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The ICOM International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) has been actively involved for some time in reflection on the process for adopting a new museum definition. After numerous debates following the presentation of the proposed definition at the Extraordinary General Conference in Kyoto in September 2019, and given the inability to seek input from our members before the vote, ICOFOM launched a survey on the subject in October 2019. I would like to thank Olivia Guiragossian, who has been a great help in creating the questionnaire submitted to members and analysing the results that I will be presenting to you, which will soon be published in more detail.

The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and was available from last October to December in the three official languages of ICOM. A set of open questions focused on the role of the current definition in professional practices and national legislation, on the impact of the proposed definition on professional practices and the social environment, on whether or not the proposed definition reflects the professional identity, and the involvement of our members in the process of developing a new museum definition. We also asked the survey respondents to indicate the terms that they would like to be kept in a revised version of the definition, and those they would like removed or changed.

We received 194 responses and analysed 186 questionnaires, excluding those that were not filled out or incomplete, in other words those which only replied to a single question. The number of people who responded (around 15% of ICOFOM members) and the diversity of answers, which were sometimes very long but sometimes concise, show that not everyone feels equally concerned by the debate.

The majority of responses we received came from European countries, Latin America and North America. A large number of responses came from Italy (on top), France, Belgium, Brazil and Canada. 119 were completed in English, 36 in French, and 19 in Spanish. The question on the way in which the definition proposed in Kyoto can reflect our professional identity shows that the museum community is divided. 38.7 % identified with the definition and 56.5% did not.

In the responses to the questionnaire written in Spanish, the majority agreed that all the terms should be kept, with enthusiasm for “safeguard”, “memories”, “inclusive”, “for society”, “research”, and “preserve”. It was felt that “planetary wellbeing” should be changed, together with “futures” “artefacts” and “specimens”.

For the responses to the questionnaire in French, the terms to be kept focused on the museum’s functions, including “collect”, “preserve”, “research”, “interpret”, “exhibit”, as well as “heritage”, “not for profit” and “for society”. However, it was felt that “polyphonic”, “planetary wellbeing”, “global equality”, “social justice” and “transparent” need to be removed. Numerous terms, such as “the pasts”, “the futures”, “human dignity”, “social justice” and “global equality” also generated debate and are some of the terms that respondents would like to see amended.

In the responses to the questionnaire in English, the terms to be kept related to the museum’s functions, including “communities”, “not for profit”, “heritage”, “for society”, “memories”, “the pasts”, “inclusive”, and “safeguard”. However, it was felt that “democratising”, “polyphonic”, “planetary wellbeing”, and “global equality” need to be removed. Some members who responded would also like the expressions “human dignity”, “social justice” and “global equality” to be amended.

These interesting variations between languages should be studied in greater detail. The findings should be weighed to take into account the fact that some members responded to the questionnaire in a second language.

The terms that garnered relative consensus come from the current ICOM museum definition, adopted in 2007. Numerous terms, including the expressions “human dignity, social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing”, placed at the end of the proposed new definition and which rather represent objectives to be achieved by the institution, are particularly controversial, mainly due to their wording. The fact that many of the responses indicated that they should be amended shows support for the ideas expressed rather than outright rejection.

Subsequently, last December, at the request of several ICOM committees, we opened the survey up to national and international committees, and alliances. We transferred the outline of our questionnaires to all the presidents or secretaries of their executive boards and suggested they carry out a similar study with their members. The initiative was not mandatory and committees were free to adapt the questionnaire to their own prerogatives and specificities, which some did. We received responses from several national and international committees, including ICME, GLASS, ICOM Morocco, ICOM Greece, ICOM Mongolia, ICOM Ireland, ICOM Italy, NATHIST, ICOM UK, CAMOC, ICOM Luxembourg, ICOM Latvia, ICOM Netherlands, and ICOM Germany. Once again the responses came mainly from Europe and North America and some from Africa and Asia.

We also received responses from individual members who used the questionnaire sent in the email attachment, and some more detailed responses sent by individual members and national and international committees. These responses sometimes came in the form of long letters describing a vision of what a museum could be and the definition that ICOM could adopt, following discussions within the executive boards of ICOM Greece, ICOM Latvia, ICOM Luxembourg, ICOM Germany and ICOM Netherlands.

Some of them feel that the proposed definition presented in Kyoto has all the trademarks of a politically-oriented ideological manifesto and is not a real clear, concise and precise definition. The terms employed, and in particular “democratising space”, “planetary wellbeing”, “conflicts and challenges of the present”, “equal access to heritage”, “human dignity” and “social justice”, are considered problematic because they are subjective. Underlying translation problems were also pointed out, particularly for writing legislation. This was especially the case for the word “polyphonic”. Insistent requests were made to simplify the terms and form of the definition. In the letters, the committees also request that greater attention be placed on the code of ethics and the ethics committee, which they feel was left out of the process of developing the proposed new definition.

We are continuing to analyse the responses we received and the findings will soon be published on the ICOFOM website.