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Central Asia

Safeguarding ICH in Central Asia: Overview and Perspectives

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Central Asia stands at the crossroads of ancient civilisations. Its territory, crossed by the northern part of the great Silk Road, constitutes an ensemble of cultural heritage sites and monuments that express common historical experiences as well as reflect an extraordinary cultural diversity dating from prehistoric times to the Islamic period and beyond. For centuries, the phenomenon of intangible cultural heritage was a key factor for the transmission of indigenous cultural traditions for future generations as well as a matching point for intercultural dialogue in Central Asia—a region with unique oral and music traditions.

The process of socio-economic and cultural transformation observed in modern Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) after becoming independent in 1991 had also affected the state of intangible cultural heritage, including changes in funding, expertise, and management.

Serious challenges in ICH safeguarding have come in the wake of the changes created by independence. Whereas under Soviet power, the culture sector enjoyed state funding, together with an importance in state planning and a certain level

of prestige; under free-market conditions, this is no longer the case. Yet with these challenges have come new opportunities, particularly in such fields as reviving cultural traditions and sharing of expertise among international and regional experts as well as creating better approaches in identifying, inventorying, and safeguarding ICH.

Moreover, modern socio-economic growth, cultural identity needs, and a sense of history play important roles in the lives of Central Asian people. Effectively managing heritage sites, safeguarding ICH, and developing traditional arts and crafts are components for promoting tourism, and they have viable roles to play in the long-term socio-economic and cultural development of Central Asian countries.

In recent years, UNESCO has acquired a great deal of experience as the coordinator of the often complex pilot projects for safeguarding and revitalising Central Asia's rich intangible cultural heritage. Under the Japanese FIT agreements, projects for safeguarding the cultural space of the Boysun District in Uzbekistan, the classical music of Central Asia—Shashmaqom in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—and the art of Akyns (epic tellers) in Kyrgyzstan were implemented between 2003 and 2007. These projects have contributed to initiating efforts for safeguarding oral, music, and handicrafts traditions, including inventorying. Project activities have also brought into play many different public and private sector partners.

The First Central Asian Regional Meeting for the Promotion of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH was conducted by UNESCO in May 2006 in Boysun, Uzbekistan. The meeting provided a platform to exchange views and experiences among experts and other stakeholders in safeguarding ICH as well as to analyse some good practices in ICH inventorying. The meeting encouraged Central Asian countries to ratify the 2003 Convention (at that time, no Central Asian state had ratified the Convention) and promoted the adoption of international norms into the respective national legislations.

Following the Boysun workshop, and in line with its recommendations, a CIS training workshop on making ICH inventories was held in February 2009 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, for specialists in the ICH field. The aim of the workshop was to develop standard guidelines and formats for inventorying. It was also an occasion to review the state of ICH and safeguarding policies,

including institutional frameworks, and to identify and share good practices in ICH safeguarding. As the result of this meeting, Central Asian countries made an essential step towards establishing a planned institutional framework for reinforcing national, regional, and international cooperation in this field.

Serious efforts in cooperation and networking for ICH safeguarding in Central Asia have recently been made by ICHCAP. So far, two sub-regional network meetings on ICH safeguarding have been conducted, one in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in March 2010, and the other in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in July 2011. In addition one Expert Seminar on ICH Inventory Making for Central Asia was held in Seoul, Korea, in November 2010. It will be beneficial to continue to collaborate with UNESCO, UNESCO field offices and national commissions, ICHCAP, and other UNESCO-related institutes and Category 2 Centres in safeguarding the rich and diverse ICH of Central Asia.

There are five elements from the Central Asian region on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—namely, the Cultural Space of the Boysun District (Uzbekistan, 2001), Shashmaqom: Classical Music of Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, 2003), the Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers (Kyrgyzstan, 2003), Nauruz (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, 2009) and Katta Ashula (Uzbekistan, 2009). But there are no elements on the Urgent Safeguarding List or on the Register of Best Practices.

In 2010 and 2011, UNESCO Offices in Almaty and Tashkent implemented several ICH inventory and crafts development activities in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, two training workshops on making inventories were held in Talas and Osh. The main aim of these training workshops was to strengthen national capacities for inventorying and managing living ICH. Some ICH elements were inventoried at the National Complex Manas Ordo of Kyrgyzstan.

In Uzbekistan, a pilot training workshop on making inventories of the living ICH of Karakalpakstan was conducted in the city of Nukus. The main goal of the workshop was to train Uzbek and Karakalpak specialists in the international norms of ICH safeguarding as well as to develop partnerships among communities, governmental, and international organisations to guarantee the long-term existence of this important living heritage. The workshop was followed by onsite training for one month, through field surveys in fourteen regions of

Karakalpakstan. The training enhanced the inventory-making capacity of local specialists through practices in questioning, recording, classifying collected materials, and archiving an inventory of living musical heritage.

Another successful project implemented for the last two years under the UNESCO-Korean Fund-in-Trust is linked to developing creative industries and strengthening the sustainability of the crafts industries in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Through safeguarding and reviving traditional artisan techniques, the project aims to ensure the continuation of traditional knowledge and skills as well as to increase the sustainability and competitiveness of craft markets. In the training and promotional activities, there is a particular emphasis on craftswomen.

Despite of these efforts, many factors still threaten ICH safeguarding and transmission in Central Asia. First of all, there are few or no specialised institutions or experienced experts working in this field, and therefore, there is a limited understanding of the core concepts and mechanisms in implementing the Convention. In response to these significant needs, UNESCO emphasises strengthening the capacities of national counterparts in ratifying the Convention, in meeting their obligations as States Parties, and in benefiting from the opportunities and mechanisms of international cooperation created by the Convention.

As such, for 2012 and 2013, the UNESCO Offices in Almaty and Tashkent, with generous support from the government of Norway, will implement an extra-budgetary project for strengthening national capacity to effectively safeguard ICH in Central Asia. The project, composed of a training series on implementing the Convention, performing community-based inventorying, and inscribing ICH elements onto the Urgent Safeguarding List, will focus on activities at the national level, but observers from neighbouring countries will be invited to some of the workshops.

This training aims to help four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) meet their national obligations under the Convention, in particular the inventory making and other safeguarding measures, benefit from the mechanisms of international cooperation established by the Convention, and reinforce their national capacity to safeguard ICH and implement the Convention.

National legislation and regulations in the cultural field are often not properly applied in Central Asia. Present legislation does not commonly reflect all aspects of modern development and impacts. Although many international legal instruments, in particular UNESCO conventions, have been ratified by Central Asian countries, the need to strengthen national policy in the field of culture, and ICH safeguarding in particular, still exists. In this regard, Uzbekistan's positive experience in modifying the Law of 2001 on Protection and Use of Cultural Heritage Properties reviewed the norms concerning interpretations of ICH and developed new regulations that could be considered in preserving and revitalising ICH.

As most ICH of Central Asia has cross linkages among nations, there is an obligation to promote joint regional scientific studies on various cultural forms and spaces related to ICH of the whole Central Asian region to avoid possible tensions in the inscriptions process. In the recent past, UNESCO had actively encouraged multinational nominations. On the advice of experts who examined the files before their evaluation by the jury of the Masterpieces programme, Uzbekistan was invited to submit jointly with Tajikistan a multinational file (rather than a mono-national nomination) for Shashmaqom Music, which is found in towns in both countries. Therefore, there is a real need to reinforce sub-regional cooperation and networking in the framework of implementing the Convention as a way of helping to prevent or solve conflicts that might arise over ownership, exploitation, or interpretation of the ICH elements.

In connection with the extra-budgetary project for strengthening national capacities for effectively safeguarding ICH in Central Asia, greater attention will have to be made at raising the sub-regional level's capacity to cooperate on identifying and safeguarding shared heritage and support synergies and exchange in implementing components of the project organised within the cluster countries. Joint efforts in submitting requests for international assistance for safeguarding shared ICH will have to be encouraged.

The intangible and human dimension of heritage is a key factor for the survival of cultural traditions, and it remains an essential vector in transmitting cultures, identities, and social values to future generations. Ratification of the 2003 Convention by most Central Asian countries is considered as a very important step for further preserving and developing its unique ICH. Recently, on 9 November

2011, the Parliament of Kazakhstan agreed to ratify the ICH Convention. Thus, with Kazakhstan depositing the instrument of ratification, we will have four Central Asian countries making an effort to safeguard ICH by implementing the Convention and thereby contributing to sustainable development in the sub-region.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that we have already established a fruitful relationship with ICHCAP, and we have clear perspectives in safeguarding the rich and diverse ICH in Central Asia. I would like to take this occasion to express our deep gratitude to the government of the Republic of Korea for the support and the generous contribution of USD 300,000 through the UNESCO-Korean Fund-in-Trust to develop creative industries and strengthen the sustainability of the crafts industries in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. I am sure that this support will contribute to the further development of this sector in the countries of our cluster office.