

# Inventories & Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

Survey Data - Digital ICH Observatory

## Digital Inventories: Structure, Usefulness, and Participation

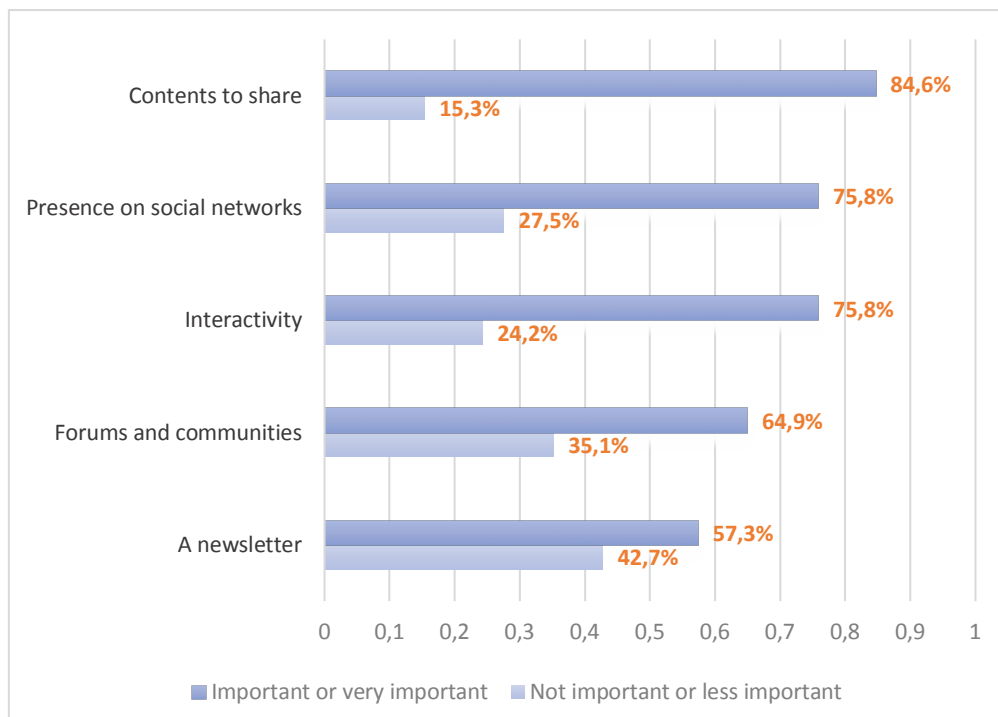
Sophie Elpers<sup>1</sup>, Susanne Verburg<sup>1</sup> and Filomena Sousa<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage, <sup>2</sup>Digital ICH Observatory MI/IELT NOVA.

In this article we react to two chapters from the 2020 Inventories Survey, namely, "ICH inventories' structure and usefulness" and "ICH inventories' participation". We will discuss the answers of the respondents who took part in the quantitative survey "Inventories & Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)" visualised in graphics 9-10, 12 and 14-15 (Sousa, 2021),<sup>1</sup> give them meaning, and connect them to the experiences that we gained from the implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention in the Netherlands. The information that was gathered during this survey gives us an insight into how inventories are currently used and structured as well as what the - fulfilled and unfulfilled - expectations of the respondents are.

### 1. The inventory as stimulus and infrastructure for social networking

In regard to the questions "What should an ICH inventory have?" and "How should an inventory be?", we would like to discuss two aspects which are considered as "important" and "very important" by approximately 76% of the respondents; the first being the relationship between inventories and social networks and the second, the interactivity of the inventories (graphic 1).



Graphic 1 – Opinion: What should an ICH inventory have/How should an inventory be? (Variables 33.3 to 33.7 and 32.3)

<sup>1</sup> In this article - graphics 1,2,3,4 and 5. We will also refer to graphic 13 (Sousa, 2021) and graphic 6 in our text.

The category "presence on social networks", as it appears in the graphic, can be interpreted in diverse ways: general presence on social networks, presence on social networks originating from ICH practitioners, and presence on the social networks of the institutions that coordinate ICH inventories, such as the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (DCIC) in the Netherlands. The category can also be approached in a more direct way and be understood as "the inventory as infrastructure for social networking". We wish to elaborate a little more on this last approach because, in our eyes, it has the potential to both strengthen existing safeguarding measures and inspire heritage professionals to be more proactive in that sense, if they haven't been already.<sup>2</sup>

Valdimar Hafstein draws attention to the fact that heritagisation can equate to recontextualisation when he writes: "To label a practice or a site as heritage is not so much a description [...] as it is an intervention. In fact, heritage reorders relations between persons and things, and among persons themselves, objectifying and recontextualizing them with reference to other sites and practices designated as heritage" (Hafstein, 2012, 508). The results of this recontextualisation process are visible in the (websites of the) inventories. It is unquestionable important to critically consider the inventories in light of the valuations and hierarchies created by heritage regimes (Bendix, 2014), that include as well as exclude specific forms of heritage, despite the adoption of the famous bottom-up principle of the 2003 UNESCO Convention and its corresponding emphasis on the involvement of the communities, groups, and individuals surrounding ICH (cf. Sousa, 2018, 13-16, 35-52). Nevertheless, understood as infrastructure, the inventories can give heritage bearers the opportunity to collaborate and exchange both good and bad experiences of safeguarding. Mutually beneficial exchange and cooperation can successfully be kick-started by taking a look at the inventory; especially if it offers the possibility to search by theme, "youth", "textile", "parade", and "urban" being some examples. Indeed, more than 90% of the respondents of the survey find searchability important or very important (graphic 2), even though it is not clear for which exact reason(s) they do.

In the Netherlands, the collaboration between the practitioners of several flower parades culminated in an inscription in the Dutch Register of Inspiring Examples of Safeguarding as well as in the creation of a general roadmap for collaborations amongst bearers of ICH. A digital version of this roadmap can be found on the website of the Register.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, practitioners of quite different forms of intangible heritage can help one another by reflecting on each other's heritage, sharing ideas, and developing creative projects together, once they have come into contact (Elpers, Verburg 2020, 38). For example, the practitioners of the Saint Martin celebration in the city of Utrecht<sup>4</sup> have been sharing their experience regarding the creation of an international Saint Martin tourist route with a community in the village of Beesel who organises a yearly open-air spectacle based on the legend of Saint George and the Dragon.<sup>5</sup>

However, attention should also be drawn to the risks and challenges that come with collaborative projects: Do situations of competition arise between the bearers of diverse forms of heritage? Do

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the respondents of the survey find social networks, interactivity, and forums important or very important, they have also answered that they rarely participate in anything.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/nl/Corsokoepel>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/sintmaartenvieringnutrecht> (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/draakstekenbeesel> (accessed 25 May 2021).

some practitioners of intangible heritage lose their individuality or local colour? Do larger groups of practitioners tend to absorb smaller groups (Elpers, Verburg, 2020, 42)?

In our experience, ICH bearers sometimes have trouble finding each other. In order to foster exchange, we organise so-called face-to-face ICH Days in the Netherlands twice a year. Invited to join these events are the communities, groups, and individuals who are involved in an ICH practice inscribed in one of the three Dutch inventories<sup>6</sup>. Next to workshops on diverse ICH-related topics, the ICH Days offer plenty of time and a safe space for personal exchanges about the opportunities and challenges surrounding the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Approaches that consider inventories as stimuli and infrastructures for social networks, rather than lists of single quantifiable elements of ICH (with which state parties tend to claim their successes in the cultural field (cf. Hafstein, 2012, 504)), like the one we have just explored, are effective because they emphasise the role of inventories as safeguarding tools.

## **2. Interactivity and the dynamics of intangible cultural heritage**

Let us share a second thought: interactive inventories can significantly contribute to the development of approaches that are based on a dynamic, rather than fixed, understanding of heritage. These approaches are said to be dynamic because they recognise that cultural practices are constantly changing, that heritage items are often surrounded by a variety of different emotions and multiple perspectives (cf. Rana/Willemsen/Dibbits, 2017), and that heritage itself is an ongoing metacultural process of making and remaking heritage during which diverse actors are constantly negotiating its present and future meaning.

Roughly 70% of the participants who took part in the survey found it very important that an inventory should be updated and only 7% found this not or less important (graphic 2). Updates can, of course, be fostered by interactive inventories that allow ICH practitioners to integrate changes and developments concerning cultural practices and their safeguarding; a point which we come back to below. Additionally, interactive inventories can also engage more stakeholders than groups of practitioners alone and can stimulate dialogue and debate about heritage, which we see as central to democratic and inclusive heritage-making processes. However, they need good moderation and sound methods if they are to lead to fruitful results and mutual understanding (rather than confronting conflicts).

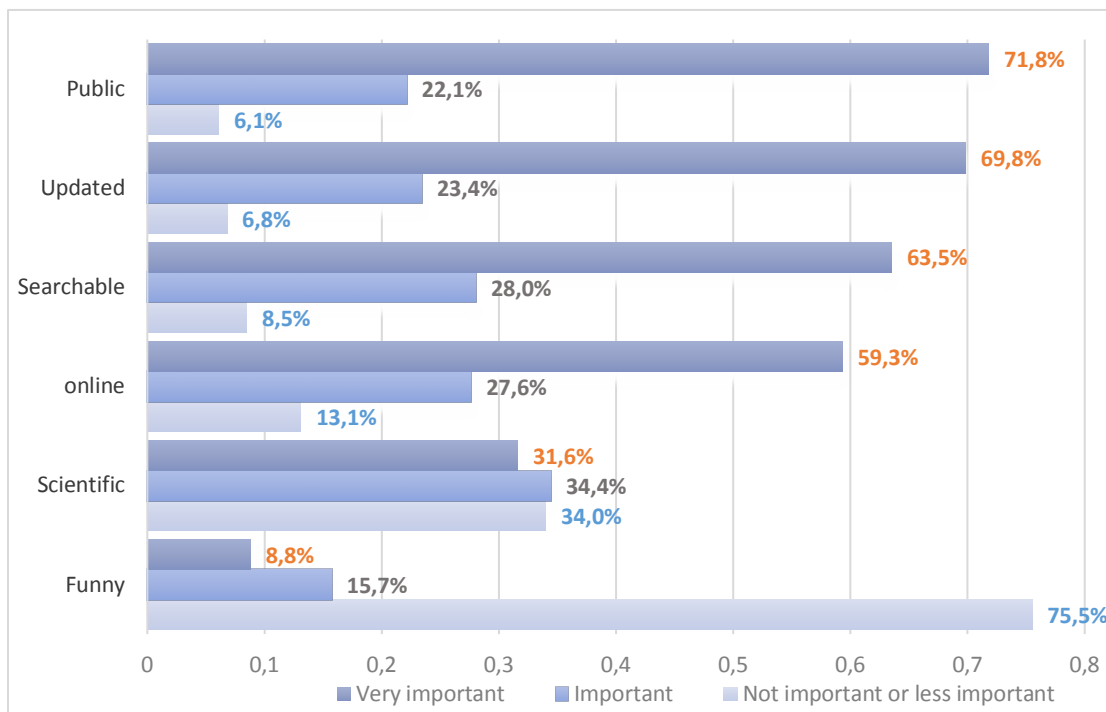
In the Netherlands, for instance, the method of "emotion networking" turns out to be highly appreciated, not only in the heritage field, but also on a much larger scale and in different parts of society. The method brings together and provides insights into complicated interplays between emotions, interests, and different sorts of knowledge about one particular heritage item.<sup>7</sup> Another tool, developed by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage, is a wheel chart that stimulates

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<sup>6</sup> A so-called "Network" which collects ICH in a Wikipedia-like way, a so-called "Inventory" on which ICH elements are listed for which the bearers have developed a safeguarding plan, and a "Register" with good practices of safeguarding. <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/netwerkinventarisregister> (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/en/research-group-cultural-heritage/emotion-networking/> (accessed 25 May 2021).

dialogue about what can be called "contested" ICH, i.e. heritage whose meaning and ownership is debated upon in society.<sup>8</sup>



Graphic 2 – Opinion: How should an ICH inventory be? (Variables 32)

There are no updates, no exchanges, no dialogues, and no debates without interactivity. However, that does not mean that interactivity should always be realised through digital methods and specifically interactive digital inventories. Experience tells us that people need small safe settings in which they can openly talk about challenges, share negative emotions, and discuss difficult topics. Digital interactivity should therefore be customised based on thorough case-by-case reflections.

### 3. Updated! Online!?

Back to the notion that inventories should be updated. There is no question that dynamic heritage should also be described on dynamic and regularly updated inventories,<sup>9</sup> especially if those inventories also have an archival function - as 66% of the respondents find important (graphic 3) - and if the archived version of ICH is considered as the "right" one or the one that should be "protected". Updates on how ICH elements and their bearers change over time prevent processes of fossilisation. But what else should be updated? In the Netherlands, for instance, updates mostly concern the information about safeguarding measures of the inventory's diverse heritage items. The updates are based on evaluations carried out with the practitioners, which reflects on executed as well as planned safeguarding measures. The evaluations take place every three years.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/page/9345/keuzekompas-ga-in-gesprek-over-immaterieel-erfgoed> (accessed 25 May 2021).

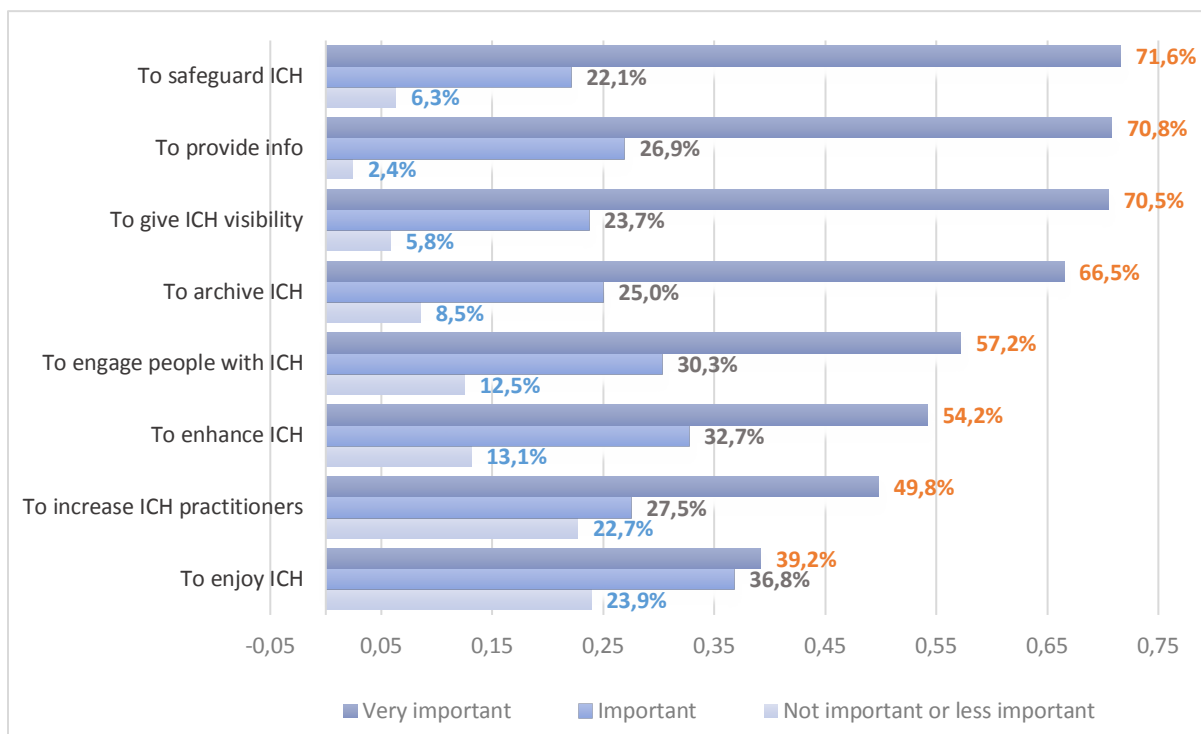
<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon that heritage lists are considered and treated as heritage themselves that we have to care for (cf. Harrison 2020, 14).

<sup>10</sup> The growing number of elements of ICH inscribed in the inventory is a challenge for the manageability of the evaluations.

Updates could, and in our eyes, should also include the impact of inventory measures on cultural practices and should describe the extent to which measures mitigate or amplify cultural change. This is a reflective feature that could also address the right of heritage practitioners to reject the inscription of an element in an inventory (cf. SIEF, 2021).

Another thought-provoking result of the survey that is visible in graphic 2 is the following: inventories should be (open access) online (more than 87% of the respondents find this important or very important). The issue of digitisation is complex and we would be interested in getting to know more about the details of the perceptions and expectations that lie behind this percentage. What exactly should be online and why? (See below)

One of the aspects of providing data online is that, beyond being linked to each other (cf. Sousa, 2018, 41), data sets can be compared to one another easily - sometimes too easily. This not only concerns information about the diverse ICH elements within one inventory but also information about ICH elements in different inventories or the inventories themselves. In order to avoid drawing misleading conclusions from such comparisons, it is of crucial importance that online inventories provide the visitor with enough contextual information regarding the heritage-making process which the inventory is part of. After all, each inventory is constructed within the confines of a specific heritage regime which comes with a particular understanding of how to implement the 2003 UNESCO Convention and how to put together inventories. These understandings might differ quite substantially from one inventory to the next, making comparisons much more complex than it seems at first sight.

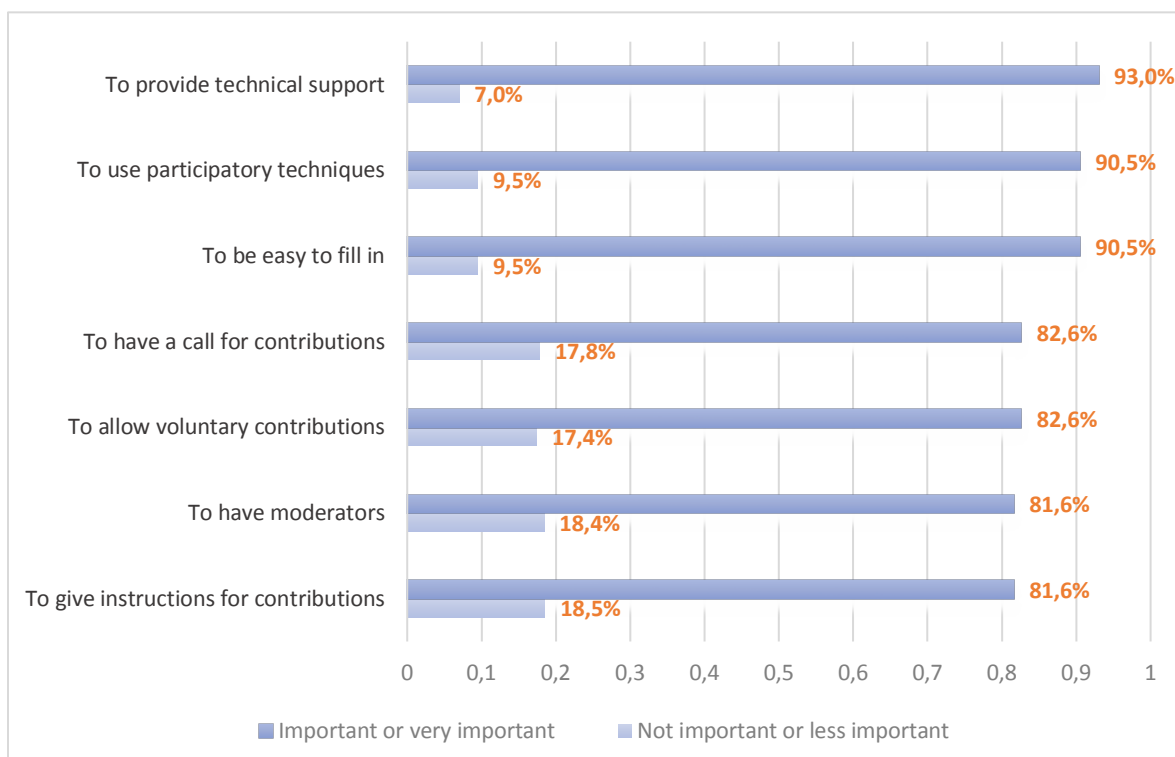


Graphic 3 – Opinion: Why are ICH inventories important?

#### 4. Safeguarding ICH and participation via the inventory

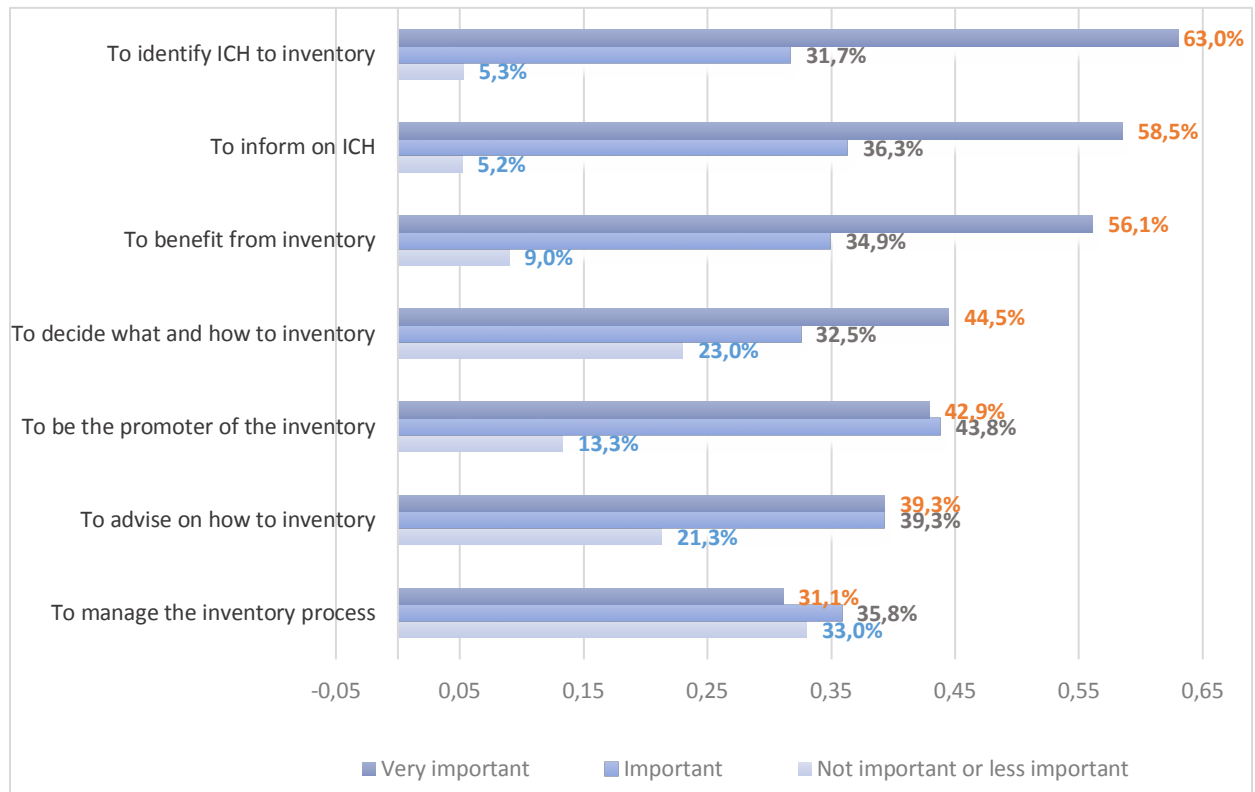
Graphic 3 shows that "to safeguard ICH" is considered to be the main purpose of inventories (more than 71% of the respondents find this aspect very important). However, the other elements mentioned in the graphic are also part of the safeguarding process. With this in mind, it is interesting to see which ones are considered more important than others. The elements of safeguarding that contribute to the creation of an informative inventory and increase the public visibility of intangible cultural heritage stand out the most. Engaging people, enhancing ICH, and increasing ICH practitioners, aspects that are all closely related to ICH bearers and that require interactivity and dialogue, are less valued. This resonates with the results presented in graphic 5 as it showed us that the main role of the bearers of intangible cultural heritage is seen as identifying ICH for the inventories and providing information on ICH. "To benefit from the inventory" is only in third place.<sup>11</sup> This leads us to ask certain questions: what is meant by "to safeguard ICH" precisely? For whom should it be safeguarded?

Depending on the way that application and inscription processes are organised and depending on how well the bearers of heritage participate in this process, the safeguarding function of inventories can already come into play long before an element of ICH is inscribed in an inventory. In the Netherlands, for instance, the writing of the application for the so-called "Inventaris" comes with an elaborate training, offered by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage. During the training, the concept of ICH as well as the spirit of the Convention and corresponding safeguarding activities are presented and discussed. Heritage bearers are encouraged to think about the core elements and values of their heritage and are supported during the writing of their safeguarding plans. Next to this outcome, the main outcome might be that the bearers of ICH develop a (more) reflexive relationship with their ICH which is one of the preconditions of heritage (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2014) - and safeguarding.



Graphic 4 – Opinion: What is important in a participatory ICH inventory?

<sup>11</sup> It remains unclear what "benefit" precisely means and if financial or legal aspects might be implicated.



Graphic 5 – Opinion: What should be the role of communities, groups or individuals in ICH inventories?

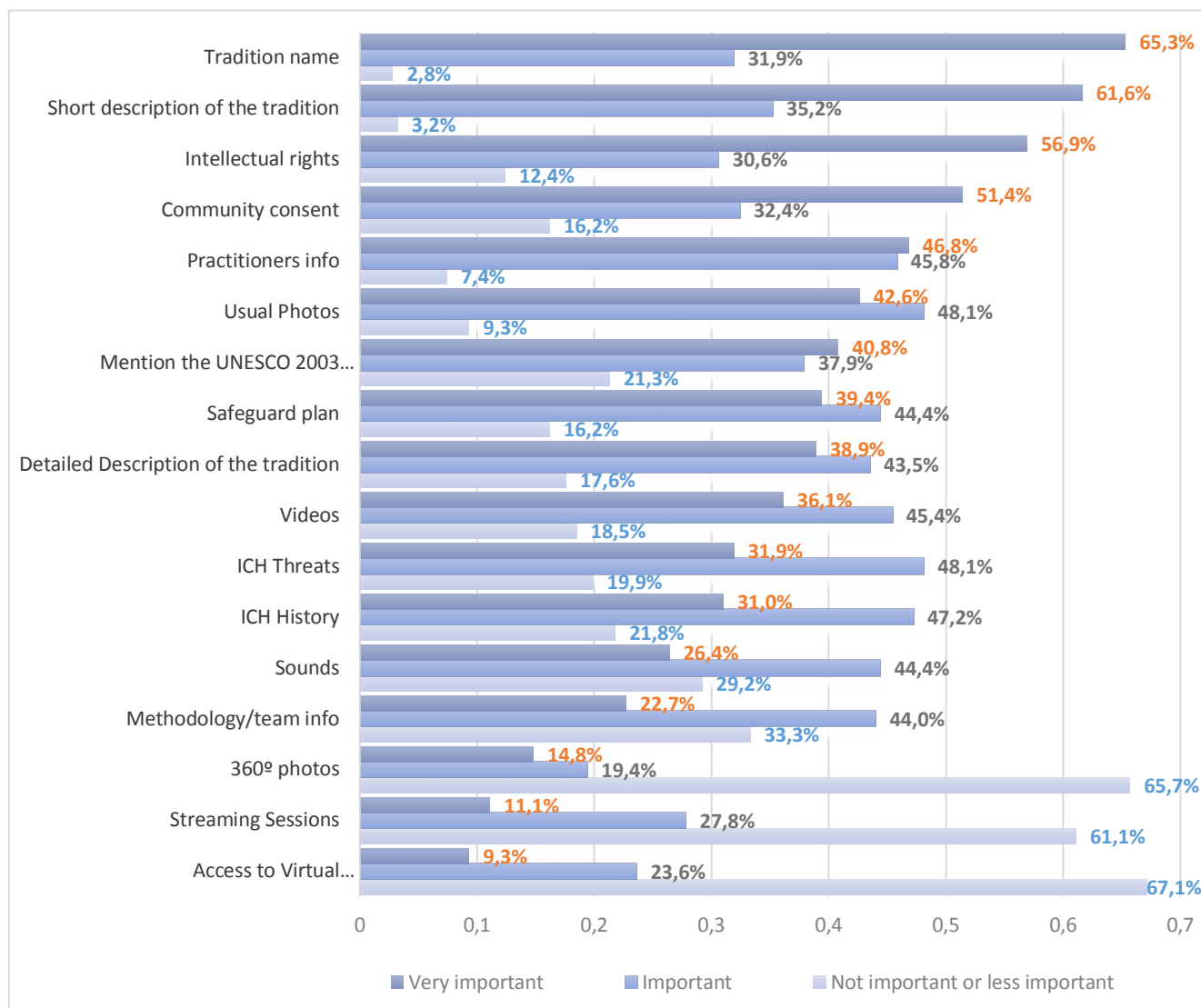
Graphic 4 visualises which elements are seen as important in a participatory inventory. When considering this subject, we will only refer to the following issue: the different elements show the challenges and contradictions that lie within participatory practices. On the one hand, the respondents' answers reveal the desire to create an accessible environment for ICH practitioners to engage with, and on the other hand, they reflect the need for support and moderation. In the Netherlands this is a challenge as well. One of the Dutch inventories, called "Netwerk [Network]", works in a Wikipedia-like manner: practitioners can inscribe their ICH themselves. However, quite substantial misunderstandings of intangible cultural heritage and factually deficient descriptions of specific heritages sometimes occur. In other cases, things are described in inappropriate vocabulary in the sense of the UNESCO Convention or simply in bad Dutch. Consequently, thorough checks as well as detailed editing by heritage "experts", then take place. Are illusions of participation created (cf. Lynch, 2020, 13)? Or do such processes point to the necessity to protect the participants of a participatory project? Should moderation also take place if participation goes further, as is the case in graphic 5 where heritage bearers are assigned the role of organisers and promoters of the inventories as well as managers of the inventory process? In any case, we think that it is helpful to relinquish approaches to participation that are derived from the idea of different grades of involvement as described in hierarchies (cf. the concept of participation leader; Arnstein, 1969). The linear structure that the concept of participation leaders is based on is problematic because it does not take into account the dynamics of social reality and the need for flexibility. Furthermore, any level of participation other than the very highest could be seen as a failure, potentially leading to the delegitimisation of participation processes. In the case of ICH inventories, the challenge is to find a good balance between the participation of heritage practitioners and the work of experts (cf. Sousa, 2018, 33) and to keep the process of collaboration as dynamic as ICH is.



## 5. Final notes and other questions

Considering its main objective, the survey "Inventories & Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)" collected quantitative information mainly on the question of how inventories are currently used and structured. However, future investigations should look to bring additional information that will allow us to tease out correlations between different answers, leading to more detailed interpretations. Furthermore, qualitative data collected from interviews will allow us to complement the knowledge that has been produced and to respond to the clues and questions brought about by the survey results. This will help us to understand why and how the process of heritage-making and listing is made, considering, for instance, the question of the agency of inventories in relation to ICH safeguarding.

Regarding online and open access inventories, we consider that this theme can be explored in future research projects by raising some of the following questions: what precisely (of the aspects made visible in graphic 6) should be online and why? Should specific aspects also be prevented from going online and remain hidden? What about privacy? And what about so-called "clandestine heritage"? Do the bearers of heritage still feel "safe" when (the updates of) their safeguarding plans are done online, or do they perceive this as an alienating mechanism that leads to (social) control, as we have experienced in the Netherlands? Based on the data visualised in graphic 1 and 2, we assume that online inventories are considered to be important because they provide information to the public and promote interactivity, but is this public element seen as a value in itself? Or is it rather seen as a means to raise awareness and empower the bearers of the intangible cultural heritage?





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