

# Twenty Years of the 2003 UNESCO Convention: **Achievements and Prospects**

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Prior to the adoption of the 2003 Convention, only a handful of States had distinct policies or programmes, or institutional structures, focusing on living heritage safeguarding. Today, with 181 States having ratified the Convention, the value of living heritage is broadly recognized in national and regional policies and programmes around the world. This remarkable progress testifies that one of the key objectives of the Convention – to raise awareness of the importance of safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage – has globally been achieved.

At the same time, a lot remains to be done. Living heritage around the world is still under considerable threat, be it due to demographic shifts, economic pressures, environmental degradation or simply changing values and attitudes. Many of these threats are beyond the control of the practitioner communities, often linked to, or leading to, their disempowerment and destabilization, ultimately triggering negative consequences for cultural diversity and human well-being in general.

It is also important to recognize that the context in which living heritage is practiced today has moved on from what it used to be twenty years ago. Large sections of the world's population lack sustainable livelihoods, the effects of climate change are increasingly apparent, biodiversity is increasingly threatened. The use of land for resource extraction or infrastructure projects is disrupting indigenous people's lives. Education systems are struggling to meet the real needs of learners. Health systems are struggling to other types of intolerance are fueled by online platforms. Furthermore, migration and rapid urbanization require urgent and innovative responses.

The first regional cycle of periodic reports under the 2003 Convention revealed that in Latin America and the Caribbean the situation is no different. The many threats to the viability of the living heritage in the region include the lack of appropriate media coverage, loss of language skills, loss of meaning and interest among young people, the inadequate remuneration of practitioners and the uncontrolled commercial exploitation of their heritage.

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As the Convention matures into a globally recognized instrument, it has to envision creative ways to safeguard living heritage in the face of these developments. At the same time, we all need to take this opportunity to explore the power of living heritage to address these contemporary challenges, towards sustainable peace and development.

This is in recognition of the fact that living heritage represents not only a body of accumulated practical solutions for specific ecological and social challenges, but also critically underpins societal values, outlooks, resilience, and general well-being of populations. In the Latin American and the Caribbean region (LAC), the many carnivals and festivals play this role by bringing together people from different social backgrounds to participate in various cultural expressions (such as dance, music, crafts, rituals, etc.) that make possible a moment of shared values, transcending differences of gender, color, class and locality.

In this respect, living heritage safeguarding provides a multifaceted and interconnected approach which transcends the sustainable development agenda. And communities around the world need to be enabled, and explore new ways, to mobilize these incredible resources more effectively.

Over the years, evidence concerning the contribution of living heritage towards sustainable development has been generated. For example, UNESCO analyzed the relation of some 670 living heritage practices inscribed on the lists of the 2003 Convention, against the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda.<sup>50</sup> The results speak for themselves: some 100 listed living heritage elements were found to contribute to SDG2, Zero hunger; over 240 elements to SDG 8, Decent work and economic growth; more than 140 elements to SDG 12, Responsible Consumption and Production; and remarkable over 500 to SDG 16, Peace, justice and strong Institutions.

Indeed, many inscribed living heritage elements involve practices that have peace building at their very core, encouraging conflict resolution and mutual respect among communities. In many cases, inscribed elements contribute to highlighting the need for respect, funding and redress for marginalized communities that have faced historical discrimination and disadvantage. A few examples in Latin America include the 'Wayuu Normative System', the 'Candombe and its socio-cultural space: a community practice', or the 'Capoeira circle'.

Once again, the periodic reports from Latin American and the Caribbean provide valuable insights about the interviewing of living heritage and sustainable development. What the LAC reports noted in particular is that placing the livelihood of bearer communities at the centre of safeguarding efforts is already a reality: about two thirds of countries in the region informed living heritage-related policies and programmes for income generation and sustainable livelihoods of people.

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50 These links can be explored further on the 'Dive into Intangible Cultural Heritage' platform on UNESCO's website (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/dive>).

Noting the substantial contribution of living heritage to peaceful and inclusive societies, it is essential that sustainable development strategies at national, regional, and international levels recognize living heritage as a cultural expression in its own right. And acknowledge the importance of its safeguarding across the full spectrum of sectors related to sustainability. As underlined in the MONDIACULT Declaration of 2022, 150 States agreed that culture is a public good which must be supported by robust policy for its protection and sustainability.

In other words: culture, including living heritage, must be recognized not only as a fundamental right, but also as a key pillar of sustainability on its own. The time has come to position the Convention as a catalyst to unleash the power of living heritage for peaceful and sustainable societies. This includes working together towards the integration of living heritage in a sustainable development goal on culture in the post 2030 Agenda.

Living heritage should not only be recognized as cultural heritage and a human right imperative, but also as a multifaceted source of wellbeing and resilience and as a tool through which communities can pass on and share contextually appropriate solutions to contemporary global challenges.

UNESCO counts on the contribution of Latin American and Caribbean countries and communities to support this collective effort and make the 20th anniversary a historical opportunity and bring culture to the core of our sustainable development efforts.

I wish the Convention many successful years ahead.