

ICOMOS

ICOMOS and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear ICOMOS members and colleagues,

We hope that you and your loved ones are well. We are conscious of the very difficult situations you are all having to face both personally and professionally.

Among the mass of information circulating concerning COVID-19, one hopeful message issued by credible medical publications is that an effective vaccine could probably be developed within the next 18 months. This would be the shortest development period for a vaccine in human history. Nevertheless, 18 months is still a very long way to go - a marathon race with the zero-infections stage as its finish line. To make this race sustainable, some countries are already relaxing the restrictions they have imposed and gradually allowing economic activities to resume, while others will have to maintain or introduce strict measures.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts a V-shaped recovery with a rapid return to growth in 2021 following a sharp drop of global GDP in 2020, while a number of economists make more pessimistic forecasts. The IMF scenario may change, if a second wave of infections arrives or the availability of a vaccine is delayed.

In order to overcome what is expected to be the deepest recession since the Great Depression, unprecedented economic stimulus packages are being rolled out in rich countries. On the other hand, many developing countries will need international assistance.

However, the challenges of recovery are not only economic, but also human and social. The importance of social justice will be re-visited and re-evaluated at many levels, also nationally and internationally, and it will be a central issue in the process of recovery and the post-COVID world.

ICOMOS believes that heritage is not only a driver of sustainable development, but also a cornerstone of human and social recovery following disasters, and our organization intends to make its contribution during and after this pandemic. We live in a world of unparalleled, unpredictable and complex circumstances. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work nor will one-off measures suffice in overcoming the impacts of COVID-19. ICOMOS' actions must therefore be designed with a long term perspective. ICOMOS is therefore planning two major activities.

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First, knowing that recovery will be long and will take various forms, ICOMOS, through its global networks and calling on its diverse expertise, will monitor and assess developments and measures taken across countries for at least the coming three years, from the viewpoint of heritage conservation. ICOMOS will publish annually a report on the recovery from the pandemic, covering both pre-vaccine and post-vaccine phases, and offer a solid basis for policy recommendations.

Second, ICOMOS believes in the power of place. Being in a historic building or at a significant site is a fundamentally different experience from seeing pictures on a screen. Whilst human values may gain new attention, the importance of heritage may not be recognized by governments in the same manner as before, as they will be overwhelmed by the pressures of the recovery process and competing priorities. ICOMOS must be proactive in ensuring that the policies and measures relevant to heritage that are implemented to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic are well balanced - for instance, that economic stimulus packages take into account the significant role that can be played by heritage and conservation. Such measures will not only protect heritage, but also the communities that are linked to it. In this context, ICOMOS is launching a series of webinars, covering diverse aspects and issues related to heritage conservation, including impacts of the pandemic, with sessions aimed both at heritage professionals and the wider public.

Collaborations among ICOMOS' National and Scientific Committees, and its working groups, including the Emerging Professionals Working Group, are indispensable to pursuing both these projects, which will be implemented under the joint leadership of the ICOMOS Board and Advisory Committee. All Committees and Working Groups will be kindly invited to participate as active players.

Finally, how this pandemic affects ICOMOS as an organization, at the heart of which are its individual members, needs to be carefully monitored beyond 2020. The cancellation of the GA 2020 in Sydney is a deeply felt first consequence. It has been a painful decision to make for the many stakeholders involved, first and foremost Australia ICOMOS. ICOMOS should take the current situation as an opportunity to adapt the format of its customary events, including statutory meetings, making better use of digital tools. The Board and the Advisory Committee officers have already started work on this.

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Dear colleagues, ICOMOS believes that our actions today shape our tomorrow. We will need the participation of all of you to fulfill ICOMOS' social responsibility and overcome this situation. We thank you for your continued support which is highly appreciated.

Please be safe!

Toshiyuki KONO, President of ICOMOS

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