

Expert Report

**Defining of Communities of ICH and Their Involvement in the Process:
Estonian Experience**

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This report introduces the Estonian experience in defining communities as carriers of ICH that have emerged in the process of promoting the UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The presenter of this report has contributed to the preparation of three candidature files, which allowed to observe:

- three separate cases with different types of communities,
- variant levels of initiatives, and
- diverse degrees of involvement of communities.

Furthermore, an ethnographic study of this process renders tentative information on the presumable effect of preparing representative lists, and in the long-term, of implementing the Convention. This recent Estonian experience in involvement and awareness on community level reflects all three perspectives addressed by the current meeting.

1) Defining communities

a) In cooperation with Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia submitted a multi-national candidature file to recognize the *Tradition and Symbolism of the Song and Dance Celebration Process* in all three countries. In 2003 this cultural expression was proclaimed a Masterpiece by UNESCO. In this case:

- the communities of practitioners (singers, dancers and musicians in relevant performance groups) are defined by particular musical expression;
- these communities are identifiable on a national level, representing a large-scale cultural expression;
- these communities of cultural practice are dynamic and mobile, occur both in rural and urban settings.

The initiative for recognizing this cultural expression was a combination of insider and outsider participation with the communities defined as such by the custodians of the particular cultural practice.

b) In 2003, the Estonian national candidature of the *Kihnu Cultural Space* was proclaimed a Masterpiece. This case represents an integrated context of insular natural environment, socioeconomic conditions and historical communal lifestyle. The community is defined by being:

- a complex body of island residents;
- a local, small-scale community;
- a permanent settlement dependent on insular subsistence that defines their ICH.

The initiative for recognizing this cultural space was launched by outside activists. The community involved, their cultural practice was initially defined by cultural researchers and experts who identified threats to its existence.

c) Inspired by the progression of preparing the previous submissions, and their success in gaining international recognition, the *Seto community* in Estonia decided to take action to define and promote their ICH in correspondence to the UNESCO guidelines. This community is defined by:

- distinct historical, religious, socioeconomic, and geographic features;
- distinct language and cultural practices;
- a combination of resident and diaspora communities, defined by border region.

This case represents a targeted inside initiative to define and recognize particular expression of ICH on the local and communal level.

2) Involvement of communities in defining, inventorying and safeguarding of ICH

The Seto community activists have convened a representative body to debate and reach an agreement on defining, inventorying and safeguarding their cultural expression. They have launched activities for identifying viable elements of cultural practice for the survival of their ICH. In this process they implement previous scholarly research, apply inside and outside resources for their purpose, and find ways to implement recent sociopolitical advantages. These actions are simultaneously geared towards the preparation of an international candidature file according to the UNESCO guidelines.

The Seto community representative activists:

- have made inventories of their cultural expression – music, dance, handicrafts, architectural monuments (involvement of local museums);

- have identified the Seto *leelo*-singing tradition as a cultural expression that involves music, verbal lore, ritual practices, communal celebration at festivals, handicraft practices and worldview that defines the Seto ICH in a nutshell;
- have taken their own initiative to identify the *leelo* communities;
- have submitted applications to governmental subsidy programs to support projects for furthering cultural, educational, scientific developments (Setomaa Cultural Program);
- further involvement through NGOs and local municipalities;
- raise awareness of their ICH through media promotion (TV programs and local periodicals).

3) Relation between ICH and community development

The Seto experience has indicated that

- cultural and political activists acquire both personal and communal symbolic capital through the on-going process of identification and promotion;
- community members are actively involved in debates on the role, significance and basics of this tradition carried out via internet (implementation of information technology);
- they negotiate networks for the transmission of their ICH, which is furthered by educational, cultural and socioeconomic means.

Contested aspects

Problems raised by celebrated fixation and representative recognition: debate between tradition and innovation, its transmission, mediation and implementation in the modern globalized world.