



Social transformation with UNESCO heritage

*By Clara Bertrand Cabral**

Culture can be experienced in many ways and serve many purposes. As the only United Nations Agency with a mandate in the field of Culture, UNESCO has thrived since its creation in 1946 to develop initiatives aimed at achieving the collaboration among the nations through culture, as indicated in its Constitution. Even through the conventions and specific programs are agreed by State Parties at the international level, their implementation has a significant impact at a national, regional and local levels, and throughout the times have contributed to change the way people address cultural issues. This is the case of heritage conventions, whose popularity and power to foster change is undeniable.

When in 1972 the World Heritage Convention was adopted, no one could guess that 45 years later it would have been joined by 193 States – almost as many as UNESCO itself – and more than 800 cultural properties in over 150 countries would have been recognised for its outstanding universal value. The consequences of the inscription on the World Heritage List is well documented and differ according to the type of property, namely whether it is a monument, an historic centre, a cultural landscape or an historic route or canal. In general, it is believed that there are several positive impacts upon the site's inhabitants: beside a better awareness regarding the value of their heritage, which generally leads to an enhanced sense of self-esteem, World Heritage properties have the possibility of attracting growing numbers of visitors, thus improving local economies and creating new opportunities for the populations.

However, this international recognition may also have negative effects on populations unprepared for changes in their livings, and special attention has been given by UNESCO to the involvement of the communities in World Heritage issues, from the preparation of nominations to the management of the sites. In addition, the intangible aspects of cultural properties are nowadays especially valued and cherished for they are indeed, in many cases, the bond that links people to places.

This focus on intangible heritage has recently been further recognised by the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has been accepted by 172 State parties in just 14 years, and has already over 400 elements inscribed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists and in the Register of Best Safeguarding Practices. In spite of being a cultural heritage standard-setting instrument, the heart and aim of the convention are the people, who are called to identify, manage and safeguard their own heritage, thus transforming the Convention, if properly implemented, into a truly democratic and empowering instrument, capable of achieving enduring social transformations and positively contributing to sustainable development.



Heritage issues, and particularly intangible heritage ones, have influence over most aspects of people's lives and activities. Bearing this in mind, in 2016 a whole new chapter entitled "Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development at the national level" was added to the Operational Directives of the 2003 Convention. In the section about inclusive social development "States Parties are encouraged to recognize that inclusive social development comprehends issues such as sustainable food security, quality health care, quality education for all, gender equality and access to safe water and sanitation, and that these goals should be underpinned by inclusive governance and the freedom for people to choose their own value systems". Other sections focus on inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability and intangible cultural heritage and peace, thus emphasising the broad and comprehensive scope of heritage.

In our globalised world, most cultural heritage, either tangible or intangible, is the result of contacts among peoples which allowed the exchange of ideas and knowledge, of practices, of experiences, of ways of living and believing. The diversity of heritage is a reflection of the diversity of cultures, and it is both useful to point out heritage differences and common features. In this sense, UNESCO has been encouraging the presentation of transnational serial nominations in both conventions, and State Parties are successfully responding to this challenge. As some other countries, Portugal is particularly well positioned regarding this matter due to its history, for it has shared tangible and intangible heritage with countries in all continents. As regards World Heritage, more than 25 properties related to Portugal and the Portuguese are already inscribed on the World Heritage List and many others have been identified. And countless elements of intangible cultural heritage are shared by the Portuguese and other communities all around the world.

In the troubled and uncertain times our societies are living in, it is imperative to recall the original aim of UNESCO's mandate of building peace in the minds of men and women, and the mobilising power of heritage can undoubtedly play an important role in this endeavour.

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