

*“Living Together in a Sustainable Europe. Museums Working for Social Cohesion”*

**The Political Dimension Panel – Introduction**

The aim of this panel is to discuss how the cohesive, connecting power of museums can be addressed at the political level; how the social value of museums can benefit the political project Europe and how EU policies, in turn, can benefit cultural heritage and museums, as part of it, in their work as active social agents. In this light, my attempt here is to join the dots between museums, social cohesion, politics and Europe; to examine how they are interrelated against the backdrop of pressing challenges and multiple crises of the present day, in order to provide a context to our discussion.

**1. Social cohesion=social capital= resilience + well-being**

Social cohesion is a concept whose importance is growing in the “after neoliberalism” world, in discussions about rethinking and modernising social policy. Revived attention has been paid to it and its relationship with social development by several key organisations including the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations and the Council of Europe and warnings appeared about the need to balance attention to economic restructuring with social cohesion in order to sustain that restructuring. Ten years ago the CoE offered a definition of social cohesion according to which social cohesion is *“the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimising disparities and avoiding polarisation. A socially cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing common goals by democratic means...No society is fully cohesive. Social Cohesion is an ideal to be striven rather than a goal capable of being achieved. It constantly needs to be nurtured, improved and adapted”* What does this entail? Again, according to the CoE: *“A social cohesion strategy means taking action to reduce inequalities and restore equity so that [existing] divisions remain manageable and do not grow so as to threaten the stability of the society”*. It also means *“creating solidarity to minimise exclusion and take specific measures to help vulnerable members of society”*. Social capital is an essential component of social cohesion or a practical tool to achieve it. Sometimes the two terms are used as synonyms. Social capital is about social bonding, bridging and linking. It is about networks, social ties and social trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Nowadays we know that *“communities with strong networks, high levels of trust and well-established habits of cooperation are much better off than those without these things”*. Social capital is thus linked with active communities and a strong civil society, as well as with individual and collective resilience and well-being.

## **2. Reinforcing social cohesion is one of the most demanding challenges for Europe now.**

Europe is faced today with societal challenges which threaten its cohesiveness and its future viability as a cultural and political body. It has become abundantly clear that the so called crisis Europe is going through is not merely economic and neither is it short term, but rather a profound transition that is also felt as a crisis of political and social values, a value and ultimately, an identity crisis.

Last May on the eve of the European elections, a gunman opened fire in the Jewish Museum of Brussels killing four people. The next day, the European Parliament elections saw 77 new MEPs from xenophobic parties, 50% more than five years ago. Faith hate crimes, political and social tensions are on the rise. Inequalities and unemployment, especially among young people, have worsened. Citizens no longer believe in political institutions and their capacity to solve today's problems. According to a report by the German think tank "Social Justice Index for 2014" which compared the 28 Member States across 6 indicators - including poverty prevention, equitable education, labour market access, social cohesion and non discrimination, health and intergenerational justice - the gap between the North and South has increased in the last year and social divisions have worsened in such a way that we can talk about "*a highly explosive situation with regard to social cohesion and social stability within the EU*". It seems that the foundations of Europe are undergoing an earthquake, and that in order to consolidate and strengthen them, society has to look out to new solutions, new visions for development, new narratives, new public policies whereby culture is an integral part.

Culture was often marginal to the political process, but nowadays there is a growing consensus at global level that cultural wealth and diversity should be placed at the heart of all public policies. As stated in NEMO's contribution to the public consultation of the "Europe 2020" Strategy, the "*post crisis scenario of EU growth has to acknowledge that Europe relates to issues of identity, reconciliation, democracy, equal rights, well-being, all of which ultimately refer to intangible cultural assets and to a negotiated and shared set of values*". At a time when economic systems have become forces unto themselves, and can hardly be perceived as either transparent or trustworthy, culture comes to fill an ethical vacuum. Culture becomes "*a currency of trust*" for Europe.

## **3. Museums have the capacity to enhance social cohesion, which is the product of a trusting, connected society. And they actually do work in this direction.**

Social cohesion is embedded in the work of museums as social institutions and enablers of change. Museums are embedded in society. It is their responsibility to society to meet its standards of justice. Museums work as connectors, creating a sense of rootedness and belonging, in particular for minorities and marginalised sections of the community, and by representing diversity and giving it official space within national narratives. Through their public programming and volunteering, they create inclusive opportunities that can also facilitate the development of new skills and help people increase their employability. They are places where learning is active, they broaden horizons, stimulate critical thinking, raise questions. They engage in community development programmes aiming to improve the mental health, confidence and self esteem. They increasingly co-curate, co-produce, co-decide with their communities. They cooperate between them, with other cultural institutions and with other sectors (e.g. education, tourism, research, social care).

Having said all that, I think everybody in this room can subscribe to the idea that museums are neither neutral nor apolitical spaces. They do not speak with one institutional, authoritative voice, but are rather *“arenas in which political messages in the broadest sense are displayed, conveyed and converted into meaning by museum professionals and the people who view and review them”*. They are powerful storytellers; they create and communicate narratives that feed public imagination and help shape collective identities. As our cities and communities are becoming more and more multicultural and diverse, in a world of migration and globalisation, and given the tensions and conflicts that inevitably arise in the interpretation of history and heritage, museums have the responsibility to try to be as honest and transparent as possible about how they craft their narratives. They have to include multiple voices, engage with difficult, controversial topics, reveal hidden histories. Museums increasingly acknowledge their role as facilitators in intercultural dialogue, as arenas where shared values can be renegotiated.

In the last years, as a response to pressing challenges, museums and their professionals' associations across Europe have increasingly felt the need to critically review their situation, rethink their sense of purpose and reposition themselves in society. They have started to prioritise capturing and articulating their social impact and making it more visible, for example through nation-wide campaigns like *“Museums change lives”* launched by the UK Museums Association. The key drivers behind this increasing focus on the social value have been the competitive funding climate, the increasing need for public accountability, the need to engage external stakeholders more effectively, and of course, a shift in the mindset of museum professionals linked with the people-orientation rather than object-orientation of the museum work. Museums are at the moment a sector in transformation.

- 4. Political interest in cultural heritage in Europe has been steadily growing, and this is reflected in a series of recent EU policy developments and initiatives which have grown out of the cooperation between national authorities of the Member States, EU institutions and civil society organisations.**

Cultural heritage is used in initiatives which stress the cultural dimension of the European integration process (as a way to legitimise it) and put the theme of a European identity based on a shared history and shared values in their centre. In addition, the last several years have seen a series of policy developments aimed at promoting recognition and understanding of the societal value of cultural heritage and its potential for sustainable, inclusive development. In a nutshell, we are now experiencing a renewed interest, at political level, in repositioning cultural heritage vis-a-vis contemporary needs, concerns, challenges and visions for Europe. Relevant initiatives include:

**The European Heritage Label**, aimed to highlight sites that bear witness to or are symbolic of European integration, ideals and history. The first awards were made last April.

**The House of European History**, a museum in Brussels commissioned and founded by the European Parliament and clearly envisioned as part of a strategy to build a cultural identity of the European integration project. An identity which is sought in the past, nurtured by common heritage, driven by shared values, such as diversity, peace and prosperity, based on the idea of a common destiny, a common future. A much debated project, planned to open in two years time.

**The declaration on a “New narrative for Europe”**, a reflection exercise on a new vision for the future, a debate on Europe’s sense of purpose, launched by the Ex-President Manuel Barroso in 2013. This document urged for a re-alignment of emphasis recognizing that Europe needs more than an economic strategy in order to address the contemporary needs of its society and its well-being. One of the key factors is cultural heritage, which is viewed as a “powerful instrument that provides a sense of belonging amongst and between European citizens”.

**Conferences organized by successive, heritage-minded Presidencies (Belgium in 2010, Lithuania in 2013, Greece and Italy in 2014)** aimed to raise awareness among all cultural heritage stakeholders and policy makers about the importance and the multiple benefits of cultural heritage for society. These conferences stressed the same aspects: a. the cross sectorial policy relevance of cultural heritage, that is the interaction between cultural heritage and other policy domains (tourism, environment, education, urban and regional development etc.) where the EU has wider decision making power, b. the potential of cultural heritage for sustainability

in its economic, social and environmental dimension, and thus the need to take it into account in the EU's development strategy and c. the need for more cooperation between different stakeholders as well as for a multi-level, multi-stakeholder approach to governance, involving the public, private sector and the civil society. They achieved in creating a body of knowledge and political momentum at EU level for cultural heritage.

**The Council Conclusions on “cultural heritage as a strategic resource for a sustainable Europe”**, initiated by the Greek Presidency and adopted by the European Culture Ministers in May 2014, the first ever set of conclusions dedicated to cultural heritage. They underlined the specific role of cultural heritage in driving economic growth, creating and enhancing social capital and contributing to environmental sustainability, all relevant to the Europe 2020 strategy for “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” and the cross-cutting, horizontal dimension of cultural heritage. They also invited the Commission to *“pursue the analysis of the economic and social impact of cultural heritage in the EU and contribute to the development of a strategic approach”*.

**The Commission communication “Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe”**, a new policy document dedicated to the role of cultural heritage in the EU agenda, launched in response to the afore mentioned Council Conclusions in July 2014. This document recognized that the contribution of cultural heritage to economic growth and social cohesion was undervalued, examined how the societal value of the sector is addressed in current actions and funding programmes and highlighted the opportunities for Member States and stakeholders to work more closely across borders and with the Commission to address the many challenges facing the heritage sector, and also to ensure that cultural heritage makes an even stronger contribution to a sustainable Europe. It was accompanied by a **“Mapping Report”** which provided a comprehensive overview of EU policies, legislation, programmes and funding opportunities relevant to cultural heritage.

Another mapping exercise focused on both qualitative and quantitative research on the economic and social impact of cultural heritage was undertaken by the platform Heritage Alliance 3.3, in which NEMO is a member. The project **“Cultural Heritage counts for Europe”** will gather, analyze, consolidate and widely disseminate existing research and data from across Europe. It is expected to produce results in mid 2015.

As we are now approaching the end of the year and of the Italian Presidency, a new **Work Plan for Culture to run from 2015 to 2018** with cultural heritage as one of its four priority areas and many new and particularly relevant to our sector topics - such as audience development, partnerships for social inclusion, emerging skills needs for cultural heritage professionals - is expected to be

adopted. Our Culture Ministers are also expected to adopt a new set of **Conclusions on the Participatory Governance of Cultural Heritage**, put forward under the Italian Presidency, calling for the promotion of multi-level, multi-stakeholder governance frameworks seeking to actively involve all levels of public government, private actors, civil society, NGOs, volunteers and groups of interested citizens in the decision making, planning, implementation and evaluation of relevant policies. Finally, a debate on the contribution of the Cultural and Creative Sectors, including cultural heritage, to the EU 2020 strategy goals is foreseen for the Council of the European Culture Ministers scheduled for 25 November 2014.

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- NEMO has actively contributed in most of these developments as a consultation stakeholder, a partner, an advocacy body representing museums and elucidating and making more prominent their contribution to social sustainability.
- We are now at a critical point for EU policy making, we are entering a new phase with a new European Parliament and new Commissioners who officially took office and started their five-year term on the first of this month.
- Taking all this into account, it is timely to reflect now on how to push the social agenda for museums further at EU level. A most relevant question to ask now, is:

How will the social impact of museums be addressed and translated in policy planning in the coming years? How can what museums do for society as agents of learning, inclusion, participation, social cohesion be addressed, reinforced and made more visible at EU level?

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