



Inventorying of Intangible Cultural Heritage

BACKGROUND

In 2007, Namibia ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Although perceived as important elements of national heritage resources, ICH elements in Namibia were never systematically documented and inventoried. In the national heritage legislation and related acts, there was no recognition of intangible heritage nor mechanisms for its safeguarding and promotion. Provisions of the Convention indicated the potential solutions but no concrete steps were taken.

ICH requires a participatory approach involving various stakeholders, most importantly local communities. The Convention mentions that each state party shall 'identify and define various elements of intangible cultural heritage... with the participation of communities...'¹ and reiterates the importance to ensure 'the widest possible participation of communities...', in its management.² The reason for giving such significant status to community involvement is that intangible heritage can only be identified by the local communities themselves. Without communities practicing and transmitting these traditional practices, they would be in danger of extinction.

Among the obligations of States Parties to the Convention is the duty to undertake inventories of the intangible heritage present on their territories, in a manner geared to their own situations, but always, as noted above, with the participation of the communities concerned. In this context, Namibia took the initiative to use local communities to identify and inventory its ICH elements with the help of the JP.

PROCESS

Local community members were trained to document ICH elements in their area. Among the stakeholders were traditional authorities, local authorities, regional councils, national heritage institutions, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Women and youth were given preference in both the selection process and for the actual inventorying.

1- Article 11.b
2- Article 15



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After the training, local communities conducted inventorying in the field. The methodologies used included interviews that were recorded through audio-visual devices. The target beneficiaries were involved through consultation meetings, interviews and the actual inventorying of ICH elements in their areas.

Outcomes This story sets the tone for the continuing implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention and a strong and growing involvement of the local communities. Further, these communities are empowered to lead the process of recognizing, safeguarding and promoting their heritage assets for their own benefits. It is difficult for an outsider to speak to local people and obtain the required information, firstly because of language and secondly for reasons of trust and sensitivity of certain ICH information. Therefore, the decision to train and use local people for the inventorying exercise helped the programme to overcome this common obstacle. The inventorying process in turn sensitized local people on the importance of ICH and how it can help social development, which promoted a national dialogue on the subject.

The project also helped raise awareness among Namibian citizens on the importance of cultural resources and more specifically the endangered and the not-sufficiently-recognized ICH elements.

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