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# **Transmitting Social Dance Practices in Flanders as Living Heritage**

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In safeguarding intangible heritage, success hinges on ensuring that heritage communities retain control over their practices, deciding what to transmit and how. Heritage institutions, however, can facilitate safeguarding. In order to do so, CEMPER (Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage in Flanders) adapted existing models to explore the viability and sustainability of music traditions and applied these to folk dance in Flanders.

**Keywords:** sustainability, intangible heritage, folk dance, safeguarding

The project *Dance as ICH: New Models for Facilitating Participatory Dance Events (Dance-ICH)* focused on how cultural heritage institutions can best support the safeguarding of participative dance practices. The goal was to develop new models for facilitating participatory dance events and safeguarding dance as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through collaborative processes with heritage communities. CEMPER (Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage in Flanders) adapted existing models to explore the viability and sustainability of music traditions (Grant 2014, Schippers and Grant 2016) and applied them to folk dance in Flanders. Through fieldwork, we tested these adapted models with the objectives of 1) expanding CEMPER's network within this community, 2) initiating open discussions about safeguarding practices, and 3) investigating the potential role of museums and other heritage professionals in general in safeguarding dance as ICH.

This chapter provides an overview of how we tailored these research models to folk dance within the Flemish context. Based on the research data, we evaluate the efficacy of this model within this specific setting.

## Heritage Community

In any effort to research and safeguard cultural heritage, defining the boundaries of a community becomes a complex but necessary task. In the context of folk dance in Flanders, this task is especially difficult due to the diversity of practices, historical baggage and cultural associations surrounding the term “folk dance”. While the dynamism and fluidity of ICH make it challenging to assign rigid labels, practical considerations often demand clear definitions to guide research, policy and safeguarding actions (Council of Europe 2005, 2; Wood and Judikis 2002, 12; Grant 2014, xiii; Jacobs 2020, 277–279).

## Social Dance

Based on advice from Danspunt, an organisation supporting Flemish amateur dance groups, we adopted the term “social dance” (*folk-, volks- en werelddans*) in our communication to appeal to different kinds of dance practitioners. We defined social dance as group-based practices, passed down through collective participation, and relatively accessible to all. Respondents were asked to specify the dance practice(s) to which they felt

connected, allowing us to acknowledge the diversity of social dance practices in Flanders. This inclusive approach, however, highlighted the complexities inherent in researching and safeguarding ICH, describing something fluid without being overly restrictive or overly broad. As Grant (2017) notes, attempting to define something so dynamic risks “fixing a moving target”, potentially overlooking the processes of change and exchange that shape dance practices over time.

In our research, we used the term social dance to broaden our scope, although this term is not commonly used by the communities, leaving some participants feeling unaddressed. Similarly, “dance practice” did not resonate with all participants. Through discussions and interviews, we found that while some participants are accustomed to “heritage talk”, many did not see their practices as part of it. We adapted our approach to better reflect the folk dance community’s self-identification.

Despite our inclusive efforts, we primarily connected with the traditional folk dance and *balfolk* communities, rather than the wide spectrum of social dance. This reinforced the importance of terminology, leading us to opt for the term “folk dance”, which in this case applies to the traditional folk dance community and the *balfolk* community in Flanders.

### ***Folk Dance in Flanders: Background and Evolution***

Traditional folk dance and *balfolk* in Flanders share the same roots but have evolved differently. In the 1950s and 1960s, traditional folk dance experienced a revival, particularly among urban enthusiasts who gathered in groups to learn and perform dances that had formerly been part of rural life. These included spring, harvest and fairground dances connected to the agricultural cycle, which had once varied from village to village. Between 1965 and 1980, significant data on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century dances were collected.

By the late 1970s, international folk dances from across Europe began to emerge in Flanders, supported by weekly dance evenings and festivals that promoted both traditional and newly introduced dances. In the early 1980s, numerous national and international workshops made these dances more widely available. Through this exchange, traditional dances were shared and spread across Europe, resulting in both traditional folk dancers and *balfolk* dancers often starting from similar dances.



Figure 1. Boombal in Mechelen, 1 February 2023. Photo: CEMPER.

During this period, *balfolk* distinguished itself from traditional folk dance through commercialisation, offering more classes and workshops. The rise of Boombal in the early 2000s helped *balfolk* grow, creating a new community around larger dance events (Van Craenenbroeck and Devyver 2022, 122–124). Boombal began as a student initiative in Ghent and quickly developed into a series of popular, party-like evenings where live bands played folk music for social dancing. Its informal, festive atmosphere attracted a younger audience and gave *balfolk* visibility and momentum.

### ***Characteristics of Folk Dance in Flanders***

Traditional folk dance and *balfolk* in Flanders share roots but have evolved into distinct practices. Both include European dances such as the schotische, waltz, mazurka, and polka but traditional folk dance emphasises Flemish dances linked to agricultural traditions, such as the maypole dance (Van Craenenbroeck and Devyver 2022, 123). These are performed either in their traditional form or as part of new choreographies.

Traditional folk dance groups, also known as *volkskunstgroepen*, focus on performance with fixed sets and choreographies, often practising weekly and wearing traditional costumes. They also engage in related activities such as flagwaving and crafts (Reuzegom Leuven n.d.; Registratie immaterieel erfgoed n.d.; Dans-info n.d.; Van Craenenbroeck and Devyver 2022, 121–122).

*Balfolk*, on the other hand, involves larger, more informal gatherings at balls or festivals, where dancers do not rehearse weekly in fixed groups. There is more flexibility in the steps and the dancers are not focused on performance. Although traditional folk dance groups also attend festivals, they tend to remain together, whereas *balfolk* dancers mix with others in more spontaneous varied forms (Indesteege 2005; Boombal n.d.; Van Craenenbroeck and Devyver 2022, 125).

## Methodology

In this chapter, we will outline the methodology employed in our research, detailing the data collection methods used. We will discuss the design and implementation of the questionnaire, the approach for individual interviews, and the structure of the roundtable discussion. Additionally, we explain the data analysis techniques applied to interpret the findings, emphasising how this multifaceted approach enabled us to capture the diverse experiences and perspectives within the folk dance community. We begin by outlining the organisation and context in which the research was conducted.

## CEMPER

CEMPER, the Centre for Music and Performing Arts Heritage in Flanders, is based in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. It provides services related to the cultural heritage of music and performing arts, implementing UNESCO's and Flemish heritage policies but does not maintain a museum or public archive. As a dedicated professional team working on ICH, our approach is typically bottom-up. We respond to requests from heritage communities, playing an advisory and supportive role in helping them define safeguarding actions that reflect their values and needs. If desired, we also assist them in applying for inscription on the Flemish Inventory for Intangible Herit-

age, our regional equivalent of UNESCO's Representative List (Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media n.d). We also, at times, initiate projects when we identify specific needs within the heritage communities, either through direct observation or research. In this case, however, the *Dance-ICH* project inspired us to explore the sustainability of folk dance proactively. Instead of waiting for the community to approach us, we took the lead, our aim being to map the community, encourage reflection on folk dance as ICH and engage in conversations on its sustainability and safeguarding.

The ethical principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasise that communities, groups and individuals should take the primary role in safeguarding, identifying, and valuing their ICH practices (UNESCO 2015). The Department of Culture in Flanders has insisted upon community involvement and thinking about safeguarding actions as formal requirements for cultural practices to be eligible for a place on the Flemish Inventory of ICH. In this way, it acknowledges the community's engagement to safeguard their intangible heritage. Safeguarding actions react to the threats and opportunities that the community perceives, reflect the values they attach to their ICH, and focus on those aspects that they find important. This allows the community to find creative solutions to changes in their environment and to let their heritage evolve in a way with which they can identify (Adell et al. 2015, 10). Our role entails consolidating all community opinions about values, threats and opportunities, facilitating conversations around them, and assisting the community in devising safeguarding actions.

In this case, the top-down approach at the start presented challenges. For many of the dancers, the concept of intangible heritage (and the associated policies) was unfamiliar territory, which likely impacted their engagement and response. While we, as heritage professionals, focus on safeguarding policies, many participants view their dancing as a hobby or passion, rather than as a practice or tradition to be safeguarded consciously within a formal heritage framework. This reveals a disconnect between heritage discourse and the everyday experience of practitioners, many of whom are not primarily interested in nor have the time for engaging with their practices on a meta-level.

Our role was to bridge this gap, facilitating discussions about safeguarding while respecting the personal nature of their practice, and empowering the community to see its place within the heritage framework.

## Theoretical Frameworks

The questions used in our research were inspired by two frameworks: Huib Schippers' and Catherine Grant's *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective* (2016) and Grant's "How to Identify and Assess Endangerment: The Music Vitality and Endangerment Framework" (2014, 105–126). While these models have been developed and used to assess the sustainability of music cultures, their application to dance practices remains underexplored. Notably, Tanya Merchant applied Huib Schippers' model in her study "Queer and Trans Inclusivity Efforts as Sustainability Strategies in Urban Contradance" (2025) demonstrating its relevance to dance contexts. A secondary objective of our study was to ascertain the viability of utilising these models within the realm of dance.

Recognising the synergy between these models and the relevance to our research goals, we opted to integrate aspects from both frameworks into our research. By combining the holistic approach of *Sustainable Futures* with Grant's quantitative assessment of vitality, we aimed to construct a comprehensive methodology for analysing folk dance in Flanders.

We chose to retain the five domains from the *Sustainable Futures* framework – systems of learning, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, infrastructure and regulations, media and music industry, and issues and initiatives for sustainability – adapting them to the context of dance. For each domain, we formulated specific questions to deepen our exploration, as we believe these domains encompass the most critical aspects of dance culture sustainability and will improve our understanding of the factors that influence it. A sixth section of the framework examines the broader implications of these domains, analysing community initiatives that support the long-term viability of their dance culture.

## Modes of Outreach and Inquiry

To understand the values and concerns within the folk dance communities, we employed a multifaceted approach, utilising a questionnaire, individual interviews and a roundtable discussion.



## Survey

We began our research with an online questionnaire to broaden our reach and allow everyone in the folk dance community to share their perspectives. This approach enabled us to gain insights into the community's network, identify key stakeholders, and understand the different viewpoints within the field. The survey was conducted from 21 February to 2 April, 2024 (42 days) and received 75 unique responses. It consisted of 35 mandatory questions, of which 8 were open questions and the other 27 multiple choice, some with options for additional comments.

To tailor the questionnaire specifically to Flemish folk dance, we adapted Grant's survey into Dutch, removing music industry-specific questions and incorporating dance-related terminology. We included at least one qualitative question for each domain from *Sustainable Futures* to explore the values that practitioners attribute to their practice.

We distributed the survey widely within our network, targeting a diverse range of stakeholders, including dancers of varying expertise, event organisers, dance teachers, musicians, choreographers, the wider public and dance enthusiasts. We published the call on our website, in newsletters and on social media platforms. We also collaborated with key organisations, such as Danspunt, Actieve Interculturele Federatie (AIF+), Instituut Vlaamse Volkskunst (IVV), Vlaamse VolksKunstBeweging (VVKB) Flanders Folk Network and Muziekpublique to communicate about our survey. In addition, we reached out directly to dancers, dance instructors and festival organisers in our existing network.

The questionnaire included a question about respondents' willingness to collaborate further, through interviews or a roundtable discussion, offering us insights into their commitment to the project's future. These interviews and the roundtable provided an opportunity to expand on the survey results.

While the 75 responses indicate an interest for further collaboration within the community, this number is relatively low. Upon reflection, we recognise that simplifying some of our questions could have made the research more accessible. Striking a balance between accessibility and a level of scientific depth needed to make the results useful provided a challenge. Additionally, it is possible that many respondents did not feel addressed by the terms "social dance" and "dance practice", which may have limited the questionnaire's reach. Sending out the same survey to each dance



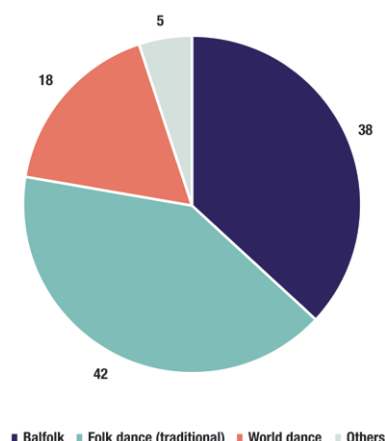


Figure 2. The dance practices in which participants of the survey are Involved: folk dance (traditional), balfolk, world dance and others. Made by Plouy and Witkamp.

community – such as *balfolk*, traditional folk dance, swing dance and the like – separately could have respected their self-attributed identities and differences. Some participants, however, did see the connection between the different dance communities, and preferred a more unified approach. This underscores the complexity of engaging a diverse community while respecting the identities and preferences of its members.

## Interviews

We conducted ten individual interviews from 5 April to 16 May 2024. For these, we drew on a range of questions from the comprehensive list provided by Schippers and Grant, translating and simplifying them for clarity. The questions were categorised into two groups: those related to the general dance practice and those focused on individual experiences. Conducted in a semi-structured manner, the interviews encouraged respondents to express themselves freely, enabling us to extract insights that held particular significance for them. Additionally, these interviews provided an opportunity to seek clarification on certain survey responses from the participants.

## Roundtable

Following the completion of both the questionnaire and the individual interviews, we facilitated a roundtable discussion, lasting two hours in our office. The roundtable included six participants: three from the traditional

folk community, two from the *balfolk* community, and one who represented both groups. We began by defining ICH, heritage community, and safeguarding. The group further elaborated on the terminology of social dance and its connection to both traditional folk dance and *balfolk*. This naturally led to a discussion of the differences and similarities between the two traditions. Based on preliminary results of the survey, we curated a selection of questions to further deepen these insights. We asked what elements constitute the dance practice, who is involved in it, the perceived evolutions in the transmission of folk dance, the societal importance of folk dance, its accessibility, and the participants' ideas and needs for safeguarding. Although the roundtable was structured, it provided ample room for participants to express their views freely, and the enthusiasm among the participants was evident as they engaged in meaningful exchanges.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis involved a systematic approach to ensure the rigour and validity of our findings. For the quantitative data derived from the questionnaire, we summarised responses across the six domains by identifying the median and the variance. This allowed us to identify trends and patterns, offering insights into the predominant themes. In addition, we utilised graphical representations such as bar charts or pie charts to present the results visually and to illustrate the distribution of responses between traditional folk dance and *balfolk*.

Qualitative data from open-ended questionnaire responses and individual interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. We employed a coding process to categorise the data based on themes that emerged directly from the responses and the theoretical framework used for this research, which facilitated a deeper understanding of practitioners' values, experiences, and perceptions.

By triangulating data from the questionnaire, interviews, and roundtable discussion, we aimed to construct a comprehensive narrative that reflects the complexities and nuances of folk dance in Flanders. This analytical framework underpins our conclusions and recommendations for safeguarding actions.

## Report

Based on the data analysis, we developed a detailed report summarising our findings and insights. This report (CEMPER 2024) reflects the rich and nuanced voices and experiences gathered through the questionnaire, individual interviews and the roundtable discussion.

The findings were presented thematically, following the *Sustainable Futures* framework. The report combined both quantitative and qualitative data, highlighting key trends, themes and narratives. When relevant, we emphasised the differences between traditional folk dance and *balfolk*. We included graphical representations of the quantitative data, making it accessible and visually engaging for the folk dance community members.

We shared this report with the community for their review and feedback, allowing them to reflect on our findings and validate our interpretations. We received, however, minimal feedback. The only notable response came from *Folkmagazine* and *Volkskunst* which published summaries of our findings (Laekeman, 2024, 9; CEMPER, 2024, 32–34). By returning the report to the community, we aimed to foster a sense of ownership and agency regarding the safeguarding of their practices, to ensure that the conclusions and recommendations corresponded with their values and needs and to strengthen their relationship with CEMPER. The limited feedback underscores the need for targeted outreach and engagement strategies. It also raises the question of whether extensive reports are effective when working with non-professionals, whose involvement is key to safeguarding efforts. Moving forward, we will keep the report as an overview and seek more accessible ways to present its content. Below, we provide a summary of the report and outline how we arrived at the results for each domain.

## Results

### *Systems of Learning*

This section of the research examines the transmission of folk dance, based on the hypothesis that this plays a crucial role in sustainability. We explored the balance between formal and informal learning methods, the use of notation versus learning by doing, and contemporary trends in teaching and learning practices in a postmodern society. The survey assessed both the methods of transmission and the perceived effectiveness

of these approaches. In the individual interviews, we focused on gaining deeper insights into the transmission methods, exploring the challenges and successes. In the roundtable we discussed the interplay between traditional and modern teaching approaches, the role of technology in dance transmission, and how cultural shifts are impacting learning practices.

### *Discussion of Results*

Respondents often became involved in folk dance through friends and family, followed by local dance organisations and neighbourhood events. Other entry points include internet resources and youth movements. Traditional folk dance groups are typically family-oriented, the activity passed down from parent to child, creating a close-knit, supportive community. *Balfolk* participants, on the other hand, tend to become involved through friends. These characteristics need to be kept in mind when developing safeguarding actions.

Informal dancing is the most common way to transmit folk dance in Flanders. This is followed by formal lessons, events like dance parties and festivals, and workshops. Traditional folk balls typically require prior knowledge and *balfolk* often includes an initiation for beginners. Popular festivals attract (new) dancers and enthusiasts, fostering strong social bonds within the dance communities, with word-of-mouth being a significant promotional tool. Written instructions and internet resources are less frequently used.

Formal lessons in *balfolk* are offered by various schools, focusing on individual improvement and proper technique. Traditional folk dance groups often hold weekly rehearsals with step-by-step instructions for performance dances. Workshops and stages with guest instructors are also common. Courses for dance leaders include detailed dance descriptions and historical context. There is a concern within the community of *balfolk* that the essence of dances might be lost through reliance on memory and observation, suggesting that notation systems could help to preserve techniques and history. In this respect, *balfolk* participants might learn from traditional folk dance and its elaborate notation system. Audiovisual media are increasingly used to transmit dance knowledge, supplementing traditional methods such as verbal descriptions. More work, however, is needed to document dances in an audiovisual way.

Survey results on the successful transmission of social dance across generations show a mixed but generally positive view. Dedicated dancers, musicians, and teachers are crucial to the communication of knowledge and enjoyment. The strong social cohesion enhances participation and emotional well-being, making these groups a vital part of members' social lives.

Folk dance fosters strong community bonds and a sense of belonging, yet it faces challenges in attracting new members and gaining public recognition. A major challenge for traditional folk dance is attracting younger generations, as some groups face declining membership due to aging participants.

The transmission of these practices is generally effective within the community but it fails to reach beyond it. Enhancing visibility through professional communication, leveraging audiovisual media, and engaging younger generations through education and youth movements are crucial for their viability. Flexibility and an emphasis on the social benefits of membership may help in attracting new recruits..

## *Dancers and Communities*

This domain examines the positions, roles and interactions of dancers within their communities and the social basis of their traditions. The survey assessed key themes linked to accessibility and inclusion and the perceived growth or decay of the community. In the individual interviews, we focused on gaining deeper insights into specific dynamics within the heritage community and the impact of age, gender, culture and socio-economic status. During the roundtable discussion, we explored who belongs to the community, the criteria for community membership and identified barriers for participation.

## *Discussion of Results*

The core of the heritage community consists of dancers who are connected to groups or meet each other at balls. There is little interaction between traditional folk dance and *balfolk* communities as each forms a small world of its own where familiar faces are always encountered. Dance communities span multiple generations, the traditional folk dance scene providing specific groups for children, teenagers, and seniors.

Musicians are vital to dance, with live music enriching the experience. Many traditional folk dance groups struggle to find musicians, leading them to use recorded music. Some have grown accustomed to it and even prefer its consistency and reliability. In the *balfolk* music scene, musicians can be found more easily because of the vibrant music community where many folk musicians earn their living by playing at dance events.

The term *volkdansgroup* is used for traditional folk dance groups, but *volkskunstgroup* is also common, which encompasses dance, singing, crafts, and flag waving. These groups frequently participate in international events such as the *Européade*. Most groups operate as informal associations, while some are structured as non-profit organisations. These latter, unlike informal groups, have a formal legal structure, with statutes, a board, and accountability for finances, which allows them to apply for subsidies. In addition to dance groups, there are guilds which are historic brotherhoods often rooted in medieval traditions such as archery or shooting. While guilds also once had dance traditions, these have largely disappeared today due to a lack of younger participants. Youth movements are also part of the heritage community but dance less frequently than before.

Folk dance is volunteer driven, involving the organisation of events, costume-making, dance documentation and more, leading volunteers often to describe this work as unpaid second employment.

The survey reveals a generally positive view of accessibility. Most respondents find the community welcoming with few to no barriers, although some minor obstacles exist. Interviews suggest that, while efforts are made to integrate new members, challenges such as tight-knit groups, complex dances and costume requirements can hinder participation. *Balfolk*, on the other hand, is noted for its inclusiveness, although some experienced dancers see room for improvement in managing differences in skill level. Financial accessibility is high, but low fees could reduce member commitment. Overall, the community strives to balance inclusivity with maintaining quality and engagement.

The number of people involved in folk dance seems to be largely stable, but there are differences reported. Traditional folk dancers noted a perceived decrease in the number of dancers and other people involved. Various factors contribute to the decline in participants. First of all, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many groups temporarily stopped dancing and some dancers withdrew to become involved in other leisure activities. Second, some dance groups broke up because of insufficient members or

when their dance leaders left on account of personal factors such as career moves, starting a family, a health situation and so on. These trends highlight the vulnerability of traditional folk dance and underscore the need for concerted efforts to revitalise folk dance participation.

*Balfolk* dancers are more positive and report an increase in participation. The folk music scene has seen a growth in both the number and quality of musicians over the past decade. This professionalisation, however, has led to higher standards and potentially higher costs.

Traditional folk dance faces specific challenges. Unlike *balfolk*, which allows for more casual participation, traditional folk dance groups require a long-term commitment from members to attend weekly rehearsals, performances and steering committees, which can be hard to maintain in today's fast-paced world, where people prefer more flexible activities.

There is, moreover, increased competition from other hobbies, making it even more challenging to attract and retain members. As a result, traditional folk dance groups struggle with shrinking membership, leading to a vicious cycle: fewer dancers make it harder to put on a performance, thus reducing visibility and discouraging new members from joining. The results of the research findings clearly highlight that to survive, these groups may need to adapt by offering more flexible participation options or by emphasising the social and cultural benefits of their activities. Furthermore, festival organisers of *balfolk* also have to commit to long-term engagements, which can be demanding but necessary for sustaining interest and participation. Without festival organisers, there would be no balls for individuals to attend.

## Contexts and Constructs

This domain assesses the social and cultural contexts of folk dance traditions: the underlying values and attitudes influencing folk dance. A section of the research focused on perceived prestige and its impact on community engagement, as this is often underestimated. In addition, we examined the realities and attitudes surrounding recontextualisation and authenticity, along with obstacles such as prejudice and stigma, as well as the role of the media and government in these dynamics.



### Discussion of Results

Folk dance provides a way to relax and enjoy social interaction without the pressure of conversation, allowing people to connect through shared enjoyment of music and movement, often leading to friendships. It brings together dancers and musicians from different generations and backgrounds to share their passion. This offers significant physical benefits, improving health, flexibility and coordination. The support and encouragement within communities also contributes to mental well-being by reducing stress and boosting self-confidence.

Many respondents feel that folk dance connects them to their roots and strengthens their cultural identity, cultivating a sense of European togetherness, serving as a bridge between past and present and preserving traditions for future generations. Folk dance provides continuous opportunities for learning and skill development, contributing to personal growth and a deeper appreciation for the art form. Participants often volunteer to sustain and promote their dance practices, organising events, teaching classes, and preserving cultural heritage.

Folk dance plays a crucial role in strengthening the social fabric of society by uniting people, promoting well-being, and fostering understanding between different groups. They offer an alternative social activity that emphasises dancing and interaction in a more inclusive and less intense environment than typical nightclubs.

The perceived popularity of folk dance varies. Traditional folk dance experienced a boom in the 1960s, and *balfolk* is now on the rise again after a dip in its popularity. Factors such as media attention and social trends, and the expansion of leisure activities, play a role in this. Regional differences also affect popularity, with *balfolk* being more prevalent in urban areas than in rural ones.

Lack of awareness and misconceptions about folk dance contribute to its general perception. Outsiders' opinions significantly impact dancers' self-perception, sometimes leading to less pride and promotion of their dances. Folk dance is unknown to the broader public and therefore underrated, resulting in a lack of prestige for the art form. Greater visibility and appreciation could be achieved through enhancing communication, introducing dance in schools and youth movements, and increasing government and media support.

## *Infrastructure and Regulations*

This domain primarily pertains to the material aspect of dance, including places for rehearsal and performance, as well as the availability of technical requirements. Within this domain, we also investigated the extent to which regulations facilitate or hinder the flourishing of folk dance. This includes considerations of umbrella organisations, grants, municipal support and copyright laws.

## *Discussion of Results*

Finding affordable practice spaces and covering associated costs remain ongoing challenges. Securing funding is difficult, as initiatives often rely on local governments that lack substantial financial capacity. Financial support or access to free or discounted dance floors depends on the goodwill of individual politicians. Many respondents indicate that the shift of cultural authority from the provinces to the municipalities and cities was a significant loss. Music licensing is a major hurdle for groups and festival organisers, with a large part of the budget allocated to music rights. For many respondents, the rules surrounding these rights, especially for traditional music, are unclear, and there is little transparency about how much of the money actually goes to the musicians.

Traditional folk dancers express nostalgia for an earlier period when multiple umbrella organisations were active. Although these organisations often competed rather than collaborated, each had a large following. Today, these organisations have either disappeared or merged into Danspunt, which supports all amateur dance practices. VVKB and IVV still exist without subsidies and have the potential to strengthen each other. They often collaborate on projects, such as courses for dance leaders, and seek to improve cooperation with subsidised organisations like Danspunt and CEMPER.

Several organisations have joined forces to create *Dansbank*, a public online platform for folk dance descriptions and videos. Organisations and individuals hold archives with thousands of descriptions which they want to make accessible. Collaboration has currently stalled, however, as a result of practical issues, leaving the descriptions in separate archives and inaccessible online.

*Balfolk* has dedicated organisations; some organise festivals, while others provide lessons and initiations. Muziekpublique is a non-profit association that promotes folk music and dance and support festival organisers.

The gatherings organised by organisations are highly appreciated, providing opportunities for participants to meet and exchange ideas, helping to face challenges collectively. Some respondents, however, expressed concern about a perceived disconnect between dancers and the overarching organisations. Respondents specifically cited a lack of communication and cooperation, with some feeling that the organisational priorities do not always reflect the needs of the dancers. This was reported to hinder collaborative efforts aimed at the sustainability of folk dance. These findings emphasise the need for more targeted and inclusive collaboration, where both practitioners and organisational leaders work together.

### ***Media and Dissemination***

Originally, this domain was called “Media and the Music Industry” but we changed it to “Media and Dissemination” to better reflect its focus on the sharing and promotion of folk dance. The research identified factors that influence accessibility through community-based initiatives and digital platforms. The survey examined the primary methods of dissemination within the folk dance community, while the interviews explored the impact of media representation, performance opportunities, digital platforms, and how folk dance is shared and promoted. Additionally, the roundtable discussion addressed the role of local governments and heritage organisations such as museums.

### ***Discussion of Results***

With a few exceptions, folk dance is rarely featured in mainstream media. Their dissemination often occurs within the existing folk dance community, sometimes intentionally.

Viability relies heavily on community-based dissemination and the strategic use of online platforms. Folk dance events and activities are disseminated through websites, social media, and online event calendars, allowing participants to stay informed about upcoming practices, workshops, and festivals, fostering broader engagement within the folk dance community. Occasionally, local events are promoted via local communication channels, reaching a limited audience outside the folk dance community.

The internet and social media play significant roles in circulating folk dance. Dances are frequently recorded and uploaded to YouTube, albe-

it with varying quality. Organisations such as VVKB, IVV, Danspunt and Dansgazet (a private initiative for documenting dance descriptions) have observed a growing demand for audiovisual material alongside written descriptions. Videos serve as valuable resources for dance groups and individual dancers to refine their techniques. The increasing demand for audiovisual material suggests a shift in how dance is learned and shared, indicating potential for broader reach and engagement if quality content is consistently produced and accessible.

Over the past twenty to thirty years, there has been a decline in performance opportunities. Currently, groups perform at self-organised events or heritage-related activities. The groups that focus on performance need those opportunities to have a goal to work for in their weekly rehearsals. Performances are often unpaid or compensated with a small, symbolic amount used to cover travel expenses or added to the association's fund. Payment is never the main motivation for performing. For the dance community to thrive, ongoing efforts to finding performance opportunities is essential, ensuring that both new and existing members can continue to experience, learn and grow. Respondents felt that museums and local governments could provide more performance or participative dance opportunities.

### *Issues and Initiatives for Sustainability*

Each of the five domains highlights specific issues related to sustainability, and it is important to recognise their interconnection. These domains should not be viewed in isolation but as part of an integrated ecosystem.

Documentation and archiving are practical strategies for sustainability, which the *Sustainable Futures* framework addresses in a separate section distinct from the five domains. This focus reflects the numerous initiatives aimed at documentation and archiving cultural expressions, with the primary goal of preserving them for future generations. Documentation, however, extends beyond mere preservation; it plays a crucial role in sustaining and revitalising dance practices.

In both the survey and interviews, particular attention was given to issues surrounding documentation and archiving, as well as other sustainability initiatives. We also explored the support required from organisations like CEMPER and other heritage organisations to ensure the longevity and vitality of these practices.

### Discussion of Results

Traditional folk dance and *balfolk* have shared advantages, such as high community involvement, social, physical and mental benefits and a high number of activities and courses. But they also face similar challenges: limited funding and government support, minimal media coverage, misconceptions by the general public, shortage on accessible and qualitative dance floors, and a heavy reliance on a few dedicated volunteers.

There are also differences to consider. Whereas *balfolk* dancers seem less worried about the viability of their practice, a significant number of traditional folk dancers is particularly concerned about sustainability: traditional folk dance is at a critical juncture, and without intervention, it might disappear. These respondents are highly engaged and proactive in their efforts to sustain and promote their dance practice.

Viability of folk dance can be enhanced by defining priorities. The most emphasised aspect is generational transmission. Engaging youth is notably important, with a strong focus on reaching out to young people, nurturing them and ensuring the dance traditions are passed down. There is a need for more promotion, including public dance activities and actively approaching schools and local communities. Practitioners emphasise the importance of modernising and refreshing folk dance to make it more attractive to younger generations. This includes the use of social media, organising contemporary events, and involving young instructors.

Another critical area is the existence of sufficient knowledge and skills among people to continue this practice, reflecting the importance of educational continuity. There is a plea for more education and awareness about the cultural value of folk dance. Integrating folk dance into cultural and educational sectors, such as part-time art education programmes and youth movements, could help to reach out.

Intentional efforts to maintain the strong sense of community are also needed, such as the focus of the *balfolk* scene on creating a safe space on the dance floor. Persistence and engagement are necessary to enhance the viability. This is a current strength, supported by a number of very dedicated participants, although the challenge is to find new and younger volunteers.

Support, both financial and physical, is crucial for the viability of folk dance. This includes obtaining subsidies to organise festivals and events and securing spaces with good dance floors. There is also a call for more support from government and other agencies. Collaboration between dance groups, associations, and organisations is needed to organise this in

a more integrated way. Some participants advocate for more professionalisation in the sector, including the payment of teachers and the provision of subsidies for local events. Sharing knowledge and experience is also emphasised as an important aspect of sustainability. The looser connections in the *balfolk* scene seem more welcoming than the often tight-knit groups found in traditional folk dance. Conversely, traditional folk dance, with its extensively documented and shared dance descriptions, provides a structured learning method, while *balfolk*, relies more on observation and practice, offering a more experiential approach. Being aware of these different approaches makes it easier to exchange with each other. In addition, media attention can help increase the visibility of folk dance. While public recognition is considered less important than intergenerational transmission and competence in knowledge and skills, it can significantly influence success in reaching a broader audience. Finally, attention is called to the need to improve the accessibility of folk dance, such as offering affordable courses and organising public dance rehearsals.

## Documentation

Throughout our discussion above, we have already made some remarks about documentation in written and/or audio-visual form. The perceived quality of records within folk dance varies, with traditional folk dance putting more emphasis on documentation and archiving. Documentation often relies heavily on the involvement of individuals, such as Hubert Boone, a prominent figure in the field, who has made significant contributions to documenting dance traditions. To compensate this, several overarching initiatives, including VVKB, IVV, Dansbank and De Dansgazet, are working towards increased accessibility, producing new material and disseminating traditional folk dance practices. IVV, for example, catalogued approximately 260 dances in their Flemish dance archive. Nonetheless, accessibility remains a challenge, due to scattered personal archives and limited digitalisation.

*Balfolk* organisers have largely ceased audiovisual documentation, relying on past recordings. Also here, the degree of documentation often hinges on the enthusiasm of individuals within the community, leading to uneven preservation efforts.

So, despite good initiatives, challenges persist. First of all, there needs to be a growing consensus about what the folk dance community wants to



Figure 3. An illustration from the Archive of IVV showing how to dance a quadrille. Source: Institute for Flemish FolkArt (IVV).

consciously preserve from contemporary times for future generations, so that these priorities can be documented in a structured and coordinated way. Second, there is a growing recognition of the need for better availability of archival material that was already produced in the past, both for traditional folk dance and *balfolk*.

These challenges correlate with music documentation. High-quality recordings are scarce, yet they are essential for purposes such as rehearsals for performances. The production of new recordings is hampered by lack of access to professional equipment and not every group has the budget for such costs.

### ***Past and Current Initiatives***

In addition to schemes that focus on documentation, several groups undertake transmission initiatives, as, for example by participating at a local market or event in order to recruit new members. Some also offer workshops in schools, mostly at the school's request. These workshops involve teaching



simple and accessible dances or steps, sometimes in combination with music. These initiatives, however, tend to be small-scale and uncoordinated.

Larger initiatives do exist but often rely on non-structural funding. IVV, for example, will host a Flemish gathering with a spotlight on the quadrille, featuring a symposium and performances. Folk organisers in Limburg will arrange regional *balfolk* dance courses, thanks to additional funding. The free poster campaign by Werkplaats Immaterieel Erfgoed (WIE), ICH organisation in Flanders, which featured the slogan “intangible heritage feels so good” was widely praised. Many dance groups participated, increasing their visibility in Flanders and Brussels.

## Support

There is a general need for greater coordination within the dance communities. The participants were very pleased to share their opinions and experiences with each other and pleaded for more exchange between the communities and participants involved.

Workshops, gatherings and organised events can foster community bonds, but recognition from local governments, the cultural sector and media is vital for broader acceptance and visibility. Financial support, even beyond direct subsidies, through logistical assistance and professional involvement, is essential for sustaining folk dance.

Simplifying project submission processes and raising awareness about the importance of documenting and archiving dances are crucial steps, as well as more direct support and collaboration among various cultural and heritage organisations.

Support from museums was initially not a priority for respondents, but they expressed a willingness to explore this further. It became evident that museums are often perceived as repositories for objects, and there is a concern that involving museums might signify the end of a tradition. To keep the tradition alive, museums would need to offer dance venues. One group had the experience of dancing in a museum and, although the experience was mutually fulfilling for both the museum and the dancers, they eventually lost contact. This group suggested creating a database for potential events, as volunteer-run groups often lack the time to prospect for opportunities themselves. Interestingly, some museums have shown a proactive interest in supporting dancers, particularly in the use of such a database. This interest was not captured as a result of this particular research, but

during other steps during the *Dance-ICH* project, such as a workshop and subsequent feedback from museums. Museums see this database as a valuable tool to connect with dance communities and to plan events, to share resources and to make social dance practices visible within their spaces.

## **Towards Safeguarding**

Our work extends beyond identifying threats, challenges and opportunities. We are now taking steps to facilitate the development of a safeguarding plan. In the first place, we shared the research findings with the respondents and other stakeholders and plan to organise workshops to discuss the findings and the safeguarding process. We, as facilitators, will guide these sessions ensuring ownership remains with the participants. Balancing guidance with autonomy is key, as fostering active engagement and addressing diverse priorities can be challenging.

Setting priorities is critical. Participants will identify and prioritise the most pressing threats and the most promising opportunities. Following this, they will develop specific strategies and assign roles to ensure ownership. We will help to explore resources such as funding, training and external support. When necessary, we will provide capacity-building to enhance their ability to execute the plan effectively.

Although we are still working towards safeguarding, our adapted methodology did prove useful for our purposes. These were: 1) expanding CEMPER's network within the folk dance community, 2) initiating open discussions about safeguarding practices, and 3) investigating the potential role of museums and other heritage professionals, including ourselves, in safeguarding dance as ICH. Although originally designed to assess the viability of music cultures, these adapted methodologies proved to be a useful framework for discussions about folk dance.

1. By applying this methodology through a survey, interviews and a roundtable discussion, we successfully expanded our network within the community, engaging with many respondents whom we did not previously know. We received positive feedback from participants who felt acknowledged in both their passion and concerns. Additionally, the participants themselves expanded their own network, which is already a significant step towards safeguarding.

2. Safeguarding actions should always involve the heritage community. To achieve this participation, it is crucial to first identify who belongs to the community – essentially, everyone who identifies with the practice. By using a survey, we reached various participants, and through interviews and a roundtable discussion, we gained deeper insights into the practices, dynamics and diverse opinions within these communities. This personal contact, coupled with an open exchange of ideas, helped us to build the trust necessary for the rest of the process. The written report serves as a starting point, laying a solid foundation for open discussions and collaboratively developing a safeguarding plan that takes all opinions into account.
3. The potential role of museums and other heritage professionals in safeguarding dance as ICH needs to be further investigated. However, we have already gained some insights. The role that museums and heritage workers can play in safeguarding varies widely. The involvement of communities, groups, and individuals in safeguarding ICH is a key distinguishing feature of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, compared with other cultural heritage agreements. This aspect is complex, however, and is subject to varying global measurements and valuations, raising ethical and political questions in its application (Adell et al. 2015). Cultural heritage researcher Marilena Alivizatou (2021) discusses participation as both a conceptual framework and a practical approach for safeguarding endeavours. She emphasises that effective implementation of the 2003 Convention requires diverse partnerships involving governments, tradition bearers, and intermediary cultural brokers.

As cultural brokers, our role is to facilitate partnerships that ensure that safeguarding practices are inclusive and reflect a community's needs and values. In this case, we took the initiative to engage with the folk dance community, and key institutions saw this as an opportunity for collaboration and mutual strengthening. Our experience shows that an engaged community, supported by diverse intermediaries, significantly boosts the effectiveness of reaching a larger audience and fostering partnerships.

While museum workers can be a part of these partnerships, many dancers still see museums as spaces for conservation rather than for safeguarding. This fosters the idea that museums will only reinforce the outdated image of social dance in Flanders. Our role as cultural brokers is crucial in demonstrating how museums are evolving towards more societal

roles, where communities participate and retain ownership of their living heritage. It is essential to approach this role with sensitivity and a genuine commitment to community involvement.

## Conclusion

CEMPER developed a comprehensive methodology aimed at engaging the folk dance community in Flanders. Previously, this methodology had been applied exclusively to the field of music. Extending this approach to dance – particularly folk dance – represents a first for CEMPER and a milestone in our efforts to safeguard dance as ICH. This expansion is a crucial evolution, broadening our scope and allowing us to engage with the folk dance community.

In applying this methodology to folk dance, we have encountered both successes and challenges. The structured inquiry approach proved effective in helping the folk dance community to expand its network, raise awareness and develop a deeper understanding of safeguarding concepts. Nonetheless, challenges arose in the later phases when applying the research results. These included difficulties in transitioning from institutional leadership to a community-driven process and a lack of immediate ownership within the folk dance community due to reliance on CEMPER's direction, and obstacles to sustaining long-term engagement beyond the initial phases.

Moreover, tensions around defining community boundaries emerged during the research process. The question of who constitutes the “community” was more complex than anticipated. This underscores the importance of flexibility and adaptability in research methodologies in heritage studies where communities are ever-changing.

In conclusion, the modified methodology from Huib Schippers' and Catherine Grant's frameworks has proven effective for our primary objectives of this project. Not only did this methodology enable the identification of new stakeholders and the expansion of a more comprehensive network, it also provided a structured, practical way for communities to engage with safeguarding processes. Establishing personal connections through interviews and discussions, and the trust and partnerships that come with it, can create a foundation for long-term collaboration. Encouraging open dialogue about safeguarding practices helps to identify the needs and concerns of heritage communities. Engaging the community in the safeguard-

ing process ensures that actions are relevant and supported by those most invested in the heritage. This approach aimed to foster greater involvement and a sense of ownership among heritage community members, though this was not always fully realised. While the process encouraged engagement, some participants remained reliant on institutional support. Nevertheless, this was an inclusive process that allowed for deep reflection on the community's needs and values in their search for sustainability.

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