

## ***Collecting and Collections – the politics and praxis of social, economic and intellectual sustainability***

Seoul (Republic of Korea), 26-31 October 2015

*COMCOL is the International Committee for Collecting of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) which aims to deepen discussions, and share knowledge on the practice, theory and ethics of collecting and collections development.*

COMCOL's 2015 annual conference will be organised in cooperation with ICOM Korea and will be hosted by The National Folk Museum of Korea. The conference will be dedicated to the sustainability of collecting and collections. The theme links up with this year's theme of the International Museum Day, "Museums for a sustainable society", but will focus on the sustainability of the role of museums (and other heritage institutions) and their collections itself.

The most generally accepted definition of sustainability is the one given in the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) saying "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". In its brochure, *Sustainability and museums. Your chance to make a difference* (2008), the UK Museums Association discusses how "concepts of sustainability have the potential to help museums improve their service to society, to make decisions about collections management, to secure long-term financial stability – and, of course, to serve future generations appropriately". Speaking about collections, the Museums Association suggests that to flourish sustainability, museums should "acknowledge the legacy contributed by previous generations and pass on a better legacy of collections, information and knowledge to the next generation", and "manage collections well, so that they will be a valued asset for future generations, not a burden".

In its conference, COMCOL will explore the meaning of this in terms of the composition and structure of collections. **What specific methodological approaches towards collection development does sustainability require?**

As specific aspects of this main theme we would like to address following topics:

**What does sustainability mean for institutional collections?** Museums are said to work for eternity. Acquisition and de-accession policies and practices are always situated, and are results of decisions at specific moments, decisions with long term consequences. How can museums and other heritage institutions meet different – sometimes conflicting – societal requirements? Long term consequences have also to do with extended responsibilities in terms of storage, conservation, etc. Can all the "hidden" material be allowed to decay, while resources are used up on acquiring more which is not always displayed? What role can digitisation play in the sustainability of collections? Digitisation may enhance the use of collections without putting too much pressure of the physical condition of the objects. Does

this mean that digitisation contribute to social, economic, intellectual and physical sustainability at the same time?

**What does sustainability mean for private collections?** What is the role of the collector? To what extent should the philosophy of the collector be respected after his/her death? What does this mean for autonomous museums based on a private collection? And, when a private collection is incorporated in a larger museum collection, should the specific composition and structure be respected as separate entity?

**What is the impact of collecting on the sustainability of ecosystems and communities?** Museums are often accused of disrupting ecosystems and communities by their collecting practices. There is a growing awareness that museums should adopt an activist attitude towards key social issues such as social injustice and environmental degradation. Following this attitude, should collecting be replaced by the ethics of guardianship, i.e. the abstinence of collecting in favour of protection in situ, in function? In other words, can museums contribute to the sustainable development of ecosystems and communities by not-collecting? And, going one step further, can museums contribute to this development – in particular the sustainable development of communities – by returning items of cultural significance to their creators?

**What are proper (sustainable) methodologies of documenting the present in a participatory way?** The assumption is that documentation projects that engage the participation of communities contribute to empowerment in representation. How can this be achieved so that such documentation will remain relevant for future (academic) research?

For the topics as outlined above we invite papers that explore the issues from the perspective of theory, practice and/or ethics. Presentations are limited to 20 minutes. We are particularly keen to encourage submissions that cut across and between disciplinary vocabularies to provide new synergies, domains and inter-disciplinary possibilities. We warmly welcome proposals which go beyond traditional paper presentations and encompass also panels and workshops.

It should be noted that although the main institutional focus will be on museums, the experiences of other heritage institutions will also be regarded. Similarly we are interested in the whole scope of documentation (tangible – intangible, movable – immovable).

### **Submitting abstracts**

Submissions (between 250 and 300 words) should be sent to [L.Meijer-vanMensch@smb.spk-berlin.de](mailto:L.Meijer-vanMensch@smb.spk-berlin.de) by **April 20th, 2015**. Approval of proposals will be announced by **May 5th, 2015**

The following information should be included with the abstract:

- Title of submitted proposal. Please indicate if it is a paper, workshop or panel contribution.
- Name(s) of Author(s)
- Affiliation(s), e-mail address(es) & full address(es)
- Abstract in English (between 250 and 300 words)
- Technical requirements for the presentations.