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Defining communities, individuals and groups

1. Communities could be broadly defined as ‘groups sharing a common self-ascribed sense of connectedness and culture, that distinguish themselves from other groups through their cultural practices, expressions, representations, skills and knowledge and objects and spaces that are transmitted from generation to generation and constitute their intangible cultural heritage’.
2. Indigenous communities are broadly defined in the convention but are usually understood to mean first nation communities that retain a special relationship with the territory in which they originally lived. Indigeneity is a political concept that carries the connotation of a group of people occupying land prior to a period of colonization or dispossession by another group. It is politically important and valuable in safeguarding ICH to recognise the necessity of special attention being paid to indigenous cultural heritage, and most attention will be paid to heritage at risk. Heritage devaluation often occurs through the colonisation process which often damages communities who safeguard that heritage. However, ICH communities are not necessarily indigenous, ethnic or regionally-defined.
3. In my opinion, the concept of individual and group as used in the Convention, refers to an individual or small group of people within a larger community (that may or may not exist in the present time) who carry specific responsibility for safeguarding ICH. They may be a remnant of a community that has been severely depleted in numbers, for example one of the few remaining people to understand certain old community-wide ways of preparing food products or writing. An individual as defined in the Convention is not a creative genius who invents new ways of preparing food or writing, or a sole performer. Or they may be a group of people within a community who transmit knowledge or skills not widely known to the community as a whole, but of benefit to that community (e.g. healers or seers).
4. Communities and groups are volatile entities and tend to coalesce or define themselves around current issues by drawing on past histories and identities. The definition of community in the ICH thus needs to take into account the possibility that the composition of a community claiming ownership of ICH may not be contiguous with the composition of a community that has historically developed and practised that ICH. People are often included or excluded in the process of bringing the ICH to the attention of the authorities.

The involvement of communities in defining, inventorying and safeguarding their ICH

1. Communities earn the right to be involved in the definition and management of the ICH because they ‘own’ it. The notion of ownership here is more like intellectual property ownership than ownership of a thing, however. It emerges out of the development and practice of a particular form of ICH in that community over time – that’s why I like to call them ‘practising communities’.

2. The extent and nature of this ownership may vary between different examples of ICH. The relationship between the practising community and the ICH resource should thus be carefully defined at the beginning of the negotiations about how to identify and manage the resource.
3. Community participation is often seen in heritage site management as a process that is owned by the heritage professionals who manage a site, and call the meetings at which communities express their opinions. There has been quite a bit of tension in some African heritage sites over who (community leaders or heritage practitioners) has the right to own the process of heritage management.
4. This tension will be exacerbated unless UNESCO explicitly sets out guidelines for enabling heritage professionals and communities to determine in what circumstances management of the process of defining, inventorying and safeguarding ICH will NOT be done by communities (e.g. where communities are fragmented or almost entirely gone), and to define the role of heritage professionals in ASSISTING communities to do their task without taking over.
5. Communities that define ICH worthy of safeguarding need to work with UNESCO in order to establish whether the continued practice of this ICH infringes the human rights of people inside or outside those communities. This is part of the process of defining ICH that can be listed on the UNESCO list.
6. Community members should be enrolled as experts on the nature and significance of their own ICH. Community members could be researchers who learn more about their own ICH through the process of identification and nomination. They should control access to the information by outsiders where such information is secret or sacred in the inventorying process.
7. Experts outside a community should develop an 'outsider report' on the nature and significance of the ICH, its historical antiquity, its relationship to other forms of ICH of this kind in other communities, and how modes or transmission or recreation have changed over time.
8. Both community and outsider expert reports should be drawn on by the committee that develops the nomination containing documentation of the resource including its nature, significance, raising human rights issues, vulnerabilities and measures for safeguarding.
9. Community control of this process is important, but the skills to develop the dossier are often very specialised. In the case of the WHC, outside experts tend to write dossiers for sites for developing countries. This is not really ideal in the case of ICH, and specific expertise needs to be developed among the experts to provide expert assistance while encouraging not only community involvement but community control of the process. This will be particularly difficult where communities are divided or fragmented.

The relation between ICH and community development

1. Community development is a logical part of ICH safeguarding because socially and economically healthy communities are better able to value and practice their ICH.
2. Heritage management for ICH should be focused on safeguarding skills, histories and identity for communities, both now and in the future. Any socio-economic support for communities should be designed with this in mind, rather than the other way round.

3. Community development need not be achieved simply by selling ICH products to outsiders. This is often the model of community development proposed through tourism, and there are many examples of this approach damaging ICH and other more tangible heritage resources.
4. Instead of focusing only on making heritage management economically productive for communities, community development projects can be made more sensitive to heritage issues.