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Cécile Duvelle*
talks to Hanna Schreiber and Lucas Lixinski

“We Need to Make Synergies
between the Conventions.
This is the Next Step for UNESCO...”

Hanna Schreiber and Lucas Lixinski: Can you share with us your memories from the drafting of the Convention and the first years of the functioning of the Convention?

Cécile Duvelle: You know that before becoming the Secretary of the Convention in October 2008 I was in the office of the Director General since 1999 and as such I was in charge of cultural matters, and I was also the speech writer for Mr Matsuura. ICH was one of his obsessions, I would say. Immediately when he came to UNESCO, and he came after having been a chairperson of the World Heritage Committee, maybe it was in an inauguration speech that he already said there was a big gap in the actions of UNESCO in terms of heritage. ICH was not on the radar at the time. And I think it was because he was Japanese, and in Japan ICH is a normal topic and he was shocked that in such an institution it was not. So he engaged in that very much. And at that time Mrs Noriko Aikawa, a chief of the department

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that was dealing with the ICH program, was working on the Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, so he speeded up the Proclamation. He said it was a good way of enhancing the visibility of ICH and he convinced Japan to finance the process of drafting. And, as I was myself in his cabinet, drafting his speeches and also in charge of all activities in the culture sector, I can say my role was a bit across the board. Because he could not attend all expert meetings, I was there, to report to him but also to convey his opinions. I am a trained anthropologist, so I was at ease with the subject, and I had a very good relationship with Noriko Aikawa, so I think I really was a part of the story from the very beginning. It was a long process. It took from 1999 when he came with the idea and we ended in 2003, so it was a few years. Yes, it was very interesting for me to see how much the world, and the representatives of the governments, were so different in their understanding of what was at stake – there were very strong debates. The Europeans were laughing, saying it was not serious. Even colleagues in UNESCO, in particular from tangible world heritage, were laughing!

So from the very beginning I was “Mrs Intangible”, even in the cabinet. I was defending the idea. I thought it was fundamental that we engage in this area. And I must say I was so happy to see that the Director General, each time he was in a country – and he did this very often and I often went with him – always spoke about the Convention, both when it was in its elaboration and after it was adopted of the need of the ratification. So my life with the Convention did not start in the position of Secretary. When I came in as the Secretary I was already completely submerged in the Convention – I came after Rieks Smeets, who replaced Noriko Aikawa after the adoption and he was in charge of the elaboration of the Operational Directives. And I came at the time when the first Operational Directives were adopted and the first inscription took place. So it was funny, because at that time we had three very different periods of the Convention and with a different person in charge each time.

HS and LL: If you were to indicate the most important people of that time, who would they be?

Well, the draft was elaborated by people, by experts. They drafted the Convention. It is not the Secretariat that drafted it. For instance, a lot of expert meetings took place in order to discuss the definitions, for example of the “communities”. The text of the Convention came after many contributions that were not the product of one person. And each word was very much negotiated.

I remember that during the ongoing debate (I even remember the room, it was Room 12), there were people who did not want Lists, and people who said “yes, but Lists can also draw attention”. At the beginning, however, there was only an idea to have an emergency list, the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, because the logic of the Masterpieces was that ICH is in danger and the Convention should address that. And I remember as if it were yesterday, that the representative of Benin, Mr Olabiyi Yaï, a representative of Benin for a long time who was a linguist, who said: “If ICH on the list is represented only by the things that are dying, we are giving a wrong idea of what it is, because ICH is also to be celebrated, it is joy, it is fantastic. Not all ICH is dying, so we need to show also expressions that are in good shape to celebrate ICH”.

So this is how the good idea of having the Representative List of ICH was born.

HS and LL: Do you think that the experiences collected during drafting and adopting the Convention that you, Noriko Aikawa, Riëks Smeets, and others had at that time, are used today?

I think that the academic world is interested in these experiences, but “the owners of the Convention” – those in charge of its governance – who are the politicians and the representatives of the States, do not care that much, because they want it to be operational, and they are not interested in the reasons behind the things, especially if certain things do not support their points of view and immediate interests.

More and more research is being done and there are more people working on the topic right now than there were ten years ago. And I think this trend will be kept up and there will be more people writing and publishing about it. However, I do not think it will be necessarily used by those who run the Convention. As is often the case with scientific work. If you see how much clever work and scientific evidence has been produced on sustainable development and how many *unsustainable* choices are made every day, you can see that it is not the scientific evidence that matters, but the political will in any field. I think the sources of wisdom are plenty, but they are not interesting for some.

HS and LL: We have also noticed many pessimistic remarks on how politicized the Convention is sometimes...

As most of them are...

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HS and LL: Out of six cultural conventions, do you see any siblings or cousins of the ICH Convention?

I think we have two sibling or cousin conventions. Clearly we are very close to the 2005 Convention. We are “a policy convention”. Since I came to the Secretariat I put the emphasis on the implementation of the Convention at the policy level, not just on the listing role, because I also saw the limits of the implementation of the 1972 Convention, as it has been turned into “a list Convention”. It should be noted that the 1972 Convention does not speak only about the list; the list is one of the mechanisms. The 1972 Convention is about the whole heritage. There is Article 12, which says that the heritage not on the list deserves equal attention. And the World Heritage List is a mechanism to highlight and raise awareness, and they choose the outstanding universal value as criteria. But the purpose of the 1972 Convention is not the list. Unfortunately, the implementation has steered the 1972 Convention in that direction though. It was the first convention to have a list like that, and I think they probably had not foreseen at the beginning that it was a risky way to go. But when I came in, I already knew this unfortunate trend. So I did not want to immediately put the list as the main mechanism. I knew it was going to help, because it was giving visibility. But from the beginning I knew I had to push the other way, which I did. And I succeeded. I succeeded in convincing some States – not all, but at least some – and some of them know that they have a better way to go. And they did it because a person in charge of the 2003 Convention in a given State was convinced. I think I didn’t avoid placing a high visibility on the Representative List because that is not controllable, but I succeeded in emphasizing another side of Convention, and I put all my efforts into that. My big success, if I can call it that, is the capacity-building strategy which I developed from scratch. I said to all donors: do not give me money for anything else; I do not want to do exhibitions; I do not want to do expert meetings on topics that you like; I just want to do the capacity-building. And I got a lot of money like that, because they were surprised and because they were pleased to have a clear project, and they felt they needed it.

HS and LL: So, you think the capacity-building program is the biggest success of the ten years after entry into force of the Convention, the most important project and also the real “spirit” of the Convention?

Yes, because capacity-building is the spirit of the Convention. When I came in, we had four PowerPoint presentations of ten slides each, explaining the Convention. And my colleagues were running around the world and I said: “no, no, we cannot do that. First, we are not teachers, and we are not going to travel all around the

world. I love traveling but this is not our job”. We unfortunately had to process the nominations, etc. So we needed to have an army of trainers. So I said: “Let’s train around ten instructors per region, so that they can train their regions”. We chose the experts that we knew, or even people that we did not know but discovered, because we were looking for them through various activities. We developed materials on specific topics after having asked colleagues from the UNESCO field offices: “What are the things you need to understand?” The answers were: “What are the benefits of ratification? What are the obligations around the Convention? How to do the inventory? How to prepare the nominations? How to make a safeguarding project?”

So, we first decided our priorities. We developed our materials in a logical, chronological order and we gathered a vast material for the teachers and for the tutors. And we started raising money for translation into different languages, because you are not going to speak to the Russians in Spanish, just like you are not going to speak Russian in Bolivia.

HS and LL: Do you think we should have at least one trainer per country?

You should have several trainers in each country.

HS and LL: Because now the capacity-building program has some limitations related to the costs of training and the limited number of people.

Of course it does. Our idea at first was to have ten trainers per region to start with. But the idea was that we develop training for trainers within the countries.

HS and LL: But eventually it has not worked this way.

Yes, you need time and you need money. In the first years we developed the training material and curricula, then we trained our trainers, say one hundred people around the world. Each time we did the training in a different region. We went locally. Can you imagine how many hours of training for the trainers we had on each topic?

HS and LL: And how many people from the Secretariat were involved in developing the capacity-building program? Four people, you said?

Yes. Of course we also had external experts, and Rieks Smeets and Harriet Deacon contributed to a lot of materials. But we also requested other people. So depending on the topic, we had to develop it, usually in English, and then to translate into several languages and to update them each year because of the changes taking place in the implementation of the Convention. I think it has completely opened up the

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understanding of the Convention. After a few years people were starting to have a better understanding, including within UNESCO. And of course this process is not finished and they continue to expand the network again. It is always limited by the means, but there must be several trainers in each country and the UNESCO materials must always be available to all the people who need them. But it is not so easy to understand this, and it is not enough to just read them, you need to have a dialogue with people.

HS and LL: We started talking about sisters and cousins of the 2003 Convention, and you mentioned the 1972 and 2005 conventions. Poland organized the meeting on building bridges between 2003 and 1972 Convention in Krakow, during the 41st World Heritage Committee session...

Yes, I wish I could have been there...

HS and LL: ... And the final remark was that there is an awareness in both Secretariats that we have this potential of joining in common efforts and the number of places inscribed in one list and on the other are connected in many aspects to each other. We have this Krakow example: Old Town is inscribed on the World Heritage List and the Nativity Scene Tradition might one day be inscribed into the Representative List of ICH. However, though there is an awareness of these mutual connections on both sides, there are no mechanisms for building these bridges in practice, in the field.

I have two things to say on that subject. First, for me, working together is not about elements inscribed in one list or another. The way the Conventions can complement each other is how a country can implement them together in a coordinated and complementary way. Implementing the Convention is a “policy” issue, it is not a “site” issue. My dream is really to provide States with a common cultural framework policy integrating all conventions. Because a State is one entity, and a ministry of culture is also only one institution. If you provide them with six very precise guidelines for each Convention, they just do not know where and how to start.

I wanted to have a common mechanism, not only because it is interesting, but because it is a request from States. Delivering such a platform would prove UNESCO is serving its fundamental purpose to protect, safeguard, and promote cultural diversity in all its components. We internally had a kind of group of all Secretariats of the Conventions, the Secretaries. And we were meeting once a month in order to share, because we understood it was a need. But it ended up with sharing technical things, we never went into anything substantive.

It is a real challenge. But why? Because sometimes you see provisions of the implementation of the 1972 Convention that are problematic in terms of the provisions of the 2003 Convention. And I think this is very worrying. An institution like UNESCO cannot on the one hand say one thing, and on the other hand say something else to a State that is a party to both treaties.

We should have put in place a mechanism to share and to make sure that nothing comes from UNESCO's mouth putting one treaty in a collision route with another. We should not care if we are in the context of 1972, 2005, or 2003 Convention, because if the State is a party to those three conventions, it is supposed to implement the three Conventions together. So nothing should go out that is problematic to one of the Conventions.

So this is the next step for the UNESCO. We need to create and enhance synergies. People very often think that the synergy is to inscribe together the elements on the ICH lists. This is not the point. The point is to have an integrated cultural policy putting all that in place to organize the ministry of culture around the priorities of the Conventions. It is a broader, more holistic thing.

There is still ongoing work on the governance of UNESCO, including the Conventions, etc. And a part of the conclusion of the experts is to have the same States in all committees so that one single committee can speak about all and make one single Secretariat for the conventions. So it is a vision about saving money, staff, and meetings, but nothing about the substance, which to me is more vital to the very essence of UNESCO.

HS and LL: There is a risk in that type of approach...

Yes. And that is why the General Conference has not accepted it. I mean, they are trying to save money in merging and pulling together resources. It is not necessarily going to solve the issue, but maybe if there is one Secretary of all conventions, then they will work together. Maybe, or maybe not. It is an intellectual problem and it is not solved yet. But it should be done, because I think it will give more relevance to UNESCO's work.

HS and LL: Taking into account recent developments in international relations related to the abuse of cultural heritage, on the ground of what happened for example in Syria or in Iraq, and the growing attention, not only about the places and sites, but also about the people who are there, do you think there is a potential for the development of the principle of safeguarding ICH in armed conflicts?

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This has been a big problem for us, because as you know UNESCO has been quite active these last years, unfortunately because of all these events. I think in times of war and conflict I understand perfectly that the protection of the physical heritage is something that has to be done in order to prevent further destruction, but when people are displaced and they need to be saved, there is nothing more important than to help them escape. So the ICH issue appears because people are displaced, they are far away from their native land and sometimes they are no longer in a position to draw on the heritage for resilience, but are just recovering. We had proposals, attempts for organizing some cooking or music ateliers in refugee camps, but this is not the work of UNESCO. UNESCO is a policy organization. We are not an NGO. I did not feel able to engage in this kind of things. I think we are much more able to interact in post-conflict situations, when peace has come back and when ICH can help people to recover and reconcile, and find back the things that are really important for them. And reconnect with the real, normal life. But really during conflicts, even if we have been called several times, I feel we are not properly equipped to realistically do something normal. I remember for Haiti, after the earthquake, we proposed something that was not retained, which was to organize small inventory recordings by young people to elders in the refugee camp, just to have an activity and record things and eventually have people telling stories about earthquakes and how they recovered. But we were not selected by the UN, because it was not as important as the water problem, or even protecting museums from looting. So we could only do the protection of the tangible masterpieces, only tangible. After that I read a lot of articles, where people were saying that they had constructed tents and shelters for the people that were in the streets, organized safe water, but that people do not go there – they prefer to sit in their destroyed houses and organize prayers. And I told myself: “yes, those who think that the shelters are the priority for people, have just missed the point in asking what the priority was for the people”. And if for the people the priority was a praying or organizing a singing place to soothe the pain...

I think that the international community is not necessarily ready for that step. The international community is still very Western-minded, Western-oriented – in the way that they understand what the priorities are, and they propose to the populations in need different things in good faith. We have to consider that one population is not similar to another population and that their needs are not necessarily the same. I also have a good example of that: there was an earthquake, I think in Bolivia, and there were a lot of clothes that were brought in from various international organizations for the people because it was cold. And women refused

to wear these clothes, because they did not have the proper design, and for them there was even a problem that they were not in line with their ICH.

ICH is not easy for the international community to understand, as it takes time.

So, I would say that I see better possibilities to act in post-conflict interventions than in conflict interventions.

HS and LL: If you had a crystal ball, and took into account all your experience and knowledge, what do you think will be the next step ahead of the Convention? What future directions might be for the Convention?

I think there is a serious trend toward opening the doors to the list and having a flood of nominations. This is not necessarily a bad thing. What I think is a bad thing is to allow the flood with the impression of being included into the list as a serious and very competitive process. But if the doors are open and at the end everything can enter and thousands of elements are entering, in a way I would also be happy, because then UNESCO will be the repository of the ICH inventories, all of the inventories of all the countries. Why not?

I think anyway it will happen, because it is not sustainable as it functions now. As I see it, States want to have open doors in order to have more elements listed. And it is alright, all the process facilitating the dialogue, etc. At some point, as I understand it, the Secretariat is giving up on that topic. I have a feeling that the Secretariat thinks it is a lost battle and not necessarily a good battle. So probably, there will be, in a few years, a real open list, but without criteria of inscription, or with only one, not five criteria as it is now actually.

HS and LL: Without an Evaluation Body?

Maybe the resources and time will be spent on more interesting things. You know, the Evaluation Body and all this treatment consumes time and money. It is taking more than half of the working time of the staff each year, and at a time when the staff is scarce and lacks resources for promoting or finding new ways of good safeguarding practices etc.

I think at one point it is obvious that it is not sustainable and not serious to have these middle ground lists which are supposed to go through very serious screening, but in the end nearly everything gets in. So why spend so much money and time where everybody wants to be, why not facilitate the integration with the other safeguarding mechanisms instead?

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And I would be happy, because at the end we will see a bigger difference with the World Heritage Lists, which need to have very serious screening and criteria. But I think it will happen because of the pressure of States and the acceptance of the Secretariat which oversees it that it is not manageable as it is.

HS and LL: Any other things you foresee? How about the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices? What will happen with the Register?

This is now more wishful thinking than a crystal ball. Because I would like very much that a strong repository of good safeguarding practices be elaborated by the Secretariat if time allows. My hope would lie in some States that are exemplary in the way they are implementing the Convention and that are showing how much the Convention is more than a visibility tool.

That is why in the capacity-building curricula we refused to start with nominations. We started with implementation of the Convention at the national level. We continued with inventorying, safeguarding, and then we also explained how to make a nomination. But the nomination is in a way only a photograph of what is implemented. It cannot be the starting of an action on ICH for a State. And this is what is happening very often. The first action that very often States take is running for the nomination. And they do the inventory just for the purpose of the element to be presented, having no legal framework, no institutions in charge, no plan. Sometimes it is just one or two people lost in the ministry of culture who are managing the process. It is tough though, because it is not the way that will help us safeguard ICH, not by making a beautiful book.

HS and LL: On the other hand, we can see that the first nomination from a country creates so much interest that other initiatives happen to be possible, like the creation of the national register of the safeguarding practices, which is a step following the thinking: we have the first nomination, now we have to really take care of this issue.

I respect it if it works like that, but it is not usually the case. In France we have ten nominations and there are still only two or three people dealing with ICH in the ministry of culture. This is not acceptable, compared to the high number dealing with tangible heritage or creativity. Real change and real consideration of ICH safeguarding means people. You need to have people in charge.

HS and LL: True. But limitations regarding people and resources devoted to ICH are everywhere...

Yes, especially if you look at the number of people working in tangible heritage... I also need to tell you why the idea of the best safeguarding practices is not working. Actually, this concerns not only safeguarding, but also the international assistance, and the list of urgent safeguarding. I think there are several reasons why they are not working. One of them is obviously the limitation of the nominations per year, which forces a State to make a choice, and you know where such a choice goes. So this is very simple.

The second reason is that having the best safeguarding practice inscribed should be the beginning of the way, because the interest lies in promoting it, not only inscribing it and to having it on the website. This implies work from the Secretariat, and a promotion strategy. And I must say that we were unable to do this for practical reasons; lack of human resources. I felt very frustrated because of that. I saw what was needed but I just could not deliver. We were flooded with nominations to the Representative List and we could not afford not to do them properly. We had also many other things to do. If you look at the list of decisions the Committee takes each meeting, there is a human resource problem. Each year in front of the Committee I have said: “We have a human resource problem, and you need to choose what the priorities are”. And the priority was never to promote the Register of the best safeguarding practices. I would have loved it, but it was never that. It was to consider more nominations for the Representative List. And I had to fight to keep this 50-nomination limit. And nearly every year some were starting to question it.

HS and LL: ICH is also more than the register...

Yes, we can have a lot of good input for the sustainable development agenda and not only for the cultural heritage as such. I’ve said I was very proud of my achievements in terms of the capacity-building. But if I was asked to mention a second thing, I would say – it is the new chapter of the Operational Directives on sustainable development. It is really my vision of what ICH is for in life. ICH is for the environment, for health, for agriculture, for peace, for many things outside of the heritage box. And this new chapter shows the role ICH can have in all areas of sustainable development. It could take a real form in a country – I would see a developing country that is more attached and connected with its ICH, which is not having a life so disconnected with its heritage. If this happens – I would be the happiest woman. And I think it can happen.

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HS and LL: The future of the Convention might seem bright, would you say?

I am not sure where it is going to go. What I am sure about is that it depends very much on the people. Both those who are running the UNESCO Secretariat and those within States. Life is made of people, and people make the world; not the texts, not the institutions. All of the institutions are made of people, so I hope for the best of the Convention, because I think it is one of the most extraordinary texts I have ever seen. It is purely democratic and respectful of the real people; it is not hierarchical; it is a fundamentally democratic text and it is at the core of the ideas of UNESCO, and of anybody who wants peace, respect, and dignity. So we are really at the basis of human rights and all similar values. I hope the Convention will have many friends in order to support it against some bad friends whom it will surely meet, too.