

20 Anniversary of the 2003 Convention: **The Mexican Experience**

Edaly Quiroz Moreno⁶⁶

Carmen Ruiz Hernández⁶⁷

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has placed at the center of analysis the deep meaning of popular cultures and intangible forms of culture. The anniversary of this international instrument is an opportunity to reflect on how it was implemented in Mexico. This reflection process requires reviewing the historical development of culture institutions nationwide and how they are related to the communities of bearers and to the enforcement of their cultural rights.

The institutions, legislation, policies, and cultural programs in Mexico have shaped the understanding of this important instrument of global impact. This is further compounded by Mexico's status as a country with great cultural richness, inherited from important pre-Columbus cultures and the encounter with Europe, Africa and Asia. Indeed, 68 national indigenous languages prevail in the country, remaining the main medium for transmission of ancestral knowledges, traditions, and world views. They are a testimony to this cultural wealth and the complexity resulting from wanting to name it, characterize it, inventory it.

The Mexican government has the duty of conducting the necessary actions to fulfill the obligation to ensure the cultural right to heritage. As well as to preserve the multicultural character of the country and the cultural rights of Mexicans. It was established on articles 1, 2 and 43 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, and on articles 15, 16 and 17 of the General Law on Culture and Cultural Rights.

Mexico's legal framework highlights the creation of institutions such as the National Institute of Anthropology and History (1939); the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (1948); and the Directorate-General of Popular, Indigenous and Urban Cultures (1978). These institutions have sustained their work in the important anthropological tradition that has been developed in the country. This anthropological tradition results from community work

66 Master in Studies on International Relations with emphasis on Public Policies. Assistant director of Intangible Cultural Heritage from the Directorate of World Heritage – National Institute of Anthropology and History.

67 Anthropologist and communicator, responsible for the Intangible Cultural Heritage from Directorate-General of Popular, Indigenous and Urban Cultures from the Department of Culture.

produced by the knowledge, permanence, and dissemination of cultural diversity, particularly among indigenous peoples. In addition, these institutions were part of the analysis for public recognition of multiculturalism, as well as the process of understanding culture as a human right. The acceptance of the State responsibility in such matters developed before, during and after the 2003 Convention was approved and ratified by Mexico.

As of 2015, the Department of Culture from the government of Mexico is juridically responsible for implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Therefore, it has placed at the center of its public cultural policies the importance of fostering and respecting cultural diversity, popular cultures and the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). It gives continuity to iconic programs for revitalization of local and community cultures. On the other hand, giving a particular focus at the training of cultural managers, through its branches and government programs, such as the Program for Multilingual and Community Cultural Actions (PACMyC). These programs usually evolve young indigenous language speakers who act as spokespersons between instances of the three government levels and the bearer communities they belong to. Furthermore, the projects conducted by the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), prioritize the community management by bearers over their cultural heritage.

The Department of Culture has established the National Commission on Intangible Cultural Heritage (CONPCI) with the aim to give a response to the commitments assumed within the framework of the 2003 Convention. By drawing upon the collaborative work carried out by the cultural sector over the past 15 years, initiatives have been proposed to monitor communities, peoples and bearers of ICH in safeguarding self-management processes. Additionally, efforts are being made to create conditions for this cultural heritage to be reproduced and transmitted to new generations. Currently, the cultural policy has focused on boosting initiatives that promote and ensure the collective rights from an inclusive, non-discriminatory standpoint.

However, there are areas of opportunity that require a work of coordination and harmonization of the principles established in the 2003 Convention. Particularly, among different sectors and players that must necessarily be involved in the safeguarding of the ICH, such as education, environment, healthcare, economic development. Institutions dedicated to issues on gender and peacebuilding are needed. It also highlights the importance of joint actions with Non-Governmental Organizations and private initiative.

It is worth stressing the work from different governmental organizations that are nationally connected to community participation. The Directorate-General of Popular, Indigenous and Urban Cultures from the Department of Culture has boosted the Program for Multilingual and Community Cultural Actions (PACMyC) for 30 years. Its work aims at strengthening cultural development. This is done through the annual granting of financial support to cultural projects of community groups, creators, and practitioners of uses and

customs, native languages, rites, practices and traditions of popular culture. These elements make up the Intangible Cultural Heritage of indigenous, mestizo and Afro-descendant peoples of rural and urban areas of Mexico. This program has simple operating rules and is easily accessible to communities throughout the country. In addition, it stimulates local participation and promotes community initiatives, since they are based on their own needs, and are also managed and carried out by the community itself.

Another initiative developed by the Department of Culture is “Original”. This is an action focused on Mexican textile art, especially indigenous creators. It is based on a decalogue of good practices and fair trade, with principles such as respect to collective rights from creative communities and peoples in Mexico about their cultural heritage. Additionally, it focuses on the preservation and promotion of techniques and materials used for their creations. Also including respect for the conditions that creative peoples and communities from Mexico established for the use, reproduction and production of their creations, as well as respect to their production times and fair payment. Finally, the fight against any practice that encourages the misappropriation and abusive appropriation of designs, iconography and creations owned by creative peoples and communities in Mexico.

Incidentally, the Mexican government issued in early 2022 the Federal Law on Protection of Cultural Heritage from Indigenous Peoples and Communities. It was adopted with the purpose of recognizing and ensuring the right of ownership over elements that form their cultural heritage, traditional knowledges and cultural expressions, as well as collective intellectual property over such heritage. It is worth highlighting that this legislation was finally enforced, after decades of peoples and their organizations demanding to legislators and rulers the defense to their cultural rights as much as to their social and political rights.

Mexico has also strengthened initiatives that promote the revitalization of its linguistic, food, artistic diversity and the different areas of ICH, through formative and promotion actions.

For example, in 2010, a meeting called ‘Of Tradition and New Rolas’ was created for young people from native populations. The term ‘rolas’ is a synonym used by youngsters to refer to their compositions across generations. This event serves as a national platform to consolidate and explore proposals that blend indigenous oral, poetic, and musical traditions with music cultures from various origins.

In 2021, only two dozen teenagers participated, but in 2022 and 2023, there were over a hundred participants each year. Also, year after year new young creators have come, with proposals based on their traditions and their language.

In parallel, several instances and sectors of the Mexico government implement multiple actions that are significantly related to the safeguarding of the ICH. The Directorate of Traditional Medicine and Intercultural Development from the federal Department of Health, for example, offers qualification courses aimed at healthcare personnel, such as the course

Interculturality and gender in the context of human rights. This training addresses specific themes related to traditional knowledges of indigenous peoples, culture and worldview, cultural diversity and identity, traditional medicine and human rights. They have the objective of raising awareness among healthcare personnel about cultural rights concerning their health and the need to transform institutional services and the legal framework to operate considering other perspectives.

The project “Health and traditional medicine from Totonacos”, developed in the framework of the State of the economic and social development of the Totonaca region, provides another illustrative example of the work carried out by the Indigenous Arts Center (CAI) in Veracruz. It was inscribed in 2012 in the Registration of Good Practices for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, in collaboration with the University Program for Studies of Cultural Diversity and Interculturality – PUIC-UNAM. Several activities have been conducted through this project: workshops, qualifications, consultations, field works, development of educational materials, dialogs, etc. These activities were developed together with the traditional doctors of Totonacapan and for the benefit of themselves. The specific objective of the project is the creation of the Totonaca School of Traditional Medicine, as an educational model for intergenerational transmission.

With innovative methodology, the project started with a pilot plan, the *Xaliskgalalan likuchun* / Certification Program in Traditional Totonaca Medicine. The project included a theoretical-practical teaching program with main goal of training specialists in traditional Totonaca medicine. These specialists are capable of promoting the recognition of traditional knowledge from indigenous peoples, aimed at preserving both biological and cultural diversity. Additionally, the project aimed to establish connections between traditional medicine and conventional medicine, home remedies, as well as alternative or complementary medicine.

On the other hand, there is also the work conducted by Conservatorio de la Cultura Gastronómica Mexicana. This NGO was accredited by UNESCO for consulting purposes. It has collaborated with the federal Department of Public Education in the development and implementation of the qualification standard “Preparation of traditional and popular cuisine”. It was established with the aim of being a benchmark for assessment and certification of individuals who work as traditional cooks. These are people who have learned this abilities in an oral and customary manner according to ancestral practices from their community and/or individuals who work at the kitchen of a food and beverage enterprise that offers traditional Mexican cuisine. Within the framework of this initiative, since 2018 the first ten traditional cooks and practitioners have been certified.

It is worth highlighting that, to be certified as a traditional cook by this standard of competence, it is not necessary to have any professional diploma. It is open to everyone who has worked as a traditional cook, and the criteria for assessment are also structured based on the deep meaning of what traditional Mexican cuisine is.

It is also crucial to mention the work conducted by the federal Department of Education and the National Educational System from Mexico. It is based on a series of general regulations established by this Department and it aims at ensuring the recognition and valuing of cultural and linguistic diversity from the plan and national education programs. However, each state has autonomy for developing and adapting their own study plans and respective educational materials, according to their local context.

The General Law on Education in force promotes an education based on cultural identity, as well as the sense of belonging and the respect from interculturality. But as already mentioned, local educational guidelines, plans and educational materials are developed at the state level. The design and structuring of the project involve a highly diverse group of specialists in pedagogy and teaching. This includes teachers and pedagogues from indigenous communities and peoples, who contribute their traditional knowledge and wisdom to develop culturally relevant educational materials.

For example, in Guanajuato, in central Mexico, study plans consider educational actions targeted at showing students the reality from different cultural and social standpoints. It helps them to understand the world from different logics of building the reality and, thus, contribute to the recognition and valuation of cultural diversity. Similarly, strategies aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and fostering equitable and respectful coexistence among linguistic and cultural differences are implemented. These strategies are executed from a standpoint of valuing and learning from differences, which ultimately contributes to the construction of peace.

In the field of extracurricular education, more convincing actions related to the knowledge and dissemination of ICH have been undertaken. These actions include artistic activities such as declamation, theater performances, poetry recitals, dance performances, musical presentations, gastronomic demonstrations, and more.

The figure of the Cultural Missions also stands out in the northern states of Mexico like Coahuila that belong to the Directorate of Extracurricular Activities. These states carry out activities related to retrieving traditions, as well as the valuation and recognition of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, since their main objective is to promote the economic, cultural and social improvement of rural and suburban communities.

Nevertheless, challenges have been identified in the ICH-Education relationship. Indeed, given the dynamics of the ICH in Mexico and the strong presence of indigenous languages, its local approach is closely related to teaching languages by connecting them to festivities or traditions, often with a folklore character and out of context. For this reason, it is necessary to work on actions targeted at connecting the education planning with the concept and different dimensions and scopes of the ICH.

The National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI) is a decentralized organization from the Department of Culture. Its objective is to promote the strengthening, preservation and development of indigenous languages spoken in the national territory, the knowledge and use of the nation's cultural richness. It also advises the three government levels to articulate public policies on the matter. Among its lines of work, there is the transmission and diffusion of mother languages. In this context, INALI has published writing normatives in a bilingual version of the languages: *Tselal, Tsotsil, Mam, Mocho', Kakchikel, Ch'ol, Otetzame, Tojol-ab'al, yoremnokki, Jiak Noki, O'otam, Oichkama No'oka/Oishkam No'ok, Tének, Tutunakú, Cmique litom, Maayat'aan, and Hñáhñu.*

It has also published the alphabets from *Tselal, Tsotsil, Mam, Mocho', Kakchikel, Ch'ol, Otetzame, Tojol-ab'al, yoremnokki, Jiak Noki, O'otam, Oichkama No'oka/Oishkam No'ok, Tének, Tutunakú, Cmique litom, Maayat'aan, Bot'una (Matlalzínca), Tu'un Savi (Mixteco), Pjiekakjo (Tlahuica), Úza' (Chichimeca Jonaz), Lhima'alh'ama/Lhimasipij (Tepehua), and Hñáhñu (Otomí).*

These normatives are distributed in indigenous schools with the support of the participants in the development of normatives, academies, intercultural universities and schools from the Directorate-General of Indigenous Education, among others. They are available on its official website.⁶⁸

INALI has also assisted and processed 13 translations of the Mexican national anthem into the languages: *Tutunakú*, south central Totonaco, *Úza'* (Chichimeca Jonaz), Zapoteco from the low northwest valleys, *Maya, Hñáhñu* (Otomí), *énná* (Southern Mazateco), low southeast Chinanteco, top center Mixe, central Veracruz Náhuatl, *P'urhepecha, Cmique litom* (Seri), *Kuapá*. In addition, it has applied to the Ministry of the Interior to authorize its use in the country's indigenous communities.

Educational materials have been developed about variations of four linguistic groups that comprise the sub-branch: *Úza'* (Chichimeco Jonaz), Chichimeco Jonaz/Spanish Compendium; *ÚZA', Bot'una* (Matlalzínca) Matlalzínca/Spanish Compendium; *BOT'UNA, Jñatjo* (Mazahua); Doctrine and teaching in the Mazahua language: philological study and interlinear edition of bilingual text from Nájera Yanguas; *Jizhi, Xoru Jnatjo*; Educational Manual for collective learning of the Mazahua language (Book and Record); *Mazahua/Spanish Compendium; JÑATJO and T'éñe jñatjo*, Memory game in Mazahua; *Hñáhñu* (Otomí) *He'mipomuhñä ar Hñähño ar Hñämfo Ndämaxe*i, Bilingual Otomí-Spanish Dictionary from the State of Querétaro, Vol. I A-L, Vol. II M-Ñ, Vol. III O-Z; *Hmämbät'ot'e yá Nt'epi yä Hñäki yä*

68 <https://www.inali.gob.mx/es/difusion/publicaciones.html>.

Hnini Mudi Mem'onda, Terms extracted from free textbooks in Hñahñu (Book and Record); Otomí/Spanish Compendium; and HÑÄHÑÜ. Hñahñu Alphabet Cards.

The translation of the General Law on Linguistic Rights of the Indigenous Peoples into Otomí language is also a highlight.

Concerning the participation from higher education instances in the safeguarding of the ICH, on one hand we have the model from Intercultural Universities. These are public higher education institutions. Their objective is to contribute to achieving greater equity in the distribution of opportunities for educational development in the country, characterized by their quality and linguistic and cultural relevance.

With these schools, the aim is to offer opportunities for professional academic development and research to young rural populations of diverse cultural origins. Its educational offer is of 36 bachelor's degrees, six master's degrees, and four doctorates with four axes of work: Language and Culture, Discipline, Community Bonding and, finally, Social-cultural and Axiological.

Currently, there are 12 Intercultural Universities in the states of Sinaloa, Estado de México, Tabasco, Puebla, Chiapas, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Michoacán, Guerrero, San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo, and Nayarit. It is worth highlighting that they are located in places with higher indigenous and rural populations.

In Mexico, there are independent initiatives, promoted by non-governmental players, such as the Superior Intercultural Institute Ayuuk in Oaxaca (belonging to the Jesuit university system), the Autonomous Communal University of Oaxaca, the Intercultural University of the Peoples from South Guerrero, and the Indigenous Rural Network University in Puebla and Chiapas.

On the other hand, there is also the case of the University Program of Studies on Cultural Diversity and Interculturality from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Its work with the Indigenous Arts Center had already been mentioned. The objectives of this institution are to conduct, promote, and coordinate disciplinary or interdisciplinary research studies of theoretical and methodological nature applied to social issues in Mexico and other regions. This is done within the framework of cultural diversity and interculturality, aiming to generate and contribute new knowledge to the humanities and social sciences. Additionally, the institution seeks to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental social, community, or family structures in Mexico

The Program also develops the faculty project "Mexico, Multicultural Nation". This project started its activities as an optional subject at UNAM in 2002. It is currently taught in a total of 11 higher education campuses. The program contributes to the training of students from the field of cultural diversity in bachelor's degree courses such as Law, Political Science, Architecture, Philosophy and Literature, Economy, Social Work, Design, Medicine, Science, among others.

Mexico and the international cooperation in the context of the 2003 Convention

Mexico has a long tradition in international cooperation. Especially in Intangible Cultural Heritage, several projects have been conducted giving a testimony on the important impact the exchange of experiences and good practices with other nations has had to the country.

For example, in 2020 a course was held to strengthen capacities around the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It was executed in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture from Colombia. The course was implemented as part of the commitments assumed through the Cultural, Educational and Sports Cooperation Agreement between Colombia and Mexico 2018-2021. The activity targeted bearers, cultural promoters, managers and other actors involved in its safeguarding in Mexico. Its main objective was to strengthen the technical capacities from participants, coming from different regions of Mexico. It sought to motivate community self-management of cultural heritage among ICH-bearing communities regarding its safeguarding, based on the experience in the development of special safeguarding plans in Colombia.

This drove Mexico to structure, for the first time since the country ratified the 2003 Convention in December 2005, the strategy for strengthening the self-management capacities for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This strategy is currently being implemented in Mexico, and that has been a turning point in the process of implementing the 2003 Convention in the country.

The Mexico-Colombia collaboration has definitely demonstrated that strengthening the institutional collaboration bonds, especially in cultural and educational projects, contributes to the social development of countries and their populations. Thus, one of the most significant premises from the 2003 Convention and from UNESCO itself is fulfilled.

However, it is important that the aspect around the Intangible Cultural Heritage expands and becomes stronger, especially for countries in the Latin America and Caribbean Group (GRULAC). In other words, collaboration is crucial, especially with countries sharing similar cultural and institutional contexts. Additionally, it's essential for the region to establish new cooperative ties with different parts of the world to create opportunities for dialogue, exchange of experiences, and sharing of best practices. Therefore, there's a need to enhance the professional capacities of various stakeholders involved in safeguarding ICH, particularly in terms of international cooperation. It's also necessary to effectively evaluate and measure collaborative projects and secure technical and financial support.

In this sense, the work conducted by the Regional Center for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage for Latin America and the Caribbean (CRESPIAL) has been crucial in structuring a regional cooperation network. However, it is mandatory to strengthen it and expand the themes in which it has revolved around until now. Emphasizing the formation of facilitators and fostering the cross-articulation between different sectors with assignments related to the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, with the goal of promoting its full, in-depth approach.