

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ICH IN MONGOLIA: A CASE STUDY IN ULAANBAATAR CAPITAL CITY

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BACKGROUND

During 1 December 2021- 1 January 2022, we conducted a Questionnaire-Based Desk Survey on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and COVID-19 Pandemic Situation in Mongolia, regarding the new project 'Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic' undertaken by International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI).

The survey was conducted at the national level to assess the status of the ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic. Questionnaire A enrolled research institutions, researchers, and other organizations in this field, and Questionnaire B enrolled the community, local people, and practitioners of intangible cultural heritage.

To ensure accessibility and participation in the survey, the questionnaires were distributed to local cultural departments, cultural centers, which are the primary focal units, of 21 aimags in 5 regions of Mongolia. In the end it covered all 5 domains of ICH, enrolled capital city and 15 aimags, 12 soums, 3 local museums, one NGO, and a total of 45 practitioners. Namely:

- Ulaanbaatar city: 8 practitioners, 1 NGO;
- Khangai region includes 16 cultural organizations, 35 practitioners /enrolled 5 aimags: Arkhangai, Bayan-Khongor, Bulgan, Khuvsgul, Uvurkhangai
- The central region includes 4 cultural organizations, 6 practitioners /enrolled 3 aimags: Govisumber, Darkhan-Uul, Dornogovi
- Western region includes 5 cultural organizations, 17 practitioners /enrolled 4 aimags: Bayan-Ulgii, Govi-Altai, Zavkhan, Uvs
- Eastern region includes 5 cultural organizations, 8 practitioners /enrolled 3 aimags: Dornod, Sukhbaatar, Khentii

According to the survey, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, negative impacts such as reduced frequency of ICH, the cessation of apprenticeship training, disrupted the inheritance system, deprived of financial resources for practi-

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tioners, and shortage of raw materials have been observed. Despite the challenges and risks, positive changes and progress have been noted. As an example, it has been observed that there is a growing trend towards the revival of traditional culinary practices and traditional medicine. Furthermore, communities and families are engaging in traditional games to create a pleasant and effective atmosphere. Additionally, traditional dances, long songs, and other related exercises have been utilized to promote respiratory and physical activity.

To adapt to the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of respondents noted that the intangible cultural heritage had undergone some changes in practices and transmission. It was also mentioned that these changes had both positive and negative sides (Table 1).

Table 1. Positive and negative aspects of the COVID-19 on ICH

| Positive | Negative |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional technology has been revived - Increased ICH-based production - Increased ICH training and learning opportunities through online - Increased participation of family members, their collective attitudes, and activism - Inherited within the family - Craftsmanship developed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Changes in apprenticeship training - Material technology changes - Apprenticeship training stopped - Lack of live communication has had a negative impact on inheritance |

Participants responded to the following questions: new/innovative attempts, ways, or techniques added to the practice and/or the transmission of ICH, to adapt to the current situation, and whether these have improved safeguarding of ICH (Table 2).

Table 2. Methods added to the practice and transmission of ICH and its effects

| New/innovative attempts, ways, or techniques added to the practice and/or the transmission of ICH, to adapt to the current situation | Whether these have improved safeguarding of ICH |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mutual learning in a family environment - Online contests - Online training - Online content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased public awareness and understanding of ICH - Introduced into the life and household use of ICH - Promoted ICH and bearers |

72 percent of practitioners said that the practice of inheritance had changed, while 28 percent said they had not changed. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, 29 percent have tried to continue their practices in some way, but have experienced difficulties and lack of opportunities as a result of the situation. And 20 percent have stopped because they could not continue it. To be sure, 5 percent of inheritors concluded that new opportunities have opened up. In addition, 69 percent of respondents believe that the situation during the

COVID-19 pandemic and changes related to it has negatively affected the ICH, and 58 percent believe that this change should not continue after the pandemic is gone. However, 31 percent responded that the changes of the time had opened up new opportunities and facilitated the practice of ICH, and 42 percent agreed that they could continue in this direction.

Furthermore, 33 percent of practitioners concluded that the use of the internet made it possible to learn and to continue the practice of ICH for the young generation, while 42 percent felt that the situation did not encourage people to join ICH practice.

According to the survey, 49 percent of the respondent said, that they prefer the style of practice before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The survey responses note that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes and innovations in the use of the online environment, such as the use of the Internet, were seen as more conducive to the intangible cultural heritage promotion and awareness-raising of the general public.

In some responses mentioned, there is an urgent need for support, such as capacity building and technical support. It shows that the role of information technology is important, but it also makes us aware of the importance of 'live' communication between people.

OVERVIEW OF ICH IN MONGOLIA

At the present day the total of 362 ICH elements of the 23 ethnic groups in Mongolia are being registered in 7 domains of the National Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mongolia: 83 elements registered into the 'National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding', 279 elements registered into the 'National Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage', 102 bearers are registered as a masters into the 'National List of Bearers of ICH Heritage with High Level of Skill' (updated by Order A/759 of the Minister of Education, Culture, Science and Sports of Mongolia on November 29, 2019).

Since the year 2010, registration and information, documentation of intangible cultural heritage and its bearers have been updated annually and the state integrated registration and the information database have been made available to the public in an accountable and accessible manner.

As of the year 2023, a total of 11,189 bearers, 277 ICH elements and relevant documentation of the ICH have been accumulated in the State Integrated Registration Database of Cultural Heritage.

The half of the Mongolia's population lives in capital city Ulaanbaatar. In that sense, more than 30 percent of all ICH practitioners of Mongolia live in Ulaanbaatar.

In addition, during the high exposure to the pandemic COVID-19 and the restriction period has affected highly and longer the Ulaanbaatar city than in other provinces. Counting this situation, the field trip aims to focus on ICH and its

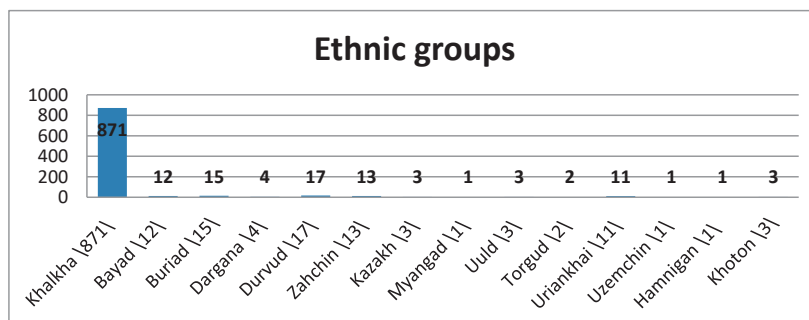


Figure 1. Ethnic group of ICH bearers. (Source: Database of National Center for Cultural Heritage, 2023)

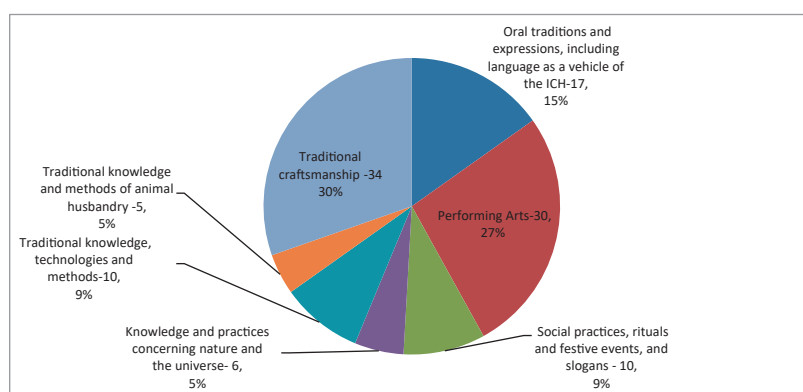


Figure 2. ICH elements listed into the Representative List are broken down into domains. (Source: Database of National Center for Cultural Heritage, 2023)

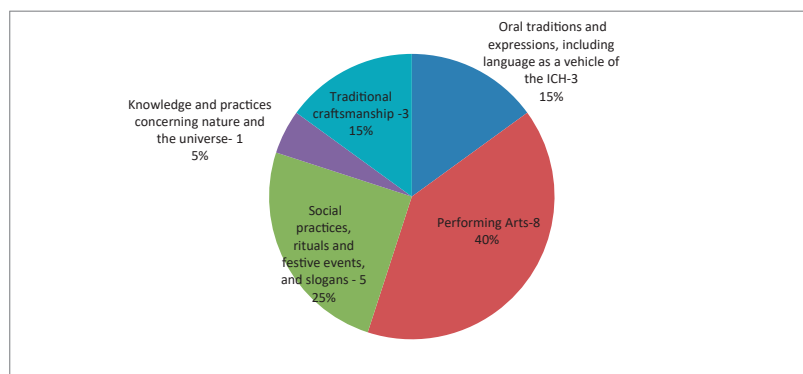


Figure 3. ICH elements listed into the List in Need of Urgent Safeguarding are broken down into domains. (Source: Database of National Center for Cultural Heritage, 2023)

practitioners in Ulaanbaatar city.

As State Database of Cultural Heritage Information and Registration (Figure 1) show a total of 957 ICH bearers are registered in Ulaanbaatar City. Out of them, there are belongs to the following ethnic groups 871 Khalkhs, Bayad 12, Buriad 15, Dargana 4, Durvud 17, Zahchin 13, Kazakh 3, Myangad 1, Uuld 3, Torgud 2,

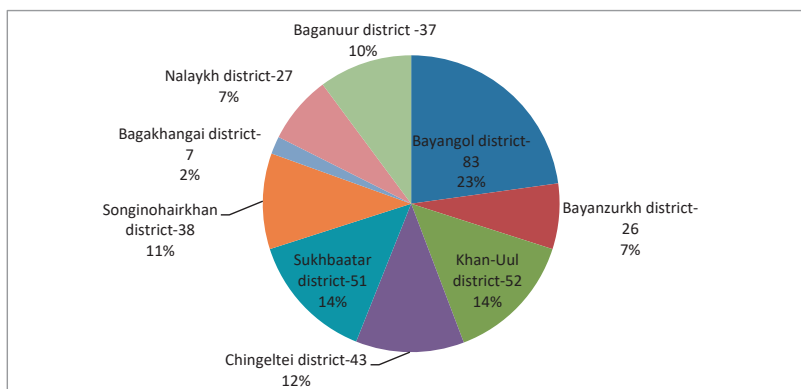


Figure 4. Districts' of elderly practitioners. (Source: Database of National Center for Cultural Heritage, 2023)

Uriankhai 11, Uzemchin 1, Hamnigan 1, and Khoton 3.

There are 843 bearers on the list of the National Representative List of ICH (Figure 2), and 114 bearers on the list of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (Figure 3). A total of 364 elderly practitioners (Figure 4) were registered (above 65 years): 182 women, 182 men.

The result of the desk study shows that ICH elements within the following domains were more likely to be affected (in good or bad ways). These include:

- Performing arts
- Social practices, rituals, and festive events
- Traditional craftsmanship.

The ICH elements within the above-mentioned domains are mostly abandoned or facing the following difficulties due to COVID-19:

- Decreased frequency of inheritance
- Apprenticeship training has stopped, and the system of transmission has been lost
- Shortage of raw materials
- Loss of financial resources.

Likewise, following ICH practices were revalued as important and gained greater attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as:

- Traditional medicine
- Traditional Culinary culture
- Folk games.

The ICH elements which belong into the following domains are less or not affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. These domains are:

- Traditional knowledge, technologies and methods
- Traditional knowledge and methods of animal husbandry.

FIELD RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Initially, the field research was planned to cover two provinces from the Khangai region, such as Arkhangai and Uvurkhangai, and the Eastern region, as well as the capital city Ulaanbaatar (central 6 districts and 3 sub-districts), overall 14 field points. Nonetheless, after the discussion with IRCI and counting the situation of high exposure, and post pandemic situation the project team focused on the central districts of Ulaanbaatar City.

The field trip goal is to research the present-day's situations of ICH elements, in the frame of the selected location.

The field research will be conducted mostly using following methods:

- Observation
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Documentation

The field research concerned equal enrollments from central 9 districts of Ulaanbaatar city to cover ICH elements and practitioners from the list of the representative and in need of urgent safeguarding. In this way, it will be researched and discovered which ICH elements have stagnated during the period of COVID-19, which heritage items have developed more, and what resources and policy implementation are needed to prevent and protect intangible cultural heritage in future emergencies, and identify the post-COVID-19 situation of ICH.

The objective of the field research was to survey 15 percent of the ICH practitioners located in all six central districts of Ulaanbaatar, the capital city. We organized several consultation meetings with relevant local cultural authorities, communities, and non-governmental organizations to achieve this. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, we conducted field trips in the districts and held interviews with focus groups. The results of our field research have the potential to offer valuable insights and recommendations for all relevant stakeholders and policy-makers.

BRIEF INFORMATION ON COVID-19 IN MONGOLIA

The situation of COVID-19 subsides at the end of April 2022, and the Government of Mongolia annulled the restrictions. Starting from April 29, 2022, the official website of the Ministry of Health and other media stopped to provide detailed information on the number of COVID-19 infections. (Figure 5, 6 and 7)

We should note here that almost all participants of the field research were infected and some of them were infected twice.

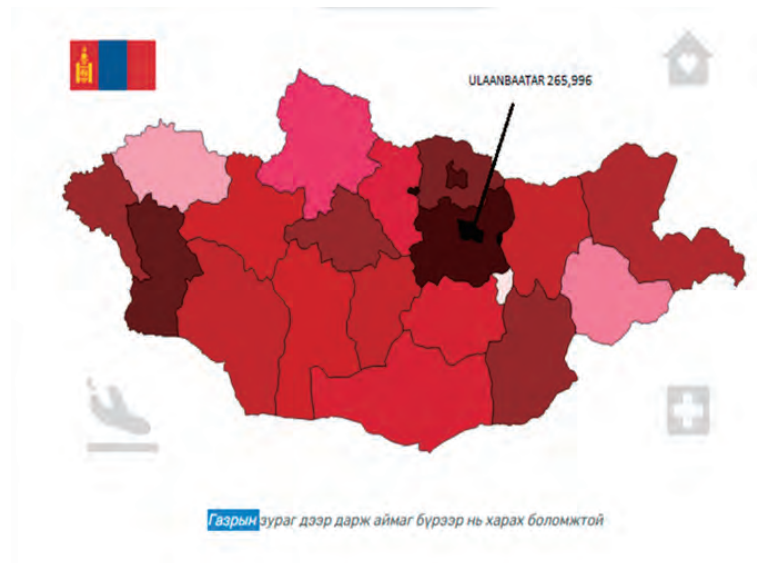


Figure 5. Map of spreading COVID-19. (Source: Ministry of Health as of 29 April 2022, <https://visual.ikon.mn/>)

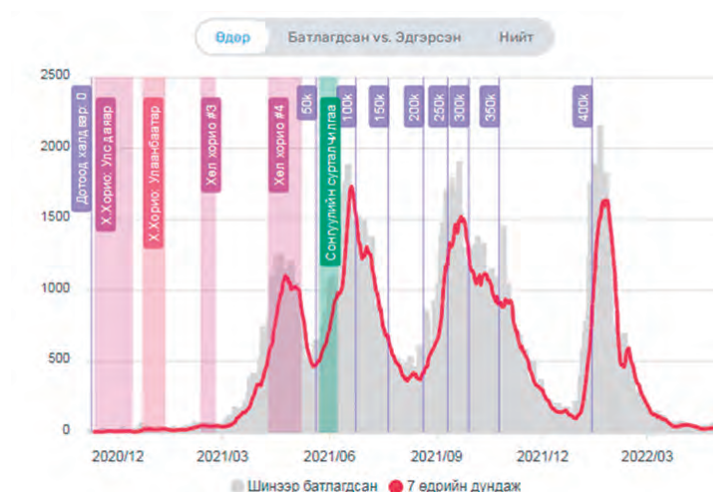


Figure 6. Statistics of spreading COVID-19. (Source: Ministry of Health as of 29 April 2022, <https://visual.ikon.mn/>)



Figure 7. Statistics of spreading COVID-19. (Source: Ministry of Health as of 29 April 2022, <https://visual.ikon.mn/>)

FIELD RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYZES

Since the field research coincided with the State inventorying of intangible cultural heritage, we had the opportunity to conduct research in 9 districts of Ulaanbaatar within the framework of the inventorying (Figure 8). Following ICH practitioners are respectively enrolled in the field research:

- Khan-Uul district- 11,
- Chingeltei district- 10,
- Bayanzurkh district- 10,
- Bayangol district- 10,
- Songinohairkhan district- 9,
- Sukhbaatar district- 7,
- Baganuur district- 9,
- Bagahangai district- 6,
- Nalaikh district- 7. (A total 79 people)

Based on the results of the previous survey and observation of the situation, in this current field study, out of the seven intangible cultural heritage domains of Mongolia, the ICH elements of three domains, which are likely to be more affected by the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been covered (Figure 9). The participants in the field research are classified by the domains are following:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the ICH 20 (major concerned ICH elements: praise, blessing, epic),
- Performing art 25 (major concerned ICH elements: horse fiddle, circular breathing of limbe flute, traditional dance of bii biyelgee, folk songs, lullaby),
- Traditional craftsmanship 34 people (major concerned ICH elements: traditional techniques of blacksmith, embroidery, wood carving, leather producing, producing of traditional musical instrument of horse fiddle, producing of traditional costumes).



Figure 8. Map of Ulaanbaatar City and involved practitioners. (Source: Database of National Center for Cultural Heritage, 2023)

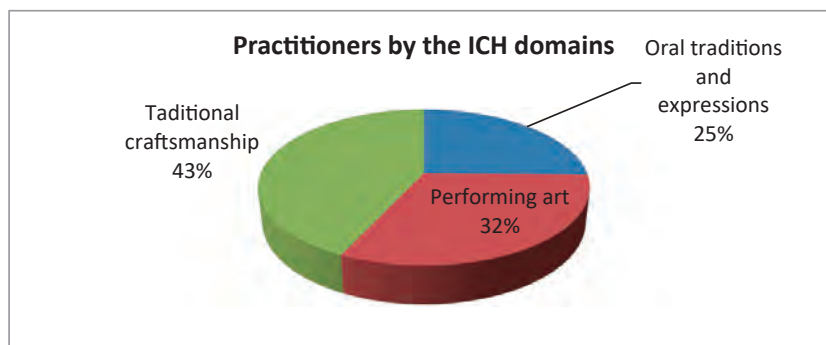


Figure 9. Practitioners involved in field survey by the ICH domains

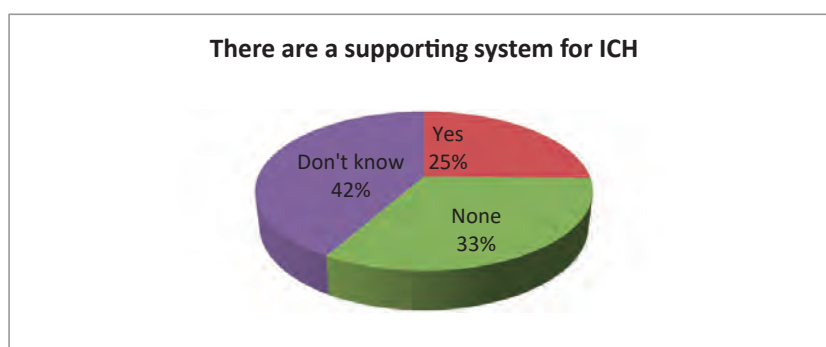


Figure 10. Responses by percentage on are there any supporting system for ICH

Out of 79 people enrolled in the field research, 12 noted that they had an opportunity to learn more about ICH and increase their skills online, 30 people stated the practice has no changes, and 25 people have tried to practice continuously, still, there were fewer opportunities, 25 answered do not know.

The question that there are any supporting systems or specific means of assistance provided for the ICH communities was noted yes 20 people, none 26 people, and 33 people answered do not know (Figure 10).

The answer was that there is no state or local support for promoting, disseminating, and studying cultural heritage, and even though they request to participate in competitions, there is little encouragement and support for the ICH practitioners.

34 people who participated in the field research were the practitioners who belong to the traditional craftsmanship domain, including 29 people who sell their goods. These people have their own workshops and employ people. Individuals and small business owners who earn a living in the field of traditional crafts had to buy their products at higher prices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have faced the risk of reduced income, interruptions, and in some cases, work has stopped. But still, their advantage is that it is possible to sell online.

It can be seen from here that there are many people who are ICH practitioners and laborers belonging to the traditional craftsmanship domain. The fact that the

participants do not know what intangible cultural heritage is, and who are the practitioners or community of the ICH, shows that the knowledge and understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of the citizens is weak.

21 of the interviewed practitioners belong to communities, groups and associations that learn from each other. During the pandemic, these people connected with each other online, participated in trainings and activities of the association, learned, and sold their products through groups, associations, and online.

Regarding the ICH changes in ICH practices during the COVID-19 pandemic interviewed practitioners commonly noted the following positive and negative changes. Positive changes include:

- A good opportunity to create
- Increased opportunity for online sales
- A good opportunity to learn in the online environment has been created
- It is commendable that cultural services such as contests and awareness-raising content were conducted online in order to increase public awareness of the intangible cultural heritage.

However, 59 percent of the participants believed that the delivery and promotion of information about cultural heritage to the public in electronic form has a positive effect on intangible cultural heritage, while 41 percent believed that due to the lack of knowledge and information about the intangible cultural heritage, they disseminated wrong information, decontextualized the meaning of the heritage in the online environment. It has been warned that there are negative aspects such as distortion of the content. Therefore, it was believed that it is necessary to pay attention to the content of the online content of intangible cultural heritage. Negative changes are listed below:

- 21 people who were interviewed stated that they do not get profit from the ICH, while there were 6 people who passed down the blessings and praises and said that they no longer have a 'slick job' that earns and helps them for a living.
- There were no specific recommendations directed at the cultural and heritage level, common warnings were only received from the Internet.
- The small business income of inheritors, self-employed people, and other groups of people has decreased, and rent and loan payments have piled up, putting pressure on the bank.

Others have highlighted the needs of assistance. Especially for elderly inheritors through government policy and those who make small pieces of traditional crafts through financial and housing support.

In question, if there were any beneficial and helpful conditions for your ICH elements during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Most of the participants who were interviewed stated that they lost the

opportunity to earn income from their inheritance due to the lack of preliminary preparation for the pandemic rather than benefits. There is a necessity for risk management and preparedness for such kind of situation, especially for the ICH community.

- In addition to work, there were 2 people who conducted the training on ICH, and during this time they prepared teaching materials.
- 1 felt maker and 3 embroiderers answered that they taught their family members and prepared small crafting materials with help of the family members.
- Some of them received and exchanged other needed materials online.

About 20-30 percent of the interviewees expressed the desire to have their own workplace and income from their ICH elements, to be economically sustained.

Due to the pandemic lockdown, the senior inheritor has created a good opportunity to teach his family members, especially children of primary and secondary school age, to make the most of his grandfather's time. It is very appreciable that during the pandemic, 13 children of primary and secondary school age from 4 families received apprenticeship training from their fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers. For instance, Mr. S., S., the practitioner of Nalaikh district, he showed us how he taught his grandchildren to use waste materials to make small household items.

CONCLUSION

As the results of the previous survey and observation of the situation, in this current field study, out of the seven intangible cultural heritage domains of Mongolia, the ICH elements of three domains, which are likely to be more affected by the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, are ICH elements of the following domains:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the ICH
- Performing arts
- Traditional craftsmanship.

Concerning the 'Social practices, rituals, and festive events' domain, the domain of course affected. However, it is observed that the communities are still more or less level tried to keep or continue the rituals and practices in the family during the pandemic.

The practitioners of the 'oral tradition' and 'performing arts' are had as both desk study and field research show, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, negative impacts such as reduced frequency of ICH, the cessation of apprenticeship training, disrupted the inheritance system, deprived of financial resources for practitioners. 'Traditional craftsmanship' had a negative impact concerning the shortage or higher prices of raw materials during the COVID-19 pandemic, and they have faced the risk of reduced income, interruptions, and in some cases, work has stopped. But still, their advantage is that it is possible to sell online.

To adapt to the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic the intangible cultural heritage had undergone some changes in practices and transmission. During the lockdown, electronic advertising, training, trade, and cognitive commissions continued to be introduced, creating opportunities for public and ICH practitioners.

59 percent of the participants believed that the delivery and promotion of information about cultural heritage to the public in electronic form has a positive effect on intangible cultural heritage, while 41 percent believed that due to the lack of knowledge and information about the intangible cultural heritage, they disseminated wrong information, decontextualized the meaning of the heritage in the online environment. It has been warned that there are negative aspects such as distortion of the content.

As result of the previous desk study shows, 33 percent of practitioners concluded that the use of the internet made it possible to learn and to continue the practice of ICH for the young generation, while 42 percent felt that the situation did not encourage people to join ICH practice.

It shows that the role of information technology is important, but it also makes us aware of the importance of 'live' communication between people.

25 percent of practitioners concluded that there is a support system for ICH, 33 percent that there is none, and 42 percent that they do not know.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to raise awareness and publicize, promote the existing laws, regulations, and regulations for the protection of ICH, as well as increase the number of professional staff and capacity building. In addition, Mongolia does not have a specific policy or management for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in times of disaster or risk. Therefore, the need for innovative changes and reforms, such as the implementation of specific measures for ICH and practitioner and communities in time of any disaster or risk.

As the COVID-19 pandemic eased and quarantine subsided and transitioned to normal life were able to easily switch to old/previous conditions. We have seen that the ICH practitioners still need support from the government and the private sector.