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World Heritage Convention

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

**25-26 April 2024
10.00 am-6.00 pm
(*in praesentia* and online meeting)**

REPORT

The meeting was attended by a total of 107 States Parties to the Convention, either *in praesentia* or online.

Opening of the meeting

The **Chairperson** of the Open-ended Working Group, Mr Mohammad Alaidaroos (Saudi Arabia), welcomed the participants to the second meeting of the Open-ended Working Group in relation to **Decision 45 COM 11**. Among others, he warmly welcomed the Vice-Chairpersons and the Rapporteur, and reaffirmed his confidence that the Working Group will succeed in preparing pertinent recommendations for consideration by the World Heritage Committee at its 46th session in July 2024. The Chairperson emphasized the importance of the mandate of the Working Group, and he referred to the five points specified in **Decision 45 COM 11**.

Following the introduction, **the Assistant Director-General for Culture (ADG/CLT), Mr Ernesto R. Ottone**, provided an overview of the main tasks of the Open-ended Working Group. He emphasized the careful selection of the keynote speakers in regional and thematic terms with the aim to enrich the working group's deliberations, and outlined the objectives and expectations for the group's discussions.

Presentation of the Background Document by the Secretariat

The Director of World Heritage (DIR/WH), Mr. Lazare Eloundou Assomo, presented the Background Document that had been prepared by the Secretariat for the Open-ended Working Group, which was provided to all States Parties prior to the meeting. He recalled that documents relevant for the work of this Working Group are available on a dedicated webpage with restricted access to States Parties at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/activities/1405/&p=oewg>.

As presented by DIR/WH, the Background Document outlines the collaborative efforts undertaken in the past, aiming at addressing the issues that are within the mandate of the Working Group, including reducing representation gaps on the World Heritage List, improving evaluation processes, exploring additional service providers and addressing financial sustainability. In his presentation, DIR/WH explained that the Background Document follows

the structure of **Decision 45 COM 11** and contains four parts corresponding to the first four points of Paragraph 6 of the Decision. The first two parts of the document are devoted to the representativeness and balance of the World Heritage List and to improving capacity building. It brings together factual information since 1977, and in particular decisions, policies, measures, reflections and processes discussed, as well as all the actions carried out. The Document also presents some possible ways forward and provides some ideas to guide the discussion. Parts three and four bring together the factual information already provided to the Committee between 2022 and 2023 with regard to the sustainability of funding for the World Heritage Fund, financial issues related to the nomination process, and the possibility of using other advisory services.

General reflection by invited keynote speakers

At the invitation of the Chairperson, seven invited keynote speakers with relevant experience in the fields covered by the working group, either in their regions or globally, shared their reflections and experience with the working group. The presentations can be accessed on the dedicated webpage for the Open-ended Working Group.

Ms. Haifaa Abdulhalim (Jordan) highlighted the urgency of nominating more natural World Heritage sites from the Arab States region, emphasizing the need to safeguard its unique natural heritage. She acknowledged the progress made in nominating properties for World Heritage status in this region but noted the predominance of cultural over natural sites. She also stressed that challenges such as the complexity of the nomination process and limited local expertise still exist, and proposed simplification of the nomination process and fostering regional cooperation. She also emphasized the importance of community involvement, diversification of funding sources, and enhancement of scientific research, to ensure the conservation of natural heritage in the Arab States region. She concluded by calling for collaborative efforts to safeguard the region's natural heritage for future generations.

Mr. George Abungu (Kenya) provided a critical perspective in the application of the Convention, he encouraged a shift of paradigm with regards to equitable representation and recommended increased investment in capacity building. He reflected on the achievements as well as on the shortcomings of the Global Strategy, which has fostered diverse heritage types and encouraged capacity building, but which has struggled to address the persistent gap in regions representativity. He underscored that the problems are particularly due to the Eurocentric approach of the definitions of Outstanding Universal Value, authenticity, and integrity under the Convention. He pointed out the challenges faced by underrepresented regions, particularly Africa, including issues with management, capacity building, and development of nominations, as well as insufficient investment in national policies for World Heritage by States Parties themselves, leading to a lack of trained experts, resources and infrastructure for effective conservation. He called for a re-evaluation of heritage approaches to better reflect global diversity and underscored the need for a shift in mindset and increased commitment from Southern nations in preserving and nominating their heritage sites. He stressed the importance of equitable representation and sustainable management for achieving a more balanced and credible World Heritage List.

Mr. Ray Bondin (Malta) emphasized the underrepresentation of certain regions and heritage typologies on the World Heritage List, noting the need to revisit its basic principles and purpose. He highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach to heritage preservation globally, suggesting a focus on site values rather than fitting predefined categories. He also

noted that emphasis should be placed on balancing tourism benefits with sustainable management and the recognition of historical significance of heritage over its tourist appeal. He stressed the importance of considering intangible aspects, climate change threats, and conflict areas in nominations, alongside the need for improved management plans and expert selection. He concluded by stating that the mandatory Preliminary Assessment was an opportunity to be seized, and also proposed adjustments to the evaluation process by adding external evaluations.

Ms. Carolina Castellanos (Mexico) reflected on the challenges of credibility, balance, and representativity in the World Heritage List. She exposed the evolution of heritage definitions in Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasizing the need for updated inventories and regulatory frameworks to address emerging notions of heritage. She stressed the importance of strengthening capacities, integrating ancestral knowledge, and promoting diversity in the nomination process, as crucial steps towards a more inclusive and representative World Heritage List. She highlighted the importance of credibility beyond representativity, with a focus on achieving high levels of conservation, management, and social inclusion for properties. Finally, she underscored the role of the World Heritage Convention as a key instrument for promoting cooperation, integration, and sustainability on a global scale.

Ms. Nobuko Inaba (Japan) reflected on the persistent issue of imbalance of the World Heritage List and the proposed solutions within the framework outlined in the Background Document. She advocated for strengthening regional cooperation to address ongoing challenges effectively. She highlighted the importance of synergy between the Convention and local heritage protection systems, addressing language diversity and conducting regional gap analysis. She concluded by emphasizing the need for strengthening the existing regional cooperation frameworks, effective allocation of international cooperation budgets by each country and developing prioritized emergency work plans.

Ms. Špela Spanžel (Slovenia) emphasized the importance of reflecting on the future of the World Heritage Convention. She stressed the importance of the success of the Convention but also noted growing difficulties related to its credibility. Drawing from her experience with the nomination process reform, she provided insights into challenges and expectations from a State Party perspective. She emphasized the need for capacity building and stable funding and advocated for international collaboration to address gaps effectively. She highlighted the importance of using established procedures and planning tools to support conservation efforts and enhance the credibility of the Convention. Finally, she stressed the importance of broad participation and shared responsibility in preserving World Heritage for future generations.

Mr. Joe King (ex-ICCROM) highlighted the significance of regional balance and diversity in nominations, emphasizing the need for simplified processes, and for shorter, more concise nomination files focusing on essential information, and considering limits on length and financial expenditure by States Parties. He specified the importance of Management plans but noted that to ensure implementation they should not be overly complex. He stressed the importance of promoting international cooperation between well-represented and under-represented States Parties to enhance nomination quality and reduce costs (twinning). He further pointed out the importance of increased support for sustained capacity building, with a focus on holistic training programs covering various aspects of heritage management and

offering practical avenues for improving the inclusivity and effectiveness of the World Heritage system.

Reflection by the members of the Open-ended Working Group

During the debate, 33 States Parties took the floor and expressed their points of view. The majority of the interventions concerned points 1 and 2 of the mandate of the Working Group. Point 3 was mentioned by few States Parties, whereas points 4 and 5 were not covered during this meeting.

The main topics that arose during the discussions were:

1 – Better Representation

- The importance of addressing the existing imbalance of the World Heritage List by supporting under-represented and non-represented States Parties in preparing high quality and successful nomination dossiers.
- The necessity to have a common understanding of fair representation and existing gaps.
- The possibility of slowing down nominations of well represented States Parties.
- The necessity of addressing the nomination process, including:
 - simplification of the nomination format,
 - use of new technologies and update of communication tools,
 - revision of Tentative Lists,
 - regional harmonization of Tentative Lists, with the support of the World Heritage Centre, and the Advisory Bodies, for possible cooperation and serial or transnational nominations,
 - updating of the gap analysis by the Advisory Bodies,
 - enhancing the use of existing processes such as the Upstream Process and the Preliminary Assessment,
 - ensuring possible financial support for a sustainable nomination process, notably through more voluntary contributions,
 - researching the potential of twinning of sites during the nomination phase but also after inscription,
 - Including possible support from World Heritage-related Category 2 Centres.

2 – Credibility

- The necessity to have a common understanding of credibility, and to agree on the definition of authenticity and integrity.
- The necessity to clarify the concepts of Outstanding Universal Value and of gaps.
- The necessity to recognise regionality in the World Heritage context.
- The importance of conservation, therefore protecting the heritage and not only increasing the inscriptions.
- The importance of ensuring conservation at two levels: before and after inscription. This also pertains to the commitment of the States Parties.
- The importance of implementing the Operational Guidelines and taking into consideration the Code of Conduct¹.

¹ “Declaration of principles to promote international solidarity and cooperation to preserve World Heritage.” endorsed by the General Assembly at its 23rd session in November 2021.

3 – Ensuring Structural Capacity Building

- Ensuring structural capacity building and awareness raising at all levels, including local communities, decision-making stakeholders and youth is of paramount importance.
- Systematised capacity building programmes, including mentorship and training of trainers, as a response for under-represented and non-represented States Parties, who should ensure that these capacities are sustained over time internally.
- Priority should be given to SIDS and Africa.
- Capacity building is needed in the framework of nominations as well as for conservation and management, including to face tourism development or climate change challenges.
- The necessity to determine what kind of capacity building is needed in identifying potential sites for nomination and ensuring high quality nomination dossiers. This also includes the Preliminary Assessment and technical evaluation requirements.

4 - Dialogue

- The importance of enhancing the dialogue between States Parties, Advisory Bodies and the World Heritage Centre.
- Preliminary Assessment as an opportunity to strengthen the dialogue with the Advisory Bodies and instore confidence.

The group also discussed the need to structure its debate effectively and the necessity for concrete proposals to progress and formulate recommendations. It was therefore agreed to discuss points 1 and 2 together and the remaining points afterwards. Furthermore, States Parties were encouraged to submit their concrete proposals in a concise format to the Secretariat for compilation, and presentation to the Working Group at its next meeting.

Closure of the meeting

In his closing remarks, the **Chairperson** reiterated the need for concrete proposals from States Parties ahead of the upcoming meeting scheduled for 22-23 May. States Parties were encouraged to send their concise proposals preferably by 6 May but not later than 10 May with regards to the five points of the mandate of the Working Group. Finally, the Chairperson expressed his gratitude for the valuable contributions made by the participants, both online and in person.