

Enforcing in what we cannot grasp: Suggestions and policy implications on the development of sustainability indicators in intangible cultural heritage

Pablo Picó Salort, Yu Jie Law

Double Degree in Business Administration and International Relations, IE University, Madrid
Bachelor in International Relations, IE University, Madrid

E-mail: ppico.ieu2021@student.ie.edu; yjlaw.ieu2021@student.ie.edu

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Abstract

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Management is an emerging field within heritage preservation. Following the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the value of said patrimony has been brought to light. However, given its intangibility and abstractness, it presents significant challenges in its comprehension and management. Nonetheless, it reports very positive effects in different areas of governance and living, particularly in the sustainability of communities as a whole. We prove how the development of an appropriate framework is highly beneficial to helping the management efforts oriented towards sustainability and management, by proposing an approach that deals with both areas conjointly instead of separately. For it, we define sustainability as well as ICH and look at the overlap between them. We examine the current use of sustainability indicators in general heritage management, both at an organizational and academic level, to understand why they are insufficient and extract lessons to be applied to ICH. Then, we examine three different case studies to further examine what areas are left out of consideration by the current framework, as well as to indicate some potential indicators. Throughout it, we emphasize the need for concrete targets to be attained, as well as the similarities between cases. Finally, we further highlight the necessity for the indicators not only at a heritage level but also at a policy level. Some suggestions for policies are provided, as well as further research that can be done taking this paper as a basis.

Keywords: Heritage, Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICH, sustainability, sustainable heritage, UNESCO

I. Introduction

Not only do we attempt to understand, but also to measure what escapes our grasp. In order to conceive what is abstract, the human mind often tends to resort to measurable and concrete methods in order to simplify reality and provide some guidance. One of said areas that

often needs a tangible approach is sustainability, which has in recent decades acquired relevance in the sphere of public policy and management. As it is subsequently applied to more areas, the need for developing appropriate frameworks that fit them properly to properly evaluate approaches and formulate policies also increases. The field

of heritage management is no exception, and in the last two decades, we have seen some early developments.

In this paper, we contribute to these developments by assessing the usefulness of developing appropriate sustainable indicators in the management of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). ICH management is a field that sometimes proves complicated to tackle at a policy level, given its abstractness and complexity.

The interest in this paper comes from a research gap that currently exists in the field. While some studies have already analyzed the lack of consensus in measuring sustainable heritage¹ or urban heritage management,² there is currently no research that tries to bring sustainability indicators and ICH together through an assessment strategy. We believe and prove that the currently proposed indicators for overall sustainable heritage management are not sufficient for its intangible derivative, given the different challenges it proposes in its documentation, quantification, register, and approach.

In order to accomplish our task, we will first determine a definition for sustainability that we can use as a baseline, which will be mainly based on the one the UN provides in its 2030 agenda. We will then delve into the literature regarding heritage management, ICH, and the sustainable dimension of both, before reviewing the indicators that

have been proposed as a method to quantify the impact on the sustainability of their management. We compile the existing and proposed indicators on heritage management and examine them based on two criteria: how well they can be applied to intangible cultural heritage, and how well they fit within our defined framework for sustainability. Having established this theoretical basis, we will also analyze several case studies of intangible heritage and the literature around them: the Mediterranean Diet, the ceramics of Talavera and Puebla (in Spain and Mexico), and the practices around the Argan tree (in Morocco). Each of these case studies closely correlates with one of the three dimensions of sustainability that will be explained later: society, economy, and environment, respectively. The aim is to demonstrate how the proposed frameworks are insufficient for ICH, and how the field requires a specialized approach in order to facilitate its study and management. Finally, we will also discuss the policy implications of implementing said indicators, and how they can help facilitate the development of policies to be efficient. This principle will also be emphasized as important not only for ICH but for heritage management as a whole.

We have decided to take an indicator-oriented approach since it facilitates a consensus on practices that can be used across different regions and cases. Despite the complex reality of heritage management, having a series of measurable elements can facilitate its approach, especially in terms of standardizing some basic processes and holding decision-makers accountable. Although no specific set of

¹ Hari Gopal Shrestha, et al. "Identification of Indicators for Sustainability of Cultural Heritage". *Tribhuvan University*, Nepal, December 2023.

² Georges Tanguay et al. "A Comprehensive Strategy to Identify Indicators of Sustainable Heritage Conservation." *C RTP Working Papers*, (September 2014).

indicators will be proposed, we will suggest general criteria to be met in order for them to be efficient. It is also worth mentioning that while indicators are a useful tool, this paper does not try to find an absolute method to quantify or approach ICH management. Instead, it seeks to provide some standardization in a field that often finds challenges because no common framework exists, while still acknowledging that each case of intangible cultural heritage is unique in its characteristics and circumstances.

II. Sustainability framework

Before analyzing the correlation between heritage management and sustainability, it is essential to understand the scope of both concepts. Previous studies into the matter have concluded that the conceptualization of sustainable development highly influences the establishment of indicators in order for them to fit the case studies analyzed.³

The Brundtland report, published in 1987, is widely considered to be the godfather of the term “sustainable development” as it is understood today. Published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), the report defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”⁴ This groundbreaking report challenged the commonly accepted notion of sustainable yield, allowing for the transition to a broader concept that linked

the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. These dimensions were conceptualized in the foreword of the 1987 Brundtland Report: “What is needed now is a new era of economic growth – growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable.”⁵ This groundbreaking concept laid the foundation for the convening of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, five years later in Rio de Janeiro.

Some of the most significant outcomes of the Summit include the establishment of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the signing of the Convention of Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Agenda 21, and the Rio Declaration.⁶ Signed by over 175 countries, the Rio Declaration consists of 27 principles aimed at balancing environmental protection with economic growth and social development.⁷ Another key outcome of the Earth Summit was Agenda 21, which was designed to address global environmental and development challenges, preparing the world for the 21st century. It covers the multifaceted aspects of human life, and many of its principles have been incorporated into national and international legal frameworks. More importantly, it laid the groundwork for newer frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015. One of the key

⁵ WCED, *Our Common Future*, 7.

⁶ UNCSD. *Framing Sustainable Development. The Brundtland Report – 20 Years On*. 2007.

⁷ UN. *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992*. 2024.

³ Tanguay et al., “A Comprehensive Strategy.”

⁴ WCED. *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. 1990. pp. 41.

advancements of these is the quantification of impact through the different indicators included in each one of the goals, as a way to provide concrete action for achieving the targeted objectives.⁸

The three pillars of sustainable development – social, economic, and environmental considerations – are often intertwined with each other. This is portrayed in the following Venn diagram (Figure 1).

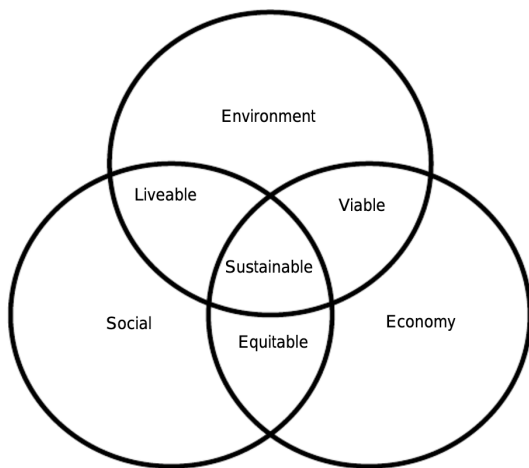


Fig. 1. Graphical Representation of Sustainable Development.

Source: Tanguay et al. (2014).

This will also be the basis of this paper's definition of sustainable development, not only because it reflects the interdisciplinarity of implementations, but also because it paints a more holistic picture of what sustainability is and represents. In addition, this paper will interpret sustainability as the responsible usage of resources while

safeguarding that future generations would have similar, if not more, access to such resources. The fact that the terms “sustainable development” and “sustainability” are often used indifferently points to the notion that economic development can help solve ecological and social problems.

III. Heritage Management and ICH

In what refers to heritage management, we will take the definition given by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the main global institution dedicated to heritage classification and management. In its 1972 World Heritage Convention,⁹ it distinguished between the different types of heritage: cultural (man-made) and natural (present in nature created).¹⁰ The definitions and subcategories have been further developed over the years, the most important of modifications being the subdivision of cultural heritage into tangible and intangible.

When speaking of intangible cultural heritage, the category is fairly recent, its formal origins tracing back to 2003 with the publication of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. This feat was motivated by a growing interest and realization that some cultural expressions escape the conventional, material

⁹ UNESCO. *Convention concerning the protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. 1972.

¹⁰ There is also a category destined to those assets that “satisfy a part or the whole of the definitions of both cultural and natural heritage”, known as “mixed assets”, but since the focus of this article is the intangibility, it would be considered in detail. See UNESCO. *World Heritage Convention Glossary*. “Mixed Assets”. 2024.

⁸ UNDESA. [The 17 Goals](#). 2024.

form that heritage management traditionally associated with them. The resulting text has remained fundamental not only to define what intangible cultural heritage is but also to determine what the appropriate approach to it is. It enables a deeper understanding of the scope of what Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) encompasses by providing the following definition:

*The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. [It] is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity[...].*¹¹

Furthermore, the Convention specifies that ICH is manifested in the forms of: oral traditions and expressions (including language), performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship.¹² Thus, we can see the diversity of this concept, requiring a rather complex management. Having a set definition is rather useful, not only because of the limits it sets in the forms and characteristics of an otherwise abstract concept, but it also hints at the possible ways of managing it, which is intrinsically complex given the nature of this concept. As such, it is vital to keep in

mind this variety of forms present in ICH when we approach the use of indicators for measuring it since these will have to effectively be able to encompass all dimensions of sustainability while still being able to maintain the technical rigor required in heritage preservation.

Another concept that is also very relevant inside this framework is the strategic objectives adopted by the World Heritage Committee in 2002 and expanded in 2007. Also known as "The Five Cs" (credibility, conservation, capacity-building, communication, and community, which was added later), they set the direction that UNESCO follows not only in their work towards the preservation of heritage but also when describing the impact that it can have in our society.¹³

Right from the very definition of heritage, and also through the concepts explained below, a strong link with sustainability can be observed. Firstly, the division between cultural and natural heritage resembles two of the pillars of sustainable development, as natural heritage can be directly correlated with the environmental pillar, while cultural heritage focuses more on the social dimension. UNESCO, as part of the United Nations, also worked on the previously mentioned framework of sustainability, and the development of the SDGs. As will be discussed below, UNESCO itself has also become more aware of integrating the concept of sustainability inside ICH management. In 2020, they published a report highlighting the link and positive rapports that ICH has in some areas of

¹¹ UNESCO. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. 2003.

¹² UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding*.

¹³ UNESCO. *World Heritage Convention*.

sustainability.¹⁴ While it is merely informative and does not provide any tools for the integration of one and the other, it is representative of which direction the official line points towards.

As there is no physical being to manage, any attempt at regulating the management of ICH will be more difficult to formulate. Its link to sustainability is also evident in a different way: the environmental impact is less linked to the physical space occupied by an asset and more about how the assets themselves can impact their natural environment. Thus, its social impact is much more significant, as human communities are precisely the creators of heritage, and the ones responsible for its evolution and preservation. The 2007 edition of the "fifth C" (community) to the Strategic Objectives mentioned above, sought to emphasize this fundamental social role while enabling a more clear connection between the social dimension of sustainability and the community objective of heritage management.

Having established how the link between heritage management and sustainability is something inherent to both concepts, we will now delve into how we can quantify said relationship through the use of indicators.

IV. Indicators for Sustainable Heritage Management

The starting point of this review will be the indicators that UNESCO itself proposes and uses in its approach to ICH.

As highlighted in their Sustainable Development

¹⁴UNESCO. *Intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development*. 2015.

Toolbox,¹⁵ the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) included in the UN's 2030 agenda, are their main guiding framework. The SDGs provide a common framework and standards for sustainable development, which are important to ensure that no one is left behind while enjoying a prosperous life on a healthy planet. By having a common standard, nations are better able to comprehend such indicators, putting forth policies that aim to work towards such goals. It also enables a simpler quantification of their achievements towards the goals, while allowing for benchmarking with other countries. Indicators cross the "world of research and science to be integrated with that of the policy," allowing for analytical effectiveness, as well as a common language.¹⁶

Nonetheless, the use of the SDGs for heritage management must be approached with caution. While on the one hand, they are a useful and concrete tool for being able to understand the impact of applied policies, on the other hand, they were not envisioned specifically for heritage management. Thus, heritage management and sustainability are conceived as two separate fields, whereas the reality is that to have better results, they should both be considered simultaneously, as will be analyzed later. They also fail to consider the technical necessities of heritage management, thus being limited to nothing more than a starting point in bridging sustainability and heritage management together. In addition, and as will be analyzed

¹⁵ UNESCO. *Sustainable Development Toolbox*. 2015.

¹⁶ Christophe Bouni, "Sustainable development indicators: Theory and methodology." *Nature Sciences Sociétés*, 6 no.3 (1998).

through the case studies, SDGs do not address the nuances of ICH management. While SDGs rely heavily on quantifiable frameworks such as poverty reduction, ICH often involves practices and skills that are difficult to quantify in terms of SDG metrics. For all of these reasons, the Sustainable Development Goals should be adopted as a complementary tool that allows measuring the impact of already existing approaches, but that is rather limited when it comes to the technical aspects of the implementation of new policies itself.

Having established that SDGs are insufficient for approaching sustainable heritage management, some proposed indicators are more specialized, and therefore more appropriate for the field. As mentioned before, given the lack of a commonly agreed set of indicators for heritage management, not much research has been carried out on ICH indicators. Therefore, the proposals analyzed below are purely academic and targeted at other forms of patrimony that could, nonetheless, have a potential application in ICH.

In an article published in the year 2023, several authors from Tribhuvan University in Nepal compiled some recent work in the field of indicators for Sustainable Heritage Management:

SN	References	No. of papers reviewed	No. of Indicators
1	Liusman, et al. (2013) [25]	NA	17
2	Sowińska-Swierkosz (2017) [26]	48	8
3	Tanguay, et al. (2014) [27]	25	20
4	Guzman (2020) [22]	NA	36

Fig. 2: Set of indicators analyzed for this study.

Source: Shrestha, Singh and Bajracharya (2023).

It can be observed, that the method used for determining the indicators follows two lines: the papers by Sowinska-Swierkosz (2017) and Tanguay et al. (2014) rely on the review and comparison of different papers proposing indicators (normally for a particular case) and extracting the best of them; whereas the others rely solely on one case study and try to extract from them a general rule that can be extrapolated to other examples. In many of the papers analyzed below, it is also highly emphasized how the cases of heritage management (and, by extension, ICH) require a very specific approach to them, which makes their individual indicators be unique and not really applicable to other cases.^{17 18} This is a factor to reckon with but should still not discourage the effort to find a common framework for all assets considered as intangible cultural heritage.

Starting chronologically, the study conducted by Liusman et al (2013), focuses on heritage buildings, highlighting their importance inside modern spaces.¹⁹ For it, the authors created a model named the Heritage Sustainability Index (HSI), for which they selected the following indicators:

¹⁷ Paloma Guzmán, "Assessing the sustainable development of the historic urban landscape through local indicators. Lessons from a Mexican World Heritage City." *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, 46 (December 2020);, pp. 320-327.

¹⁸ Shrestha et al. (2023)

¹⁹ Ervi Liusman, et al. "Indicators for Heritage Buildings and Sustainability." *Central Europe towards Sustainable Building*. (2013).

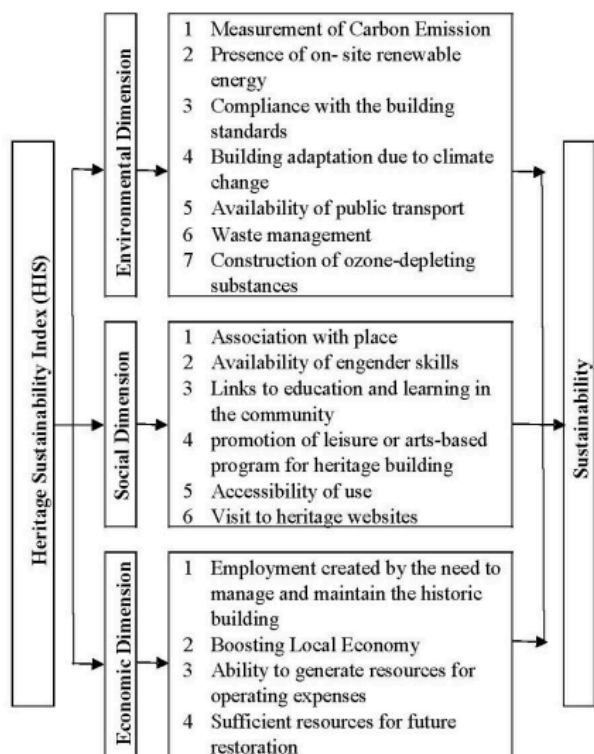


Fig. 3: Framework of Heritage Sustainability Index (HSI) for heritage buildings.

Source: *Sbrestha, Singh, and Bajracharya (2023) from Liusman et al. (2013).*

While the indicators have been tailored for heritage buildings and can therefore not be used for ICH, it is interesting to analyze them to understand the selection process and potential utility.

Their main strength is that they present a balance between the three dimensions of sustainability, suggesting sufficient indicators to address the economy, society, and environment. Furthermore, each one of the indicators has the right scope by not being overly specific, which allows it to encompass broad aspects. For example, measuring the "association with place" (Social Dimension indicator 1) covers an important aspect related to historical buildings

that guarantees their preservation (it seems plausible that a construction to which a community is linked more strongly will be more taken care of), yet it leaves room for some of the various issues that can be included within the category (for instance, visibility and prominence inside of a community, or a link to any particular social events, among others). This is the case for the other indicators as well, making them universal enough to be applied to any case study as long as they stay within the limits of heritage buildings.

On the other hand, even though it was never the authors' intention, some more concrete ways of tracking the progress of said indicators would have enhanced their credibility and potential for practical application. For example, within the Environmental Dimension, for indicator 6, how will waste management be measured? Or within the Economic Dimension, for indicator 2, how can the boost of the local economy be quantified? Given the scope proposed (with heritage buildings being part of UNESCO's tangible heritage category), it would have been possible to do so, still retaining the openness that has been highlighted before in each one of the indicators, yet providing a more specific way to evaluate performance. Related to ICH, the emphasis on the dimensions is particularly relevant to take into consideration when developing indicators, as it is the basis for accurate measuring.

Moving on to the second paper, Sowińska-Świerkosz (2017) puts the lens on the management of cultural

landscapes, proposing eight indicators based on an analysis of recent papers.²⁰ These are the following:²¹

1. *Architectonic quality (preservation of façades)*
2. *Ecological quality (improving urban greenery - the presence of historic fruit and habitat trees),*
3. *Economic significance (funding for community arts projects and the necessary investments for cultural property preservation),*
4. *Perception aspect (the area or percentage of places that are spiritual or religious),*
5. *Value of political activities (landscape management's effectiveness and a plan that preserves the historical and natural environments),*
6. *Social care (percentage of individuals engaging in customary or cultural activities),*
7. *Spatial superiority (historical buildings and monuments),*
8. *Visual quality (the quantity and clarity of unsettling objects and elements, aspects of the cultural landscape that are visible).*

Once again, we see that the three dimensions of sustainability are sufficiently covered, despite the division not being as emphasized as in Liusman et al. (2013). Furthermore, no specific targets for the indicators are proposed, as the more abstractness of the landscape when compared to buildings makes it more complicated to do so.

Nonetheless, we already encounter a situation that can be extrapolated to intangible heritage. What is particularly interesting from the study of the landscape is its relation with a concept that can also be a part of ICH: cultural landscape, which refers to the "diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment."²² When analyzing the landscapes in which an interaction between man and environment has occurred, not only do we coincide again in the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, but it is also possible to study and understand the reach and impact of some cases of ICH. This relation will be explored in depth later with a specific case study to illustrate it.

The third research paper studied is that of Tanguay et al. (2014), which tackled a total of 25 papers referring to urban heritage management.²³ Something interesting about this study is that it provides a more quantitative approach to the selection of their indicators, carrying out statistics on issues such as the number of indicators used by each paper, how representative they are of both each one of the sustainability dimensions, and their overlaps, and how frequently similar indicators are proposed across studies. After that, they selected the most repeated ones and retained those that were more representative of dimension overlaps, resulting in a total of 20:²⁴

²⁰ Barbara Natalia Sowińska-Świerkosz, "Review of cultural heritage indicators related to landscape: Types, categorisation schemes and their usefulness in quality assessment," *Ecological Indicators* 81, pp. 526–542. (June 2017):. pp. 526–542.

²¹ Sowińska-Świerkosz (2017) as quoted by Shrestha et al. (2023).

²² UNESCO. *Cultural Landscape*. 2024.

²³ Tanguay et al., "A Comprehensive Strategy." Tanguay et al., 2014

²⁴ Tanguay et al., "A Comprehensive Strategy."

Indicators	Covered Dimension	Threshold
Characterisation		
Attachement to place	Social	5
Traditional value or perceived	Social-Econ.	5
Artistic, aesthetical and harmonious value or perceived	Social-Econ.	6
Building fabrics, insulation and ability to adapt	Soc-Econ-Env.	5
Protection		
Viability of recycling existing materials	Econ.-Env.	4
Authenticity	Social-Econ.	7
Integrity	Social-Econ.	6
Spatial compatibility	Social-Econ.-Env.	5
Enhancement		
Environmental and ecological awareness	Env.	5
Promotion of actions for further knowledge of historical-cultural heritage	Social-Econ.	2
Improvement of living conditions and quality of life	Soc-Econ.-Env.	5
Benefit of reuse versus redevelopment	Soc-Econ.-Env.	3
Use and Impacts		
Locals and visitors interests and involvement to conservation	Social	4
Business and functional use	Econ.	3
Investments and tourists drawing	Econ.	2
Increase urban density	Soc-Econ.-Env.	2
Policy and regulations		
Public perceived consideration of their opinion	Social	3
Adequate protection and management system	Social-Econ.	4
Compliance with regulations and building codes	Social-Econ.	4
Stakeholders inclusiveness and partnership	Soc-Econ.-Env.	2

Fig. 4: Key Indicators of Sustainable Urban Heritage Conservation.

Source: Tanguay et al. (2014).

This paper's approach seems much more balanced than the others, seeing how the selection of the indicators was carefully measured so that it encompasses the dimensions equally. However, it also presents a series of challenges.

Firstly, it neglects the concept of ICH, which may nonetheless still be present within the urban heritage, as it focuses exclusively on tangible goods. This makes this model harder to extrapolate for ICH management, but it remains interesting due to the approach it takes in its selection of indicators. Secondly, since the indicators come from a summary of past studies, the bias of these is still present. For instance, the authors themselves reckon that the intersection between society and the environment is not covered in the indicators, as it did not appear sufficiently in the papers reviewed.²⁵ And lastly, there is still

²⁵ Tanguay et al., "A Comprehensive Strategy."

a lack of quantifiable targets, despite once again being a non-exhaustive, non-conclusive list.

The fourth and final paper compiled by Shrestha, Singh, and Bajracharya (2023) is that of Guzmán (2020).²⁶ In this case, the author bridges two concepts that were already analyzed in other papers (urban heritage and landscape heritage), and selects a total of 36 indicators:²⁷

SN	Indicator	Dimension
1	Urban Size	Sustainable
2	Protected Areas	Environmental
3	% of Green Areas – Recreational Parks	Livable
4	No. of Public Libraries	Equitable
5	No. of Theatres and Music Halls	Equitable
6	Festivals and Religious Parties	Social
7	No. of Museums	Social
8	Road Network	Equitable
9	Population Density	Equitable
10	Literacy Rate	Equitable
11	Air Pollution	Livable
12	Accessibility (River Area)	Livable
13	Housing	Equitable
14	Deterioration phenomena (built environment)	Equitable
15	Marginalization Rate (Low)	Equitable
16	Community Involvement in Decision-Making Processes	Social
17	Population with Access to Healthcare	Equitable
18	Research and Development	Equitable
19	Financial Organization	Economic
20	No. of Police	Equitable
21	Natural Risk	Sustainable
22	No. of Automobiles – Road Traffic	Sustainable
23	Crime Level (Robbery)	Equitable
24	New Constructions/% of New Buildings (On Virgin Land)	Equitable
25	No. of Schools	Equitable
26	No. of Markets	Equitable
27	Productive Sectors (agricultural, industrial and services)	Equitable
28	Recreational-Sport Areas	Equitable
29	Electricity (Light Infrastructure)	Equitable
30	Water Supply	Sustainable
31	Telephone (Access, Visual Disruption)	Equitable
32	Investment for Intervention	Equitable
33	Modes of Transport	Equitable
34	Access to Sewage System	Equitable
35	Population with University Degree	Equitable
36	No. of Hotels	Equitable

Fig. 5: List of frequently used local indicators.

Source: Shrestha, et al. (2023) from Guzmán (2020).

²⁶ Guzmán, 2020.

²⁷ Guzmán (2020) as quoted by Shrestha et al. (2023).

The main strength of this proposal is that it does not stop at the theoretical level, applying her framework in the study of the city of Querétaro (Mexico).²⁸ Furthermore, the indicators are more strategic, and they address the intersection between sustainability dimensions once again. The downside, however, is that, once again, ICH is neglected despite being a part of urban heritage as a whole. The indicators proposed are too tangible, which makes it difficult to extract value from them in the application to the ICH indicators.

Despite the value of the compilation of analysis of the different papers that by themselves already summarise the literature concerning heritage indicators, and even mention ICH in their research, a critique we can formulate of the paper by Shrestha et al. (2023), is that it abandons its accomplishments of trying to extract a general model by comparing specific cases to go back to the local level by trying to develop indicators that are specific for Nepali heritage. Despite localized heritage exhibiting different characteristics, the purpose of indicators is to allow management practices to be shared and extrapolated, so this biased return to regional cases is greatly harmful. Especially with ICH, where the localization of the assets is often difficult, indicators should strive to be as universal as possible.

After having reviewed these papers, the following key learnings for the creation of ICH indicators were extracted:

1. Indicators should be broad yet include some targets to attain in order to increase their usefulness and facilitate their application in diverse cases.
2. Equal representativeness of the three sustainability dimensions, as well as of each one of their intersections, must be present.
3. Universality should be the main focus when approaching intangible assets since it helps to solve one of its most frequent problems: the difficulty of determining geographical and conceptual reach.
4. The most efficient approach in heritage management indicators is the one that compares and contrasts different case studies.

However, as we saw with Tanguay et al. (2014), the mere act of reviewing the literature is not enough to develop appropriate indicators, as the bias from these papers will be perpetuated.²⁹ In order to avoid this, we will now further analyze three specific ICH cases that present certain differences among themselves (the Mediterranean Diet, the ceramics of Puebla and Talavera, and the practises around the Argan tree), to further explore the intricacies of the development of indicators and apply the learnings extracted from the papers above.

V. Case studies

²⁸ Guzmán, 2020

²⁹ Tanguay et al., “A Comprehensive Strategy.”

UNESCO currently³⁰ features 730 elements in their Intangible Cultural Heritage List, which encompasses 145 countries.³¹ While analyzing all of them would produce more accurate results, it is a task out of the scope of this article. We have therefore selected some examples to analyze, not only how sustainability comes into play in them, but also how the indicators examined before could be applied to them.

V.1 The Mediterranean Diet

The first case studied is the Mediterranean Diet, which was inscribed in the List in the year 2013, and defined as a “set of skills, knowledge, practices and traditions ranging from the landscape to the table.”³² The Mediterranean Diet is “not only a particular nutritional model, but also the social interaction brought by communal meals, the folklore originated from these, the respect for the territory and biodiversity, and the traditional crafts and activities linked to these communities that live in the Mediterranean area, among others.”³³ The myriad of aspects it encompasses transform it into part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage that connects these communities despite the geographical distance.

Studies have also shown that the techniques used to cultivate the products that form part of the Mediterranean diet traditionally have a positive impact on the local ecosystems through the care of the biodiversity and higher

reliance on plant products compared to other diets, which reduces the resources utilized and facilitates regeneration.³⁴ Literature on its sustainable impact is abundant, with some studies devoted entirely to just summarising it and extracting indicators that are unique to its characteristics.³⁵ However, few papers are devoted to examining this impact from its Intangible Heritage Side.

UNESCO, as previously mentioned, limits their measuring to the SDGs. In their report on the Mediterranean Diet, they highlight the different SDGs related to it:³⁶ for example, SGD 2 (zero hunger), which is related to the availability of the Mediterranean Diet to those communities, but also SDG 5 (gender equality), citing the role women play in “the transmission of expertise, as well as knowledge of rituals, traditional gestures and celebrations, and the safeguarding of techniques.”³⁷ However, it is an approach that only focuses on the benefits that this heritage reports, failing to consider the complex preservation mechanisms that might have to get behind the Mediterranean Diet at a policy level. If, for example, the Mediterranean Diet highlights the role of women in the preparation of meals, and transmission of traditions around as a unifying element of communities; how can we ensure that this is maintained over time? That

³⁰ As of November 2024.

³¹ UNESCO. *Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices*. 2024.

³² UNESCO. *The Mediterranean Diet*. 2024.

³³ UNESCO. *The Mediterranean Diet*.

³⁴ Sandro Dernini and Elliot M. Berry, “Mediterranean Diet: From a Healthy Diet to a Sustainable Dietary Pattern.” *Frontiers of Nutrition*, . (2015).

³⁵Joana Margarida Bôto, et al., “Sustainability Dimensions of the Mediterranean Diet: A Systematic Review of the Indicators Used and Its Results.” *Advances in Nutrition*, 13, no. 5 (September 2022).

³⁶ UNESCO. *The Mediterranean Diet*.

³⁷ UNESCO. *The Mediterranean Diet*.

is a question that the SDGs cannot answer by themselves. While they might highlight the consequences, they are unable to provide clear working goals and performance indicators, that is, developing policies to ensure that the Mediterranean Diet endures as a way of empowering women in the area is something that falls short just with SDG five's indicators. The divide between sustainability and heritage is once again too accentuated to formulate reconciling policies.

The question we now have to ask ourselves is how we can see this case study reflected in the indicators covered before. As was analyzed in the previous sections, there is currently no set of proposed indicators for ICH. However, drawing from the conclusions we extracted from the other areas of heritage, the process of ICH indicators can be analyzed. The first point to raise is how. Based on how it was shown that the Mediterranean Diet has a significant impact on sustainability, it is essential that the indicators used can grasp all of the complexities it has, as well as all of the ways in which it can touch upon the sustainability dimensions of society, economy, and environment. For instance, one of the essential concepts it encompasses is that of cultural landscape (mentioned above): the existence of the Mediterranean Diet does not only transform the landscape of the coastal regions that cultivate products such as olive, cereals, and small livestock; but also through the communities that inhabit those spaces, their way of living, their particular architecture, their traditions...

Another aspect to also take into consideration is how the divide between the territories that adhere to this style of

Diet is sometimes blurred, building upon the need for indicators as universal as possible. An approach similar to the one that was taken for urban heritage in the papers cited previously would fall short of reach given its insistence on spatiality. Nonetheless, this wouldn't impede the hypothetical indicators from having concrete targets, not exclusive to the case (as could be the amount of olives consumed on average per person), but rather that could also be extrapolated to other cases. An example of an indicator could be the perception of the heritage among the communities that perpetuate it. In the case of the diet, this would be measured by researching how conscious they are of their unique way of living if there is some element of attachment to it, and other similar aspects. While allowing researchers and policymakers to more properly visualize the reach of the ICH asset and the impact it has on a community, as well as help target certain objectives that might aid in its preservation. As we will see later, this can also be applied to other cases, which makes the information flow simpler among authorities and allows to build bridges between different manifestations of intangible heritage.

V.II The Ceramics of Puebla and Talavera

Moving to another case study, the Ceramics of Puebla and Talavera were selected. This case is interesting for a variety of reasons. The first of them is the multilocality of this heritage across continents: Talavera de la Reina and El Puente del Arzobispo (Spain) and Puebla (México) share a

similar ceramics style given their shared colonial past³⁸. The techniques used to make the ceramics and their style remain similar despite the centuries and distance, which is not only an interesting phenomenon to study but also a challenge when it comes to measuring its impact. Furthermore, ceramic production in both locations has played and continues to play a fundamental role in the economy of the areas³⁹. If the Mediterranean Diet had a stronger emphasis on the social dimension, the case of Puebla and Talavera is intrinsically linked to the economic dimension (although it will also be demonstrated how it also impacts the other two). However, the communities in Spanish Guadalajara and Mexican Tlaxcala are different in their socioeconomic configuration, which is a challenge to reckon with when measuring its sustainability impact.

In its declaration for the inclusion of the list in 2019, UNESCO highlighted "their domestic, decorative and architectural uses," and how the processes such as "making techniques, enameling and decoration, retain the same pattern as in the sixteenth century."⁴⁰ It also mentions the knowledge related to the process, as well as how "every workshop has its own identity, as reflected in the detail of the shapes, decorations, colors and enamels of the pieces, and the production of ceramics remains a key identity symbol in both countries."⁴¹ Other highlighted aspects

³⁸ UNESCO. *Artisanal talavera of Puebla and Tlaxcala (Mexico) and ceramics of Talavera de la Reina and El Puente del Arzobispo (Spain) making process*. 2024.

³⁹ Instituto de Promoción Económica de Talavera. *Talavera de la Reina: Ready for a paradigm shift*. 2023.

⁴⁰ UNESCO. *Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 14.COM 10.B.23*. 2019.

⁴¹ UNESCO, *Decision*.

include common lexicon related to the process, how "the element helps foster a sense of unity and strengthens ties to the community," and how the decision mentions the interstate cooperation that should take place in order to guarantee its preservation, similar to the case of the Mediterranean Diet.

Despite being presented fundamentally as a social element, the truth is that traditional ceramics have a remarkable impact on their local economies. For instance, there are currently 15 workshops active in Talavera dedicated to its particular style of ceramics,⁴² which not only employ the artisans in them but also serve as a tourist appeal for the area. In the early 2000s, a factory in Puebla was still operative, employing over 250 workers and exporting to the US, Canada, South America, and even Europe.⁴³ We once again find a research gap regarding the full impact of ceramics in the local community, but just by gathering fragmentary information, we can indeed observe the impact it has in the economic dimension.

Nonetheless, how can we quantify its sustainability impact? Once again, the SDGs might help us in analyzing their impact a posteriori: SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) is quoted as the most prominent, given the economic implications that have just been discussed, but others such as SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) also come into play.⁴⁴ But once again, they fall short by neglecting the complex reality behind it:

⁴² Instituto de Promoción Económica de Talavera, *Talavera*.

⁴³ José Luis Solana, "La Talavera poblana." *México Desconocido*, 2010.

⁴⁴ UNESCO, *Artisanal*.

the intergenerational knowledge transfer, the struggle to keep the industry alive against the competence of new technologies, and the overall community impact are aspects fundamental to observe inside of this ICH asset, but that can not be measured by the SGDs.

As for further indicators, based on the lessons extracted from the research papers analyzed above, we can try to create indicators based on a cross-case study. For instance, the suggestion proposed for the Mediterranean Diet of assessing the perception of local communities of their heritage could also be applied to this one, with special attention on the likelihood that these perceptions will be skewed towards the economic aspects. Facing once again an example of transnational ICH, it could be interesting to somehow quantify how it enhances inter-state cooperation on cultural matters, given how the Spanish government reported in 2022 a rapprochement with the Mexican government thanks to cultural matters and the combined work carried out to present the eventually successful candidacy for the inclusion in the ICH list.⁴⁵

V.III. The Argan Tree in Morocco

The final case study that has been selected is the practices around the Argan tree in Morocco. Inscribed in the list in the year 2014, refers to the practices concerning an endemic woodland species whose fruit can be processed

into oil.⁴⁶ This is done through a series of traditional, generationally transmitted techniques that seek to utilize the tree to its fullest extent and that have developed a series of tools, practices, and social customs and relations from it.⁴⁷ UNESCO also highlighted in its inclusion to the list how "the know-how concerning the argan tree contributes both to the local economy and ecological sustainability and is recognized by local communities as a part of their intangible cultural heritage,"⁴⁸ as well as some "measures proposed by the submitting State for safeguarding the argan tree and the related knowledge of the practitioners, including legal and institutional frameworks for the creation of cooperatives and associations and a museum."⁴⁹

In the practices around the Argan tree, we find that the environmental dimension takes a more prominent role than in the other two analyzed, given how the relation between communities and the trees is configured in a particular way and becomes vital for its persistence. Proper care for the environment and the trees becomes quintessential in the survival of these communities, which in turn pushes them to make a greater effort to preserve the environment. Some studies have also shown that Argan trees help stop desertification,⁵⁰ which makes this particular case of ICH environmentally impactful not only at a community level but also at a much broader regional one. Nonetheless, as climate change also affects them and

⁴⁵ La Moncloa. *Spain and Mexico strengthen cooperation in cultural matters*. December 2022.

⁴⁶ UNESCO. *Decision of the Intergovernmental Committee: 9.COM 10.30*. 2014.

⁴⁷ UNESCO, *Decision*.

⁴⁸ UNESCO, *Decision*.

⁴⁹ UNESCO, *Decision*.

⁵⁰ Stefan Ellerbeck, "This is everything you need to know about the Argan tree." *World Economic Forum*. June 2022.

the communities around them, their preservation is linked to a greater cause with the intervention of more actors.⁵¹

In comparison with the other two case studies, this one is much more localized in some areas of Morocco. Nonetheless, it also presents other challenges to be reckoned with. For starters, even though the culture and practices around the Argan tree are intangible, this element is linked to a tangible product that is not created by the human community itself, as are the trees. In other words, it is intrinsically linked to something that would still exist even if the cultural heritage and communities around it were not there (which was not the case in either of the two previous cases). Other than being included inside the hypothetical indicators, it presents a reality in which communities are forced to care much more about issues that go far beyond their local communities, such as climate change to guarantee the survival of the trees and, by association, of their way of living.

Taking a look at the indicators, we can see that UNESCO highlights SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) as one of the main ones for this asset.⁵² While the limitations of SDGs remain the same as in the other cases and will not be discussed here, the coincidence with the Puebla-Talavera case study in the SDGs it affects brings to light another benefit of including them in the approach to sustainability: it helps bridge the consequences of more

than two cases, which might be similar despite the great difference in practices and therefore facilitates the extraction of patterns that can be later used as indicators. This links to one of the conclusions from the review of the papers: while indicators should strive to be universal and applicable to various cases, targets for each ICH asset might be different.

In conclusion, the three different case studies analyzed provide a variety of learnings on how indicators can be applied to assessing their sustainable impact. Firstly, the three of them prove how the current framework of the SDGs is insufficient for dealing with ICH, as it leaves out of consideration many of the patrimonial aspects and even their impact in some of the sustainability dimensions. Secondly, by comparing case studies that are so different in nature, we have been able to extract some common characteristics (such as the perception of local communities or the need for cooperation between transnational actors, among others) that have a significant impact both in sustainability and in the preservation of the ICH, so they should be somehow formulated into indicators and performance to finally merge both concepts. The insights derived from the comparison of case studies highlight the need for universality that was extracted from the review of the currently proposed indicators. Finally, through this brief analysis, we have also been able to see how the intervention of different stakeholders, most pre-eminently government actors, is fundamental for the persistence of the heritage and its management. We will

⁵¹ Chaima Afi, et al. "Assessing the Impact of Aridity on Argan Trees in Morocco: Implications for Conservation in a Changing Climate." *Resources*, 15 no. 135 (September 2024).

⁵² UNESCO. *Argan, practices and know-how concerning the argan tree*. 2024.

therefore devote the next section to trying to extract the utilities of the set of indicators at a policy level.

VI. Policy implications and recommendations

The fundamental question that remains unanswered is the purpose of having a set of commonly agreed indicators for sustainable ICH management. We highlighted before how indicators not only serve as a way of materializing the abstract but also provide clear objectives and goals towards which to work at a policy level. As we saw in the case studies, governmental actors are a fundamental force to reckon with, as they can legislate in favor of protection measures (as described in the Argan tree case) or increase cooperation to maintain the heritage (such as the case of the Puebla-Talavera ceramics). Therefore, this section aims to explore the policy implications of having a measurable approach to sustainable ICH management.

As suggested throughout the paper, indicators should not be the sole tool with which sustainability and heritage management can be bridged together, but rather serve as a concrete way to somewhat standardize and share information in a challenging field. However, based on the literature review conducted for this research, it seems no developments have been made since 2015 at an institutional level to further integrate both areas.⁵³ Taking the SDGs as sufficient enough, it seems like both areas are perceived as separate and no efforts for complete integration have been formulated. Whereas academia has

sometimes tried to fill in this gap, its efforts have been scattered and not backed by any practical experience nor joint effort between different elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Furthermore, the indicators proposed are often too specific, which makes the knowledge transfer from some cases to others more difficult, thus increasing the difficulty of the challenges that ICH management poses.

Nonetheless, based on the research carried through the literature review and the case studies, it seems imperative that some coordinated and standardized indicators are oriented in order not only to facilitate the comprehension of ICH but also to facilitate preservation efforts both at an administrative and interstate level. As the leading organization in charge of International Heritage, as one that is respected and minded by the majority of the countries, and as the leading producer of academia and regulation concerning ICH, UNESCO has the role to step up and lead the efforts for this standardization efforts. Despite their claims that sustainability is a fundamental part of the heritage as a whole, the tools they currently utilize are insufficient and still present heritage management and sustainability as two separate issues, believing that through the case studies, we have proven to be a myth. Moreover, they should also increase the emphasis on sustainability issues when including a new asset in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List, thus guaranteeing the commitment of its Member States not only to the preservation of their assets but also to the assessment and policy of their impact. Despite being a

⁵³ Joana Dos Santos Gonçalves, et al. "Contributions to a Revised Definition of Sustainable Conservation." *LDE Heritage Conference on Heritage and the Sustainable Development Goals. September 2021*. September 2021.

global organization, it seems like UNESCO members are isolated in what refers to ICH management, which proves to the detriment of individual cases that might share common characteristics or similar management challenges.

Furthermore, it seems necessary that concrete targets are set for each one of the indicators. Despite its fundamental condition as intangible, ICH can also be approached in a quantifiable manner (taking into consideration that this is not a definitive solution, but rather a simplifying tool that provides guidance and help in the management process). While ICH can not be completely regulated and structured, we currently find the opposite situation, where ICH work focuses exclusively on the abstract realm, while neglecting its more quantifiable impact on the economy, environment, and society. Measuring indicators such as public perception or economic contribution, as we suggested in the case studies, would facilitate the orientation needed to formulate appropriate efforts. In this, the cooperation of local and national administrations, as well as civic organizations and other stakeholders devoted exclusively to ICH causes. Given their specific knowledge of the individual cases, and if provided with the appropriate framework and training to work with, they should be the ones in charge of documenting and reporting the targets in each case, which later must serve as a basis for formulating adequate policies. Having a framework of indicators also enables higher accountability for the decisions taken concerning ICH, with local and national governments having to respond to UNESCO, and potentially being punished with fines or removal from the

list if their actions result to be negligent and harmful either for patrimony or sustainability.

Nonetheless, we must always take into consideration that heritage has never been an organizational matter, but rather a communitarian one, as it is born and preserved within human societies. Therefore, the approach towards it should also be majoritarian led by civic actors, and merely monitored by UNESCO. While some steps in this direction have been taken, such as the inclusion of the fifth C for community in the World Heritage Declaration, there is still room for improvement. There currently seems to be an overreliance on an organization that might be relied upon for some things, but that should not be expected to handle all the load.

Overall, ICH is an area that is still emerging, and while some advancements have to be acknowledged, the action taken is insufficient. The lack of coordination for an appropriate framework is lacking in all areas of heritage, but given the greater challenges posed by ICH in terms of management, action must be taken in this regard. As we have seen, ICH can report a positive impact in societies, economies, and environments, which is beneficial both for public actors as well as citizens, but also touches upon some other important matters such as identity, belonging, intercultural issues, and our identity as humans.

VII. Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, we have been able to delve into the definitions of sustainability and intangible cultural heritage, seeing how they're often intertwined. As a new

field of study that is still in development, it is still finding out its path and developing the appropriate tools, but as was proved during the article there is still a long way to go. The lack of coordination in measuring heritage management and sustainability, which is common to all forms of heritage, takes a particularly high toll on ICH given the higher impact that it can have as well as the greater challenges it proposes. Sustainability and heritage need each other, yet the current efforts seem to be insufficient and too case-oriented.

We hope that this paper serves as a stone with which to build an appropriate set of tools for ICH and heritage management as a whole. Further research into this field would not only expand the case study list to identify more characteristics of the sustainability-ICH relation but also develop an appropriate set of sustainable intangible cultural heritage management indicators based on these case studies that have measurable targets and can be applied universally, facilitating cooperation and understanding of this fascinating field.

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