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Knowledge and Nature: Why the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage is a Foundational Activity for Environmental Conservation

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Abstract

The work of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) under the UNESCO 2003 Convention, although 'cultural', is also essentially multidimensional in nature. Questions about livelihood and income, about product and market, about loss of habitat, about the need for long-term support of one kind or another are often raised by government officials and tradition bearers. Our work touches a much larger audience than state party functionaries, and its interests are fundamentally deeper than those of government and that is why addressing 'development' as an outcome has become central. Perspectives gathered in several countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including India, show that the more our training and that transitions to an economics that is participatory and not exploitative, the more we will see safeguarding becoming an accepted development methodology. Already we find that a wide variety of actors and stake-holders are considering their activity and subjects as being 'ICH' or in the universe of indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) and associated expressions. These actors and stakeholders may be educational and academic institutions, bearer and practitioner associations, civil society, NGOs, private sector and philanthropic foundations. Yet countries still fail to envision and conduct safeguarding ICH as part of their efforts towards attaining sustainability in natural resource use. One way to enable this is the localisation of ICH safeguarding training materials and methods as the foundation for capacity-building. This requires a novel approach, working on local needs with contact points in ministries, and in non-state institutions and organisations, and particularly with ICH groups and associations. Training on inventorying, safeguarding plans, national or sub-national policies, ICH and development, ICH and gender, ICH and

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biodiversity/climate change/environment will all benefit from specific treatment.

The vectors influencing safeguarding may be economic, policy (cultural and other), social, demographic and political change, environmental and natural (including disasters). Thus we need to study and apply the learning about development pathways that are in tune with the agro-ecological and climatic conditions and respect natural boundaries. Education is critical, to sensitise people to the inter-related subjects of culture, heritage, knowledge, transmission, and environment. In this way, for example, the connection between the raw material from which a musical instrument is crafted and the forest is made clear because the forest is nearby and requires protection. Under such an approach ICH safeguarding helps a country meet one or more of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), contributes to livelihood security and earning avenues for host communities, strengthens the ability of communities to adapt to the effects of climate change, deepens their capacity for undertaking environment stewardship as a foundational step for ICH safeguarding. It is practitioners and tradition bearers who are likely to provide the most compelling expertise. The UNESCO 2003 Convention shares subjects and aims with a number of international conventions and agreements on biodiversity, environment, flora and fauna, climate change. They all share goals of conservation and sustainable use, which are central to the SDGs. To meet their objectives, these (and other) conventions and treaties have developed a number of complementary approaches and operational tools that can benefit the work of the ICH Convention, and strengthen its contribution to having local and national ecological and natural habitats be treated with much greater care than has hitherto been done.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage, Development pathways, Environmental sustainability, Livelihood security.

Introduction

The tribes of North-East India consider humans to be integral in nature and that there is scarce or no difference between human and non-human forms in the same landscape. In fact, the small knowledge that humans came to possess was given by birds and animals, and this is a view of human origins that is commonly related in the North-Eastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. These are also viewed several ancient tribal societies in central India (such as the Santhal) share. For the Santhal, the human body is made up of the elements of nature: air, earth, and water. In this way, the human organism is a minute part of the macrocosm. In some other tribal societies, an element is dominant, and so the Bhuiyan is

associated with earth, or a form of nature is dominant, and so the Birhor is associated with the forest. In the region mostly covered by the modern Karnataka state, each distinct craft is associated with one of the five elements. The relationship between nature elements and humans is expressed in the active theater by the Paiks of modern-day Odisha state.

The farmer perceives the earth as divinity and mother. Thus agricultural work begins with the worship of the earth, and it is exceedingly common for farmers to find themselves as children of the soil. Traditionally, the agricultural societies work according to a territorial distribution based on soil or other earth-related characters. Some may inhabit the coastal region and cultivate the estuarine salt-resistant rice and protect their crops from the inundation of salt-water by building earthen dams. Others cultivate rice and vegetables in the coastal plains and valleys. Some are proficient at growing rice in hill-top villages. Still, others combine rice-cultivation with toddy-tapping of the wild palm in the interior hilly villages. These different groups held and accumulated knowledge about various qualities of different soils as related to the crops each type could support (qualities such as particle size, fertility, water-holding capacity, drainage characteristics and so on). In this fashion, the different nature-based communities divided the resources of the earth, without unhealthy competition between them and entirely sustainable.

These Agro-ecological societies have had until recently a strong tradition of using different local strains or varieties of crops, each suited to the type of soil. It is not unusual, especially in the river deltaic regions within twenty kilometers of the coast, to find that an administrative cluster of villages has within it the practical knowledge on thirty or forty local varieties of rice, each suited to different soil conditions. They know well that the river floods and when it does bring material from the forest-clad hills to enrich the soil and yield bountiful crops. In the same way, they acutely know of their proneness to erosion and quick depletion of fertility. To overcome this, they developed shifting cultivation involving a rotation of fields, a practice that has been prevalent all across the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia, and, which goes by hundreds of local names. During the fallow period vegetation in the field builds up. This vegetation is chopped and burnt to ashes, is distributed evenly over the field and so returns the depleted elements to the soil. Cattle are highly valued for their manure, which is nature's best tonic for the multitude of organisms that inhabit the soil and so influence the growth of crops.

These are some insights I have been fortunate to receive during the environmental and economic study in these regions from the early 1990s.

Context

This integral relationship has been shaken by new disturbances, and they are depleting these fundamental materials just as much as altering their nature. The fresh uncertainty is undermining the intimate knowledge held by communities

of natural processes in their specific locations, such as inter-annual variations in weather or the cycles of certain plant and animal species. Protecting such knowledge is of critical importance - not only for its role of being the cultural heritage, and for respecting the wealth of accumulated and transmitted knowledge - but because it possesses the keys to living with change, and especially living with the effects and impacts of climate change.

It is these questions - the finding of ways and means to reduce the harmful effects of climate change, and then the choice of behaviors that allow us to live in relative harmony with these effects - that have moved to the center of the scientific and technical debate about climate change. Except that in these circles, this is known as 'mitigation' and 'adaptation', words and concepts that can scarcely be rendered in the languages and dialects spoken by the bearers of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and the holders of indigenous and local, or traditional knowledge (ILK/TK).

It is known, however, on the ground is that the rate of change is testing, at times beyond the capacities of communities, the strength of their ICH and the depth of their local knowledge. Yet it is not climate change alone that is the villain, for the community endangering effects are in almost all cases the amplification by a changing climate of environmental degradation, of the over-exploitation of a natural resources base of urban and industrial encroachment into ecological commons that have long survived because of the cautious thriftiness of its human stewards.

There are 429 elements that have been inscribed in the lists (and register) of the 2003 ICH Convention, and my estimate is that not less than 80 percent of them are dependent, directly or indirectly, on the use of natural resources by their practitioners. Where ICH is expressed through art and performance, then musical instruments are made from these materials; rituals and customs need objects, which are both common and sacred and are fashioned from the product of local biodiversity; culinary ICH relies entirely on crops, herbs and horticultural product whose cultural significance can only be guaranteed when that product has been cultivated organically, from seed that has been locally saved. In this way 'applied' ICH - by which is meant a community's means of recognition of its relationships with the habitat, and the terms under which that community sustainably exploits that habitat - is totally circumscribed by natural resources.

When the qualities and characteristics of those natural resources change, or when their typical habitat cannot support them any longer, and they begin to wander (as plants have done to escape climatic stress), or even when they face new predators or invasive species were until then foreign and unknown, then the natural resources that ICH is linked to and depends upon becomes unsuitable or scarce and in turns weakens the ICH, at times even endangering it terminally.

In domains such as traditional medicine, forestry, the conservation of biodiversity, protecting wetlands, it is ICH practitioners and the communities

they belong to who see and interpret phenomena at scales much finer than formal scientists are familiar with, besides possessing the ability to draw upon the considerable temporal depth in their observation. For the formal sciences, such observations are invaluable contributions that advance our knowledge about environmental (including climate) change. For the local world, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices are the means with which the effects of climate change are negotiated so that livelihoods are maintained, ritual and cultivation continue, and survival remains meaningful.

Protection and evidence

In March 2017 the United Nations General Assembly, through its Human Rights Council, accepted the Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. This is the first-ever UN report acknowledging that losing biodiversity undermines human rights, for example, by reducing agricultural and fishery's outputs, by removing the plant basis for local medicinal traditions, or by cutting down plant species that act as filters in the water cycle.

The report, on the value of biodiversity to human beings, has been widely welcomed for underlining the right that people have to benefit from nature for their livelihoods and for leading rewarding and dignified lives. It re-establishes, in a rights framework that applies to communities; that human rights to food, water, housing, health and other social, economic and cultural rights are close if not directly bound to ecosystems and the nature-based material base upon which our societies depend. "The full enjoyment of human rights, including the rights to life, health, food, and water depends on the services provided by ecosystems," the report has said. "The provision of ecosystem services depends on the health and sustainability of ecosystems, which in turn depend on biodiversity. The full enjoyment of human rights thus depends on biodiversity, and the degradation and loss of biodiversity undermine the ability of human beings to enjoy their human rights."

While the report focuses on the value of biodiversity to human beings, the Special Rapporteur noted that the components of biodiversity also have the intrinsic value that may not be captured by a human rights perspective, but which 'applied' ICH can elicit. In the same way, it recognizes the link between human rights and biodiversity and thus has the potential to collaboration between the conservation, human rights, and development communities to achieve the objectives of sustainable development. Such collaboration, in my view, will be successful when it rests upon the cultural basis that is common to conservation, rights, and development.

ICH and ILK/TK therefore, are central to such collaboration because of the very trans-disciplinary character. This centrality is brought out by the report when it lists the procedural human rights obligations of states in relation to the

environment for the included duties are: (a) to assess impacts and make environmental information public; (b) to facilitate public participation in environmental decision-making, including by protecting the rights of expression and association; and (c) to provide access to remedies for harm. The reckoning of and communication of impacts, participation, expression, and remedies - all these are components of ICH safeguarding. The obligations of states referred to by the report have been clarified and extended in the environmental context based on the entire range of human, social and community rights at risk from environmental harm. They are supported by provisions in international environmental instruments, including principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

These obligations apply to measures that affect biodiversity in ways that threaten its full use ('use' in the sense known and practiced by ICH and ILK/TK bearers) by communities. Before a national or provincial government grants a concession for exploitation of a forest (logging), allows a dam on a river (hydro-electricity) or takes other steps that allow the degradation or loss of biodiversity (land zoning for industrial use or infrastructure), it should assess the environmental, social and cultural impacts of the proposal, provide unbiased and fair information about its possible effects, facilitate the informed public participation in the decision-making process, including by protecting the rights of freedom of expression and association, and give access to effective legal remedies for those who claim their rights have been violated.[1]

There has in the last two to three years been a wider awareness of the inter-connection between biodiversity (the ecological basis of societies), communities and their living habitats, and the practices and knowledge systems found in those communities. The following few examples illustrate these:

* In March 2017, the High Court of the state of Uttarakhand in north India legally recognized the river Ganga, which rises in the Himalaya and empties into the Bay of Bengal over 2,500 kilometers away, as a living entity (as it has been regarded by Hindus since time immemorial). The court has directed the central government to recognize the river Yamuna as a living entity of India and to form a Ganga Administration Board for cleaning and better maintenance of the most important and sacred river in a country whose every river is considered sacred.[2]

* For the first time, the provincial government of West Papua, Indonesia, has handed over 3,000 hectares of forest to indigenous communities, who plan to see agribusiness out, and harvest products from forests without cutting them down. The agreement grants villagers the right to

[1] http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/34/49.

[2] http://www.oneindia.com/india/rivers-ganga-yamuna-are-now-legal-entities-2380119.html.

reject the advances of palm oil, logging and pulpwood companies in favor of pursuing alternative, deforestation-free livelihoods.[3]

* Contemporary science belatedly recognizes the ageless science of farmers, such as these in northern Thailand whose swidden-fallow systems maintain a mosaic of fields, fallows, and forests that are heterogeneous and therefore, resilient to climate change. When managed properly such systems preserve local biodiversity, even as they enable villagers to harvest a broad range of vegetables, herbs, and fruits from the fields and wild medicines and edible plants from the forests.[4]

* Even small environmental indicators such as squirrel behavior in fall, or caterpillar markings, can illustrate a traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) data set that has been established and relied on for other traditional activities, such as gathering or hunting and/or fishing, and has done so for generations. Long ignored by formal sciences, the importance of traditional ecological knowledge is now becoming visible as foundational systems with which most indigenous populations operate. It evolves from generations of experience; a base that is incomparable in terms of the depth, breadth, and holistic perspectives that it provides for an ecosystem.[5]

* New UN platform for indigenous and local community climate action: "The international climate policy arena has recognized the unique role that indigenous peoples and local communities play in exchanging knowledge, technologies, practices, and efforts of local communities and indigenous peoples related to addressing and responding to climate change," the UNFCCC has said. This platform will exchange experiences and sharing of best practices on mitigation and adaptation. It came about through the decision adopting the Paris Agreement in December 2015. Thereafter during the climate conference held in Marrakech in November 2016, countries adopted a participatory approach to developing the local communities and indigenous people's platform.[6]

* In November 2016 representatives of civil-society organizations, farmers, fisher folk, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, consumers, youth

[3] http://www.eco-business.com/news/west-papua-gives-indigenous-communities-control-over-forests/.

[4] http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/03/160303-thailand-farmers-slash-and-burn-forests-climate-environment/.

[5] http://blog.ucsusa.org/science-blogger/the-importance-of-traditional-ecological-knowledge-tek-when-examining-climate-change.

[6] http://newsroom.unfccc.int/paris-agreement/new-un-platform-to-boost-indigenous-peoples-and-local-communities-climate-action/.

networks, women's networks, food processors, practitioners, government, academics and researchers, recognizing that food systems in Africa have dramatically changed over the last century, issued the Addis Ababa Declaration on Agro-ecology, Ecological Organic Agriculture and Food Sovereignty. They called for collaborative and strategic action to create more momentum for change and to emphasize the need for a multi-sectoral and holistic approach to nutrition and health. They said Agro-ecology/ecological, organic production systems are the true future, delivering not only on economic objectives but also on environmental, social, cultural, nutritional and health objectives.[7]

* Indigenous and community forestry is the key to slowing species extinction and global warming, so governments must do more to guarantee the land rights of forest peoples, as well as their participation in decision-making, experts told the UN Convention on Biological Diversity's 13th major conference in November 2016. Community forest enterprises in the Maya Jungle Alliance are providing ecosystem services to conserve the largest rainforest in Mexico and Central America, in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor.[8]

Conclusion: integral safeguarding

The work of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) under the UNESCO 2003 Convention is in 'culture' but is also essentially multi-dimensional in nature. During capacity-building workshops and training session, likewise, during advisory missions and policy guidance assignments, questions about livelihood and income, about product and market, about the loss of habitat, about the need for long-term support of one kind or another have all been raised by government officials and tradition bearers.

The audience for our work is much larger than state party functionaries, and the interests of the wider audience are fundamentally deeper than those of government. That is why addressing 'development' as an outcome of our work has moved from being important to being central. The perspectives I have gathered while co-conducting workshops in several countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and also from my work in India, has shown the more our materials, methods and advice support a development that respects environment and nature, which is socially just, and that transitions to an economics that is participatory and not exploitative, the more we will be able to see safeguarding, in fact, becoming an accepted development methodology.

We already find that a wide variety of actors and stakeholders is considering their activity and subjects as being ICH and TK/ILK and the expressions of

[7] http://afsafrica.org/addis-ababa-declaration-on-agroecology-ecological-organic-agriculture-and-food-sovereignty-the-way-forward-for-nutrition-and-health-in-africa/.

[8] http://news.trust.org/item/20161230060444-5ffp4/.

such knowledge systems. These actors and stakeholders may be educational and academic institutions, associations of bearers and practitioners, civil society and NGOs, the private sector and philanthropic foundations. However, countries still falter at both envisioning and carrying out safeguarding ICH as part of their effort towards attaining sustainability in using natural resources (thus environmental sustainability).

One measure to enable this is the localization of our ICH safeguarding training materials and methods as the foundation for capacity building - this is indeed vital for the province/state level. This requires an approach that is different from that adopted, until now: working on local needs with our points of contact in ministries, and in non-state or para-statal institutions and organizations, and particularly with ICH groups and associations. Training that has to do with inventorying, safeguarding plans and programmes, framing of policy nationally or sub-nationally, ICH and development, ICH and gender, ICH and biodiversity/climate change/environment will all benefit from specific treatment. This is 'integral safeguarding'.

We recognize now that the influencing vectors upon safeguarding (whether policy or plan) may be economic, policy (unrelated and related to culture), social and demographic change, political change, environmental and natural (including disasters). Thus it becomes necessary to study and to apply the learning from that study; development pathways are in tune with the Agro-ecological and climatic conditions, that recognize and stay within natural boundaries. Education is critical, to sensitize students, teachers and all their families to subjects (culture, heritage, knowledge, transmission, environment) that are best treated together. In this way, the connection between the raw material and a musical instrument which is crafted from, is made clear because the forest is nearby, and the forest requires protection.

Under such an approach, ICH safeguarding helps a country meet one or more of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), contributes to livelihood security and earning avenues for host communities, strengthens the ability of communities to adapt to the effects of climate change, deepens their capacity for undertaking environment stewardship as a foundational step for ICH safeguarding. Practitioners and tradition bearers are likely to offer the most compelling ability.

The UNESCO 2003 Convention shares subject areas and aims with the implementing apparatus of several international conventions and agreements on biodiversity, environment, flora and fauna, climate change: to name some of the most prominent, these are the Conventions on Biological Diversity, the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the World Heritage Convention, the International Plant Protection Convention, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Likewise, there are multi-agency international networks such as the

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Future Earth, which is a major international research platform on global sustainability issues, and The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB). All these share goals of conservation and sustainable use, which are central to the SDGs.

To meet their objectives, these (and other) conventions and treaties have developed a number of complementary approaches and operational tools that can benefit the work of the ICH Convention, and strengthen its contribution to having local and national ecological and natural habitats be treated with much greater care than has hitherto been done.

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