

Partial results of members' meeting on 6 February 2020  
Analysis of input from members to the new museum definition

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During the *ICOM General Conference* in Kyoto 2019, the decision on a new museum definition was postponed. One of the main reasons was to give all the committees within ICOM more time to inform and consult with their constituents. ICOM Netherlands is also expected to present its opinion on the new definition in the near future. This analysis is a next step in this process. Moreover, it provides a good opportunity to delve deeper into what a museum is or could (should) be. After all, how often does one have the chance to consider the future of one's profession on such a fundamental level?

This discussion is stimulated as much as possible in collaboration with other players in the Dutch museum landscape. In this context, ICOM Netherlands organized an initial substantive discussion regarding the new museum definition for its own members. This took place on 6 February 2020 at Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht.

During this meeting, a number of provocative columns were presented, discussions were held and there was a round of written questions. For the latter, members were asked to respond to questions concerning the museum definition by filling in question cards.

This qualitative analysis is based on the elaboration of those completed question cards. This short report clarifies how people thought about what and for whom a museum definition is, while documenting the opinions regarding the old definition, the new definition and the process. The result gives an impression of the different answers and connotations that the questions evoked. For an overview of the rest of the afternoon, a Dutch report is available online. The aim was to (carefully) provide a pleasant and manageable account of the great diversity of opinions discussed on that afternoon.

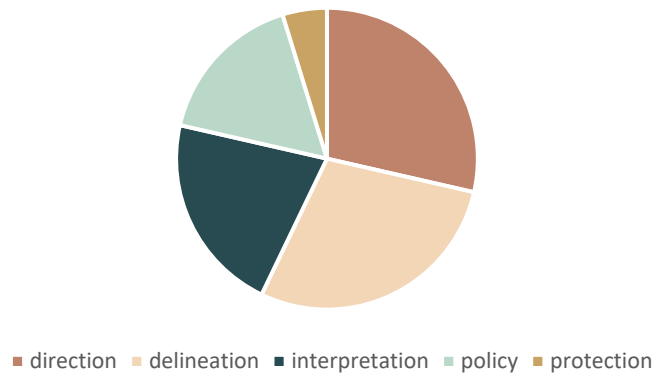
## Method

The answers that form the basis were gathered during the members' meeting on 6 February. There were six questions assigned to six tables and all attendees were asked to visit each table and answer a question. Ultimately, not all the tables were visited with the same frequency; the number of answers per question varies between fourteen and thirty. Many question cards had multiple suggestions or answers. Sometimes there were even conflicting answers on the same card.

To make them manageable, the answers have been labelled. Some answers, with multiple suggestions, therefore outweigh others. Moreover, in order to make this document more readable, some questions have been combined.

Due to the limited number of respondents and the varying weight of the answers, this document cannot claim to be representative of the opinions of ICOM Netherlands' constituents. However, interesting relationships and tensions have emerged that deserve attention. In addition, attempts were made, where possible, to identify relevant questions that are of interest for the next steps in gathering the members' opinions.

### 1.a What is the function of a museum definition?

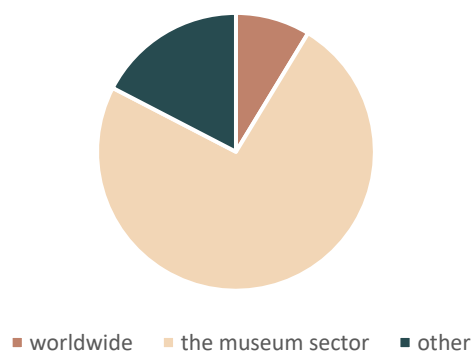


The above question was answered by no fewer than thirty people. The answers are collated under various categories. Thus, **interpretation** means a definition with room for interpretation. While **delineation** looks at what falls within the definition. Answers that focus on a suitable definition for dealing with third parties are categorized under **policy**. Other answers indicated a desire to see a vision for the future: these have been classified under **direction**. Finally, there were also a few answers that referred to securing and safeguarding the collection as a function of the definition: these have been collected under **protection**.

### 1.b And who is it for?

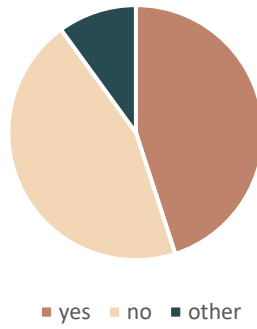
Most respondents (9) stated 'business stakeholders'; business or legal matters that museums have to deal with, such as subsidies, legislation and other financial flows. A close second was that the definition is for 'everyone' and 'for museums' (both mentioned eight times). The 'public', as a more limited view of 'everyone', was named five times. If you add 'everyone' and the 'public' together, then the community, for whom the heritage is intended, is actually in first place. Furthermore, in the margins there were 'future generations' and specific 'governing bodies', such as ICOM and the Dutch Museum Association, each mentioned twice.

### 1.c For whom does the new museum definition have major consequences?



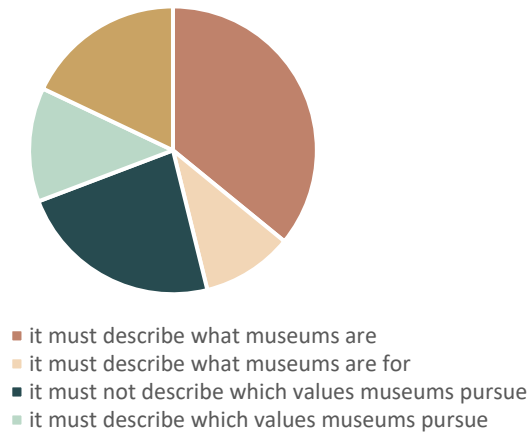
The vast majority of respondents indicated that the greatest impact of the new museum definition will be on the museums themselves. Some see it as affecting the entire sector, others the functioning of museums on a policy level, specialized museums or 'those museums that will have to change as a result'. A small number (2) indicated seeing this impact on a global or worldwide scale. One answer lay precisely in between and indicated that foreign museums would suffer most from this. In the margin (4), it was also indicated that this will have a significant impact on 'statistics', 'potential political goals', 'everyone' and 'white museum people'.

### 1.d Is there a difference in impact between large and small museums?



It remains unclear whether there is a difference between large and small museums. The answers among the 'yes' voters also varied widely, from 'large museums are more cumbersome' to 'small museums have a different budget'.

## 2.a.I What requirements must a museum definition meet? (function)



According to most people, a museum definition should describe what museums are – simply put. Because new questions also arise within this dark green pie section: is that by describing what a museum does? Or by what you achieve as a museum? Moreover: does it also mean that you define what a museum is *not* and that the definition will then serve as (a basis for) a seal of approval?

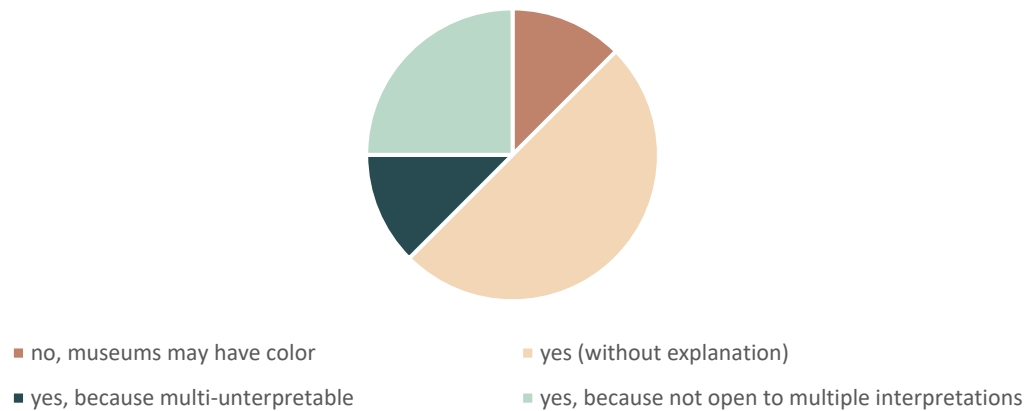
Slightly fewer respondents (9) said that the values a museum should pursue also belong in the definition: by serving as ‘tools for improvement’ or by ‘describing the social role of an individual museum or of the museum sector’. The term ‘cultural ecosystem’ was used several times. This term means that the museum sector as a whole can aspire to the new definition, without individual museums being judged by it.

Here, the first dilemma arises regarding what the definition should relate to: will a bar or a threshold be chosen? Does the definition serve to uphold the standard (as a seal of approval) or to help museum develop mutually (as an ecosystem). The responsibility also changes as a result: a seal of approval places responsibility with the individual and an ecosystem with the collective.

In addition, five votes were cast for not explicitly naming those values. In their opinion the definition should remain free of ideology or political mission.

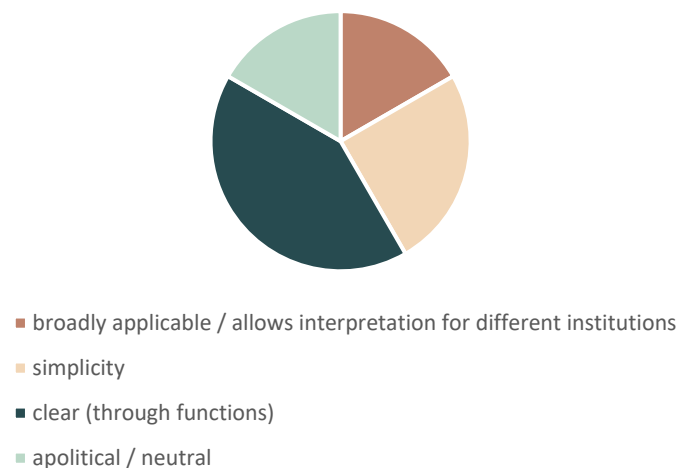
Several respondents also mentioned that the museum definition should, among other things, describe who museums are for. On the one hand, it was suggested that this should be ‘the widest possible audience’, but on the other, ‘everyone as long as they were financed with public money’.

## 2.a.II What requirements must a museum definition meet? (neutrality)



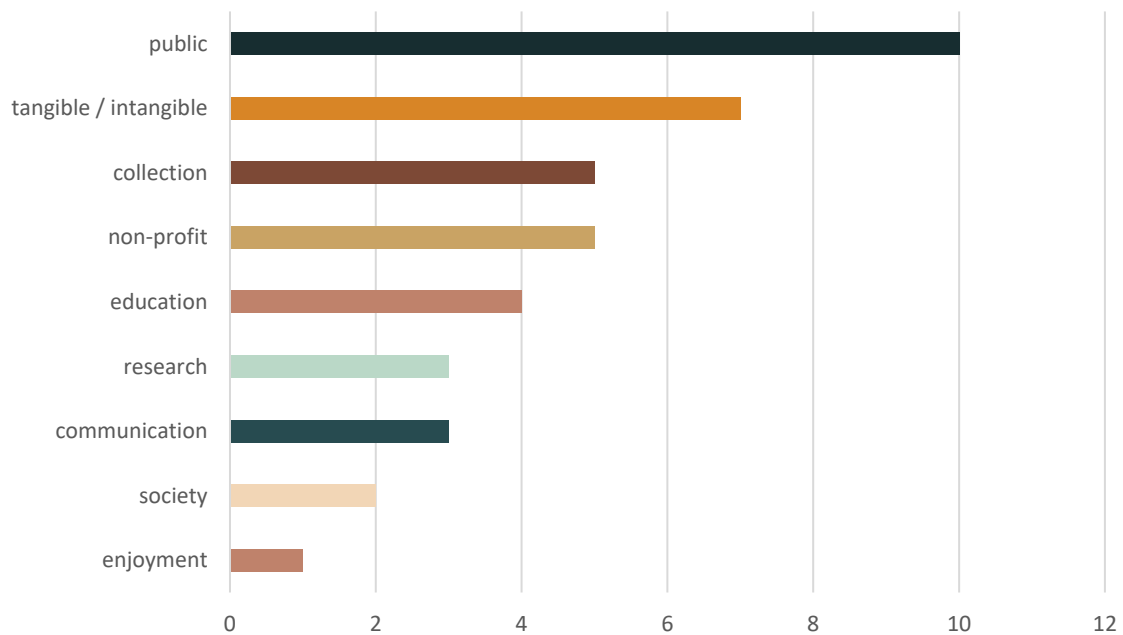
A final element that arose frequently (8 times) is the call for a neutral definition. This shows that the old definition functions well as the status quo. Opinions differed as to whether or not a 'neutral' definition leads to multiple interpretations.

## 3.a.I What are strong points of the old definition? (function of definition)



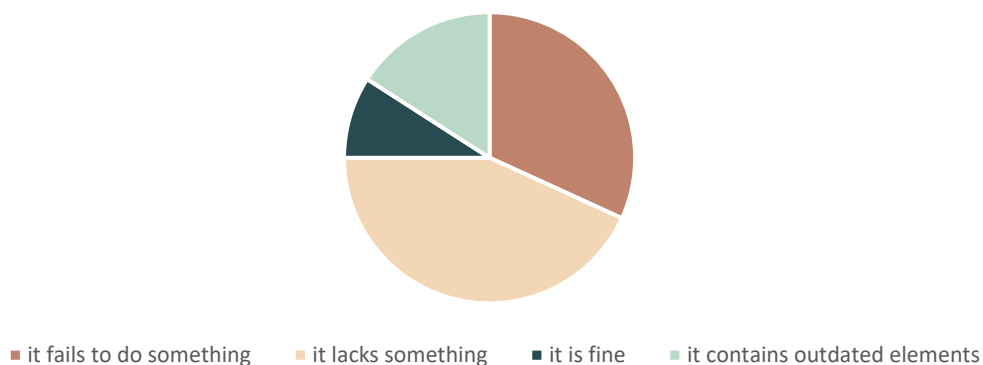
A sentiment that, for twelve respondents, seems to emerge from the responses to the above question is convenience. That which makes the old definition powerful – neutral, clear, simple and widely applicable – indicates a definition that is convenient in practice. A small number of respondents reacted to the functions of the old definition. Most important to the majority of them (5) was the clarity. That clarity, often based on a function description, is also reflected in the answers below that cited specific parts of the definition. Most responses mentioned multiple options; hence the relatively large number of answers.

### 3.a.II What are strong points of the old definition? (function of museum)



'Public' was by far the most frequently mentioned: ranging from 'open to the public' to 'serving the public'. It is notable that 'tangible/intangible', as the most recent part of the old definition, came in second place. Other elements, such as 'non-profit', 'collection' and 'education' were also mentioned several times. A few votes went to 'research', 'communication', 'society' and 'enjoyment'.

### 3.b What do you dislike about the old definition?



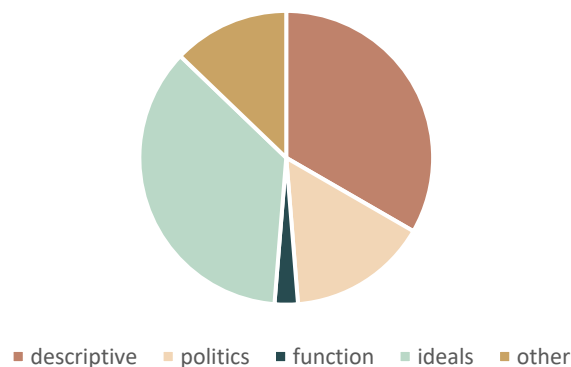
The lesser aspects of the old definition reveal some interesting things. Most people found that it lacks 'something' (19). Answers often included specific suggestions, such as 'the rejection of heritage', 'how permanence relates to stewardship', a 'digital' element, 'accessibility' and 'the background story of where you come from as a museum'. Terms that are included in the new definition, such as 'transparency', 'responsibility' and 'the environment' were also mentioned (once or twice).

Another sentiment that appeared regularly is that the old definition fails to do something. For example, the definition gives ‘no incentive for relevance’, it ‘does not fit the current times’ and is ‘too noncommittal’. Moreover, this definition works ‘only in free societies’.

Outdated elements were mentioned on seven question cards: ‘the need for a building’, the emphasis on a traditional collection, ‘non-profit’ and ‘enjoyment’.

Pertinent questions were also asked about whether the old definition might make ‘being a museum’ too easy. “*It sounds like a museum is an end in itself. It has no regard as to for whom we do our work as who/what guides our thinking.*” In short: should the definition be more society-oriented instead of function-oriented? And if so, on what scale? Because what is then the function of a museum definition in less free societies? Reflecting on the views regarding the new definition offers a helping hand in this.

#### 4.a What are the strongest points of the new definition?

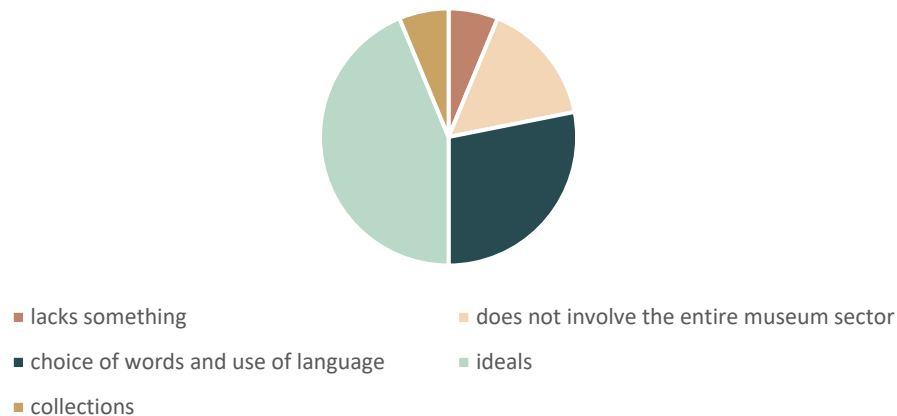


A large number of respondents (23) named ideals as the strongest point of the new definition. These were largely about political support – certainly for colleagues abroad – for future generations, and ‘universal goals worth pursuing’ possibly following the UN. For the rest, the answers in this are close together: from ‘social relevance’ (3), ‘social orientation’ (2) to ‘social justice’ (2). Some individual answers were: ‘universal elements worth pursuing’, ‘the idealistic’ and ‘contributing to well-being’.

As with the old definition, many of the answers (13) focused on describing the good elements of the definition. The answer by far the most frequently given was ‘inclusivity & plurality’ (5). Then came ‘partnership’ and ‘awareness of the position of the museum’. ‘Planetary well-being’ (2) and ‘human dignity’ (2) were also mentioned. Then there were several unique answers, such as: ‘museum-wide definition’, ‘transparent’, ‘accessible to all’ and ‘diversity’.



## 4.b What do you dislike about it?

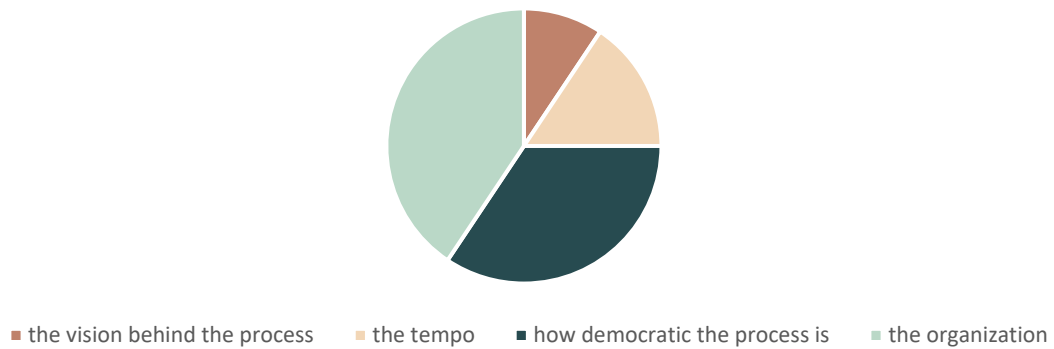


The ideals that were regarded as the strongest point were also seen as the weakest point by a slightly smaller group (14). Most responses refer to the political meaning, which 'implies a limitation', and is 'detrimental to inclusiveness'. So this definition aims to 'reflect society as a whole with coloured collections', is 'politically correct, fearful', 'too activist' and 'too controlling'. Two responses focus on the possible consequences of 'planetary well-being', fearing exclusion of museums and unachievable goals. A few point to possible international consequences: 'will we limit foreign museums with this?' Two others believe that the definition is not inclusive for Dutch museums. One indicated that museums cannot solve these global problems.

After that, most of the criticism concerns the choice of words and use of language (9), which was deemed 'unclear' or 'vague'. Polyphonic in particular was singled out. 'New' terms, such as democratization, polyphonic, inclusivity and transparency, do not seem sufficiently ingrained in the museum world that they can be used as concrete aims. Both the substance and usage of these deserve more attention. Also, according to some, the language is 'too subjective' and the definition could be 'simpler', 'less controversial' and 'more clear and concise'. Two respondents missed the collection as an anchor point of the definition. They said it was mentioned too little, or not prominently enough. Conversely, three others missed less traditional aspects of the museum, such as creativity, collecting, enjoyment, beauty and education. This definition also lacks 'stability'. Those ideals do provide direction, but not necessarily interpretation.

Many respondents are concerned about what these ideals mean for the positioning of museums in practice. This is evident in the series of questions that were asked. 'Should a museum (be able to) express a conviction?' Whether a museum is allowed to position itself as neutral is one thing; but 'will ICOM oblige museums to take sides with this definition?' A few wonder 'where the need for political guidance for museums comes from', followed by 'Does the new definition answer this question?' The possible necessity of this for colleagues in other countries is obvious to many, but whether it will also have an effect in practice is not. Moreover, it is unclear what role ICOM aims to play in this active protection of museums with regard to governments.

## 5.a What do you think of the process of arriving at a new definition?



Responses to the process revolved around how democratic the process was or was not, the organization, the tempo and the vision behind it. On a positive note, the process was largely seen as democratic and transparent (11). At the same time, within the same group it was indicated that it is difficult to have a meaningful process with so many people and opinions and that not everyone had a voice.

Thirteen attendees wrote about the organization behind the process. Five attendees felt that both ICOM and the Museum Association should have been active earlier. For the rest, especially after Kyoto, the organization was mainly described as 'active', 'transparent' and 'productive'. Five other responses concerned the tempo at which this process is taking place: most believe that it started late. The other responses as to whether this should be faster or slower were mixed. Finally, three respondents said that the thinking should be more global. While another actually indicates that the process should be kept simple and not 'involve the whole world'.

## Conclusion

The variety of answers indicates little consensus. However, a series of interesting issues has emerged that require more clarification and which we hope will further support a continuation of this process.

### **Room for interpretation or an unambiguous answer**

The old definition is largely considered 'clear' and 'simple'. For some this means room for interpretation, while others see it as unambiguous. The new definition, on the other hand, is seen as 'vague' and leaving too much room for interpretation. At the same time, it is felt to be 'limiting'. An interesting question is whether these mixed feelings are due to the substance of the definition or the choice of words. This may be (at least in part) due to the novelty of this modern museum jargon, which has not been adopted everywhere. As a result, the objectives sometimes appear more grand and idealistic than realistic or feasible.

### **Between relevance and ideology**

The new definition requires a (political) position, which some see as 'hopeful'. A clear positioning with regard to these ideals is also regarded as the strongest point of the new definition. But problems arise in the interpretation and application as this creates a large grey, undefined area. What responsibility does my museum bear? Will this soon be used against me? How feasible are these objectives? The question is where these ideals belong between the definition and the everyday reality: should they be limited to a common vision or should the interpretation also be specified? Or is it better to leave the interpretation of responsibilities to practical considerations?

Foreign museums in need of political support also play an important role in this. To most people it seems entirely unclear whether or not these museums will benefit from this definition. Creating more clarity on this seems to be an easily achievable improvement.

### **Accountability to the collection or the community**

The old definition clarified what a museum is by setting out its tasks. Nowadays, what constitutes a museum is determined not only by these tasks, but also by its role in society. This creates a sticking point: 'what a museum is' is no longer just about what a museum does, but also for whom and why. From a static construction focused on the function of a museum, there is a shift towards a dynamic and outward-looking framework: a society-oriented definition. This also means that the more museums define themselves as institutions with a social responsibility, the more room there must be for dynamism in the definition.

This shift, in turn, leads to a lack of certainty. An outward-looking, society-oriented vision requires more flexibility and coordination with stakeholders. In addition, it is worth having further discussions about how for-profit museums can relate to this. How do museums collectively reflect the whole of society? And should that responsibility be imposed from above?

### **Individual organizations or an ecosystem**

This will perhaps clarify the most important issue: should museums meet the definition as an ecosystem or is each museum individually responsible? 'Museums no longer function as individual institutions', while at the same time the objectives outlined in the new definition are simply felt to be endless. 'How am I going to achieve "planetary well-being" with my postage stamp museum?' Others wonder whether it is 'a duty to show ambition'. At the same time, it is also said that ICOM members are actually brought closer together by collectively finding and determining these ambitions.