

SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MUSEUMS: AN INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage includes the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills which people pass on from one generation to another. These living practices are everywhere in today's society, and people consider it a part of their cultural heritage. They give people a sense of identity and continuity; they are a source of cultural diversity and contribute to sustainable development.

Museums are vital for the preservation, presentation, and dissemination of cultural heritage. Museums that engage in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage have experienced that this opens up a world of – also new and other – opportunities for them. Intangible cultural heritage is a doorway to social relevance and participatory museum practice. It helps museums contribute to sustainable development and be entrepreneurial.

This booklet talks you through some basic insights in relation to intangible cultural heritage and museums, gained throughout the course of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project (IMP)*.

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It is perceived as an introduction to the **online environment of the IMP toolkit**. Here you can find a repository of resources that relate to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and museums in a multitude of ways. This repository is updated regularly and includes materials in many different languages.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) are the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills that communities, groups, and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. People also refer to ICH as 'living heritage' or 'living traditions.'

Intangible cultural heritage includes, among others:

- **Oral traditions and expressions**
- **Performing arts**
- **Social practices, rituals and festive events**
- **Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe**
- **Traditional craftsmanship**



The value of ICH goes beyond the value of the cultural manifestation alone. Its social and economic importance lies in the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The inclusive, representative, and community-based presence of intangible cultural heritage, which is traditional, contemporary, and living at the same time, makes it a significant dimension of our societies.

Intangible cultural heritage is a source for human creativity and ingenuity, and it is as diverse as people are. It evolves, changes and new generations enrich it. ICH plays a dynamic role in societies and communities and for the sustainability of our world.

In a rapidly changing world, many expressions of intangible cultural heritage are under pressure or threat. The diversity they represent is endangered by cultural homogenization, while a lack of funding and support, appreciation or understanding can erode the values it represents.

We are all responsible for avoiding intangible cultural heritage from being lost, for fostering bright futures for various and living heritage practices in all corners of the planet, and to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and celebrate its vivid expressions whenever we can.



INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MUSEUMS

Collecting, preserving, studying (researching), interpreting, and exhibiting intangible cultural heritage is part of the mission of museums. Equally, museums are increasingly called upon to work with communities, groups, and individuals on heritage making processes. Museum collections often have ties to intangible cultural heritage practices, a relationship that goes beyond merely providing a story associated with an object.

Numerous museums have adopted human- and community-centred approaches in their work. The practices associated with intangible cultural heritage are both an approach, a prerequisite, an opportunity for, and a potential consequence of this new relationship between museums and the world around them.



QUICK CHECK

To what extent is your museum active in intangible cultural heritage?

- ▶ In your collection, which objects can be associated with specific traditional or living practices?

What do you know about these practices? What do you tell your audience about these practices?

- ▶ Walk around an exhibition. Can you list a few references to intangible cultural heritage on display?

How do you communicate to the audience about these social practices, rituals, and other activities? Where can you quickly add additional references?

- ▶ In your collection plan, what role does intangible cultural heritage play?

Are there procedures in place concerning intangible cultural heritage?

▶ **Do you work on any hands-on practices in your programming?**

To what extent are these connected to domains of intangible cultural heritage, e.g. crafts practices, oral traditions and storytelling, or performing arts?

▶ **List three ICH communities, groups, or individuals that you have worked with or could work with:**

Does your current museum strategy mention these communities, groups, or individuals? How can you develop relationships with others as well?

SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Intangible cultural heritage is a mainspring of humanity's cultural diversity. Fostering intangible cultural heritage in its various expressions feeds creativity and the sustainable development of communities and societies.

As a living heritage, expressions and manifestations of intangible cultural heritage run the risk of being lost or becoming frozen as a practice belonging to the past. In a world of growing globalization and cultural homogenization, we are challenged to nurture intangible cultural heritage and protect it from a lack of support, appreciation, and understanding. Preserving intangible cultural heritage means passing it on to future generations; keeping it alive while allowing it to be dynamic.

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires a specific set of approaches, which are in several ways diverging from the practices associated with tangible heritage, mostly because of the living character and participatory nature of ICH.

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is first and foremost about transmitting the living heritage to future people and about continuing the practices in genuine ways. Additionally, a range of measures can be taken to contribute to safeguarding ICH. We distinguish five clusters of measures, based on the UNESCO 2003 *Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage*:

INVENTORYING	Identification and documentation of ICH <ul style="list-style-type: none">▸ For example: acknowledge specific ICH that exists within communities, groups or in some cases with individuals, capture and record ICH practices and traditions that you are aware of.
TRANSMISSION	Transmission of ICH <ul style="list-style-type: none">▸ For example: practice and learn by doing. Teach new generations (about) the knowledge and skills embedded in the ICH, together with current passionate practitioners.
RESEARCH	Research on ICH <ul style="list-style-type: none">▸ For example: develop a deeper understanding of specific ICH.
EDUCATION	Education and capacity building around ICH <ul style="list-style-type: none">▸ For example: provide resources to help a community maintain its ICH.
PROMOTION & ENHANCEMENT	Awareness-raising, promotion, and enhancement of ICH <ul style="list-style-type: none">▸ For example: invite others to explore the ICH in your community or group or cooperate to apply ICH and related knowledge and skills in new contexts.

Intangible cultural heritage does not safeguard itself. Make a conscious decision to care for it and dedicate time and resources to its continuation.

MUSEUMS AND SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is an opportunity for museums and museum professionals. The rich experience in acquiring, conserving, researching, and presenting tangible cultural heritage is invaluable for intangible cultural heritage. The inclusive, dynamic, and people-based approach of ICH provides museums with approaches to be more relevant, participatory, work on sustainable development, or stimulate cultural entrepreneurship.

To engage in the opportunities safeguarding ICH provides, a museum can use most of its existing infrastructure. What needs to happen is a shift in perspective from the object to human ingenuity more broadly. Although this may change the actual activities of the museum considerably – for instance, from exhibitions to performances, from material to community research, from events in a gallery to events offsite – museums that have engaged with ICH have uncovered that it is rewarding for them in many different ways.

After all, ICH has been part of the museum practice ever since the first museum opened its doors, and it has become part of the museum definition (ICOM) since 2007.



Discover more practical and theoretical input related to ICH and museums, while browsing the toolkit of the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project*!



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