



Culture as a Tool for Social Transformation: the role of museums and community

**by Dr. Karen E. Brown*

Over 48 months from September 2016, an EU-CELAC network of academics, museum professionals and policy makers will investigate the topic of *Museums and Community: Concepts, Experiences, and Sustainability in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean*. Our collective aim is to investigate and implement ways for culture to be a tool for social transformation and mutual understanding between regions. Our research project is called **EU-LAC-MUSEUMS**, and has been explicitly designed in response to the EU Horizon2020 Work Programme call INT 12 (2015) “The cultural, scientific and social dimension of EU-LAC relations”.

The project is coordinated by the University of St Andrews in Scotland, working with partners in France, Spain, Portugal, Chile, Peru, Costa Rica, and the West Indies. A full list of our institutions, Work Packages and initial work in progress can be seen here: <http://eulacmuseums.net/index.php/partnership-2/>

The focus of the EU-LAC-MUSEUMS project is to follow the **EU-CELAC Action Plan** in carrying out a comparative analysis of small to medium-sized rural museums and their communities in the EU and LAC regions, and to develop associated history and theory. To this end, we have created the following objectives:

- To increase the knowledge area of EU-CELAC relations in the museum world by researching the concepts and experiences of sustainability in museums and communities in the two regions, with a special focus on heritage technologies and histories of migration as they relate to these communities;
- To enhance sustainable development and social inclusiveness in the museum sector in remote rural and island locations through dialogue between academics, policy makers, museums, and local communities;
- To create a common and sustainable vision for community museums ratified by ICOM, and in line with EU-CELAC and JIRI actions;
- To make available and to celebrate knowledge generated by the project to all potential users, museum professionals, and decision makers through an ambitious web portal and an extensive dissemination programme;
- To ensure rigorous evaluation of project methods and outcomes for future EU-LAC platforms, and to build long-term sustainable relationships between institutions in EU and LAC, and especially within our partner countries.



How can our EU and CELAC researchers work effectively together using culture as an instrument for social transformation?

Societal challenges can lead to opportunities if approached in the right way. Europe is currently undergoing a crisis of identity, seeking to define its past, present, and future position in relation to the wider world, and to consolidate regional cohesion across generations within a wider, global knowledge economy. ICOM Europe and ICOM LAC are committed to the idea that fostering inter-cultural dialogue and creativity through their regional and community museums is fundamental to this process.

Museums hold an unequalled responsibility to communicate the “shared history” and “cultural, political and economic ties” between Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Museums have enormous capacity to reach all levels of community, from towns to remote villages, and can be neutral spaces for building social cohesion and reconciliation in a variety of contexts. Together, our research teams will create a common vision for sustainable, small to medium-sized local and regional museums and their communities, and reinforce mutual understanding and cooperation between regions. In particular, our research speaks to the Societal Challenges of **Youth, Migration, Sustainability, Gender, Entrepreneurship, Education, and Digital Heritage**.

What are the difficulties we face on the ground and how do we suggest that these can be overcome?

Overcoming societal challenges as they relate to our museums and their communities, our collaboration is built to endure the lifespan of the project and beyond through immediate and future cooperation and mobility of researchers between institutions.

The INT 12 (2015) aim is to “shed light on how LAC representative groups of citizens perceive the role of Europe in their own continent and the process of European integration, more generally”. This presents a challenge for any research programme. However, through the mediation of ICOM networks and our regional and national museum leaders, we are fully committed to achieving this goal in order to bring about strategic “future interaction and cooperation between the two regions”.

Building on existing good relations between researchers in our consortium, we will provide mediation for each other in carrying out pioneering and grassroots research into our tangible and intangible heritage, and share it with the world.

To this end, an ambitious database and website is being developed by the National Museum of Archaeology in Lisbon, aggregating existing and new models of best practice in community museology.



Could policy makers from the two regions help projects in the field of culture with the mission of community development?

Absolutely. Our overarching aim is to strengthen our individual and collective museum communities; an ambition requiring support at all levels, including meaningful contribution to policy documents. EU-LAC-MUSEUMS has its genesis as a partnership between the European and Latin American and Caribbean Regional Alliances of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). Created in 1946, ICOM is a worldwide organisation of museums with more than 32,000 members in 135 countries committed to promoting and protecting natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible. We have also entered into discussion with the EU-LAC Foundation on the themes of Youth and Migration in particular, including the possibility of an **EU-CELAC Youth Day** in conjunction with our youth exchange between Scotland, Costa Rica and Portugal.

We welcome the participation of other regional policy makers in EU and LAC, and we look forward to hearing from you!

***Dr. Karen Brown** is the Scientific Coordinator of EU-LAC-MUSEUMS. She is Director of the University of St Andrews Museums, Galleries and Collections Institute (<https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/arthistory/>).

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To learn more about EU Horizon2020 Work Programme:

<https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/int-12-2015.html>

To learn more about European and Latin American and Caribbean Regional Alliances of the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

[http://icom.museum/the-committees/regional-alliances/regional-alliance/international-council-of-museums-latin-america-caribbean-alliance/;](http://icom.museum/the-committees/regional-alliances/regional-alliance/international-council-of-museums-latin-america-caribbean-alliance/)

<http://network.icom.museum/europe>