

Opening remarks

Despina Pilides, chair of ICOM Cyprus

It is a great pleasure for me to address this online conference jointly organised by ICOM Germany, ICOM Greece and ICOM Cyprus entitled *Museums Facing a Planetary Emergency*. Such a discussion is indeed timely: the issue of climatic change requires our urgent attention and immediate enforcement of appropriate measures. Our world is changing rapidly, as we are currently witnessing, living amidst an unprecedented situation with the Covid-19 pandemic. Along with the effects on our lives in general, museums and museum collections around the world are also affected. It is, therefore, imperative that we set up strategies to protect the cultural heritage of humanity so that it can be passed on intact to future generations.

Climate change, the loss of biodiversity, shifts in migratory patterns and habitats, increased health risks from pollutants, social unrest, amongst many other factors, have far-reaching repercussions that go beyond the equally dramatic effects of extreme weather phenomena. We therefore need to examine first how to protect the physical existence of museums and their collections and which new requirements may be necessary in view of environmental changes. Weather patterns and temperature fluctuations affect the long-term preservation of the world's cultural treasures, a perennial source of inspiration in our daily lives. The delicate and fragile nature of museum collections are susceptible to such conditions. Often, they are housed in museums which are themselves monuments and in need of protection from environmental risks, requiring necessary interventions to protect both their settings and contents. Thus, risk assessment is a first necessary step to define the nature of possible threats in each case and enable the development of strategic plans to be applied. ICOM

and the supervising authorities of museums can certainly play a decisive role in sensitising museums about the need to put such plans in effect. I am certain that the presentations and discussion to follow will lead the way forward and show how new methodologies can mitigate risks.

On another level, museums as mediators of social change can also have a role in raising public awareness on the risks that museums and society are facing. With focused exhibitions, conferences and other events, they can initiate a dialogue that can be mutually beneficial in the long term.

With regard to museums in Cyprus, the Covid-19 pandemic and consequent closure had a detrimental effect but, on the other hand, the situation precipitated the introduction of alternative actions and activities so as to reach the public at these times of restriction and has shown that the public responds positively. After all, culture does seem to have a positive effect with its healing qualities in situations of stress. Virtual visits of museums, story-telling around selected collections or objects on particular days, connected to thematic celebrations or occasions, online lectures and workshops have sustained the interest of the public, even though, inevitably, closure has had its impact on museums, particularly on privately funded ones.

The contribution of digital technologies has proven valuable in these difficult times, indicating and stressing the need for further applications. 3D object or site representations trigger the public's interest. They can be used in educational programmes and they can add to people's knowledge and strengthen commitment towards saving and preserving cultural heritage in general, while digitisation is in itself the most important tool in safeguarding museums' collections. Technological applications are likely to provide innovative ways of approaching the issue of accessibility to museum collections and will have to be put into wider use, especially at times such as the current situation.

In conclusion, I would like to welcome all the participants and to thank them in advance for their contributions. The proceedings will, I am sure, provide ideas for the future and will undoubtedly prove beneficial for the management of museums and museum collections.