

Bridging Cultures: Moving Towards New Perspectives in Museums

Day of exchanges

24 May 2024 – 09:30 AM – 04:30 PM

Room XI, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

Concept Note

Background

In the ever-evolving cultural and social landscape, museums are expected to be at the forefront of embracing change. They have continuously adapted to the shifting needs and perspectives of societies, signifying a considerable transformation in museum curation. This evolution reflects an increased awareness of the diverse role museums should play in education, social engagement, and intercultural dialogue, and as custodians of cultural heritage.

Recent trends have demonstrated the increasing role of museums as agoras for community building and spaces for intercultural dialogue while breaking new ground with a reinvented social role as activists. Furthermore, many museums have put the spotlight on and created knowledge for key social issues at the heart of our contemporary societies, including inequalities, migrations, racism and discrimination, among others.

Urged by impacted communities to confront and address the legacies of colonialism, museums increasingly recognise their roles not just as custodians of cultural heritage but also as active participants in shaping narratives for a comprehensive future. This involves embracing the diversities and multifaceted nature of societies, promoting community inclusion for the conservation and management of cultural property, and re-evaluating their place in colonial history and discourse. By incorporating the expressions and histories of various groups, including Indigenous Peoples, museums are making significant strides towards inclusivity and representation. This shift is crucial in ensuring that museums appropriately represent the diversity of human cultures and histories and facilitate the return and restitution of cultural objects, thus playing a pivotal role in communities' healing and reconciliation processes.

Central to this transformation is the 2015 UNESCO *Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of Museums and Collections, their diversity and their role in society* (hereinafter 2015 Recommendation), which underscores the importance of the educational and social role of museums and collections. It emphasises their responsibility to promote diversity and their integral role in society. The *MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration* further reiterates the critical role museums play for the rights of peoples and communities to their cultural identity and heritage, thereby reinforcing the principles set out in the 2015 Recommendation.

Set against this backdrop, this day of exchanges aims to explore the evolving role of museums in contemporary society in the context of the 2015 Recommendation. Leveraging dialogic practices, it intends to give voice to museums, communities and stakeholders to shed light on current museum practices and investigate the role of museums as spaces for the construction of social and historical narratives.

Furthermore, this event will aim to promote the adoption of a more inclusive approach to museology that would foster cultural and intercultural dialogue. It echoes the growing global consciousness of the vital roles that Indigenous and diasporic communities play in our shared cultural heritage and the evolving roles of museums as dynamic spaces for cultural inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and reflection on contemporary world complexities.

Resonating with this context, UNESCO's scaled up its efforts in the field with the launch of a global Network of Places of History and Memory Linked to Enslavement and the transatlantic Slave Trade in 2023, with the objective to revitalise these places through joint activities and use them as awareness-raising tools on the history and legacies of enslavement, the event, coinciding with the 30th anniversary of UNESCO's Routes of Enslaved Peoples programme, will also emphasise the presence of Afro-diasporic cultures in museums as part of the valorisation process of places of history and memory linked to slavery and the transatlantic trade.

The day of exchanges will focus on three key themes: the involvement of communities in the return and restitution of cultural property, the representation of the African Diaspora in museums, and collective cultural rights in the context of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), for which UNESCO is a lead agency.

The event is underpinned by several considerations, such as:

- **Reinforce Museums' Role in Cultural and Intercultural Dialogue:** Museums must engage in a more inclusive and sensitive curation that reflects the diverse histories and identities of various ethnic and cultural communities. It should also build new approaches for partnerships between museums and communities.
- **Highlight Museums' Responsibility in Return and Restitution of Cultural Property:** Museums play a critical role in the restitution of cultural objects and in contributing to healing and reconciliation.
- **Educational Imperative:** Provide a platform for professionals and the public to deepen their understanding of the complexities involved in cultural heritage preservation in line with communities, as well as to serve as a knowledge resource for collective action.
- **Policy Impact:** Offer insights that can guide policy development, ensuring adherence to international standards and ethical practices in cultural heritage management respectful of communities' basic rights.

Objectives

The objective of the event is to engage in a comprehensive exploration of the modern roles of museums within our society. Furthermore, its aim is to foster a dialogue on how museums can adapt to contemporary societal needs and become active proponents of cultural and linguistic diversity. In this regard, the three sessions will all together focus on the following central themes: Firstly, enhancing community engagement in museum activities and decision-making processes, ensuring that exhibitions reflect the narratives and heritage of diverse communities. Secondly, the event will address the representation of the African Diaspora in museums, aiming to highlight the diversity of their cultural experiences and histories along with their cultural contributions to modern societies. Lastly, the event will focus on the preservation of collective cultural rights, with particular emphasis on the protection and promotion of Indigenous languages, aligning with the goals of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Session description

Session 1: Communities at the heart of the Process of Return and Restitution of Cultural Property

This session will concentrate on the vital role that communities play in the return and restitution of cultural property. It will emphasize the importance of community involvement in making the restitution process both ethical and meaningful. The discussion will feature case studies to highlight how community engagement has been pivotal in successful restitution efforts. Additionally, the session will tackle the challenges and identify good practices in incorporating communities into the decision-making process, challenges and facilitating the return of cultural property.

Moderator: Sunna Altnoder, Chief of Unit, Movable Heritage and Museums, Culture Sector, UNESCO

Participants:

1. George Okello Abungu, Emeritus Director General of the National Museums of Kenya and Honorary Professor at the Australian National University of Canberra, *Kenya*
2. Sadiyah Boonstra, Postdoctoral Researcher at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam and Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne, *Indonesia*
3. Alissandra Cummins, Director of the Barbados Museum & Historical Society, *Barbados*
4. Bernarda Delgado, Director of the Museo de Sitio Túcume – Ministry of Culture, *Peru* – video message
5. Mirjam Hoijtink, Head of Collections & Research at Wereldmuseum (Amsterdam, Leiden, Rotterdam), *Kingdom of the Netherlands*

Session 2: The African Diaspora Perspective in Museum Collections

In alignment with the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation concerning Museums and Collections that calls museums to expand their narratives to encompass a broader range of histories and cultures, including those of the African diaspora, this session will focus on the portrayal of the African diaspora within museum collections. It aims to scrutinize how museums are integrating the history and culture of the African diaspora into their exhibits, with a particular focus on narratives related to the transatlantic slave trade. The session will emphasise the need for authenticity and sensitivity in presenting these stories, exploring the nuances and complexities inherent to this history. A key part of the discussion will be the collaboration between museums and communities from the African diaspora. This collaborative approach is vital to ensure that the representations in museums are accurate, respectful, and truly reflective of the diaspora's experiences and perspectives.

Moderator: Anna Maria Majlöf, Chief of Section, Inclusion, Rights, and Intercultural Dialogue, Social and Human Sciences Sector, UNESCO

Participants:

1. Key Jo Lee, Chief of Curatorial Affairs at the Museum of the African Diaspora, Smithsonian Affiliate, *United States of America*
2. Monica Lima, Historian and the General Coordinator of Project Articulation and Internationalization at the National Archives of Brazil, *Brazil* – video message
3. Vijaya Teelock, Historian and Member of the International Scientific Committee of the UNESCO Routes of Enslaved Peoples Programme, *Mauritius*

4. Richard Tsogang Fossi, Postdoc Research Fellow at the Technical University Berlin, *Cameroon*
5. Françoise Vergès, Political scientist and author of *Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum* (2023 for the French version), *France*

Session 3: Collective Cultural Rights in the Context of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

The third session will discuss collective cultural rights, particularly in the follow-up to the *MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration* and in the context of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. This session will emphasise the importance of protecting and promoting the expressions of the cultures of Indigenous Peoples, including their knowledge systems and practices, as a crucial element for the respect and exercise of all human rights, in particular cultural, individual and collective rights. It will explore the role of museums in providing access to culture and supporting preservation initiatives, promoting living cultural heritage and creating spaces for cultural diversity, as outlined in the 2015 Recommendation. Discussions will include strategies for museums to engage with communities to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indigenous Peoples and their significance in maintaining cultural diversity.

Moderator: Emmanuelle Robert, Project Officer, Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue, UNESCO

Participants:

1. Vital Bambanze, Member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, *Burundi*
2. Mariana Françaço, Associate Professor of Museum Studies at Leiden University, *Brazil*
3. Medea Ekner, interim Director General of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)
4. Lucina Jimenez, Anthropologist and International Consultant in Cultural Policy, Cultural Management and Arts, *Mexico* – online
5. Mohamed Zinelabidine, Head of the Culture and Communication Sector of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) – online

Format and beneficiaries

The one-day event, organised by UNESCO with the support of the Government of Brazil, will convene experts, relevant partner organisations, and representatives from various regions and countries. This gathering is designed to showcase new forms of institutional engagements and partnerships in the field of museum curation. Attendees will have the opportunity to participate in person, with the added option of connecting online.

The event aims to maintain a geographical balance in terms of participant representation. This includes a diverse array of representatives from museum institutions, academia, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, partner institutions, and youth groups. Such diversity will ensure a broad range of perspectives and experiences, enriching the discussions and outcomes of the event.