

**“National + Regional = International. ICOM’s Policy for the Regional Organisations”**

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As members of ICOM, we always like to emphasise the fact that the “I” in the association’s name stands for “international”. But is our outlook and approach really international enough? Does ICOM truly distinguish itself from the individual countries’ national and regional museum associations? After all, these associations are also often international in reach, just as ICOM aims to have an effect locally. It does so by spreading the ICOM Code of Ethics, which – by establishing global standards – plays a very important role in discussions concerning cultural and educational policy in all nations.

But what do we really mean when we speak of an international association, and who benefits from its efforts?

In my opinion, it is above all a question of ICOM offering its collaborators in museums an opportunity to address international topics related both to museum work and to international cultural and educational policy issues; to give them a chance to learn about cultural organisations on an international scale. Ultimately, by increasing its members’ expertise, ICOM allows them to gain a better understanding of different ways of looking at culture and history. As a result, the fruits of their labour – that is, the exhibitions and events organised by the individual museums – also assume a more authentic flavour. This, in turn, allows visitors to experience these exhibitions – which are designed with wider horizons in mind – more intensely, encouraging them to develop a deeper understanding of historical processes and cultural situations.

At the same time, the national committees should also keep in mind the interests of the museum world in an international context; they should act as lobbyists and work to ensure that the interests of museums are represented in society at large.

We have already taken various steps to improve the association's international impact. ICOM-Germany's practice of holding its annual conferences on international themes in the countries in which these issues are most relevant has become a model of success, which other countries have since adopted. Other national committees focus on sponsoring national committees from third world nations. This bilateral programme also perfectly reflects ICOM's philosophy.

But is this enough? Are we prepared to react to new contemporary challenges and, if need be, to develop new structures and strategies to tackle them? We need to consider above all international political events, such as the end of the Cold War in Europe and processes of social transformation in the wake of political upheavals. But we should also keep in mind the development of multinational communities such as the European Union. These processes have profound effects on everyday life, to which cultural and educational policy and cultural organisations need to respond.

In the past, ICOM's national committees have already done so by encouraging multinational dialogue between museums. Consider, for example, the Central European ICOM, an international team that was established at the end of the Cold War. Its members are the national committees of the countries that formerly bordered the Iron Curtain. When CEICOM was founded - a time of new beginnings - the priority was to give communities from the museum world that had long been divided from one another an opportunity to get to know each other, to exchange information and, above all, to help each other. Ten years later, this process of establishing common ground has been largely successful. The eight ICOM nations involved should be proud of the work they have accomplished so far, for they reacted effectively to a major historical development.

Another example are the efforts of the various national committees in Eastern Europe in recent years. They organised numerous international conference series that focused on identifying how best to approach museum work in the post-communist era, problems and expectations inherent in the transformation process, and previous experiences that could be looked to for guidance. These same issues were examined with regard to how museums in the eastern European regions are tackling the issue of changing national borders and related shifts in identity - a question of great importance for cultural and educational policy. ICOM Europe took the helm at these meetings, supervising their international coordination.

Another issue that concerns all of us equally is how to deal with intangible heritage - that is, our immaterial culture. This issue was tackled brilliantly by the ICOM committees of the

Asian and Pacific nations, and found its expression in ICOM-ASPAC's Shanghai Charter. Similar initiatives for addressing the question of intangible heritage have been launched, on a smaller scale, in Europe and Latin America. AFRICOM, the association of African museums, in its turn, plans to make the question of immaterial culture the focus of its 2006 general conference in Cape Town.

The experiences of recent years have shown that ICOM's regional organisations – whose influence reaches across entire continents – are becoming increasingly instrumental in structuring, coordinating and directing multinational activities. As a result, these regional organisations are becoming more and more important to the global association.

Precisely what role the regional organisations should play in the global association in the future, and how they see and define themselves, is currently the subject of intense discussions within ICOM as a whole. Then, there are questions regarding content – the philosophical questions, as it were: should ICOM's regional organisations try to contribute to stabilising continental identities? Should they serve as a service agency for their members? Or should they act as lobbyists – to ensure, for instance, that museum interests are integrated into the process of European unification, or simply that as many European cultural resources as possible are channelled into the museum world? Many of these questions remain unanswered.

What is certain is that the regional organisations are sure to become even more important and successful if the national committees do not merely identify with ICOM's efforts on their respective continents, but actually work to advance them. They need to see their involvement within the larger international context as a challenge to widen their own efforts.

At the same time, however, the regional organisations should also work to facilitate and promote the national committees' international efforts, and to encourage supranational cooperation among museum associations on their respective continents.

Regional organisations depend on the participation of the national committees. They do not speak for the entire region as such – that is, in the name of all its national committees – unless, of course, these national committees as a whole choose to establish a regional structure to interface between them and the Paris headquarters.

Another matter under debate is the size of the regional organisations and whether or not it should correspond to UNESCO's definitions. It isn't hard to see that, at first glance, finding

common ground between the countries in the Asia-Pacific region might be difficult – just ask yourself what Iran and the Fiji Islands, or New Zealand and Mongolia, have in common. But the same is true for other regions in the world. What, for example, do Mexico and Argentina have in common? The question even applies to Europe: what do Iceland and Albania have in common? And, in Africa, what interests do Morocco and Mauritius share? Is there common ground in terms of a shared philosophical outlook, cultural and historical connections or practical work requirements?

In addition, the role of the sub-regional organisations in relation to the regional organisations is still largely unclear. Isn't the Caribbean, in all its diversity, a large enough area to merit its own regional organisation separate from the rest of Latin America? What is ICOM-Europe's relationship to the CEICOM sub-organisation or to the most recently established Balkan group?

Whatever answers we may find to these questions, there is no doubt that, in their current form, ICOM's regional organisations are weak. Unlike the national and international committees, the regional organisations are underrepresented. At the meetings of ICOM's Advisory Committee – in which the chairpersons of all the national committees, regional organisations, international committees and affiliated organisations participate – they are all represented by their chairpersons. However, to date, no meetings exist for the members of the respective regions. Nor are there official interregional meetings to bring together the various regional organisations.

That said, the situation has changed somewhat since Seoul 2004, where the regional organisations and their respective chairpersons took it upon themselves to meet with the member committees independently of the official conference programme. We must now work to consolidate this initial approach.

In addition to the necessary statutory improvements – including the right to vote in general conferences – there is another matter that must be addressed: the question of the financial support given to the regional organisations by the global association and by the national committees of the respective regions. This backing is necessary if the regional organisations are to act with greater autonomy. Currently, they do not have any solid ground beneath their feet – generally, they do not have a secretariat of their own, nor paid employees, nor a consistent budget. Rather, to date, the regional organisations have been successful above all when they have been given substantial support from individual national committees, or thanks to the involvement of individuals.

In the future, the various national committees of each region need to agree much more clearly on the regional organisations' responsibilities and structure. To make improvements possible, the leadership of the global association – the Executive Council and its corresponding task force – is currently trying to identify the regional organisations' interests and to improve the basis for their efforts by establishing new goals.

The various divisions of ICOM should all see the regional organisations as forums in which the national committees and individual and institutional members can cooperate to develop new programmes that are of regional – and thus potentially of global – significance. These programmes should thus reflect the global association's long-term strategic plans.

ICOM aims to play an important role in society. Has it already accomplished this goal? Or are there potentially outdated or inappropriate structures that stand in the way of these desired improvements?

Can museums, supported by their national committees and regional organisations, make a socially essential contribution to education for sustainable development for today's generations? Can they help people to better understand the world, to shape it to ensure that it remains a place worth living in – and worth caring about – in the future? Is ICOM contributing to creating the kind of world for tomorrow that we hope to leave to future generations today?

ICOM can play an important part in tackling these basic cultural issues. Let us discuss the necessary structural improvements to the regional organisations and national committees to ensure that, in the future, the "I" in ICOM carries even more weight than it already does.