

The Participation in the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: The role of Communities, Groups and Individuals. Author: Filomena Sousa,
Collaboration: Vera Refólio.

(Memória Imaterial CRL. Alenquer. Portugal, 2018)

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● **Rachel Watson MA**

Heritage consultant, Canberra, Australia

This publication examines the issue of participation by communities, groups and individuals (CGIs) in the recognition and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, approaching this key theme from multiple directions. The author argues that the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* changed the narrative around intangible cultural heritage, as a semi-defined set of social, economic and political conditions was added to the language used to describe community activities that had become subject to safeguarding (pp. 3-4). In doing so, she also argues that this safeguarding activity imposes additional risk - the potential that the heritage ceases to be a living and dynamic entity, subject to pressures of population, resources and external inputs, and becomes a static exercise, one

concerned more with maintaining the 'recorded' example accurately than with continuing to evolve to suit the population within which it is situated.

The first chapter discusses the nature of involvement of CGIs as a key aspect of the 2003 UNESCO *Convention*, notwithstanding the absence of detail within the document as to how this is to be achieved. Concepts such as participation and consent are explored, particularly in the context of a group or community - is it enough to demonstrate the consent or involvement of a few representatives of the community, or is evidence of a more widespread community participation required? Over what period of time or what proportion of the process is involvement necessary? How can involvement be demonstrated and

proven to be legitimate and effective in achieving the aims of safeguarding heritage under the *Convention*? These key themes are examined and discussed in the context of previous nominations received under the *Convention* and prior studies conducted on these.

The second chapter examines different methodologies that have been tried in previous nomination processes, attempting to draw distinctions between processes driven by States Parties and those driven by different types of heritage organisations. While the *Convention* text is deliberately vague as to recommended methods of achieving participatory safeguarding outcomes, studies such as this are integral to creating an idea of what a best practice approach may look like - enabling increased success rates across genuine attempts at participatory processes for the nomination and safeguarding of intangible heritage with the communities, groups and individuals truly responsible for the survival of the practice in its original setting.

Overall, the author draws the conclusion that, although the importance of community involvement in the process is recognised and discussed within

nomination processes, real and genuinely inclusive participation remains relatively rare. The author attributes this to five factors:

- excessive centrality of the States Parties in the heritagisation process;
- diversity of interpretations of the concepts;
- deficit of information among the groups, communities and individuals;
- deficit of experience in the improvement of teams comprising different actors; and
- deficit of methods and professionals to operationalise the participation of communities, groups and individuals.

This publication seeks to provide initial responses to several of these factors throughout its discussion, paving the way for further research and discussion of the issues and methods of overcoming these barriers to success. Genuine participatory safeguarding of intangible heritage under the *Convention* will require each of these factors to be addressed and resolved, probably in more than one way, so as to allow different State frameworks to be accommodated within recommended best practices.



The publication concludes by positing a framework of methods and techniques that could aid the involvement of communities, groups and individuals in the safeguarding activities that fall under the UNESCO 2003 *Convention*. It is presented as a theoretical approach that can be adjusted as appropriate to relevant cultural contexts. The framework itself is an interesting document, drawing from studies and observations of previous nominations, as discussed throughout the publication. However, the framework is introduced almost as an afterthought - the publication had not previously appeared to consist of a series of case studies with the purpose of building a definitive framework for better practice, and little discussion is directly applied to the framework once it has been compiled. If the overall aim of the author was to produce a sample methodology that could be utilised to increase the participation rates of communities, groups and individuals within nomination processes, perhaps a preferable approach might have been to dedicate an entire publication to the exploration and dissection of case studies? This could involve carefully discussing and interrogating each aspect of a case study that was worthy of inclusion in the methodology or presenting counter-arguments to a possible inclusion. In doing so, a methodological framework could have been built, with a solid demonstration of success clearly articulated to accompany each recommended course of action. The current content and layout of the publication leaves the methodology almost as the afterthought of the publication that commenced the process, but does not take the work to its comparative and documented pinnacle.

The technological component in the second chapter regarding the correlation between different methods of digitally capturing and inventorying examples of intangible heritage was fascinating, providing an additional consideration in the pursuit of participatory safeguarding of intangible heritage. The role of the choice of platform in enabling community participation was well demonstrated in this publication, however additional elements are open to consideration in a larger study of this area, including factors such as metadata choices, the levels of technical prowess required to navigate data entry and the ultimate aim of any information capture - retrievability and findability.

Overall the publication raises a number of key challenges for practitioners who seek to proactively safeguard intangible heritage in accordance with the guidelines of the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The importance of the genuine involvement of traditional owners of the heritage in this process cannot be denied, nor can the risk of arbitrarily halting the natural evolution of the heritage practice in the course of registering it for safeguarding be minimised. Communities, groups and individuals who work with heritage practitioners on these projects must be acknowledged and involved in the process as the true owners of that which is to be protected, and as such, have roles within the process that reflect this reality. This publication's broad approach to identifying and addressing key areas of weakness in the existing process has contributed to the journey towards genuine participatory safeguarding practices under the *Convention*. 