

The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in Ensuring the Sustainability of Cultural Heritage: A Case Study of the SERDE Art Residency Centre

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Introduction

Without cultural heritage in all its diversity — natural, tangible, intangible, and digital — it is hard to imagine the existence of any full and viable cultural ecosystem. The cultural ecosystem can be conceptualized as a set of interdependent elements: organizations, groups, and individuals, whose activities are aimed at the balanced and productive existence of the whole society. Awareness and understanding of the role and the importance of each of its actors is essential for the successful functioning of an ecosystem and for any meaningful, innovative, and development-oriented initiative to be valued and, where appropriate, supported. All players — the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), communities, and individuals — are equally important in the management of cultural heritage. There are three levels of policymaking and implementation — the national, regional, and local (European Commission 2021). The aim of this article is to analyze the experience of cultural NGOs focusing on intangible cultural heritage to reveal their potential and role in cultural heritage management processes by applying a case study approach, thus identifying factors that promote sustainability and factors which contain risks. The research was carried out using the ethnographic approach, conducting participant observation and in-depth interviews and identifying documentary evidence and the norms regulating the activities of the non-governmental sector relevant to the research.

The theoretical framework is based on the four-role model developed by John Holden, a cultural policy researcher. These roles are normally performed by members of the cultural ecosystem, which has a certain significance for *guardians*, caring for the culture of the past, for *platforms* that provide the cultural expressions of places and spaces today, and for *connectors* that connect parts of an ecosystem. In this way cultural processes are promoted, so that the *nomads*, the cultural citizens — as artists and as the audience — can act in all the above three roles (Holden 2015a: 29). J. Holden emphasizes that usually each participant plays one role; however, the examples of Latvia reveal that NGOs, working in the cultural heritage sector, at the same time provide several roles — those of the guardian, platform, and connector or process facilitator — thus serving as an essential resource for supporting and enhancing cultural heritage (Eiropas Reģionu komiteja 2015), and in this way ensuring the creative circulation of cultural heritage, becoming a source and breeding ground for innovation and new forms of culture (Holden 2015b).

The Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030 emphasizes:

“The people of Latvia have a common tangible and intangible cultural heritage accumulated through centuries of creative work. Culture lays the foundation for what we are and what we want to be. Common cultural heritage, language, traditions, and an understanding of values are key components which provide a sense of belonging to a particular community and promotes social cohesion.”

In turn, a cohesive society is characterized by its involvement in cultural processes, and NGOs will continue to play a significant, active role in the future (Saeima 2010: 16).

Concepts and definitions

In a modern democracy, the development of any sectoral policy is difficult to imagine without the active participation of the non-governmental sector; cultural heritage management processes are no exception. Despite conceptual diversity — grassroots, community-based, or civil-society organizations¹ (Willett 2011: 22) — the main characteristics of NGOs are independence from public administration institutions, non-profit status, non-political status, non-violent and non-criminal status (Willett 2006; Davies 2014: 3).

Despite the deep historical roots in Western culture dating back to the 18th century, when anti-slave and republican-based public organizations were founded (Davies 2014: 24), the NGO designation, along with a now-recognizable format, became relevant only as late as 1945. In accordance with Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations, it was recommended that the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the Member States, when coordinating international cooperation, consult with non-governmental organizations concerned with matters within its competence (United Nations [n.d.]). Since then, the functions of NGOs have been and continue to be mainly focused on development, humanitarian aid, the environment, and human rights. Naturally, UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), as a specialized UN body, also envisages a close partnership with NGOs in all areas of UNESCO’s competence. The 2012 UNESCO National Commission Charter Directives require NGOs to become official partners in the design and implementation of UNESCO programs. They must also adhere to the principles of independence from the state, democracy, and non-profit-making activities (UNESCO 2012: 155–159).

1 As P. Willett points out, there is no general agreement on the criteria for distinguishing an NGO from a CSO (civil society organizations) or CBO (community-based organizations). It is easier to use one term for NGOs and to divide them into global, regional, national, and local NGOs (Willett 2011).

Based on UN normative analysis and historical evidence of concept development, the political scientist Peter Willett offers a universal and easy-to-understand definition of an NGO: an association of independent volunteers working together on a permanent basis to achieve a specific common goal, other than seeking public office, making money, or engaging in illegal activities (Willett 2006).

The World Bank, an international financial organization for the reduction of inequality and poverty in the world in support of developing countries, emphasizes the importance of values, donations, and volunteering in NGO activities and extends the concept to any non-profit organization independent of the state, defining an NGO as a private organization working to alleviate suffering, protect the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or develop communities (Malena 1995: 7).

As an alternative to the international development discourse of the 1990s, the concept of civil society is defined by the World Bank:

“a wide range of non-governmental and non-profit organizations participating in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members and others based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious, or philanthropic considerations” (World Bank [n.d.]).

At the same time, scientists point out the operational uncertainty of the two concepts, differing only in trends: namely, NGOs are larger, formal, multinational organizations; civil society organizations, on the other hand, are smaller, informal, national, or local organizations that are, moreover, functionally similar to community-based organizations. However, for the sake of simplicity, Mr. Willett calls for the concept of an NGO to be used as a unifying factor, indicating contextually whether it is a global, regional, national, or local organization (Willett 2011: 22). Terminological diversity is also noted by A. Vakil, who points out the alternative concepts found in scientific literature, such as private voluntary organizations and non-profit organizations, the differences of which are not convincingly analyzed and determined (Vakil 1997: 2059).

Regarding the types of NGOs, it must be acknowledged that their criteria overlap, change, and hybridize, thus complicating typological clarity. The type of NGO can depend on a wide range of factors, such as the purpose and type of activity, the number of staff involved, the extent of geographical spatial impact (local, national, international), ideological orientation, social affiliation, diversity of initiative agents, etc. (Vakil 1997; Charlton, May 1995; Korten 1990; Hilhorst 2003).

In this respect, it is useful to refer to the World Bank’s basic classification of NGOs based on the NGOs’ objectives, which can be divided into two types: operational and advocacy NGOs.

Operational NGOs implement development-related projects on a national, international, or local scale. They can be divided into three main types:

- community-wide organizations serving a specific population in a small geographical area;
- national organizations operating in selected developing countries;
- international organizations, normally headquartered in developed countries, with operations in more than one developing country.

The main goal of advocacy-type NGOs is to deal with a specific case; they try to increase awareness and knowledge by carrying out various activities, such as lobbying the issue, publicity, and activist events (Malena 1995: 15–16).

The NGOs which, alongside the state, municipalities, communities, and individuals, are involved in the council (Xxyy 2018: 10), should be defined as cultural NGOs in terms of interests and scope. On the other hand, it is rather difficult to answer the question of what cultural NGOs are for two reasons: the fragmentation of the common conceptualization of the NGO sector described above and the functional diversity of the NGOs themselves, where cultural and artistic activities may overlap with education, entertainment, sports, health, and other areas (Providus 2021; Laķe et al. 2018: 12). In 2018, researchers from the Latvian Academy of Culture conducted a study on the socio-economic impact of non-governmental organizations in the field of culture. The researchers formulated criteria for cultural NGOs to enable further study and to put forward precisely applicable principles for obtaining empirical data. Firstly, it must include the following keywords in the formulation of the objective of its activity to be defined as a cultural NGO: “culture, art, creative industries, cultural industries, cultural education, cultural events, intercultural co-operation,” in the Register of Associations and Foundations of the Republic of Latvia; secondly, it must functionally correspond to one of the types of institution defined in the Law on Cultural Institutions, one which “ensures the preservation and supplementation of cultural heritage, as well as promotes creative and economic initiative, professionalism, and artistic quality and which meets the cultural needs of society.” (Saeima 1998) Hence, in order to qualify as a cultural NGO, the activities of an association or foundation must be directly related to investment in one or more areas managed by the Ministry of Culture: “architecture, archives, libraries, circus, dance, design, films, cultural education, cultural monuments, literature, museums, music, creative industries, folk art and intangible cultural heritage, theatre, visual arts” (Laķe et al. 2018: 17).

In the context of this article, one of the key findings is that cultural NGOs are particularly successful in specific areas, niches, and in some ways “filling in the gaps” where state or municipal institutions fail to do so, including the field of cultural heritage management (Laķe et al. 2018: 107). When observing the activities of NGOs in the cultural heritage sector, it can be concluded that interest groups are often structured around them, which reveals the role of NGOs as a connecting link: they serve as a bridge between public administration institutions and self-initiated group and individual activities.

Cultural heritage, its understanding and management in Latvia

Despite the dominant dimension of the concept of heritage in the semantics of the past, cultural heritage is becoming an important stabilizing, tolerant, and inclusive factor in the face of the global turmoil and challenges of the 21st century. The European Strategy for Cultural Heritage for the 21st Century emphasizes that cultural heritage and all its components, both tangible and intangible, are crucial for our society to find new landmarks based on intercultural dialogue, respect for identity and diversity, as well as a sense of belonging to a values-based community. Cultural heritage can play a key role in shaping, agreeing on, and strengthening identity (Eiropas Padome 2018: 10).

The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) defines the tangible and intangible cultural heritage as an expression of a way of life that the community has developed and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, cultural practices, places, objects, and artistic values. Cultural heritage values refer to aesthetic, historical, research, social, spiritual, or other features attributed to a particular place, object, or habit by present or future generations (ICOMOS 2002: 21). The Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, or the Faro Convention, marks a major turning point in the treatment and management of cultural heritage (Eiropas Padome 2005). Under the Faro Convention, "cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time" (Eiropas Padome 2005).

Just as culture is not possible without people, cultural heritage does not make sense if it is not identified, recognized, valued, and used by people. Public attitude towards cultural heritage in 2019 was studied by researchers of the Latvian Academy of Culture, conducting a specialized representative sociological survey, with the aim of "find[ing] out the understanding of the Latvian population of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and their attitude towards it" (Laķe et al 2019: 5). The target group of the study surveyed 1,027 people who were permanent residents of Latvia older than 16. The study was conducted in order to gain insight into the general knowledge of the Latvian population in respect to cultural heritage, as well as to identify people's comprehension, knowledge, and experience of the intangible cultural heritage in Latvia. According to the survey data, Latvians have a good understanding of the concept of cultural heritage: 65% admitted that they had heard about the concept of tangible cultural heritage, while 59% indicated that they had heard the concept of intangible cultural heritage (Laķe et al 2019: 5).

The survey reveals that Latvians are aware of "the important role of cultural heritage in the development of the travel industry (4.61 out of 5 points); they feel proud of Latvia's cultural heritage (4.46) and consider that the state should support any form of cultural heritage that is important to a large part of society (4.47)." Despite the importance of

cultural heritage, the population evaluates personal involvement in its preservation on average: a rating of 3.14 on a five-point scale, with the responsibility for its preservation being shifted mainly to public authorities. The answers to the question *Who should make the greatest effort to preserve cultural heritage?* reveal that the Ministry of Culture is most often indicated (55%), followed by local regional authorities, municipalities (45%), while every inhabitant takes up the third place (37%).

The opinion that NGOs should take care of cultural heritage has been voiced by 13% of respondents, while other groups present better results: educational institutions (27%), the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO (18%), the National Cultural Heritage Board (18%), which is responsible for tangible cultural heritage, and the Latvian National Centre for Culture (16%), whose activities are purposefully focused on the management of intangible cultural heritage. Hence, it can be concluded that despite a fairly good understanding of the importance of cultural heritage for society and the economy, the population shows a relatively passive personal involvement in the preservation of cultural heritage (Laķe et al. 2019: 35). This situation could be addressed with the help of NGOs as actors in the sustainable development of cultural heritage, where NGOs are formed as intermediaries between state institutions on the one hand and cultural heritage communities on the other (UNESCO 2013: 10; Zeijden 2014: 355).

In Latvia, the institutionalization of ideas for the protection of tangible cultural heritage values has deep traditions, dating back to the 17th century; in turn, the establishment of a system of professional protection of cultural heritage began in the very first years of the establishment of the new national state. In 1923 the Law on the Protection of Monuments was adopted, which provided for the establishment of the Board of Monuments. At present, the management of Latvia's tangible cultural heritage is ensured both by the regulatory framework set by the state and by structures, such as the National Cultural Heritage Board, which exercises state control over the protection of cultural monuments, carries out their identification and research, and performs inventory of cultural heritage (Dambis 2021).

Preservation and development of intangible cultural heritage in Latvia is coordinated by the Latvian National Centre for Culture, an institution subordinated to the Ministry of Culture (Ministru kabinets 2012) which, on the basis of the definition of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, defines intangible cultural heritage as a source of cultural belonging, identity, and self-confidence, "including customs, games and forms of oral expression, knowledge and skills, as well as related instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces, which are recognized by communities, groups and in some cases individuals as part of their cultural heritage" (Latvijas Nacionālais kultūras centrs, Kultūras informācijas sistēmu centrs 2021).

The processes of protection, preservation, and management of the intangible cultural heritage are regulated by the Latvian Intangible Cultural Heritage Law, adopted in 2016 (Saeima 2016; Vaivade 2016), which is based on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural

Heritage Convention. NGOs at the national and international levels were assigned an important role in the processes of preserving the national cultural heritage during the debate that arose during the drafting of the 2003 Convention (Intangible Cultural Heritage 2021). The convention delegated to them an advisory function in the evaluation of international nominations, as well as the identification and definition of ICH in the national context (Bortolotto, Neyrinck 2020: 155; UNESCO 2003; UNESCO 2020: 45). According to the guidelines for the implementation of the Convention (UNESCO 2020: 45), non-governmental organizations must have proven competence, knowledge, and experience in the protection of ICH, as defined in Article 2, Paragraph 3, of the Convention, which means carrying out activities aimed at “ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage” (UNESCO 2003).

UNESCO regulations provide for the accreditation procedure and criteria for NGOs, which require NGOs to be able to demonstrate their competence, knowledge, and experience in the field of ICH in order to operate at the local, national, regional, and/or international levels in a manner consistent with the spirit of the Convention and to be able to:

“cooperate in a spirit of mutual respect with communities, groups, and, where appropriate, individuals that create, practise and transmit intangible cultural heritage; possess operational capacities, including a regular active membership, which forms a community linked by the desire to pursue the objectives for which it was established; an established domicile and a recognized legal personality as compatible with domestic law; and having existed and having carried out appropriate activities for at least four years when being considered for accreditation” (UNESCO 2020: 46).

In Latvia, two organizations have been accredited in the field of ICH: the World Ethnosport Society² and the interdisciplinary art group SERDE, the latter of which was accredited in 2016 and can be considered an example of good practice in view of its scope and quality. In accordance with UNESCO regulations, the principles of good ICH management practice apply to those activities that demonstrate innovative, creative, and effective approaches to the protection of ICH in the form of projects, activities, and programs and ensure the participation of relevant stakeholders, such as communities or practitioners. These activities are aimed at developing, identifying, documenting, researching, preserving, protecting, promoting, transmitting, and restoring ICH, reflecting the spirit of the 2003 UNESCO Convention (UNESCO 2020).

2 This organization was founded in 2012 in Montreal, Canada, by two organizations: the Canadian Ethnosport Association and the Ethnosport Federation of Russia and Traditional Games. In 2018, the headquarters of this organization was moved to Riga and in 2020 it received UNESCO accreditation (Ethnosport 2021).

A case study of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE

The interdisciplinary art group SERDE is an association founded in 2002. It is a cultural NGO, classified as an operational non-governmental organization by its type of activity (Hilhorst 2003: 15–16) — although the main goal of the association is to promote the development of professional art in Latvia, “by developing regional and international co-operation between cultural and artistic organizations from different sectors and individuals, offering a real functioning environment and infrastructure outside the usual central urban environment” (SERDE 2018: 92). The interdisciplinary art group SERDE focuses on the preservation, research, and promotion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The interdisciplinary art group SERDE operates in the cultural and historical centre of Aizpute³, a small town in Kurzeme, in an artists’ workshop and a residence centre at 9 Atmodas Street. As the residence centre is housed in a building that has been an architectural monument⁴ of national significance since 2015, SERDE regularly organizes restoration workshops and educational events on the preservation of cultural heritage. The historic building managed by SERDE not only provides a working environment and conditions during the restoration workshops, but it has also become a 1,500 m² restoration object itself (SERDE 2018: 92). In 2007, SERDE received the Cultural Heritage of the Year Award in the nomination “Society Award” for its work in the field of preservation and restoration of cultural heritage. In 2010, 2015 and 2020, the SERDE Residence Centre was included in the programs of the European Heritage Days.

One of the three directions or programs of SERDE, alongside art activities (artist residency program) and restoration activities, is the preservation and promotion of ICH. Since 2005, SERDE has been active in organizing ethnographic fieldwork, intangible cultural heritage workshops, and creating publications in the “Tradition Notebook” series, which has produced 22 books since 2007 (SERDE 2008). Tradition Notebooks feature descriptions of values of individual ICH, the most vivid and characteristic parts of oral testimony, recorded in fieldwork, preserving the peculiarities of the language⁵ of the narrators and interviewers (Pucena 2015).

In order to bring to life the traditional skills and knowledge documented in research, SERDE collaborates with artists and cultural heritage researchers and encourages and provides an environment for artistic interpretations of different traditions. This collaboration has resulted in several presentations and practical workshop cycles on topics such as

- 3 The historical centre of Aizpute is included in the list of cultural monuments of national significance as a unique urban planning monument No 7347, see: <https://is.mantojums.lv/monument/7437>.
- 4 In 2015, a building complex in Aizpute, at Atmodas Street 9, a residential building and a warehouse (dated 18th century, 1st quarter of the 19th century, the 1940s), was entered into the List of State Protected Cultural Monuments No 9104: see <https://is.mantojums.lv/monument/9104>.
- 5 The thematic series “Tradition Notebook” publishes the results of field research, which include two main themes: preservation of traditional skills and of personal experience stories, and oral testimonies (Pucena 2015).

soap-cooking, candle-casting, beer-brewing, collecting herbs, and more. Internationally, the projects created by SERDE, which are closely related to traditional culture in Latvia, have also been presented at several art and culture festivals around the world.⁶

For its achievements in preserving the intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the interdisciplinary art group SERDE received the Folklore of the Year Award in the nomination “Creativity in Tradition” for the project “Točka” in 2007, and in 2015 it received the “Time for Ziedonis” award in the nomination “Kedas.” In 2016, as mentioned above, SERDE was accredited as an advisory body to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Cultural Heritage 2021; UNESCO Latvijas Nacionālā Komisija [n.d.]).

Analysis of the activities of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE, according to J. Holden’s cultural ecosystem model

Analyzing the activities of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE, it can be concluded that its impact manifests in three main ways:

1. The function of identifying, preserving, and passing on cultural heritage (the role of guardians)

When working in the field of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, the projects implemented by SERDE and their results reveal that the authenticity of tradition is considered a priority in the process of identifying and preserving cultural heritage. The complex of historical buildings at 9 Atmodas Street in Aizpute is being restored and renovated very carefully and gradually, respecting the cultural, historical values, and historical profile of the building. In restoration, when renovating the facade parts of the buildings (including the lattice structures for the warehouse building in the yard), windows, doors, and furniture, professional restoration specialists are involved who are attracted by ancient buildings and who possess craftsmanship, and/or who own a building of cultural and historical value. As Signe Pucena, the founder and board member of the association, said in our interviews with her⁷, “everything related to the restoration, maintenance, and inclusion of ancient build-

6 For example, in Finland (at the Kiasma Museum and Botanical Gardens in Helsinki; in Tampere — for members of Herbology /the Collectors’ Network); in Germany (ISEA in Duisburg and Überlebenskunst in Berlin); in Switzerland (Belluard Bollwerk in Friborg and Berne (Auawirleben)); in Sweden (Art & Agriculture in Åland, and Supermarket Art Fair in Stockholm); in Ireland (Future is Domestic in Ennistymon); in Lithuania (Shakotis in Klaipeda and Res Artis in Nida), and in Estonia (Art Depo in Tallinn) (SERDE 2018: 94).

7 In-depth interviews with Signe Pucena, founder, board member, and CEO of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE, were conducted in 2021 as part of this study, exploring the involvement of SERDE as a cultural NGO in the protection, preservation, transfer, communication, and management of heritage, as well as

ings in modern life takes place here. [...] Yes, we also organize wooden window restoration workshops. Every year we have one or two windows, which we restore during the workshops. Our people are hard-working!” Architect Ērvins Krauklis writes in “Būvkultūra,” an edition of the European Culture Heritage Days 2020: “The SERDE experience presents a different approach: lively, creative, at the same time researching, caring, and complementary. A slow and thorough approach has been taken here to maintaining the heritage of wooden architecture, which is akin to the one adopted in the Scandinavian countries.” It is characterized by continuous education and an honest attitude towards the historical building material, doing much of the work on one’s own (Krauklis 2020: 15–18). In the field of preservation and restoration of historical wooden architecture, the cooperation project “We live with Cultural Heritage,” launched in 2015, has been significant for SERDE, which took over good practice from significant examples of the preservation of ancient wooden architecture in Northern Europe: in Rauma, Visby, and Kuldīga⁸.

Uģis Pucens, founder and chairman of the board of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE and the manager of restoration works, explains:

“Now, as we can see, there are few people who take real interest in the way old buildings can be restored. Throughout Latvia, there are only a number of specialists who could be easily counted. [...] Our builders do not quite understand what restoration means in the Nordic sense. In Visby, Sweden, for instance, it has recently been the practice for a designer and builder to bring in a craftsman who really knows how they worked in the Middle Ages, what tools and what technologies were there. It helps in the design and construction process because architects do not know it all. It’s nothing complicated, if you do it all correctly, ask the specialists, it can all be learned. It matters how conscientiously you approach it all. Everyone has built their own house that way” (SERDE 2018: 80).

Respect for the authenticity of the tradition is also shown by the fact that, in the case of intangible cultural heritage projects, the approach of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE is based on fieldwork or a current short-term ethnography, which, working intensively, allows for a quick and deep knowledge of the subject under study (Pink, Morgan 2013: 351–361). Folklore researchers, artists, students, and schoolchildren have been invited to participate in these research activities; thus, evidence of ICH values is documented directly from the carrier of tradition, be it traditional knowledge and skills, or experience stories and oral folklore. The results of the research are used not only in the development of the contents of the SERDE Tradition Notebooks, but also in various events, presentations, and practical

identifying the place and role of non-governmental organizations in the cultural ecosystem at local, regional, and national levels. Here and below, the most vivid and thematic quotations from her story are used in italics.

8 The cooperation project “Living with Cultural Heritage” as part of the EU INTERREG programme “Central Baltic” funding (LiviHeri, managing partner of Old Rauma) was implemented over the period of three years. For more see at: <https://www.rauma.fi/kaupunki-ja-hallinto/hankkeet/living-with-cultural-heritage/>

workshops, in which documented craft skills and lifestyle knowledge, including recipes, are reconstructed and tested. Signe Pucena, who is also an academically educated researcher in folklore, says:

“We try to ask questions about different things during fieldwork, so that we can reconstruct their tradition. That makes sense, mostly. [...] We have put many pieces of research together in such an artistic installation where there is research data, but we also present it so that it is interesting for a person to participate. For instance, the project ‘Folk Pharmacy’ about plants. We drove around with four wall stands, which looked like shields, covered with wax cloth to make people feel at home. Then we had pictures of the plants and then those little sticky notes, on which people could write their own prescription that comes to mind first when they fall ill, and in return we gave them a copy of the newspaper ‘Folk Pharmacy.’ Then the person is motivated because the newspaper is not given just like that, it is given for a recipe. In this way we collected a whole section for the booklet ‘Folk Pharmacy,’ which contains modern prescriptions. There is black balsam, ginger, and lemon. But still, it is a modern tradition!”

Thus, by involving the bearers of tradition in the process of reconstruction and verification, the preservation of ICH values is ensured so that they see, perceive, and interpret for themselves.

2. Function of social influence: initiators of cultural processes (the role of connectors)

SERDE’s activities in the area of ICH are welcomed by individuals and communities who, as mentioned above, are actively involved in research. Even if there is reluctance on the part of the local community to embark on a research project, it usually tends to change over time: “At first the local community is skeptical. Well, that’s simple, just water the herbs! But then, you can see that they feel proud. And you see that’s a tradition!” To get feedback and keep in touch with communities, narrators whom we meet during the expeditions are invited to attend SERDE’s presentations of Tradition Notebooks: “The notebooks are opened and presented to the person who has been invited. Then he is happy, he can show them to his children. See what I’ve got! And the children are happy.”

The experience of SERDE reveals how the preservation of ICH values affects the participants of the process themselves — informants, who are the bearers of the tradition: “The acquired dignity becomes added value to their knowledge, and a link is formed between different generations. Experience has it that workshops often attract visitors who also want to share their knowledge. The events are also of interest to the younger generation who want to learn something new, thus continuing to inherit knowledge and retain skills” (Pucena 2015: 18). The results of the fieldwork carried out by SERDE do not tend to “settle” in archives, audio, and video files on computers, but are immediately returned to the public for inclusion in the content of publications, presentations, and workshops, thereby preserving the ICH and raising awareness of the importance of the ICH at local, national, and international levels. In this case, SERDE acts as an intermediary between the state and the communities, ensuring a full process of inheriting the ICH.

The SERDE experience shows that the activities of cultural NGOs can stimulate the formation of national interest and practice-based communities. For example, in the period from 2007 to 2010, when learning about the tradition of brewing beer at home: this tradition had almost disappeared. Only one brewer was identified who still brewed beer at home, even though in many places they had kept the inventory in their farmsteads, while people's memory had preserved knowledge and stories about brewing beer (Pucena 2015: 24). The results of the fieldwork were summarized and published in 2009 in the third Tradition Notebook, "Alus gatavošana" ("Beer Making"), which aroused great interest; a year after publication, at the SERDE headquarters in Aizpute, the first meeting of home brewers, who restored this tradition in practice, was held:

"And that's the way the first meeting of home brewers took place in 2010. It was quite small. Then everyone came who brewed something at home. All of them allowed to taste their products. Yes, it seems to me, also those home producers who now have small breweries [in Riga] — *Malduguns*, *Labietis*, and *Indiānis*. They have all been here with us as experimenters. What a joy!"

Another case study is related to the history of Aizpute and the disappearance of a once fairly large Jewish community in this small town. In 2008, SERDE published a Tradition Notebook "Aizputes ebreju stāsti" ("Stories about Jews, told by the people of Aizpute"), which gave oral testimonies documented in 2005 and 2006, which are eyewitness accounts of Jewish times in Aizpute, which do not only reflect the views and attitudes of the local population towards the Jewish people, their way of life and traditions, but also provides eyewitness accounts of genocide in Aizpute. The publication encouraged a voluntary initiative of Ināra Dinne, who had lived in Aizpute but had been forced to leave Latvia. Now she has returned and has translated these stories into English — the Tradition Notebook "Narratives about the Jews of Aizpute" was published in 2012. This edition, in turn, activated the descendants of Aizpute Jews around the world, providing feedback on the work done by SERDE:

"When we translated this booklet, it was really the case that several Aizpute Jewish families came and inquired whether it was possible to show where a certain ancestral property lies, because the names of Aizpute streets had been changed. And they also sent their family albums with photos, and names of their relatives. They wrote to us and asked if we could help them to find a relative. How touching! So touching that you really understand."

Another example where SERDE has spurred impetus to revitalize ICH values in the wider community, which is related to Suiti culinary heritage in Alsunga:

"I have a lot of feedback that I'm happy about. Well, it seems to me, when I see the Suiti woman Laila Puķīte, for instance, in the Gamblers' Pub. When I happen to be there with a group, she starts telling me. That's how it all started. Because she participated in the project 'The Suiti explore the Suiti,' when we traveled with Alsunga Suiti to Jūrkalne within the

framework of the UNESCO Associated Schools program to study the Suiti of Jūrkalne, and to interview them. And that's exactly how Suiti cooking, which she now practices at the Gamblers' Pub, arose from this expedition! In this way, this initiative and the recipes come from its expedition! There now, if you say in the pub that you want to bake *sklandraušī* (traditional Latvian tartlets with rye pastry and carrot filling) yourself or boil sour porridge, then most likely it will be Laila Puķīte, who will be waiting for you, nicely dressed, will sing something, and make *sklandraušī*!”

Despite the generally positive social impact, the promotion of ICH values and practices can sometimes create profanation, carelessness, and degradation of tradition. As Signe Pucena admits:

“Uģis Pucens and I think we have done a bad job by giving impetus to all this movement, I mean all these intangible cultural heritage workshops. We started them around 2007, with moonshine and beer, then with collections of plants. At first it was quite good, a workshop like any other, people came to our yard to participate and study. Then we had a series of workshops, cycles, and we also made soap there. And then museums joined us. In the beginning, each doing their own thing! And butter was made there, and then they made all sorts of nonsense, like stone painting workshops, didn't they? And then you can't figure out what the hell is going on. A whole new genre has opened up that makes me feel like I'm a little complicit in all this madness, because they have changed it that way, all this has been seen on YouTube, but these are skills workshops.”

With regard to the operation of SERDE, it should also be noted that the involvement of the local community in heritage conservation can be uneven and often even passive. Nineteen years of experience of working in Aizpute reveal that “there is no local community; it is simply a community interested in specific activities. It is good to note that there are people in Vidzeme and Latgale who know what we are, and they come to see us. But it is also the case that the local people in Aizpute do not even know what is going on here.”

3. Function of cultural events and education (the role of platforms)

The interdisciplinary art group SERDE is an active initiator of various international projects and a participant in the network of artist residencies, for instance, “M4m” (“Tanec Praha”, European Pépinières Programme), “Frontiers in Retreat” (HIAP), and others; SERDE is also a member of the “Res Artis” platform. During its existence, SERDE has created a place and space in Aizpute that is recognized by a considerable international audience: artists from more than 20 countries around the world have been here and have shared their experience! SERDE has organized and implemented around 200 different cultural projects and events in the fields of visual arts, cultural heritage, and traditional culture and folklore (SERDE 2018: 92). Moreover, it should be noted that throughout its existence, one of the priorities of SERDE has been cooperation with the regions, implementing projects that promote cultural diversity and decentralization in Latvia. SERDE activities are non-commercial. The attention of the association is focused on implementing quality projects in the regions and making their results available to the widest possible audience.

The SERDE Residence Centre has also become one of the most popular destinations among guests of Aizpute, a small town in Kurzeme:

“Usually, those people who know SERDE apply with an aim to see the house (Atmodas Street 9). SERDE has recently become one of the attractions in Aizpute. Sometimes you can’t understand whether it is SERDE or us that they want to see! (Laughs.) This is because there aren’t many funny people who have persevered. [...] Of course, I also appreciate when a person has come a long way! Oh my God! Of course, I’m trying to tell him ardently all that has happened here. What I like best is that Americans, when they come, visit an old house, and admire it, as it is even older than America itself!”

Not only did the restoration work performed on the complex of historic buildings at Atmodas Street 9 attract visitors who are able to appreciate the charm of a historic building, but it also attracted the works of art of the residents of SERDE. Currently, the city tours also include environmental objects created in SERDE, for instance, the sculpture “Pandas” by the Japanese artist Yasushi Koyama, the sculpture “The Knight” by Karl Alain, and the painting “Apples” based on the sketch of the Canadian artist Sylvia Grace Borda.

The annual events organized by SERDE have a well-known and stable place in the calendar of cultural events in the region: the cast-iron art symposium, which usually takes place during the city festivities, and the *Āboļošana* (Apple picking) fair. The latter takes place in mid-September and marks the end of the SERDE season; it is a well-attended event for the townspeople, bringing together local and resident artists as well as artisans and home producers. The event also includes an open-air market and a range of traditional skills workshops, in which the autumn harvest of apples turns into juice, wine, jam, and other products.

The fact that SERDE has become a platform for educating and raising public awareness in the field of cultural heritage is evidenced by the publications in the “Tradition Notebook” series, by various events and workshops, and by the array of excursions offered around the complex of the historical centre, introducing SERDE activities and experiences to those who are interested. SERDE has had a successful cooperation with the UNESCO Associated Schools Program, implementing joint projects for the preservation and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage together with Alsunga Secondary School and Riebiņi Secondary School.

An important field of SERDE activities refers to attracting a youth audience, providing an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills for the local young people in the Aizpute region. One of the most important activities took place in 2010, when SERDE organized the first international fieldwork and workshop, “Herbology.” It was attended by more than 30 participants from Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Sweden, Poland, Spain, and Belgium. The foreign guests were divided into groups, which included a Latvian interviewer and an interpreter, who helped the expedition participants to understand the local people — the informants. Most of the Latvian participants were from the Aizpute Youth Centre “House of Ideas” who took on the role of interpreters during the interviews; moreover, the interviews were later transcribed and translated into English:

“It was as powerful as it was in 2010, when an international herb expedition was organized! Actually, if not for these young people, I would have ended my life in an apple tree long ago, for sure! Because they interpreted all the nonsense we asked for and the answers of the narrators; it was simultaneous interpreting for a foreigner, standing by and watching the interview. And then in the evening, all these interviews were transcribed and translated into English. At the end of the expedition, there was already an English version. I don’t understand at all how we got it ready!”⁹

One of the recent joint activities with the youth of Aizpute took place in 2017, creating a publicly available interactive map, “The Path of Tales,” which depicts legends collected by the local historian Mirdza Birzniece, linking them with specific places.

Lifelong learning activities is another area in which SERDE operates. Since 2020, with the support of the State Culture Capital Foundation, so-called Local History Schools have been organized in Aizpute, bringing together local researchers, teachers, librarians, museologists, and other people interested in cultural heritage from all over Latvia to gain new theoretical knowledge, experience, and practice in obtaining empirical data during the week when performing fieldwork. In 2020, the theme of the School of Local History was “The disappearing of farm-work today,” while in 2021 it was “Culinary heritage in Lower Kurzeme.”

An important field of activity of SERDE is expertise provided by representatives of society who not only have experience and practical knowledge, but also academic education in traditional culture, folklore, or restoration. They are invited to participate at conferences, discussions, and seminars, as well as to express their views on the evaluation of various cultural heritage issues. The members of the Association have been experts of the State Culture Capital Foundation, the National Cultural Heritage Board, and the Latvian Intangible Cultural Heritage Council. They have been involved in the preparation of applications for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and evaluation of nominations. However, it must be acknowledged that, paradoxically, the role of a SERDE specialist advisor has not existed in Aizpute. This is probably related to the mentality of Kurzeme residents, the specifics of a small town, or the reaction caused by competition:

“You see, here everyone is used to not saying anything bad to anyone else. If they say something like that, it is a grumpy detail, but not a constructive suggestion or an indication. These are not well received; things are not corrected as the people get irritated. With your rating, which is not based on the likes/dislikes that is typically used by municipalities, and never analyzed, you remain alone and on the opposite front. Although, it seems to me that the museum would benefit if they were wise enough to see us as advisors in one area or another.”

9 The expedition data were processed in two weeks and were therefore named “expedition sprint,” because in this short period of time 22 interviews were transcribed and translated, and photo and video materials were selected. A selection of stories was published in 2010 in the publication “Vācēju kultūra Viduskurzemē” (Collecting Culture in Central Kurzeme) (Pucena 2015: 30).

Risk assessment of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE

Assessing the cross-sectoral art group SERDE in the context of the sustainability of cultural NGOs, a number of factors have emerged, including risks. It is a positive fact that the cultural NGO sector provides an opportunity to work and implement ideas in the cultural sector independent of public administration institutions. The mission of cultural NGOs is to contribute to the development of innovative, experimental ideas, works of art, and products; that is why creative freedom in the generation and implementation of ideas is highly valued among the NGO members themselves:

“Like in our society, we always follow some of our interests: that is, what we are interested in at a given moment. They see work in the NGO sector as a mission: It just happened that we got our house at Atmodas Street 9 in Aizpute on a long-term lease at the right moment. Our work has been voluntary, really voluntary, and conscientious, we have always worked with a sense of a mission. Well, it is a phenomenon that some people have a superior sense of mission to do something that is not for the sake of their property but for the benefit of society.”

It should be noted that SERDE has been a successful cultural NGO for almost twenty years. This fact is important, keeping in mind that in most of Latvia, where there is no state support for cultural NGOs, the average lifespan of associations and foundations is six to 10 years (Laķe et al. 2018), which is a length of time in which a driving force, based on enthusiasm and initiative, usually runs out. In the case of SERDE, it is important that it is a family-based organization, the core of which is formed by Signe and Uģis Puceni; moreover, their daughter, Trīne, has been involved in the activities of the association from an early age. Both are artists: Uģis Pucens is a ceramist, a graduate of the Latvian Academy of Arts, while Signe Pucena received her secondary education at the Liepāja School of Applied Arts, Department of Textiles and Design. They value independence highly: the opportunity not to follow the general flow of society, to be different and, in a sense, to be at the forefront. It is these aspects that are provided by activities in the non-governmental sector.

The international dimension is another important aspect that has ensured the sustainability of SERDE so far, namely, the experience and satisfaction gained from the implementation of the artist residency program:

“And it is the ecosystem that ensures diversity; if you do not have international circulation, you have nothing [...] However, I think that we, Latvia, are small. If we close ourselves off, that’s our way of thinking; our ideas go up in the air; and then it’s very good to have someone on the sidelines. [...]. It seems to me that we need to think more about foreign cooperation. It is an essential channel that makes some sense.”

Communication with the local government is essential for the success of cultural NGOs. A survey of non-governmental organizations in the field of culture conducted by researchers of the Latvian Academy of Culture in 2018 shows that the support of the municipality

significantly contributes to the activities of NGOs (Laže et al. 2018: 48). Unfortunately, the experience of SERDE in cooperation with the municipality has been very uneven and mostly passive:

“Well, cooperation, I would say, is not really cooperation. But at the same time, it may be good not to interfere in the activity too much. On the one hand, it’s good that you can be so independent, but at the same time, of course, you also expect at least to gain appreciation of what you’re doing.”

It must be admitted that at the beginning of its existence, in 2005, SERDE received a letter of commendation from the Aizpute municipality in the category “I Am for My City.” However, depending on local priorities and funding opportunities, assistance has been sporadic, mainly practical, related to the removal of construction and restoration waste or the provision of manpower during the activities within the framework of the so-called “Hundred Lats Program.” At present, the cooperation can be described as awkward, communicating with the municipality mainly in the field of tourism. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that the SERDE artists and the workshops centre have become a popular attraction in the city; on the other hand, there is the fact that Signe Pucena is also Head of the Aizpute Region Tourism Centre:

“It is also my side job, because I have been the tourism manager of the Aizpute Region for several years. We, SERDE, are a tourist attraction. But here again, the municipality accuses me of advertising my own object. But at the same time: What if it is a municipal object and a public object, and a non-profit object? Then there are constantly different interpretations by people. As in a small place, of course, there is a lot of different, personal opinions that are voiced, and they sound harshly.”

A case of unsatisfactory cooperation with the municipality can be established in relation to the management of art objects created in the SERDE residence center and donated to the city, to be displayed in the urban environment:

“When we say that we are giving this art object to the city, they never think about maintenance, even though we point it out. But with its maintenance it is like that: everyone looks and says, “You put it here and, have a look, the statue of the panda has started cracking!” Alright! Then we restore the statue, but this should be in the city budget, as should the maintenance of the streets, the removal of garbage, as well as the care of the works of art.”

At the same time, potentially successful forms of cooperation can be seen, not only in the development of tourism, but also in the creation of cultural material and art and in the preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the region:

“We could also do quite a lot for the region in the field of local studies, and in the field of restoration [...] We have repeatedly suggested that the restoration workshop

centre could also be located here, well, based on the experience of SERDE. We have the premises, and we already have some tools and equipment. This is simply an issue in which the local government should show some initiative and interest. That there should be an employee, at least one, who does the work here, and, of course, investment in the infrastructure and technological provision is also needed.”

SERDE desires more support from the municipality and from the state, both financially and informatively: e.g., a coordinated flow of information, as well as the delegation of functions:

“In my opinion, the local government and state institutions should also understand that their resources are not comprehensive either. That is why there is already an ecosystem there. When we talk about ecosystems, in this sense, there are simply sharks (meaning the municipality) in the whole ecosystem. There is no diversity, it is simply a monoculture floating on top of everything and everyone else — they are no higher than mud. That’s just the way it is.”

The participants of NGOs themselves, when assessing the role of NGOs in the common cultural ecosystem, point to the lack of mutual communication:

“While working in the municipality, I have realized that an employee in a municipality thinks he is there for everyone else to come to see him. Let the NGO come, who wouldn’t let them come!?![...] I would expect to have some more cooperation someday. Everyone is waiting for them to come. So do we: We are also waiting! We just have no resources. In general, Uģis and I are the supporters of this centre in the physical and the practical sense, which means the maintenance of the premises. Nobody helps with that.”

The unpredictability of financial resources and the lack of a stable, guaranteed income have been a serious threat to the sustainability of cultural NGOs. The budget of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE mainly consists of funding gained by winning tender projects: “We start each year with a zero budget. If the State Cultural Capital Foundation¹⁰ grants us some funding, it is cool! We can function. But we have absolutely no annual budget. As to next year too, nobody knows whether there will be some money or not. Everything depends on projects.” During the season, income is also provided by renting the premises of the artists’ workshops in the residence center and the payment for accommodation. However, this operating income is seasonal, from May to September. In historic buildings in Aizpute, it is not possible to install heating and a frost-free sewerage system in the autumn-winter period, which, in turn, does not allow to extend the season of the center: “We might as well have an ambition to become a traditional culture and folklore centre for the whole of Kurzeme — there would be no problems — but then

10 In Latvia one of the most important sources of funding for cultural NGOs is the State Cultural Capital Foundation. The “Target Programme for the Support of Professional Non-Governmental Cultural Organizations,” which is announced once a year, in fact, is the only way for cultural NGOs to obtain core funding for administrative expenditure within the framework of one year.

there should be some kind of partnership in providing the infrastructure.” The lack of funds, in turn, is closely related to the problem of human resources, namely, the board of the association consists of three members: Signe Pucena, Uģis Pucens, and Jānis Zvirgzds-Zvirgzdiņš. In the season, two employees are employed part-time, while art, restoration, and ICH research projects are implemented by five to six project managers, depending on the attracted funding. It is natural that in such a model each person is employed to the maximum. For example, Signe Pucena, who is officially the executive director of the interdisciplinary art group SERDE, has a wide scope of activities and functions: she draws project applications, she is a project manager, communication specialist, clerk, accountant, cleaner, and driver. There exist significant potential risks for the future existence of the association: overwork and fatigue caused by the multifunctional role of NGOs in providing their activities, along with insufficient and unpredictable funding, as well as weak or non-existent cooperation with the local government and unclear support mechanisms from the state. It is worth mentioning here that in 2021 the Puceni family planted a large vineyard on their private property as an investment in future business, which is a clear indicator that an alternative to working in cultural NGOs is being sought. While the grapes are growing, it may be time for the state to improve cooperation with the cultural NGO sector, which is mentioned in national cultural policy documents as an important player in and one of the cornerstones of the cultural ecosystem (Kultūras ministrija 2014; Kultūras ministrija 2021: 37).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that NGOs play an important role in the Latvian cultural ecosystem, as they are able to perform communal functions which often are not the responsibility of the public sector. The main problems for NGOs involved in the identification, preservation, and transfer of intangible cultural heritage are precarious financial conditions and a lack of human resources, which jeopardizes the qualitative and systematic operation of NGOs; thus, it is necessary that the public sector change its approach towards and view of NGOs. NGOs should not be seen as marginal structures the success of which is based solely on individual initiative and personal enthusiasm. If this attitude does not change, the state will fail in its duty to cover a very important aspect in the management of ICH.

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Nevalstisko organizāciju loma kultūras mantojuma ilgtspējas nodrošināšanā. Starpnozaru mākslas grupas SERDE piemērs

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Atslēgvārdi: kultūras ekosistēma, nemateriālais kultūras mantojums, kultūrpolitika

Bez kultūras mantojuma visā tā izpausmju – dabas, materiālā, nemateriālā un arī digitālā – daudzveidībā mūsdienās ir grūti iedomājama jebkuras pilnvērtīgas un dzīvotspējīgas kultūras ekosistēmas eksistence. Kultūras ekosistēma konceptualizējama kā savstarpēji atkarīgu elementu – organizāciju, grupu un indivīdu – kopums, kuru aktivitātes ir vērstas uz sabalansētu un produktīvu visas sabiedrības pastāvēšanu. Veiksmīgai ekosistēmas funkcionēšanai ir būtiski apzināties un izprast katra tās dalībnieka lomu un nozīmi, kā arī novērtēt un, ja nepieciešams, atbalstīt ikvienu jēgpilnu, inovatīvu un uz sabiedrības attīstību vērstu iniciatīvu. Kultūras mantojuma pārvaldībā visi spēlētāji – valsts, nevalstiskās organizācijas (NVO), kopienas un indivīdi – ir vienlīdz nozīmīgi, kā nosacīti atšķirīgu var iezīmēt tikai politikas veidošanas un īstenošanas līmeni – nacionālo, reģionālo vai vietējo (European Commission 2021). Šī raksta mērķis ir ar gadījuma izpēti pieeju analizēt tādu kultūras NVO pieredzi, kuru darbība vērsta uz nemateriālo kultūras mantojumu, atklāt to potenciālu un nozīmi kultūras mantojuma pārvaldības procesos, kā arī noteikt ilgtspējības veicinātājus un riska faktoros. Pētījums veikts kvalitatīvajā dizainā, izmantojot etnogrāfisko pieeju, veicot ietverto novērojumu, padziļinātās intervijas, apzinot dokumentālās liecības un pētījumam aktuālos nevalstiskā sektora darbību regulējošos normatīvus.

Par teorētisko pamatu tiek ņemts kultūras politikas pētnieka Džona Holdena (*John Holden*) izstrādātais četru lomu modelis, kas attiecas uz kultūras ekosistēmas dalībniekiem. Tajā savā funkcija ir *sargātājiem*, kas rūpējas par pagātnes kultūru, *platformām*, kas nodrošina vietu un telpu kultūras izpausmēm mūsdienās, *savienotājiem*, kas sasaista atsevišķas ekosistēmas daļas, veicinot kultūras procesus, un *nomadiem*, kas esam mēs visi – kā mākslinieki un kā auditorija – un kas varam darboties visās trijās iepriekšējās lomās (Holden 2015a: 29).

Dž. Holdens uzsver, ka parasti katrs dalībnieks pilda vienu lomu, tomēr Latvijas piemēri liecina, ka NVO, kuras strādā kultūras mantojuma sektorā, vienlaikus nodrošina vairākas – sargātāja, platformas un savienotāja jeb procesu veicinātāja – lomas. Tādējādi tās kalpo par būtisku resursu kultūras mantojuma atbalstam un tā vērtības celšanai (Eiropas Reģionu komiteja 2015), kā arī nodrošina kultūras mantojuma radošās aprites funkciju, kļūstot par inovāciju un jaunu kultūras formu inspirācijas avotu un augsni (Holden 2015 b).