



United Nations
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The Impact of COVID-19 on the Museum and Cultural Heritage Sectors

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The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is considered the most significant global

health disaster of this century and one of the most significant challenges that humanity has faced since the second World War. The pandemic has caused enormous disruption in all aspects of life, affecting all segments of the world's population. From March 2020 onwards, most countries took radical, unprecedented measures to counter the spread of the virus, resulting in the closure of museums and other cultural places to the public. Of the 182 states, 156, including Cyprus and Greece, closed their museums. According to a report by UNESCO, 90% of museums, so more than 85000 institutions, have closed their doors during the crisis, while nearly a third has significantly reduced their staff, and up to 10% faces the danger of being permanently closed. The required lockdown and social distancing have caused many cultural and heritage sectors to reappraise and revisit the innovative online and virtual methods for learning, exhibition, and outreach [1], [2].

Economic and Human Impact

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) report, Museums, Museum Professionals and COVID-19, the anticipated reduction or loss of public funding, private donors, ticketing, shops and cafes, the financial resources of all museums are likely to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic impact of the crisis and closure of museums will impact the short, medium and long term institutional financial planning, regardless of their primary sources of funding. 12.8% of participants saying that their institution may close permanently, more than 80% of programmes reduced and almost a third of museums forced to reduce their staff [3].

The prediction is that there will be a reduction in scheduled projects and programmes in at least 80% of museums. This figure rises to 93% and 87% in the regions of Africa and the Pacific respectively. The percentage of museums that will have to downsize their staff is the highest in North America and the Pacific, but still appears to be an expected impact for at least 23% of museums worldwide. The pandemic will likely cause a long-term dramatic decrease in institutional income, predicted to last until the end of 2020 and possibly into 2021.

As identified in the October 2020 Europa Nostra report, COVID-19 & Beyond: Challenges and Opportunities for Cultural Heritage, the pandemic has touched every part of the cultural heritage value chain: from research to conservation and protection, and from outreach to training and education. Over 7 million cultural and creative jobs are currently at risk. Employment in the cultural and heritage sectors is particularly vulnerable due to the prevalence of micro-organisations, NGOs and not-for-profit, self-employed, freelancers, and volunteers. The percentage of museums that will have to downsize their staff is the highest in North America and the Pacific but still appears to be an expected impact for at least 23% of museums in all world regions [4].

Digital Activities and Communication

As the ongoing COVID-19 experience indicates, the future of museum patronage is unpredictable and certainly under threat. In response, the sector –including Greece and to a much lesser extent Cyprus– has reacted rapidly in developing a more significant online and

engaging presence [5]–[8]. According to ICOM 2020, museums have increased their digital activities by an average of 15%. The two most popular activities that museums have started since the lockdown, i.e. live events and online exhibitions, have increased respectively by 12.28% and 10.88%. Social media posting has also increased significantly by 47.49%, and quizzes by 19.21% [3].

The Digital museum map Museum digital initiatives during the Coronavirus Pandemic setting up by the University of Graz constitutes a first pilot-study, offering an immediate overview of various digital initiatives launched by museums around the world during the Coronavirus Pandemic [9]. The various initiatives are listed in the following categories: contemporary collecting projects; social media initiatives (i.e. local hashtags and targeted projects) [10]; streaming content; virtual tours; online exhibitions; game; educational content; and other types of activities (for initiatives not covered by the previous categories) [11]–[15]. By selecting an item, the user may read a short description of the activity and, if exists, to explore the relevant website. The categories are intentionally quite broad because the map is still open to contributions (<https://digitalmuseums.at/contribute.html>) and they will be refine at a later stage [16].

It is essential to also consider that “while this demonstrates the innovation and creativity that characterise the cultural sector, as well as its ability to adapt to the crisis, it also highlights some structural weaknesses that have for a long time affected cultural institutions, in terms of resources and staff dedicated to digital activities and communication, and the level of maturity of the content produced” [3]. The current pandemic situation highlights the need for universal access to documentary heritage as a knowledge resource. To tackle this issue, UNESCO recently announced that is going to build an international policy agenda for digital preservation of documentary heritage through a policy dialogue [17].

The Network of European Museums Organisation (NEMO) has analysed nearly 1,000 survey responses collected between 24 March and 30 April 2020 from museums in 48 countries, the majority from Europe. The survey findings resulted in recommendations for immediate action, for mid-term considerations and a long-term strategy. In addition to a recommended increase in overall economic support for operations, NEMO recommends greater investment in digital services and infrastructure for cultural heritage [18], as follows:

- Promote open access to cultural heritage and use digital on-line tools wisely. The crisis will accelerate the digitisation and access to culture and heritage, and heritage sites must find adequate alternatives to generate income through virtual broadcasting and virtual visits. Collaborating with artists and on online platforms might allow monetisation of these activities, which will be very much needed due to the income decline obtained from physical visits.
- Support digitisation and enhancing digital skills of the cultural heritage sector, with the aim to strengthen participation and access to culture and heritage by digital means.
- Invest in what makes museums unique: their collections and rich content. Fun, engaging and creative digital offers will be part of museums’ digital future. This requires adequate resources to enable museums to compete with other digital services and provide state of the art cultural experiences online.

Clearly, increased support for the development of digital tools and increased online presence can be beneficial, but there are challenges and concerns. The ‘digital divide’, the gap that exists between people who have access to modern information and communication technology and



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those who lack access, is more evident than ever. Only 5% of museums in Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have been able to provide online content. There are also broader existential issues such as whether museums are capable to remain relevant if people can only visit them virtually. If the digital has the capacity to provide COVID-related income losses and change visitor behavior; or, whether exhibitions, which take years to plan and execute, can be transferred to the digital realm, in order to keep museums open [19]–[26].

The cultural and creative sectors are among the most affected by the current coronavirus crisis, and museums are no exception. Unfortunately, museums as we used to know them, will not be the same for a long time. Museum professionals, scholars and patrons will have to adapt to the realities of this new order [27]–[34].

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