

Special Lecture 2 Geographical Imbalance

Geographical imbalance: the challenge of getting a more balanced representation of accredited non-governmental organizations under the 2003 Convention

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Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are organizations which are independent of governmental involvement. The United Nations use the term for organizations which are neither governments nor member states and gives them observer status at its assemblies and meetings⁴. UNESCO has built up over the years a valuable network of cooperation in its fields of competence with NGOs representing civil society. NGOs are recognized as important stakeholders for the implementation of the 2003 the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the ongoing reflection process, several possible roles for the NGOs are pointed out: i) a laboratory of ideas and inspiring practices, ii) contribution to safeguarding measures, and to follow up on inscribed elements, iii) NGOs well equipped to share safeguarding experiences in lighter ways, iv) NGOs' role in awareness raising, and in building and strengthening capacities, and v) NGOs' possible role in reporting functions serving the Committee and the Overall Results Framework, regional reporting, status of inscribed elements, and other.

To achieve the purposes of the 2003 Convention⁵, it is important that as many cultures as possible attend with their different traditions and world views. The 180 State Parties who have ratified the convention are distributed throughout the world⁶. UNESCO has organized the world into six electoral groups for their elections⁷; i) Western Europe and North America, ii) Eastern Europe, iii) Latin America and the Caribbean, iv) Asia and the Pacific, v(a)) Sub-Saharan Africa and v(b)) Arab States. Ever since the General Assembly started accrediting the first 97 NGOs in 2010, up to the present 193 accredited NGOs in 2020, there has been a severe imbalance in the geographical distribution with more than 50 % of the accredited NGOs belonging to the Western Europe and Northern America region. There is only 4 % NGOs in group V(b) Arab States, and 5 % in group III Latin America and the Caribbean. The ICH NGO Forum was formed in 2009 as an informal platform for communication, networking, exchange and cooperation for NGOs accredited by UNESCO. The Forum has recently organized into a more formal NGO with bylaws,

⁴ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=34702&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁵ (a) to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage;
(b) to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
(c) to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof;
(d) to provide for international cooperation and assistance.

⁶ <https://pax.unesco.org/la/convention.asp?language=E&KO=17116>

⁷ The Basic Texts 2020, Appendix 2, I. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000156826.page=65>

ethical principles and a steering committee of seven members representing each of the six electoral groups in addition to one NGO representing international NGOs.

The unbalanced geographical distribution of accredited NGOs was identified as one of the major concerns by the General Assembly, the Committee and the Secretariat when the reflection process on the advisory role of accredited NGOs started at 12.COM in 2017. The concern on the unbalanced geographical distribution has been pointed out in numerous working documents of the governing bodies. The Committee and the General Assembly repeatedly encouraged "NGOs from under-represented Electoral Groups that meet the criteria for accreditation to submit their requests for accreditation at the earliest opportunity so as to improve the geographical distribution of accredited NGOs and invited States Parties from those Electoral Groups to make this call widely known among NGOs operating within their territories". In decision 14.COM 15, the encouragement also included "States Parties, the ICH NGO Forum, accredited non-governmental organizations, category 2 centres and UNESCO Chairs to organize capacity-building activities for newly accredited non-governmental organizations and for non-governmental organizations that may be interested in seeking accreditation in the future, with a particular focus on non-governmental organizations based in under-represented regions".

One of the recent actions to address the challenge is an initiative towards the establishment of a working group for the ICH NGO Forum dealing with regional imbalance of accredited ICH NGOs. The initiative came from our NGO, the Finnish Folk Music Institute, and was endorsed by the ICH NGO Forum Steering Committee. An invitation for a new working group and a survey on the regional imbalance of accredited NGOs under the 2003 Convention was launched in the ICH NGO Forum newsletter of 31 August 2020. The survey was addressed to all stakeholders of the 2003 Convention. Seven persons responded to the request, from five accredited NGOs and one UNESCO facilitator from four out of six electoral groups (I, II, III and IV).

Interesting suggestions were received on the challenge "How to reach out to relevant NGOs in the underrepresented regions of the world?"

- Important to know the local/regional conditions
 - Develop a sub-regional strategy
 - A regional focal point (accredited NGOs or UNESCO facilitators)
 - Network of brokers (accredited NGOs and UNESCO facilitators)
- Promote awareness – make a toolkit
 - Regional videos of experience of accreditation
 - Interviews
 - Brochure
 - Use media, web pages, social media
- Regional activity
 - Webinars on accreditation process, sharing experience with the convention
 - Make overview of NGOs working with ICH

In addition to concrete suggestion of names, more general suggestions were received on the challenge "suggest ICH NGOs and ICH experts belonging to the underrepresented parts of the world who could be willing to work in the spirit of the Convention"

- Make a regional call to stakeholders of the convention

- Create a database of people (bearers, academics and other relevant stakeholders) who can disseminate the goals and achievements of the Convention. This could be done by
 - the Intergovernmental Committee
 - the ICH NGO Steering Committee through the new working group
- Make contact with NGOs whose accreditation request was turned down
- Use the networks of accredited NGOs
- Contact the candidates for the International Jeonju ICH award
- Contact NGOs directly involved in nominations/requests for the four mechanisms of the Convention

The survey is still open to collect more ideas from any interested stakeholder of the Convention:
<https://forms.gle/nUdns9g9kHYXXY2v6>.

Five persons offered to be members of the working group on improving the world balance of accredited NGOs and attend regular online discussions. Four NGOs are represented, and two persons want to join as experts, representing three out of the six regions (electoral groups I, II, and III). According to the bylaws of ICH NGO Forum, it lacks the support of one NGO to be created as a working group in the forum⁸.

The working group will start discussions based on the possible measures received via the survey and work with the aim to overcome the ongoing imbalance. In parallel, we will invite other interested persons to come forward, especially those belonging to electoral region IV, V(a) and V(b). This is important both to get the regional knowledge represented in the working group, and to become a formal working group under the ICH NGO Forum.

⁸ Article 33: New Working Groups may be recognized by signed petition of five or more accredited NGOs submitted to and confirmed by the Steering Committee; <http://www.ichngoforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICH-NGO-Forum-Bylaws-adopted.pdf>

