

Report on The Second International Indigenous Peoples Forum: Side Event in the 42nd World Heritage Committee

By Claudia Uribe Chinen

Debates around the heritage stewardship of Indigenous communities are progressively gaining major attention in the international arena of the UNESCO World Heritage system, especially after the establishment of the recognition of rights and full involvement of indigenous people in the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. An important milestone was established during the Session of the World Heritage Committee in Krakow, with the creation of the International Indigenous People Forum in World Heritage (IIPFWH) and its recognition by the Committee in its Decision 41 COM 7. Following the agreements to continue the advocacy for the full respect of indigenous rights in all World Heritage processes, the second edition of the IIPFWH took place as a side event in the 42nd Session of the World Heritage Committee in Manama, Bahrain.

The event gathered experts especially from the African region. The panel was chaired by Dr. Kanyike Sena (Kenya) Director of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Coordinating Committee (IPACC), and included the participation of Leburu Andrias (Botswana), Chair of the International Peoples Forum on World Heritage (IIPFWH), Max Oof (Surinam), Policy Officer in the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Surinam, and Joseph Itongwa (Democratic Republic of Congo), Coordinator of the Network of Indigenous People in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Each of the speakers shared a perspective on the status, issues, challenges and prospects in regards with the impacts of the World Heritage system on indigenous peoples. Upon their reports and reflections, it was emphasized what has been calling for attention in recent years: The recognition of indigenous rights to participate in all decision-making processes related to the inscription of properties in the World Heritage List. Since indigenous communities are often attached to heritage sites through practices of subsistence, systems of beliefs or senses of place or identity, often revealing inextricable connections between nature and culture, any decision taken on these lands would imply a significant impact for the community. Therefore, their involvement and particularly, consultation -as stated by Mr. Andrias- should be conceived as a priority, but so far, this essential factor is being neglected or still remains absent, as reported by many contexts worldwide. This issue, in fact, is not exceptional to the properties inscribed in the World Heritage properties but -in general- to protected areas with natural and cultural values.

Despite an international legal framework has been implemented for addressing the demands of indigenous communities, local levels often witness a persistence of patterns of exclusion and lack of recognition of their rights. This aspect was especially remarked by Mr. Itongwa. In general, the reasons why World Heritage nomination processes (during and after) result in conflicting situations often respond to first, the structural fragilities expressed by national legislation, policies and the corresponding degrees of governance, and second, the management lacking of a participative approach. In fact, this issue demands a point of inflexion from a top-down protectionist to a more common responsibility and shared-benefit approach.

The engagement and participation of Indigenous peoples in the stewardship of heritage sites involving their activities or traditional knowledge is a substantial factor that not should be overlooked by any instance of national level processes including nomination, management, monitoring and reporting. Contrary to some negative perceptions, their participation and use of traditional practices might be effectively integrated in action plans requiring multi-level cooperation. Mr. Oof, for instance, mentioned indigenous communities could also contribute in the elaboration of State of Conservation Reports. In general, major dialogue and coordinated interaction seemingly require further implementation.

As stated by the speakers of the event, the forum is expecting to achieve sustainable solutions for the challenges being experienced by indigenous communities in their right to use and perform traditional practices in areas protected under the World Heritage system. One aspect remarked was the need of an inventory of involvement of these communities, so the shared experiences encoded in the database would allow the international framework to develop more accurate action plans and guidelines. It was mentioned that a website for the International Indigenous People Forum on World Heritage has been recently created. This is a still work-in-progress project, but promises to enable more multi-level synergies through a platform for the dissemination of information and experiences about how indigenous communities are affected, or how they can contribute in the World Heritage processes.

Even though still being discussed, another possibility for addressing these challenges is the development of an international fund in order to reinforce the aspects demanding assistance. Currently, there are no concrete agreements if UNESCO should undertake the management of this fund, as mentioned by Dr. Sena. Finally, to consider, but reminded several times as crucial, especially by Mr. Oof, is the potential of the mutual capacity building. The need of capacity building is commonly heard in all aspects related to heritage sites, but in regards with the involvement of Indigenous people, it would foster their visibility and empowerment in a scenario that leaves no room for their voices.

The forum would help to enable a platform for a more inclusive and mutual collaboration in the heritage stewardship at a global level. As mentioned by the Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, Mechtild Rössler, this is a historic moment. The participation of indigenous communities is being encouraged through different instruments and programs promoted by international organizations, but as reflected by the speakers of the Forum, this requires all those initiatives to be transformed in concrete actions.



Panel of the Second International Indigenous Peoples Forum in World Heritage (From left: Mechtild Rossler, Leburu Andrias, Max Oof and Joseph Itongwa).



Presentation by Max Oof, policy officer in the Association of Indigenous Village Leaders in Surinam.