

Discussion paper: Leadership at the international level of ICOMOS

Introduction

This paper has been prompted by a number of recent debates about leadership positions in ICOMOS. These have included the discussions leading up to the resolution concerning terms of office for Board members that was put to the 2017 General Assembly in Delhi, and discussions among the Advisory Committee officers concerning the requirements for the President and Vice-President of the Advisory Committee to be serving Presidents of their National or International Scientific Committee at the time of their election. As a basis for furthering the debate, this paper looks in general terms at the kind of leadership that ICOMOS might want and need at the international level, how the issues of continuity and renewal of leadership might be handled, and the practical considerations that affect the ability of leaders to be most effective in their roles.

Continuity and renewal

This issue is central not merely to the matter of leadership, but to every level of the activity of ICOMOS as a professional organisation. Humans and organisations learn by doing, and that experience allows both to become more effective over time. Keeping the same people in positions within an organisation preserves institutional memory and helps the organisation to perform consistently. However, no organisation can rely on the same people for too long, and for the organisation to survive it must therefore be able to bring new leaders in to develop their own expertise, without losing the experience that the organisation as a whole has accumulated. For any organisation, finding the balance between continuity and renewal is critical to its long term success.

Experience, expertise and training

Similar considerations apply to the experience and expertise of individuals. ICOMOS relies for its reputation on the professional expertise and experience of its members. Whatever the task, there is a natural tendency to select for it those that have demonstrated expertise in the past, so that these people build up experience and improve their expertise while those without the initial expertise may not have the opportunity to do so. For a healthy organisation, all members need to be given the opportunity to build up their expertise (including leadership expertise) and this will probably require a deliberate effort from the organisation, bringing new people into tasks and providing training and mentoring to assist them to gain experience. It is also important for an organisation to develop written policies and procedures that reflect the accumulated wisdom of the organisation and reduce the need for successive leaders to learn by direct experience.

What does ICOMOS want from its leaders?

ICOMOS expects its leaders to sustain, defend and enhance the organisation in general, and in particular the component of it which they lead. This requires an ability to manage others, a capacity to look beyond day-to-day management with a vision for the future, the skill to anticipate problems and deal effectively with them, and above all a commitment to work and to cooperate and communicate with others in the organisation. The willingness and ability to train and mentor others are also highly desirable, and personal ethical behaviour and loyalty to the organisation are essential (as indeed they are for all ICOMOS members).

What do ICOMOS leaders need in order to be effective?

As well as the personal qualities, abilities and skills described above, ICOMOS leaders have a number of practical needs if they are to be effective in their roles. The first of these is time: not only sufficient time available in their daily lives to do the job properly, but also a sufficient length of time in the job to understand what it involves, and how to do it well. In general, the more senior the position, the more time is required. In addition, because ICOMOS is an international organisation, leaders will generally need to have the resources (either personal or through support by governments or others) to travel overseas to meetings, and also to have reliable internet connections for emails and teleconferences. Fluency in one or both of the working languages of ICOMOS is also necessary, and in other languages is desirable.

Leadership within the Board

The most critical single leadership position within the Board (and indeed within ICOMOS) is that of President. The role of President requires the building of relationships over a period of years, with the Secretariat, with ICOMOS members in the National Committees and International Scientific Committees, and with external organisations such as UNESCO (particularly the World Heritage Centre), ICCROM and IUCN, members of the World Heritage Centre and Committee, and other cultural heritage organisations such as the Organisation of World Heritage Cities. The President is the public face of ICOMOS, and for good and effective relationships with all of the above people and organisations, it is desirable for the President to hold office for a reasonable period. ICOMOS therefore needs to consider what a reasonable period might be, and (given the necessary prior learning period through service on the Board and Bureau) what the full term of a person who becomes President should be.

Leadership within the Advisory Committee

The Advisory Committee was originally established as a committee of Presidents, of the National and International Scientific Committees. Over the years it became customary for Presidents who could not attend Advisory Committee meetings to be able to nominate another member of their committee to attend on their behalf, and this was enshrined in the Rules of Procedure. However, it has been the case for many years that the President and Vice-President of the Advisory Committee should be serving Presidents of their own committees, and this was confirmed in the 2014 revision of the Statutes. The 2014 Statutes also recognised the Scientific Council (composed of the Presidents of the International Scientific Committees or their nominees) as a statutory body, and provided for the three elected officers of the Scientific Council, as well as three officers elected from the National Committees, to form in effect a Bureau of the Advisory Committee.

The President and Vice-President of the Advisory Committee, being also serving Presidents of their own committees, thus have to manage the affairs of both. While holding more than one office in ICOMOS is not uncommon, it requires considerable time to do both jobs effectively. Moreover, given the maximum 9-year term for a National or International Scientific Committee President, and the need for a period of prior learning as a committee President (and member of the Advisory Committee) before embarking on a term as President or Vice-President, in practice an Advisory Committee President or Vice-President may be eligible for only one or at most two terms. ICOMOS might therefore wish to consider what a reasonable term of office for a President or Vice-President of the Advisory Committee might be, and how that term of office might be determined.

Peter Phillips
Secretary General
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