



# Mind the [climate policy and action] gaps

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Climate change is arguably the largest, most complex challenge facing society, calling for radical transformation in all sectors and in all countries. Museums, as a well-established cultural infrastructure found in all countries, support – or at least they could support - a wide range of activities that can contribute to climate action. They reach huge numbers of people; they can support education, lifelong learning and participation; and collections can be a powerful tool for studying and communicating climate impacts. Museums can also convene and take part in partnerships that can contribute to climate action. Increasing numbers of museums and museum staff are working to ramp up their levels of activity, in exhibitions and events, but climate-related activity remains a rather niche activity for many museums in many countries. There is also a downside: museums are consumers of huge amounts of resources, meaning that they also contribute negatively to climate change. How we enhance the positive benefits museums can bring to climate empowerment and reduce and eliminate their negative impacts is the basis of climate action and broader sustainable development. Yet museums are not moving nearly fast enough. The measures of success of museums (large number of visitors, large buildings, expanding) are headed in the wrong direction for climate action. Rather few measure or communicate their greenhouse gas emissions, let alone in line with best practice with reporting. Why is this, and what can be done to ensure that climate action really is action, and not ‘fiddling round the edges’ or greenwash?

## What do we mean by climate action anyway?

Before talking about climate action in museums, we should be clear on what we are talking about. Climate action is generally considered as having two main ‘planks’: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation actions reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the atmosphere or support their removal; typical themes include energy, waste, buildings, food, and supporting nature to remove emissions. Adaptation means actions that help people, property and nature face climate impacts. Discussion of climate action often refers to the first of these, and neglects to cover the second, although it is also very important, especially in terms of protecting vulnerable people and their property and ensuring museums can cope with climate impacts. In ‘Mobilising Museums for Climate Action’, developed as part of a project for COP26, I suggested a simple framework of five activities that represent museums’ opportunities to take climate action:

### **1. Mitigation through museums**

Museums must support all of society to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, rapidly, in line with Paris Agreement commitments, by encouraging and empowering people to understand the part they have to play in climate action and have the skills to play it, and to use less, waste less, and make sure anything they do use is renewable. They can foster support, and sharing of resources, for nature conservation efforts that strengthen nature’s ability to absorb greenhouse gas emissions.

## **2. Mitigation in museums**

Museums must aggressively reduce greenhouse gas emissions across all aspects of their activity, in line with Paris Agreement commitments. They can ensure all staff, and all people and organisations in the value chain understand the part they have to play in climate action and are empowered to act through policies and resourcing so that every action is supporting climate action, in order to use less, waste less, and make sure anything that is used is renewable. They can direct financial and other resources towards nature conservation efforts that strengthen nature's ability to absorb greenhouse gas emissions, through their everyday decisions and procurement practices.

## **3. Adaptation through museums**

Museums must support all of society, and nature, to face and cope with current and projected climate change impacts.

## **4. Adaptation in museums**

Museums must understand how they will be impacted by climate change, and adapt their practices, location, programmes and collections to be fit for the future.

## **5. Climate action as part of sustainable development, climate justice and a just transition**

Museums must ensure that all climate-change activity is undertaken in ways that do not themselves disadvantage people or communities, locally or globally; and recognise that, in tackling climate change, other sustainable development challenges have to be addressed at the same time.

# How are museums contributing to climate action?

## Public-facing activities

Museums can contribute to public education and awareness on climate change, and many are doing so already. A review of museum activity relating to the public-facing aspects of the Paris Agreement from 2015-19, involving input from many of the most active people working on museums and climate action in many countries, revealed ten key lessons learnt (and also a number of barriers, discussed later in this introduction):

1. The importance of acting now
2. The importance of confident and competent staff
3. The great importance of information
4. The great importance of a focus on solutions, not problems
5. The importance of making climate change and climate action personal and relevant, as well as understanding bigger pictures
6. The importance of acknowledging people's emotions and feelings
7. The importance of community, and empowering people to participate fully in society
8. The importance of engaging everyone
9. The importance of co-ordination and collaboration between museums and partners
10. The need for support from governments, government agencies and funders

## Operations

As well as their public-facing activities, museums can contribute to climate action by reducing their emissions and working to adapt to climate impacts. In practice, climate action tends to prioritise the first of these (mitigation), and adaptation is not properly considered. In caring for collections

and developing activities for the public, museums consume large amounts of resources, many of which result in greenhouse gas emissions. Many museums, in old, inefficient buildings, face major challenges to retrofit their buildings to reduce their environmental impact. Museum standards and operations are often heavy in their use of resources, for example in requirements to maintain collections to particular environmental standards, or as part of loans or in exhibitions. Exhibition production can be a heavy user of resources, whether in terms of temporary exhibitions that are discarded after their run has finished, or lending or touring exhibitions. Emissions from visitor travel can be a major contributor to a museums' carbon footprint, although shifting these towards sustainable travel options can be hard to do, especially for museums in rural areas. Another rather 'hidden' aspect of emissions is the emissions and other forms of harm associated with investments, pension funds and bank accounts. Digital is another 'hard to measure' aspect that museums often aim to expand, without appreciating or understanding that this too has a carbon footprint.

Measuring and reporting emissions is a fundamental tool for understanding and managing greenhouse gas emissions, but the requirement to do so is different in different countries. Generally speaking, museums face few requirements to measure and report their emissions, although as climate impacts bite harder, it is very likely that museums will have to report their emissions more fully than they currently do. Few museums follow good practice in reporting emissions openly, fully and transparently, although there are many benefits to doing so. Opportunities to do so are provided in a later section.

## How do museums relate to climate action policy frameworks – or how could they contribute towards them?

For the most part, museum policy is developed separately from the needs of international agreements, which are signed onto by governments. This situation applies to many agreements – human rights agreements and multilateral environmental agreements – and is problematic, as it means that museums are not contributing as well as they could to these agendas, and because it means people are denied opportunities from participating in them. Climate action is a good example of this situation.

The main international policy framework for climate action is the UN Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC), one of the three 'Rio Conventions' from the Rio Earth Summit, thirty years ago this year. All countries committed to tackle climate change. Since it was developed, the Kyoto Protocol (1997) committed to legally binding targets for countries, and the Paris Agreement (2015) made two main commitments: to keep global average temperature rise to within 2 C, and to pursue efforts to keep within 1.5 C of average warming.

One of the less well-known aspects of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement is what we call Action for Climate Empowerment: on the need for public education, training of key staff, public awareness on climate changes and actions, access to information on climate, public participation in climate-related decision making, and international co-operation to address climate change. These six elements are there for a reason, that reason being they relate to internationally recognised human rights, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They are also a golden opportunity for museums to contribute to this overarching agenda, drawing on their distinctive resources and opportunities.

Although these policy innovations have been around for some time, the museum sector has been slow to adopt them. For example, although thirty years old, the UNFCCC and Paris

Agreement are still not incorporated into the overarching work of the museum sector. The last version of the ICOM Code of Ethics (2004) didn't mention the UNFCCC, although the agreement was already 12 years old.

The new Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment, adopted at COP26 in 2021, is a fantastic framework and opportunity for museums, the museum sector and policy makers to align their work towards. The Programme even refers specifically to the key role that museums, along with other types of institution and organisation, can make to supporting climate empowerment everywhere. The programme runs until 2031, and is a great opportunity for museums to show what they can do, and to contribute very concretely and directly to the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement.

The UNFCCC and Paris Agreement are just two of many hundreds of international agreements that have not been adequately supported or achieved, by museums or other sectors. All of these were brought together in 2015 as Agenda 2030, as a new framework to support and achieve sustainable development, and to empower more of society to participate in sustainable development activity. The Agenda is largely achieved through a relatively simple framework of 17 Sustainable Development Goals, as a highly ambitious plan to address a range of social, economic and environmental challenges. Climate action is the subject of SDG 13 but is also part of many other goals and targets. Museums can support Agenda 2030 and the SDG in many ways and can also benefit from doing so.

ICOM has adopted the SDGs as its framework for support for sustainability activity, and many museum organisations have embraced the goals and the Agenda to varying extents, but the rate of progress is not nearly fast enough.

The European Green Deal is a suite of policies aiming to support the transition to a net zero future. The Green Deal is supported by the European Climate Pact, which is a platform for people, communities and organisations to participate in climate action across Europe, in terms of learning about climate change, developing and implementing climate solutions, and connecting with others to help increase the impact of climate responses. Museums could play a key role in the Green Deal and Climate Pact, in terms of empowering people to participate in them.

### [What are the impediments to museums taking climate action?](#)

Although there are many opportunities for museums and the museum sector to play a part in climate action, there are also a number of impediments that hamper progress. In the consultation on museums' public-facing work on climate action, referred to earlier, the following gaps were identified that are stopping museums from supporting climate action.

1. Many museums, or at least senior staff of museums, are more concerned with internal outcomes or the past than current or future issues. They are fearful of dealing with real-world issues for fear of appearing to be somehow 'political' or 'not neutral'. This comment came up a number of times in the consultation.
2. Lack of serious buy-in from museum leaders or trustees, while many other staff are more willing to engage with climate education, awareness and action.
3. Need for stronger leadership and co-ordination across the museum sector, notably from national governments and government departments.

4. Lack of prioritisation or support (direction, information or funding) from governments or agencies on national and international commitments regarding climate change, so the museum sector is unaware of the opportunities for it to contribute meaningfully, has no specified resource to support these, and isn't given a mandate or encouragement to direct its resources to do so.
5. Lack of budget, commitment, ambition and staff.

These challenges require more ambitious, focussed leadership at international, national, sectoral and institutional levels, and appropriate levels of committed resources (financial, staffing and time):

6. Many people in museums lack knowledge, motivation, confidence or skills to contribute effectively to climate education and awareness. They need to be empowered to contribute effectively to climate education, awareness and action.
7. Museums should embrace climate change as a social, economic and environmental problem rather than a scientific or technological one and apply this to all museums.
8. Need for focusing on impactful activities.
9. Focus on awareness raising in programmes does not necessarily lead to concrete action to address climate change. Greater emphasis on practical actions people can do is needed.

These challenges require effective up-skilling and confidence-building for museum staff:

10. Lack of a mechanism or shared process for sharing activity across museums or with e.g. national reporting for NDCs to grow momentum.
11. Need for faster flow of information, upwards and downwards, to enable museums and others to contribute to educational and awareness raising initiatives.

These challenges need mechanisms from organisations, the sector, policy makers and governments to help museums amplify, share and report work on climate action.

As well as these challenges relating to the public-facing aspects of climate action, the operational challenges remain significant. Environmental standards that result in large quantities of emissions are hard to change, not only in the technical sense, but in the sense of who is going to drive the action to reduce them. Will it be policy makers? The museum sector? Will it be museum professionals, and if so which groups of professionals (e.g. directors, conservators, facilities managers)? The answer surely involves all of these, working towards the goal of developing practices that are in keeping with the needs of meaningful climate action, but progress to make these changes remains very slow, and there is little evidence of proactive leadership to tackle this challenge.

### Rethinking museums for low-carbon lifestyles and operations

More broadly, let us consider museums as they are, what they value, and how they need to change to meet the needs of climate action. Museums are very much part of the fabric of the unsustainable system and society that developed from industrialisation. It is probably fair to say that museums regard themselves as 'a good thing': the sector often points out the high level of trust in which it is held, for example. This is in contrast to other sectors, notably the

business sector, that has a less rosy public reputation. A consequence of business's bad reputation was the development of corporate social responsibility from the 1970s onwards, where businesses recognised that their reputations needed protecting and they needed to demonstrate, or try to articulate, their corporate social responsibility. Out of this concern, a large body of reporting methods and standards has been developed, such as the GRI scheme, B Corp scheme, or the UN Global Compact. So, as a consequence of business's bad reputation, many businesses now report their actions in a fairly transparent manner, to consistent standards, and they are in fact far ahead of museums in sustainability reporting. Museums could strengthen their public claims about environmental and other socially responsible action by adopting these reporting principles and practices.

It can also be tempting to consider culture as 'a good thing', but culture is not a single entity. There are cultural practices that are good for the environment and the climate, and there are cultural practices that are very, very bad for the climate. Instead of considering culture as a homogenous 'good', we can ask which types of cultural activity – such as those developed by museums – can be part of low-carbon lifestyles and a low-carbon society, as opposed to high-carbon lifestyles and a high-carbon society. This may require us to question some of our underlying assumptions about what museums are for, what they do, and how they do them.

Let us for a minute imagine that this idea that museums are 'a good thing' is not the whole story, and that the things that museums do, or at least the ways in which they do them, are not as blame- or consequence-free as we may imagine. Let's take some examples. The environmental standards used in exhibition spaces, notably to meet the requirements of lenders (or the perceived requirements of lenders), often require heavy use of equipment and energy, much of which derives its energy from fossil fuels. Exhibitions that are produced several times a year consume materials that often end up being scrapped after the show is finished. Funders encourage museums to work internationally, and to attract large number of visitors, many of whom have to travel by high-emissions methods. All of these are high-consumption activities, that are very bad for the environment and the climate. For many years, the environment was not considered in decision-making; increasingly, the environment is a consideration, but the high-consumption practices continue largely as they did before. That is to say, sustainability is an 'add-on' while the core business and activities remain the same, at a high cost to the environment.

The overall mindset of museums that 'big is better' is a pervasive one. For example, reviews of exhibitions in museum magazines often prioritise large shows and tell you who the designer was and the cost, but miss out why it was needed, what difference it aimed to make, and why that difference was worth making. How did this 'big is better' mindset develop? The expansion of museums with this 'big is better' mindset coincides, unsurprisingly, with expanding consumption in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, increasing consumption and production led to increasing consumption and production of and in museums. Museums sought to build their prestige by international working; touring exhibitions farther afield or even round the world was made possible by cheap air travel and shipping, but with a heavy environmental cost. With increasing competition for diminishing public funds, many museums have entered the 'attention economy', competing for people's attention with their peers.

Looking at the visitor profile of museums in many countries, we find that they are often visited by people of higher educational and economic status, that is, to people that are better off. Programmes to diversify museums often struggle to shift this underlying problem, and as visitor numbers expand, the expansion is simply 'more of the same kinds of people'. That

means that we are simply maintaining the inequality, so that museums become part of higher and higher consumption lifestyles, with museums used disproportionately by those who are already high consumers, while low consumers are left out.

The number of museums has increased sharply, but these are not necessarily where they are most needed, so that more museums are built in towns and cities, often as statement buildings or tourist attractions where there are already many museums, encouraging tourist travel with high emissions. If we consider museums from the three imperatives of sustainable development – respecting environmental limits, meeting human needs, building social justice – we could ask ourselves ‘how many museums can the environment cope with?’, ‘how can they help meet basic human needs?’ and ‘what can they do to support social justice?’ For example, many local museums are now closed, and collections have moved towards larger museums, usually in larger towns or cities. How could we restore heritage to be accessible more locally, to avoid the need to travel to connect with it? How could the internet be used more fully, more in the ways that libraries have adapted services to be online? Who could benefit most from museums, in terms of supporting basic needs and services, and how can museums be placed there? How could museums change their activities to be of more use and interest to local communities, rather than prioritising tourists?

## How can museum activity and related policy contribute more concretely to climate action?

Let us look at museum climate action through the lens of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, a planning approach that was devised to accompany the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 by OECD. Policy coherence for sustainable development has three main pillars: governance arrangements, policy interactions, and policy effects. We can consider these in relation to individual museums, but also in terms of what museums are required to do by funders and other policymakers.

### Governance arrangements for climate action:

Museums are not well plugged into climate action in their countries, in terms of a smooth flow of information downwards from governments and policy makers, and upwards from institutions and sectors for reporting. For example, while governments have committed to Action for Climate Empowerment, that commitment has not trickled down to the museum sector, although it is a clearly relevant agenda that museums can contribute to, benefit from, and create public value from.

Generally speaking, government departments’ ‘arm’s length’ principle means that many museums and museum organisations are not fully factored into the official reporting of government departments, nor would governments require museums to support their climate action agendas. This is problematic for several reasons: firstly, because a lot of climate action happens at a grass-roots level – by individuals, in communities, in organisations and so on. Secondly, this arm’s length principle is cushioning funders and decision makers from taking full responsibility for the activities they fund. Third, it prevents organisations from contributing their action towards reporting. Where museums are more or less directly funded by governments, they can be held to a higher reporting standard than museums with other governance arrangements. This difference in standards and approaches also prevents

museums from operating as a collective, or with collective standards, goals or targets that are aligned with high ambition climate action, rather than as a collection of separate entities with varying levels of ambition and scrutiny.

Typically, reporting by countries for climate action is handled by environment departments, far removed from the work of the cultural departments that oversee – often in a distant way – the work of museums.

As the main international frameworks for climate action come from the UN, they are firmly rooted in human rights, that is, standards that were set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in subsequent agreements, as these are the core of UN work. However, museums have not generally incorporated human rights into their thinking, at least in a sector-wide sense. Few museum associations include human rights in their codes of ethics for example, and the current International Council of Museums Code of Ethics includes only a passing mention to human rights and excludes the most fundamental human rights agreements (e.g. Universal Declaration of Human Rights), although the Code is currently being revised and will hopefully include a more direct reference to human rights.

### Policy and climate action

Policy interactions look at how sets of policies support one another. This is different to how policies tend to be developed. For example, a museum may develop a collecting policy, education policy, exhibitions policy, social inclusion policy, commercial policy, and emergency strategy and policy, and sustainability policy. When these are thought of as separate items we face a big issue, namely that if we don't consider policies as a mutually supporting set, they could just be cancelling one another out. For example, if the sustainability policy is only 'undoing' the problems created by the commercial and exhibitions policy - which could drive very unsustainable/environmentally harmful practices - then a museum will only ever be able to make unsustainable practices 'less unsustainable', that is, to make them 'less worse'. That is not sufficient. Policies have to consider sustainable development – achieving a better balance of considerations of people, planet and prosperity – in all policies, not considering sustainability or efficiency as a separate item that just tries to undo the harm of other policies.

### Policy outcomes

What do museums aim to achieve? Are they interested in what people do within their four walls, for example as part of exhibition visits or activities? Should they concern themselves with the impact they make beyond their four walls? Should they pay more attention to the wider world and the huge social, economic and environmental challenges facing communities and nature? There is probably no one answer, but if museums were more attendant to the difference they aim to make as a result of their activities, they may be better connected to 'making a difference'. For example, if a museum had clearly set out social, environmental and economic goals – in terms of the difference it was trying to make in the wider world – its policies could work more clearly towards those goals (and to manage the policy interactions) rather than having policy outcomes that are narrowly focussed on the museum's own outcomes or future.

Alongside these activities, museums should be really reducing their emissions, and communicating their progress openly, fully and honestly. That will require a significant change of mindset to move from upholding standards that are destructive, to developing new standards and approaches that are in keeping with the needs of real climate action. While

some museums are measuring or reporting their emissions, this does not always consider the full range of activities the museum is involved in. For example, visitor travel is certainly part of a museum's carbon footprint, as a core part of their value proposition is that they attract visitors. Yet few consider visitor travel as a key activity to manage, to reduce emissions.

### Rights-based climate action

How people are involved in making and shaping the desired outcomes of museum activity is also very important. From a rights-based perspective, museums should not really aim to change or transform people or 'change their behaviour', however well-meaning or highly principled the aims may be, at least not without their full consent and participation. Aiming to empower people to act on challenges in the way they want to act is more in keeping with a rights-based approach, is more humble, and avoids a rather patronising position where museums are promoted as solutions to people's and society's problems. Museums don't need to be the heroes, leaders or any such rather unhelpful role: they are simply resources for people to make use of in the context of local and global sustainable development challenges.

Rights-based approaches could provide a very useful framework for climate action, and would help to avoid museums developing well-meaning but clumsy or inappropriate activities. Rights-based approaches acknowledge the different ways people are impacted by climate change, and also involve them in the shaping of programmes, with the aim of helping more people enjoy their human rights. Rights-based approaches and climate justice are both well developed frameworks that are ready to be used (listed later in the section on recommendations).

Rights-based climate action also acknowledges the responsibility of countries to one another, under the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' in the Paris Agreement. Museums can help raise awareness of historic and contemporary ties – and thus responsibilities – between countries, to build greater public awareness and support for climate action at a political level.

### Climate action means action

Climate action – in museums or anywhere else – must mean action, that is, reducing emissions, supporting others to reduce theirs, adapting to climate change and helping others do the same, and building climate justice locally and globally. If we are not achieving these things – all of these things - we are only talking. If we are only tackling small challenges and leaving the big ones in the 'too hard' pile, we are wasting time. In order to contribute meaningfully to climate actions, museums and those who direct their work have to do – and be required to do – the right things, to value the right things, and to be held to account when they don't do the right things. That requires effective policies, commitments, and transparent reporting and communication, as well as supportive and empowering public-facing activities. A drive upwards in ambition, standards, reporting requirements and professional practices for real climate action would all help museums and those they work with to play their part in meeting this, our greatest challenge. As we watch news of floods, fires, storms, heatwaves, and other extreme weather, whether in Pakistan, China, the Horn of Africa, the Caribbean, Germany, Italy or other European countries, we should ask ourselves, are our museums really doing enough?



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