

## MUSEUMS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL INCLUSION

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### ***CULTURE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: MECHANISM AND ACTIONS***

Notwithstanding the conceptual differences that underpin our comprehension of social exclusion, there are some elements within this concept that are common to all its definitions and understandings. First of all, social exclusion “represents the opposite of social integration. Secondly, it refers to both a state and a process and thirdly the concept is multi-dimensional, extending beyond traditional definitions of poverty and deprivation” (Sandell, 1998). Social exclusion can be considered as a state and/or a dynamic process which prevents an individual from participating in the systems of his/her country.

Those who are excluded are not allowed to participate in the social, political and economic life of a nation; obviously, these three dimensions can easily overlap because of their inter-related nature and exclusion occurs when an individual is partially or totally shut out from one or more of these systems.

Quite recently, a fourth system has been identified, within which exclusion may occur and, consequently, be combated: the cultural one (Sandell, 1998). The integration of the cultural sphere into the sociological debate about social exclusion has been the starting point for the analysis of the role which heritage can play to fight and reduce this phenomenon.

The cultural sector and museums in particular have been traditionally considered as an exclusive environment: they are “products of the establishment and authenticate the established or official values and image of a society in several ways, directly, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and indirectly, by subordinating or rejecting alternate values” (Sandell, 1998).

There are three fundamental issues which represent the way heritage (and particularly museums) acts as agents of social exclusion: access, representation and participation.

The problem of access is a crucial one, since it is not only related to physical access but, and probably in a less visible way, to cultural access. Cultural institutions were usually born as a product of a learned élite and, as such, they never had the problem of coping with the democratisation of culture until very recently.

The issue of representation is again strictly related to their history: they are the product of a “eurocentric” conception of the world and represent the dominant values of the learned European society of the XVIII and XIX century. Quite clearly, in most cases they do not reflect the current values of our multi-cultural world and a lot of people perceive them as exclusive institutions.

Participation in the creation process of cultural production is the third element which can generate exclusion within the cultural system of a society and it is also, in some respects, the one which has changed more in recent years.

The production of contemporary art is nowadays quite open to people of different social backgrounds, although this opening sometimes collides with the difficulty of having the product (a play, a sculpture or a painting) represented and accessible to the public.

The barriers within these three aspects concerning the use of cultural services by the public may be generated by institutional factors (restrictive opening hours, inappropriate staff behaviour, charging policies, lack of signage within and outside the building, etc.), by personal and social factors (lack of basic skills in reading, poverty), by barriers related to perception and awareness (for example, people who are educationally disadvantaged perceive museums as something alien to them) and by environmental factors, such as difficult physical access, isolation, poor

transport links (DCMS, 2000).

In order to tackle social exclusion a holistic approach is needed: all the institutions involved at different levels should work together in a co-operative, transversal way. They should pursue their common goal - the fight against social exclusion - each of them from its specific point of view and with its peculiar tools within an agreed frame of action. It should be indicated in a clear national policy stating its aim, objectives and strategies.

A clear definition of who are the socially excluded groups and of where and how exclusion can be generated should represent the basis of such a policy, in order to avoid confusion and uncertainty.

Within this national policy, cultural institutions (as well as social ones) should develop their own specific guidelines indicating how to face the issues of representation, access and communication within museums and cultural heritage in general and providing instruments in order to effectively overcome these problems. These guidelines should also consider the need for a co-operation with other institutions and provide standards of documentation and evaluation practices in order to assess the results achieved, to reproduce or improve the activities performed. Last but not least, institutions should communicate the initiatives and their results to the public.

### ***MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION***

Although it is certainly material culture that provides a starting point for the process of learning in museums, it is the creation of social relationships and shared meanings that defines it. Therefore, it is vital for museums staff to step outside the walls of the museum, to experience society as it is.

The gap between museums and their publics was probably smaller in the 19th century; at that time, museums had a specific role within society (execution of power, national identity, education of the masses). Today the role of museums is contested. On the one hand, they are required to be agents of social change, with responsibilities for community as well as for scientific development and to contribute to the lifelong learning agenda (ICOM, 2002); on the whole, there is a growing awareness of the educational role museums can play in the cultural memory of society, based on the great, visual power of objects and heritage in a broad sense. On the other hand, many people do not visit them, and those who visit do not necessarily learn what museum staff tell them: this happens because museums are centres for personal, not compulsory and informal learning.

Furthermore, in many countries the educational role of museums is still perceived as something strictly connected to school education; their role as important agents in lifelong learning as well as in favouring intercultural dialogue and cultural integration is not clearly defined everywhere. Learning in museums is different from that in formal education establishments and most users of museums are informal ones.

These can include individuals, family groups or friendship groups. Within museums learners there is a diverse range of learning agendas and learning styles: people like to learn in different ways (by reading, interacting with people, or by touching and doing). Generally speaking, the location of learning activities in museums and galleries is appreciated because: the ambience is said to encourage and inspire learning; Cristina Da Milano<sup>3</sup> the displays of artefacts and pictures are often directly relevant to the nature of activities.

On the whole, museums are unaware of the learning objectives of their users: they may be learning as a hobby, or for enjoyment. Many users might not even see their visit to a museum as a learning experience, although they may be learning whilst enjoying the experience. Participants to these activities are attracted by the fact that they do not last too long and do not require a too great commitment. Other motivations can be

interest in the subject and the chance of social interaction, as well as professional development, recreational reasons and therapeutic value of activities.

The outcomes of these learning experiences are equally diverse. They may include increased knowledge and understanding, development of new skills and abilities or inspiration to learn more. Often, learners use museums to reinforce knowledge that they already have. Learning in museums is therefore a very complicated matter. It is not surprising that the difficulty of measuring learning in informal environments is continually debated.

Added to this, many of the learning outcomes from such environments are the so-called “soft” outcomes (attitudes, values, emotions and beliefs), which often are not even seen as evidence of learning as the emphasis is on “hard” facts and demonstrable skills (RESOURCE, 2003). Furthermore, it would be inappropriate for museums to set specific learning outcomes for learners to achieve, since they do not know the prior knowledge of their users. Unlike in formal education, museums will not be able to make judgements about how much their users have learnt or how much progress they have made.

However, users themselves will be able to make judgements about their own learning. They will be able to articulate what they found out and if that was what they were looking for. They can say whether they were inspired or had an enjoyable time. Collecting evidence of learning outcomes in museums therefore must involve asking users how they feel about their own learning.

Here are some indicators that might be used to measure the impact of learning in museums:

- Increase in knowledge and understanding
- Increase in skills
- Change in attitudes or values
- Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
- Evidence of activity, behaviour, progression
- Social interaction and cohesion
- Self-confidence
- Enhanced understanding of the subjects
- Technical skills
- Personal development
- Community empowerment
- Local image and identity
- Health and well-being

The basic principles of museum education have been stated by international codes in order to be applied and recognised all over the world. “Museums serve society by advancing an understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural common wealth through exhibitions, research, scholarship, publications, and educational activities.

These programs further the museum’s mission and are responsive to the concerns, interests, and needs of society” (AAM, 2000)

The museum should take every opportunity to develop its role as an educational resource used by all sections of population or specialised group that the museum is intended to serve.

Where appropriate in relation to the museum’s programme and responsibilities, specialist staff with training and skills in museum education are likely to be required for this purpose. The museum has an important duty to attract new and wider audiences within all levels of the community or group that the museum aims to serve...” (ICOM, 2002).

In order to be more effective, these principles should be supported by other guidelines and standards taking into account each country’s specific situation. Guidelines on museum education can be grouped under two headings:

a) General policy Improvement of museum relationship with the community, based on principle of sustainable development, equity, participation and mutual respect; Inclusion within museums (especially historic, anthropologic, civic or regional museums) of objects which are representative of all social actors; Study of people's needs; Staff training; Development of programmes which support the mission of museum; Use of information gathered through visitor research to inform museum display and education provision; Consideration of physical differences between visitors (height, eyesight, etc.); Consideration of intellectual differences between visitors.

b) Educational policy Co-ordination and coherence with cultural policy; Co-ordination with other educational services; Adoption of a constructivist education model; Inclusion of activities in which learning happens through playing; Consideration of language requirements; Provision of appropriate location and venues; Services offered not only to schools and other learning institutions, but also to adults, families, cultural organisations, different kinds of groups as well as individuals; Accessibility and intellectual integrity of programmes.

In order to identify what can be considered as good practice in museum education, standards and principles have been developed, particularly in the UK and in the USA. They can be organised into 3 areas: accessibility, accountability and advocacy.

## **CONCLUSION**

The meaning of cultural activities - and specifically of museum programmes - addressed to favour social inclusion goes obviously beyond their intrinsic cultural value: although it is undoubtedly true that one of the goals is that of communicating knowledge, the main one is that of using culture as a tool to improve self-esteem, self-consciousness and sense of citizenship, supporting at the same time processes of lifelong learning and of intercultural dialogue. These are objectives not only difficult to be measured, but which also need a long (or medium term) evaluation: to assess the success of such initiatives is meaningless, unless we have the chance of monitoring their sustainability in the future and their outcomes and outputs - both regarding the institutions and the people involved - in the medium/long term. So far, what can be said is that it has been produced a great effort in finding shared objectives and methodologies by the different institutions which are partners in these activities and which have completely different missions and organisational structures: this seems to confirm that partnership is one of the key issues in projects like this, which have both social and cultural connotations. But the most important change is the one that has to involve cultural institutions, particularly museums: the only way they have to successfully affirm their new role in contemporary society is to comply with Alma Wittlin's statement: "Museums are not end in themselves, but means in the service of humanity" (Hooper-Greenhill 2007).

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