

Welcoming Remarks

Nisha

Director, UNESCO Office in Apia

Welcoming Remarks

Intangible cultural heritage involving oceans and coastal-communities is probably closest to the hearts of the small island developing states (SIDS). In view of the importance of the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills in the lives of the people of the SIDS, it is our privilege to co-organize this event in partnership with ICHCAP.

Intangible cultural heritage is a broad term covering, what constitutes in the SIDS, elements of our life, and society. Intangible aspects of knowledge, practices and intergenerational transmission as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces that represent or are associated intangible aspects of cultural heritage, are continuously evolving as a result of interaction between communities and their environment. For the SIDS, their interaction is marked by the ocean and oceanic history.

For long the oral traditions and expressions, symbols and performances of intangible cultural heritage, including, social practices, rituals and ceremonies were ignored in development planning. It is rather recent that their importance is being recognized as an important framework for development.

Since this webinar was held in the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic, which is marked by physical separations and emotional isolation, it is a time to further reflect on two dimensions of development, in particular in context of oceanic heritage: Firstly, the dimension of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and secondly, the role of intangible cultural heritage related social practices, rituals and events in strengthening the tangible bonds among people. Temporarily confined, as we are, in our own little islands, in our own homes, in our own four walls, we are increasingly recognizing the significance of families, neighbours, and visitors and social occasions that connect us with strangers too. Intangible cultural heritage can also be the emotional anchor that gives people ability to cope with this tragic situation as well as to reach out to others to support them.

The backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic, also brings us to a few questions of sustainable development, how much and what kind of economic growth we want, and what kind of society we want to be and for whom? Attention to intangible cultural heritage in such deliberations is important because it plays critical roles in socio-cultural life and as well as in biodiversity. The role of cultural industries and traditional

creative productions in the supporting livelihoods of tourism dependent economies is immense. This is especially significant in the Pacific where oceanic traditions and coastal and marine resources surround people's lives and have been an important attraction for tourism. Today, tourism in the Pacific has come to a halt and we have to see effect it would have on intangible cultural heritage.

As the economic crisis set in motion by the COVID-19 pandemic grows, we also need to consider the role intangible cultural heritage plays in peace and security. Often, peace and security issues are related to people's sense of identity, culture, and tradition. When these aspects are threatened, people forsake considerations of health and economic wellbeing and feel at odds with one-another. In recent, we see this debate going on in relation to the area that the ICHCAP covers, i.e., information technologies. In context of SIDS, who face high degrees of digital disadvantage, issues of legitimacy of knowledge, ownership of digitalized knowledge, its usage, etc. have tended to see technology an intruder.

It is about time that we think about how the SIDS, which are severally affected by climate change and related sea-level rise, may use digital technologies to safeguard and popularize their oceanic intangible cultural heritage. Considerable effort will be needed to ensure that knowledge-bearing communities retain the knowledge and ownership of the digitalized knowledge. Digital technologies must be used as a tool to advance oceanic intangible cultural heritage, not used to fossilize intangible cultural heritage in the digital or virtual world.

Nisha
Director
UNESCO Office in Apia