

ICH MANAGEMENT AND DRR IN VIETNAM

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Introduction

During the last two decades, the Vietnamese government has made a significant effort to the preservation and promotion of Intangible Culture Heritage (ICH). A large number of projects and programs have been implemented to conduct inventories to classify and restore lost and endangered ICH. The country has also prepared and submitted ICH related files to UNESCO for inscription on the Representative List of ICH of Humanity. The promotion of ICH elements aims at raising awareness of the local communities about their own heritage as an important part of cultural identity and the need to preserve this heritage. In addition, the dissemination of ICH as cultural assets is used as a strategy to strengthen the local economy through tourist development. In doing so, some local authorities separate ICH from its context and cultural environment. This approach is criticized because ICH, as living culture, needs to be nurtured within the communities that have created and/or held the heritage and should be regarded and managed as a total social phenomenon. The role of disaster risk reduction (DRR) in ICH management and preservation and vice versa is a pertinent example. Recent studies have shown that ICH has a close relationship with DRR. On the one hand, past experience and local knowledge about the universe, living environment play an important role in the community's resilience to disasters. Specifically, social-cultural norms and religious beliefs influence the perception of risks and thus the way communities respond to natural hazards. Furthermore, cultural practices such as rituals, lineage and religious institutions contribute to strengthening social capital that is an important element of the community's resilience. On the other hand, natural hazards have posed significant threats to ICH elements such as ICH holders (e.g. local communities, artisans, etc.) and cultural buildings where cultural practices take place and thus part of ICH.

Despite the close relationship between ICH and DRR, DRR has been poorly considered in ICH preservation, protection and promotion policies and practices in Vietnam and vice versa. This paper examines current ICH management policies and practices and its implication for DRR, and propose some recommendations on how the synergy between ICH and DRR in Vietnam can be improved.

The Concept of ICH in Vietnamese Legal Documents and the Role of State

In the 2001 Vietnamese Law on Cultural Heritage, ICH is defined as 'spiritual products of historical, cultural or scientific value, being saved in memory or in scripts, handed

down orally and through professional teaching, performance and other forms of saving and handing down, including speech, scripts, literary, art or scientific works, oral philology, folk oratorio, life style, way of life, rites, traditional craft know-how, knowledge about traditional medicine and pharmacy, about gastronomic culture, about traditional costumes, and other folk knowledge' (Art. 4, Law# 28/2001/QH10). This law highlights the role of the State (articles 17 to 26) and allows very limited room for community involvement in ICH's protection and promotion activities.

The 2001 Law was amended in 2009 in which ICH is redefined as 'spiritual products associated with related communities, individuals, objects and cultural spaces, which are of historical, cultural or scientific value, express the identity of communities, are constantly recreated and transmitted from generation to generation orally, through craft teaching, performing arts or in other forms' (Law#32/2001/QH12, underlines added by the author). This new definition was influenced by the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003 Convention), ratified by Vietnam in 2005 (as the 22nd country). It is observable that, for the first time, the notions of community, individuals, community identity, and culture spaces are introduced. This adjustment makes the concept of ICH less abstract and has important implication for the management of ICH.

ICH Management in Vietnam

Key policies, focus and achievement

The Vietnamese Government has been paying a lot of attention to ICH management. A decade after the introduction of reform policy *Đổi mới* in 1986, the 1st Program on the 'Protection and Promotion of Intangible Cultural Values' focusing on the endangered ICH elements and ICH of small ethnic groups (under 10,000 people) was approved under the National Target Program for Culture (NTPFC) in 1997 (Nguyễn Chí Bền 2005). The NTPFC is renewed every five years and always has one section on ICH safeguarding and promotion. In 2016, this NTPFC has the new name National Target Program for Culture Development.

In addition to the NTP for culture sector and the Law on Cultural Heritage, a number of policies and programs have been developed and implemented. These policies cover a range of activities, which can be grouped into the following areas: (i) investigate, collect, research and analyze the value of ICH; (ii) develop a data bank of Vietnamese cultural heritage including texts, photos, audio, and video; (iii) disseminate and promote the collected data; and (iv) disseminate ICH internationally.

To date, Vietnam has made significant achievements. A systematic inventory of ICH elements throughout the country has been conducted. Hundreds of projects for restoration, protection and promotion have been implemented (with 500 projects per five years program as an objective). Ten years after the 2003 Convention, two data banks were established at the national level and 15 satellites in provinces (Nguyễn Thế Hùng and Nguyễn Kim Dung 2014). In addition, being known as one of the most active UNESCO member states, Vietnam has 12 ICH elements inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of ICH of Humanity up to 2018 (Figure 1).



Figure 1 Bài Chòi Performance by artists from Bình Định Province in Hanoi. The art of Bài Chòi in Central Viet Nam was inscribed in 2017 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. (Source: Phan Phương Anh 2012)

Besides the policies that are directly linked to ICH, the Culture sector also develops annual plans for DRM for the sector at the national and provincial level.

Approaches and Gaps

1) Top-down approach and product oriented instead of process driven

Although Vietnam has made significant efforts in ICH preservation and promotion, there are still some big gaps. ICH policies are developed and implemented based on the top-down and sector-oriented approach. There has been limited room for an active and meaningful engagement of the community and other stakeholders/sectors. For example, while ICH has been strongly affected by natural hazards, the collaboration between agencies in charge of ICH and those responsible for DRM/DRR is very limited.

In addition, ICH management is often driven by product-oriented approach. Limited attention has been paid to relevant processes. For instance, the national government set the objective to conduct the inventory of ICH for the whole country (Cục Di sản Văn hoá 2019) and the implementing agency only focuses on having the physical list of ICH (there are 288 ICH elements classified on the national list up to January 2019) (Hoàng Phúc 2019). Questions such as how this list should be established, how ICH has been changed and what are the drivers of the viability/sustainability or decline of ICH are often not considered.

2) ICH managed separately from its socio-cultural environment and (changing) context, and also from the people

In Vietnam, ICH is often considered as fixed object even though it is continuously recreated and transformed. The support for the process of archiving ICH into books, audios and videos is useful for keeping the memory of endangered ICH elements and for research. However, this approach may also pose the risk of freezing ICH that is a living culture and need to be nurtured in its living context (Lê Thị Minh Lý 2010). In addition, the inventory and archiving process may separate ICH from the changing context and environment that contributes to the evolution/transformation of ICH. The case of *Bá Trạo*, a ritual opera taking part of the whale worship practice is a pertinent example. This worship includes multiple aspects related to the perception of risk and



Figure 2 Cá Ông (Whale) temple and altar in Sông Đốc, Cà Mau.
(Source: Phan Phương Anh 2012)

the recovery process after disasters of the fishermen community (Figure 2). However, only the Bá Trạo opera (instead of the whole whale worship) was inscribed separately to the national list of ICH in 2016. The promotion of such classified ICH is driven mainly by economic and tourism development purposes (See also Lê Thị Minh Lý 2010; Lê Hồng Lý et al. 2014). As a result, ICH elements are decontextualized from its environment and broader sociocultural contexts.

3) *Limited linkages between DRM and ICH management*

Past experience and local knowledge about the universe and living environment play an important role in the community's resilience to natural disasters. Specifically, social-cultural norms and religious beliefs influence the perception of risks and thus the way communities respond to natural hazards. Furthermore, cultural practices such as rituals, lineage and religious institutions contribute to strengthening social capital that is an important element of the community's resilience. At the same time, natural hazards have posed significant threats to ICH elements such as ICH holders (e.g. local communities, artisans, etc.), and cultural buildings and spaces where cultural practices take place. Despite the close relationship between ICH and DRR, DRR has been poorly considered in ICH preservation, protection and promotion policies and practices in Vietnam and vice versa.

As a legal requirement, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism has to establish an annual DRM action plan for the culture sector. However, this action plan is often poorly implemented especially with regards to ICH. The term 'intangible cultural heritage' is even not mentioned in the DRM action plan of the culture sector. In addition, DRR is often not considered in any legal documents related to ICH safeguarding and promotion. Our report on case study in Lào Cai province, reviewing policy documents from 2010 to 2016, also shows evidence of this gap (Phan Phuong Anh and Vu Canh Toan 2018). To date, there has been no work conducted by the sector to assess the impact of natural hazards on ICH. As a result, there is no plan and action to protect ICH holders and cultural spaces from natural hazards.

On the other side, the role of ICH is also underconsidered in DRR policy and practice. Most DRM/DRR policies, projects and programs only consider tangible heritages. In the list of the inventory of damages caused by major disasters, ICH is not even mentioned. From research perspectives, few studies have examined the impacts of

natural hazards on ICH, although there are some studies looking at the role of local knowledge in DRR and climate change adaptation activities.

The limited linkages between the ICH and DRM sectors can be explained by several reasons as following:

- the intangible nature of ICH makes the integration of ICH into DRM policies and practices challenges
- a framework to support the integration of ICH and DRR is not in place yet
- lack of capacity and also interest of government officials working in the culture sector in relation to DRM/DRR
- lack of recognition of the role of ICH in DRM by DRM officials/sector

Conclusion and Recommendations

By examining the current state of ICH management in Vietnam, this paper points out the key limitation of the existing ICH management policies as being top-down, sector based and product driven approaches that limit the participation and engagement of other sectors and stakeholders especially the communities who hold ICH, and that consider ICH as fixed objects that can be managed independently from its changing context and environment. This limitation can be a major cause of the lack of consideration of natural hazards and its impacts on ICH management policies and practices. To fill this gap, it is recommended that:

- 1) ICH should be developed and implemented based on a holistic and process driven approach that: manages ICH with close consideration of its context and environment as well as of the changing conditions that influence the existence, transformation and recreation of ICH; and that engages other relevant sectors and takes into account the voice of ICH holders and practitioners in a meaningful manner;
- 2) the role of ICH in DRM should be better recognized and the impact of natural hazards on ICH should be better understood;
- 3) new tools and framework to support the integration of ICH into DRR policies/practices and vice versa need to be developed;
- 4) the evolution and the drivers of changes/losses of ICH should be investigated during the process of ICH inventory.

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