To Implement the National Targets Program, 23 projects for the comprehensive ICH survey in different small – population ethnic groups have been carried out. Besides, on June 17, 2003, the Prime Minister of Vietnam had signed a Decision to approve a project proposed by the Museum of the Cultures of Ethnic Groups of Vietnam for the preservation and development of the cultures of the Vietnamese ethnic minorities. The project mostly concentrated in research and collection work.
Due to the limitation of the awareness and other economic conditions, most of the ethnic minorities are not able to set up their own mechanism for the safeguard of their ICH and have to depend on the supports from the government. Only a few villages are striving to revive some of their traditions which fall into oblivion or are at risk of disappearing.

Inventory work has not been officially done in an overall view. In the passing years, about over 60 projects for comprehensive ICH survey (the initiatives of inventory – making) in various provinces were approved, but approaches and results are very limited and different from province to province (Ha Noi, Phu Tho, Thai Binh, Quang Ninh, Ninh Binh, thanh Hoa, Quang Binh, Nghe An, Dong Nai, Ben Tre, Lam Dong, Dak Lak…). The goals of these projects are to:

- Identify the important ICH items;
- Understanding of the number and status of ICH items, which have fallen into oblivion, which need to revive, and which are at risk of disappearing and need urgent protections;
- Having basis to build a list on endangered heritage, a list on those with academic research results, and list of all the ICH known in a given province …
- Being a basis for the assessments and an overview on the real situation of intangible cultural heritage of the whole country or of a given region; depending on that, building relevant policies, strategies or action plans for the safeguard and promotion of intangible cultural heritage of our nation.
- Systemizing and archiving all the items of intangible cultural heritage from various areas in all over the country; select the most outstanding ICH items to publicize nationwide and internationally (in the forms of publications, CD, VCD and scientific films…)
- Helping in the Establishment of a database of Vietnamese intangible cultural heritage for the reference of researchers and future generations.

As, being designated by the Ministry of Culture and Information with a new function of ICH state management in the whole country, during 2003 and 2004, the Department of Cultural Heritage has carried out several pilot projects. Among these was the pilot project: “comprehensive survey and inventory on the intangible cultural heritage of Yen Hung District, Quang Ninh province”.

Yen Hung district in Quang Ninh province was chosen for the following reasons:

- Consisting of a large range of terrain, from mountainous to plane and sea zones, Quang Ninh province is diverse in natural conditions and ecological environment.
- Having an age – old history and being the homeland of 20 (out of 54) Vietnamese ethnic groups, this province is really rich and diverse in cultural traditions.
- Quang Ninh has around 500 relics including many famous cultural and historical monuments of state – level and Ha Long Bay, which has been twice recognized as World Heritage.
- Beside the negative impacts of globalization, the rapid industrialization, urbanization and tourist development in this province bring along threats of elimination of many ICH items.
- Among the others, Yen Hung is an important district which has almost typical characteristics of Quang Ninh province: being one of the oldest areas, having different
terrains, having 200 out of 500 valuable cultural and historical relics (33 were recognized as state – level relics) and accompanied are various famous festivals and cultural traditions.

The aim of the pilot project is

- To understand the status of the ICH of Yen Hung District, Quang Ninh province and establish it’s ICH inventories;
- To raise awareness of the community and of local authorities of the significance of safeguarding ICH via various methodologies (recording, documentation, enhancing…) including inventory – making;
- To strengthen knowledge and management ability of the local culture workers and of the Department’s staff as well.
- To draw lessons and be able to provide guidance in ICH safeguarding and inventory – making to other districts or provinces nationwide and mostly, to have practical experiences to assist the Minister of Culture and Information in promulgating appropriate policies for the safeguarding and promoting of ICH.

Involving partners:

- Department of Cultural Heritage, MoCI.;
- Department of Culture and Information, Provincial People’s Committee of Quang Ninh

Implementers: All are local people

- Staff from the Relics and Scenic Sites Management Board, Department of Culture and Information;
- Officials from the Division for culture and sports of Yen Hung District;
- Officials from the Sections for culture, members of the age - old person Association, of the War Veteran Society and of the Fatherland’s Front of 20 Communes in Yen Hung District;

Directory Bodies:

- Ministry of Culture and Information (MoCI);
- Quang Ninh Provincial People’s Committee.

Consultant institutions:

- Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage, MoCI.;
- Vietnamese Folklorist Association;
- Research Institutes related to ICH.

Funding sources:

- Department of National Cultural Heritage;
- Department of culture and Information under Quang Ninh Provincial People’s Committee;
- The People’s Committee of Yen Hung District.
Methodology:
- Community-based implementation;
- Interdisciplinary
- Experts consultancy …

Concrete Activities were carried out, step by step as follows:

Preparation stage:
1. The Department of Cultural Heritage (MoCI) organized several meetings with the Quang Ninh Department of Culture and Information to discuss to have an agreement in principle on the purpose and contents of the project to carry out the project;
2. Established a proposal with concrete plans and budgets to be submitted to the MoCI; identified the venues to implement ICH surveys; created survey sheets (see appendix 1, 2, 3);

Implementation stage:
3. Organized an experts meeting to consult members of the Committee for the ICH on the methodologies of the project and ICH survey forms.
4. Provided professional training workshops on the significance of the safeguard of ICH for local authorities and implementing persons; provided guidance/gave instruction on how to fill out the survey sheets;
- Conducted quantity survey (using survey sheets);
- Synthesized and wrote reports on the situation of ICH of Yen Hung District.

Ending stage:
Organized a final meeting for the assessment on the results of the project.

Achievements and lesson withdrawn:
The pilot project gained some certain achievements: Intangible cultural heritage of 20 communes of Yen Hung District have been comprehensively surveyed. Around 5900 ICH items have been filled out in 1569 files (following 5 categories recommended by UNESCO: language and scripts as a mean of communication; knowledge and practice of nature and universe; social practice, rituals and festive events; Craftsmanship. Through this work, the knowledge and awareness of the significance of ICH safeguarding of the community and local authorities has been improved. Working ability in the ICH aspect of the local cultural workers is strengthened.

The disadvantage of the project lies in that there had never been before, a state organization or institution to be officially responsible for a comprehensive ICH inventory. Therefore, there has not been an unified and effective method system or criteria for this work; limitation of the knowledge and experiences in recognizing and identifying or categorizing intangible cultural heritage of the project implementers; lack of scientific tools (equipments, guide book, inventory sheets…); shortage of budget as well as labor source; the accuracy of the data is therefore not high enough.

However, the results achieved provide an overview on the status of intangible cultural heritage of Quang Ninh province in general and of Yen Hung district in particular. This is a data basis and
a lesson for inventory – making for a region or for the whole country, in both terms of theory and practice.

Besides, we have also implemented some other projects relating and supporting to the ICH management in Vietnam. For instance: Following the legal instrument of:

- UNESCO’s Decision on the Establishment of a System of Living cultural properties (more commonly referred to as Living Human Treasures),
- Vietnam Law on Cultural Heritage.

We carried out the “Establishment of a list of Living Human Treasures – Pilot Project in Bac Ninh Province (Quan Ho Singers) with the following objectives:

- Raising awareness, capacity and mobilize the Vietnamese community to identify the value of oral and intangible cultural heritage;
- Safeguarding and revitalizing the intangible heritage of Quan Ho singing;
- Promoting the participation of traditional artists and local practitioners in the identification of intangible heritage;
- Evaluating and listing the outstanding skill holders of Quan Ho singing;
- Preserving and transmitting Quant Ho singing to future generations;
- Encouraging individuals, groups, institutions and organizations to make outstanding contribution to managing, preserving, protecting and promoting oral and intangible cultural heritage.

Out comes are:
1. List of the total of 59 Quan Ho singers from 49 original Quan Ho villages in Bac Ninh province.
2. List of 06 outstanding Quan Ho Master Artists of Bac Ninh province. They have then been recognized as “Nghe Nhan” (or Living Human Treasures) at province level.
   This List will be the basis for the establishment of Living Human Treasures System of Vietnam in the future.

As mentioned above, in Vietnam, various institutions have been carrying out hundreds of projects aiming at safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage. The appearance of the Law on Cultural Heritage, the Decree of Vietnam, the UNESCO’s Guidelines and 2003 Convention… are significant legal framework, creating favorable conditions for the ICH safeguard. However, most of these research institutions or organizations works independently without sharing experiences to one another. Good or bad lessons of the previous activities are not known by the latter doers. Therefore, we have also been conducting a project for the Establishment of Project Database and are preparing to organize a national workshop to identify recently best practices on the safeguarding and promoting of intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam in order to serve better the ICH state management in the nationwide. The preparation is under way under the assistance and guidance of UNESCO Office in Hanoi and a specialist from Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Frank Proschan. The Department of Cultural Heritage and is preparing a national workshop aiming at drawing assessment (with both, good and bad lessons) of the status of ICH project implementation.
In cooperation with the Hanoi City’s Committee and the Ministry of Education and Training, another pilot project for the integration of the ICH education into schools curriculum has been also implemented step by step.


Vietnam is more and more actively involving in the mission of safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage. As the results, for the third proclamation of UNESCO in 2005, “The Space of Gong Culture in the Central Highland of Vietnam” is recently inscribed in the List of 43 “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible cultural Heritage of Humanity”. This is the proud of the Vietnamese people. But, how to keep our intangible cultural heritage alive in the communities, how to safeguard and promote our intangible cultural heritage values is a crucial question and we need more cooperation and assistance from international organizations (governmental as well as NGOs), such as UNESCO, ACCU and other countries who have been pioneer and experienced in this field.

I have introduced brief information on the government mechanism and some lessons (good and bad) from Vietnam. I should leave the stage to my colleagues who will present more concrete and vivid examples of the projects or activities in safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage in general and the initiatives of ICH inventory – making in particular.