

**Open-ended Working Group
in relation to Decision 45 COM 11**

25-26 April 2024

Keynote speech by Ms Špela Spanžel

Dear ADG, DIR, Mr Chairperson,
ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is an honour for me to address you today at this important meeting of the Open-ended Working Group, which was set up to facilitate a comprehensive reflection, exchange and resulting proposals on the **future** of the World Heritage Convention. I believe that this is the **core issue** we are addressing, regardless of how we title the action or how we frame it. **Our** Convention, of which we are States Parties, can certainly be described as a **success** story: 195 countries, a long list of monuments and sites so important that they have become a common concern of the international community, endless attention for the coveted Unesco logo - and growing **difficulties** related to the **credibility of our work** at both **international** and **national** level.

I also feel responsibility - and thank the World Heritage Centre for the invitation! Namely, I have had the privilege of working for several years on the **reform of the nomination process** - in my capacity as an invited expert, as a member of my country's delegation and lastly, as a World Heritage Focal Point. A very **complex undertaking**, a wonderful **opportunity** to work with some of the most knowledgeable people on the Convention, colleagues from Australia, Jamaica, UK, Bahrain, South Africa, - and a challenging process to bring the experts' positions into a **real structure with a timeline, defined obligations and financial consequences**. The purpose of my speech is therefore **manyfold** as well: to possibly give additional information to the process of creating the **Preliminary Assessment mechanism** alongside the elements of the **Nomination reform**, to present a State Party's perspective on the main challenges and expectations and to share my experience in a very practical way. I would like to thank

the other speakers for their contributions and hope that we can present you with a number of themes or ideas to be discussed in the course of the work of the Open-ended Group.

I particularly appreciated the mention of the relationship between culture and nature and the intangible cultural heritage, with its growing importance for the much-needed resilience of our societies.

Allow me to refer to the **Background document** for two main reasons. Firstly, because it gives us a summarised and focused insight into the history of the Convention, the development of the processes and mechanisms, as well as the challenges and needs. It is quite clear that the **issues** we are addressing today are **not new** – shortly after the World Heritage List was established, the Committee and the General Assembly made a number of observations and started to address concerns about imbalance, representativeness, gaps, global and thematic approach, conduct of stakeholders etc. – and tried to find **solutions to rectify** these problems. From **restrictions** and **voluntary** actions by States Parties, to various studies prepared by the Advisory Bodies; strategies and action plans discussed and adopted. Much work was done, there were deliberations, debates and decisions on many interrelated issues.

The **geographical and thematic (im)balance** is a **recurring theme** - and more of a **substantive issue** than a simple matter of numbers and statistics. (I say that coming from Europe, that is hardly a balanced region in its own if you think about the number of World Heritage properties from only four countries). Combined with the issue of **credibility** and the growing complexity of the World Heritage properties examined (e.g., sites of memory), we may be reaching the **limits** of the current World Heritage system.

Secondly, the Background document demonstrates the role of the **World Heritage Centre**. As we are so used to well-prepared and timely documents, we need to be reminded of the expertise, experience and institutional memory that it represents. It is much more than a secretariat of the Convention; it is a source of knowledge and our collocutor.

As I cannot imagine my daily work without my colleagues from other countries - from Switzerland to Norway or Belgium to Spain - whom I can and I do consult regularly, I believe in the **value of the**

network, the expert or technical level, as we are called, **colleagues** who care about World Heritage and who are committed to the Convention. In addition, we turn to the **Advisory Bodies**, either by using the **practical tools** - resource manuals and guidelines developed to assist authorities, managers, practitioners, or by **seeking advice and guidance** through mechanisms developed under the Convention – for example, the Upstream process. Indeed, one of the strong incentives for creating a Preliminary Assessment was the opportunity to improve the **dialogue** between States Parties and the Advisory Bodies at an early stage of the nomination process and as part of the mandatory process so that it is accessible to all States Parties.

And that brings me to **capacity-building**, which I cannot emphasise enough, and that is my first conclusion on how to proceed. There are different elements, forms and levels, but the common denominator is always a **constant, systematic, accessible programme of activities** at international and regional level – that are by rule transferred to national and local levels. Also, the good results of previous programmes in under-represented regions and countries show that many gaps and challenges can be addressed step by step. However, stable funding is required, and additional financial resources must be made available for this priority.

We, the **States Parties** who are fortunate enough to provide funding for workshops and conferences with invited international experts in our countries - we used the 50th anniversary of the Convention, for example, to tackle immediate issues of conservation and management of our properties - know that these events are **invaluable** for transferring knowledge, **widening the circle** of experts involved and also for creating a **public awareness** that resonates – and also to help understand the Advisory Bodies about the needs on-site. This is particularly important **after the inscription** of a site or a series, as the practical management is quite a demanding task, including potential development projects, installation of renewable energy sources and so.

Some of the visible **strengths** of the World Heritage system are grounded on the established procedures and mechanisms; they follow the methodology, scientific-based approach, and are a part of a **well-**

defined process. I strongly believe we should **build upon these principles**; not only to avoid tensions arriving at the decision-making stage. Again, **credibility** is the key issue connected to the future of the Convention in our view; credibility of the entire **set of processes**, all involved **partners** and **actions** that follow on-site. I do not wish to talk about the percentage of the Committee's decisions that do not follow the Advisory Body's recommendations, although they are a serious factor; they often weaken our arguments and actions at national level. It is apparently difficult to believe that we carry out our professional activities openly, impartially, objectively, and responsibly and avoid conflicts of interest (i.e., professional ethics).

Instead, I would **question** whether States Parties are really making **full use of the mechanisms** of the Convention - those designed to support **conservation**, as this is the core of the Convention (think, for example, of the List of World Heritage in Danger and its reputation), and those designed to serve as a **planning tool** (also with a view to reducing imbalances in the List). For example, the regular updating of the **Tentative Lists** and their regional **harmonisation**, which has never really been implemented. In this context, I would like to support the preparation or updating of **thematic and comparative studies**, as well as **gap analyses**, which will help to obtain important information on the potential for registration, to present high quality nomination dossiers, to reduce the resources needed - and, finally, to contribute to the representativity and credibility of the List.

Those of us who have worked with national experts on a particular subject matter know that the main difficulty is the lack of understanding of the World Heritage system, its global context and methodology. In connection with the issue of **additional service providers**, I would therefore support the potential inclusion of other entities, such as a UNESCO Chairs or Category 2 centres, yet only as an addition to the current system and not its replacement – or to put it differently, as our partners in complementary actions not at the expense of the existing Advisory bodies. The same goes for youth or the use of new technologies.

Finally, the **broad participation** in this Open-ended Working Group testifies to the interest and commitment of States Parties and to the appropriate decision to extend the mandate of the Ad-hoc to the

Open-ended working group. I would like to thank all the States Parties who regularly participate as active members of groups or as observers. We greatly appreciate their **commitment**, commitment of the Committee and non-Committee, members which is exemplified by the Declaration of principles to promote international solidarity and cooperation to preserve World Heritage.

Ladies and gentlemen, at a conference a few weeks ago, I heard a proposed definition of **heritage interpretation** that defines it as “a **meaning-making** process through communication, participation and experience”. I really liked it because it not only invites **communities** to take an active role, but also encourages a **connection between people and heritage places**. I thought it could easily talk about World Heritage, about the **work** we all do in relation to this site convention, and about the shared responsibility we have to protect the most precious places on our planet. What is more, it is the **emotional** dimension of World Heritage that makes the difference.

Thank you.