

GUIDANCE NOTE

Climate action for living heritage

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Introduction to the guidance note¹

Intangible cultural heritage (or living heritage) covers a range of domains, including oral expressions such as poetry and song, performing arts such as dance and theatre, social practices, including rituals and festive events, and crafts and knowledge related to nature and the universe, encompassing agricultural practices and fisheries. These forms of knowledge and practice are typically enacted and transmitted by communities, groups or individuals (hereafter “communities”); which they consider as part of their living heritage. In addition to these conventional activities and functions, living heritage has a dual dimension in all emergencies, including climate change. In the context of climate change, living heritage can play an important positive role as a source of preparedness, recovery and prevention measures to manage and reduce vulnerability and exposure to risks associated with climate change, as well as in the mitigation of carbon emissions. At the same time, the viability of living heritage and its bearers are also fundamentally at risk from climate change impacts, either directly or from the multiplier effects of climate change on other conditions for vulnerability. Distinguishing clearly between these potential positive and negative roles and risks, and understanding how and when living heritage becomes vulnerable or can be harnessed as a positive force to address climate change-related challenges, are important areas for consideration in designing relevant policies and climate actions.

The UNESCO [2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) (hereafter, the Convention) acknowledges the potential role of living heritage to strengthen community-based resilience to disasters and climate change in the [Operational Directives](#) (Chapter VI.3.3) and the recently adopted [Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies](#) (2020). While there is a large body of literature and numerous instruments relating to climate change and different forms of local and Indigenous knowledge, they do not refer specifically to the role of living heritage from the perspective of the Convention. Further guidance is therefore needed for stakeholders of the Convention seeking to engage in and enhance dialogue between the sectors of climate change and living heritage.

Climate change

Climate change is indicated by detectable and persistent change in the average or variability of the earth’s climate. In Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) usage, climate change can result from either natural variability or human activity, while the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) focuses on that component of climate change that exceeds natural variability and that can be linked either directly or indirectly to human activity.

- The impacts of climate change on living heritage are ongoing, multiple and diverse, and operate over a wide range of time scales from slow to rapid. Climate change impacts also contribute to and heighten a complex and compounding series of other, non-climate threats and pressures, including conflict, disease, economic vulnerability, pollution and other sources of emergency, which can act together to exacerbate critical risks for the viability of living heritage.
- While climate change is a global phenomenon, its effects are highly variable around the world, and experience of its direct and indirect impacts is mostly local and specific to the conditions and vulnerabilities of particular places and communities. Living heritage that relates to the site-specific management of changes and impacts thus provides a highly relevant and significant resource for climate change adaptation strategies in the past and present, and for planning future responses.

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Practical experience of climate change impacts at a local level can relate to localised or regional environmental change and weather extremes, as well as to natural hazard emergencies such as floods, droughts, cyclones or invasive pests. A vast body of local and Indigenous knowledge and experience of these changes and hazards is increasingly informing risk reduction strategies.

- At the local scale, climate change is evident in both slow- and rapid-onset phenomena, ranging from temperature increase or the consequences of sea-level rise and desertification through to changes in the intensity and frequency of natural hazards. From this perspective, instruments and methods that relate to either climate change or disaster risk reduction are equally relevant. Stakeholders of the Convention will need to develop their own methods and protocols for climate action, drawing on models and insights from both the climate change and disaster risk reduction sectors.

Climate action for living heritage

Climate action for living heritage refers to all three of the key areas of intervention – climate change adaptation, climate change mitigation and living heritage safeguarding:

- Climate change adaptation** is defined by the IPCC as ‘the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects in order to moderate harm or take advantage of beneficial opportunities.’ Importantly, while planned adaptation policy is usually a matter for national bodies, the implementation of local or autonomous adaptation strategies on the ground should always involve and reflect the agency, knowledge and living heritage of local communities.
- Climate change mitigation** refers to actions that limit or reduce emissions of greenhouse gases or the presence of gases in the atmosphere, according to the IPCC definition, and not to the reduction of impacts from climate change. Drawing on their living heritage, local communities and Indigenous Peoples have considerable capacity to contribute to mitigation strategies through their knowledge of low-carbon practices.
- Living heritage safeguarding** remains a central focus for stakeholders of the Convention, but the direct and indirect impacts of climate change present a new and expanded range of risks to the practice and transmission of living heritage. Understanding the vulnerability of communities and their living heritage to these new forms of risk is a pressing priority in order to provide Convention stakeholders with the knowledge and means to support and strengthen the necessary safeguarding measures.

Risks for living heritage in the climate emergency

The risks posed to living heritage by climate change and related emergencies are wide-ranging. They include both the catastrophic degradation, destruction and disappearance of places, practices and practitioners as well as slower but equally dangerous processes such as loss of culturally significant habitats and environments, disruption of the dynamics of knowledge transmission, particularly those relating to nature and the universe, increasing precarity of community livelihoods, and dislocation of populations. The often inter-connected and compounding nature of climate change impacts to living heritage remains poorly understood.

- The loss or transformation of habitats and environments, built structures, spaces for practice and resources strikes deeply at livelihoods, identity and spirituality. It threatens the capacity of a community to manage and reproduce itself and to ensure the transmission of its living heritage to future generations.
- The displacement of a community and related loss of relevant contexts and relationships, regardless of cause and whether rapid or slow, is a paramount threat to the practice and transmission of living heritage. Living heritage travels with and is transmitted amongst mobile communities, but the impact on the living heritage of displaced residential communities or mobile communities constrained in their movement is not yet well understood.
- Aspects of livelihood that are underpinned by living heritage may come under threat, including

food systems, dwellings and assets, habitats and environments, cultural resources and raw materials, wild and domesticated plants and animals, market access and social capital, diverse economies and income generation in all its forms.

Living heritage can also be threatened by responses to climate change and related emergencies. In some cases, climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and assistance may undermine the practice and viability of living heritage through imposed interventions such as relocation, inappropriate aid and development policy practice and provision, and the denigration of local and Indigenous knowledge systems or their selective decontextualized use in formal risk reduction and planned adaptation strategies.

General considerations

For each climate action for living heritage – adaptation, mitigation and safeguarding – the likely benefits of the proposed action are usually understood, but both action and inaction also entail costs. These costs range from the direct national or international funding of activities by state and non-state actors, or the self-funded costs to communities of their independent actions, through to economic and non-economic forms of loss and damage for living heritage bearers and their communities. Inadvertent costs include the unintended consequences of actions, aid or intervention, including the impacts on living heritage of relocation, maladaptive practices, actions that increase emissions, and safeguarding measures that undermine local values and modes of transmission. Opportunity costs are incurred through the selection of one activity or community over another, and the uneven distribution of benefits, or non-consultation of sectors of community. Changes induced by climate change impacts in value systems or significant adaptive modifications to practices may also lead to the deliberate loss or discarding of elements of living heritage by communities. Conversely, the involuntary effects induced by climate change can be beneficial for the living heritage of certain communities, in certain environments and over certain periods.

Living heritage reflects social values, beliefs and worldviews that shape and reaffirm people's relationships to each other and to the natural world, often fostering respect, custodianship and reciprocity. Adaptation to climate change is a process of adjustment to limit harm from a changing climate as well as a chance to identify and take advantage of new opportunities. Both aspects of climate change adaptation are strongly influenced by living heritage: autonomous adaptive choices made by local communities and Indigenous Peoples are influenced and shaped by local culture and history, and by the values expressed through their living heritage; and planned adaptation policies are largely implemented by local or regional agents operating under particular social and cultural conditions. Creating and supporting the conditions for understanding and learning from local communities and Indigenous Peoples will be an essential step in climate change adaptation strategies.

In this regard, the proposed guidance note draws strength from profound engagement by communities with their local conditions, often over long periods of time, which has generated bodies of knowledge and techniques for identifying, assessing and monitoring change and impact. These bodies of knowledge are focused importantly on community wellbeing and may be complementary to scientific knowledge. It cannot be stressed enough that measures to integrate climate change issues and living heritage should be led by the communities concerned, assisted where necessary by other stakeholders, including national authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, and the private and informal sectors. Given the rapidly evolving nature of this new intersectional field, and the diversity of stakeholders involved, policy guidance should also be flexible in nature so as to accommodate the varying contexts, communities and types of living heritage concerned, and to effectively coordinate planned and autonomous modes of adaptation. More specific guidelines, tools and case studies might then be developed based on the specific needs and contexts identified.

Guidance note on climate action for living heritage

Climate change is a powerfully destructive and largely irreversible process that is already inflicting significant damage on the wellbeing and cultural heritage of communities, groups and individuals worldwide. Stakeholders of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage face the dual challenge of developing and implementing plans that support communities to safeguard their living heritage from the direct and indirect impacts of climate change, while also drawing on that living heritage as a resource for adaptation to changing environmental and social conditions, and for the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing these challenges is a matter of real urgency, in terms of supporting and improving the capacity of communities both to adapt to changing conditions and to contribute to the mitigation of carbon emissions. Living heritage is not always a passive casualty of climate change but can be an important source of strategies for adaptation and resilience, developed by communities to accommodate and thrive in changing environmental conditions and socio-economic circumstances.

This guidance note on climate action for living heritage imposes no new obligations on States Parties. It is coherent with existing statements of the Convention, including Article 3 on the relationship with other international instruments, and aligns with but does not aim to duplicate the mandates of any other multilateral agreements, frameworks, processes, or instruments relating to climate change or disaster risk reduction. In particular, this note should not be understood as an interpretation of any of the principles and provisions of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and of the Paris Agreement adopted under it. Key principles to be observed in this integration of living heritage and climate change include the [Chapter VI of the Operational Directives](#) (2016), the [Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) (2015), the [UNESCO Declaration of Ethical Principles in relation to Climate Change](#) (2017), the [UNESCO Policy on Engaging with Indigenous Peoples](#) (2018), and the [Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies](#) (2020).

This guidance note proposes a comprehensive, rights-based and people-centred approach to climate action for living heritage through three key **goals**, two transversal **concerns**, and five potential **areas** for intervention by stakeholders of the Convention.

The three key **goals** include:

a) Promote and enhance the positive role of living heritage in climate change adaptation

Living heritage has a critical positive role to play in the adaptation of societies and environments to climate change through the management of its impacts by: a) identifying, assessing and monitoring climate change impacts; b) limiting direct and indirect climate-related impacts; and c) understanding, promoting and facilitating societal and environmental adaptation to climate change. Stakeholders of the Convention, and local communities and Indigenous Peoples in particular, are important mediators in climate adaptation processes. Appropriate mechanisms and forums that promote the role of living heritage in climate change adaptation and that provide for dialogue and exchange between local and scientific knowledge systems on strategies for climate change adaptation will be crucial in realising this potential.

b) Promote and enhance the positive role of living heritage in climate change mitigation

Climate change mitigation strategies can learn from the knowledge and experience of local communities and Indigenous Peoples, particularly from their low-carbon emission practices. Local and Indigenous fire management regimes, low carbon agricultural heritage and environmental management systems, and the management of natural carbon sinks are among some of the demonstrated forms of mitigation that draw on living heritage. Stakeholders should be supported to further promote the scope for learning from and scaling up this living heritage for climate change mitigation.

c) **Improve measures for safeguarding living heritage in the climate emergency**

Living heritage has been an important source of resilience to both slow transformations in local environments and rapid onset hazard disasters and will prove vital as a resource for communities and the safeguarding of their heritage in the climate emergency. Understanding the sources of vulnerability to direct and indirect climate change impacts for communities and their living heritage is a pressing priority if stakeholders are to be supported effectively in strengthening the necessary safeguarding measures.

Two transversal **concerns** should be addressed in the design and implementation of each of the above goals, as along with a consideration of the direct and indirect costs of each action:

- i. **Roles of stakeholders and actors:** For each climate action for living heritage – adaptation, mitigation and safeguarding – the roles of stakeholders and actors need to be clearly specified and understood. To affirm and unlock the knowledge and agency of all communities, climate action requires engagement at a wide range of scales, from local through to global, and the involvement of multiple and diverse actors. Action at different scales will call for variable input from different actors, including global, national, provincial and municipal bodies, the private, non-governmental and informal sectors, urban and rural communities and Indigenous Peoples. Reflecting the primacy of local communities and Indigenous Peoples in the Convention's vision of living heritage, acknowledgement of and respect for the knowledge and contributions of the full range of stakeholders is paramount. Diversity and inclusivity amongst the stakeholders involved is essential to the success of climate actions, requiring equal access and voice for marginalised communities or members within communities, and across distinctions by gender, age, ethnicity, location and wealth.
- ii. **Rights and values:** For each climate action for living heritage – adaptation, mitigation and safeguarding – consideration should be given to the specific suite of human rights and cultural rights instruments, ethical standards and values relevant to the proposed action. Cultural rights standards, grounded in the provisions of international law, along with standards that relate to the rights of particular groups and peoples, including Indigenous Peoples, migrants, immigrants and refugees, people of different ages and genders, persons with disabilities and members of vulnerable groups, and environmental and climate change standards, provide a strong framework for the design and implementation of climate actions for living heritage. The social and cultural values particular to communities are less clearly codified but exert a powerful influence over all forms of community action at all scales; the values of living heritage bearers should prevail in prioritising actions that relate to their heritage.

The following potential **areas** for intervention have been identified for stakeholders of the Convention:

A. Integrate climate change awareness in living heritage safeguarding

All stakeholders, including communities who should have the primary role in safeguarding their own living heritage, are encouraged to integrate and mainstream climate change awareness into living heritage safeguarding plans and measures at all levels. The existing mechanisms of the Convention can make a significant contribution to this process by incorporating an awareness of climate change challenges and the needs of various climate actions in the development and documentation of inventories, the promotion of good practices, and (if appropriate) nomination files and periodic reporting under the Convention.

Inventories of living heritage are an important resource for safeguarding strategies in the context of climate change and any other form of emergency, and management of and access to inventories at the community level should be promoted. Additional support for community-led inventories might explore digital modes of documentation and safeguarding, and the dissemination of good practice materials that relate to climate action.

Further development is also encouraged of the relationship between living heritage safeguarding and the documentation of loss and damage through mechanisms such as the Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) framework, as well as longer-term monitoring of the consequences of this loss and damage.

B. Strengthen collaboration and partnerships with key stakeholders

Strategic collaborations and partnerships should be fostered between living heritage stakeholders, including communities, groups and individuals, and institutions and other actors engaged in climate action for living heritage. The breadth of institutions and instruments already involved in this intersectional field will require a strategic and selective process of engagement by stakeholders of the Convention. Approaches to collaboration may include:

- enhancing mechanisms for existing partnership with communities, practitioners and other living heritage stakeholders (including NGOs and researchers);
- strengthening synergies among the UNESCO Culture Conventions and programmes, and those stakeholders working on natural and cultural (tangible and intangible) heritage, as well as the cultural and creative industries, and education sectors;
- investing strategically in partnerships both within and beyond the heritage, climate change and disaster risk reduction sectors, and with key humanitarian and United Nations organizations; and
- engaging or facilitating regional and transboundary partnerships, communities of practice and agreements, where appropriate.

C. Promote collaborative research and case study development

All stakeholders are invited to foster research programmes and the development of case studies, notably those conducted by communities and groups themselves, aimed at understanding and monitoring the climate change dimensions of living heritage safeguarding under the Convention, to inform more detailed guidance and effective policy. A renewed commitment to profoundly collaborative research with local communities and Indigenous Peoples is essential, learning from alternative modes of enquiry and adopting cross-sectoral, trans-cultural and interdisciplinary research approaches and methodologies; this may require further refinement of protocols and principles for living heritage research more generally. The network of UNESCO Chairs and accredited non-governmental organizations should also be engaged in promoting research and education objectives, and in advocating for research programmes as a source of funding. Specific priorities for research might address:

- the negative and positive consequences for living heritage of direct or indirect climate change impacts, including relocation or changes in migration patterns, and adoption of new forms of living heritage;
- the vulnerability of transmission of living heritage to climate change impacts;
- the contribution of living heritage to climate change mitigation strategies;
- the interdependence of tangible and intangible, and cultural and natural forms of heritage in a climate change context;
- the relationship between living heritage, livelihoods, and wellbeing in a climate change context;
- the scope for living heritage climate change action in the context of human and cultural rights frameworks;
- engagement with the new fields of artificial intelligence and futures thinking; and
- models for measuring and monitoring impacts against climate action initiatives.

D. Co-design and implement policy and advocacy

States Parties are encouraged to develop policy, in consultation with stakeholders at all levels, on how best to integrate living heritage into strategies, plans and programmes that address climate change adaptation, mitigation, and safeguarding in the context of the climate emergency.

States Parties are encouraged to consider how best to adopt appropriate legal, technical, administrative and financial measures to fully integrate living heritage into systems and programmes of disaster risk reduction

and climate change adaptation and mitigation. This would include establishing effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for climate action on the regional, national or sub-national levels, informed, among other sources, by the UNESCO Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda.

Communities and organizations should be fairly represented in this process, to ensure that the values and concerns of living heritage bearers inform the development and ongoing refinement of these mechanisms.

Stakeholders at all levels should advocate for the role of living heritage in climate action, including in international discussions on climate change and in synergy with relevant international organizations, frameworks and mechanisms.

E. Strengthen capacity through communication, education, training and exchange

The strengthening of communication, education, training and exchange should be promoted to enhance the capacity and understanding of all stakeholders in implementing climate action for safeguarding living heritage. Some of the measures that might be adopted in pursuit of this goal include:

- integrating climate action for living heritage within the UNFCCC's Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), which provides an important framework for the development of education and public awareness, training, public participation, public access to information, and international cooperation at the intersection of climate change and living heritage;
- tailoring communication to particular audiences, and seeking innovative partnerships with individuals and organizations in media and arts to enhance the reach of messages around climate action for living heritage;
- promoting alternative modes of training and transfer already practiced by communities, based on mutual respect and exchange between knowledge systems;
- strengthening collaboration and joint action with climate change education stakeholders to enhance transmission of living heritage in formal and non-formal education and create synergies with initiatives to integrate climate change awareness in education systems; and
- developing or enhancing training programmes aimed at integrating knowledge of living heritage and climate change, addressed to the particular needs of the full range of stakeholders, and building on the existing capacities of participants.

UNESCO is well positioned to promote the online exchange of good practices, case studies and experiences relevant to climate action for living heritage, and to assist States Parties and international organizations in the development of national and regional forums, networks and alliances, drawing on strategic alliances between regional UNESCO offices, UNESCO Category 2 Centres, national heritage, emergency and climate change institutions and agencies, and practitioners and communities.

The Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage endorsed this guidance note at its nineteenth session (Asunción, Republic of Paraguay, 2 to 6 December 2024).