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Implementing UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Convention

## 1 Defining communities, groups and individuals

Semantic fields determine definitions. In the UN languages used in the text of the ICH Convention, the English, French and Spanish terms are virtually identical and based on Latin roots. Etymologically, they stem from the Latin term COM-MUNIS. The term *munis*, little used, denotes “he who accomplishes his task or duty”. When speaking of things, it denotes “common”, “general” or “public”. When addressing persons, it means someone who is affable and accessible. Thus the genesis of the term is positive.

The Arabic language version of the ICH Convention uses the word *jama't*, which denotes more of a cumulative consensus element than the European term. Away from the UN languages, definitions become more challenging: in the Germanic group, terms of *Gemeinde* and *Gemeinschaft* offer a semantic shift from the Romance definition and are more of a “togetherness” definition. In Asia, we often use the English word – *kamyuniti* in Urdu, *komuniti* in Japanese or *guru-pu* for “group”, or search our languages for nuanced roots that certainly exist. The term “group” can be subsumed under “community” and should not be addressed at all. There is more universal convergence on what an individual is. However, the quasi-legal mechanistic emphasis on the supremacy of the individual is misleading, because a people/community/group is more than the sum of its elements.

Social definitions – especially those contained in conventions – are ideally operational tools developed for a purpose – they are fluid and must remain so, even if we are driven by the “name it and nail it” impulse. There is always an ongoing restructuring and transformation of communities both in form and content and new communities emerge. The prime factor is time and societal transformations over time and culture areas. It is this process that we have to understand and analyse and the criteria we develop are historically and spatially determined. **Thus we must accept that the ICH definitions of communities should not be regarded as rigid – they require periodic updating and the term “group” should be ignored. Similarly, indigenous communities should not be interpreted only in terms of territoriality and the word “space” should be substituted for “area” or “territory” to encompass those indigenous peoples who co-exist with mainstream communities but are separate.**

## 2 Community involvement in definition, inventory and safeguarding

This is the most serious challenge we are faced with. Practitioners and transmitters of ICH tend to be vulnerable, marginal and “liminal” people who strive with a passionate – and sometimes jealous, secretive and self-destructive – irreverence and sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing. In their productions we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized or fixed in structure.

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In many traditional societies, ICH practitioners and transmitters are accorded low status. The key out of this impasse is recognition, both internationally and by state parties. For example, the recognition of Ali Farkha Toure and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan both at the national and international level has qualitatively boosted the status of ICH practitioners and transmitters, making them symbols of national pride.

Forcing such communities or individuals to open their clamshells for transparency and free flow of information can seriously interfere with the integrity of the evolutionary potential, with the dilemma that valuable human knowledge is lost forever if not recorded. Safeguarding is again a dynamic challenge that can “freeze” the creative process is applied with a heavy hand. Community involvement has to tread a careful path between representation and participation. **To involve communities and ensure their ownership, definition and inventory must initially be limited to a kind of “Dublin Core” of “what, who, where and when” and must never become a heavy taxonomic and overly research-based exercise,** where strong external assistance is required.

### **3 ICH and community development**

The fact that no practitioner of ICH is present at this meeting is symptomatic of scholarly and bureaucratic patronage practised by states parties and international organisations. The role of traditional ICH practitioners has changed with mainstream modes of production – in Pakistan, the drummers that traditionally accompany the wheat harvest now find employment as entertainers at private and public festivals after their livelihood is wiped out by mechanized farming. Very often, attitudes of mainstream society have to be changed for moving forward in the relation between ICH and community development. **Innovative roles must be consciously sought with ICH practitioners and transmitters in community development to ensure their survival into the future.**