

## **On the crisis of the pandemic COVID-19**

Response from the ICOMOS Our Common Dignity Working Group  
18 April 2020

At this time of unprecedented challenge caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ICOMOS Our Common Dignity Initiative – Rights Based Approaches Working Group, expresses its solidarity with the cultural heritage communities around the world.

We wish to draw attention to the fragile heritage communities and urge authorities and citizens to ensure that these communities receive the support they need, that they are empowered in maintaining and developing their livelihoods with dignity and that the measures taken in resolving the pandemic respect their dignity and human rights.

Committed to the ideas of sustainability, cultural heritage values and human rights, we support and encourage collaboration and empathy in dealing with the crisis. *[when distributing to ICOMOS members and Committees, insert here a call to cooperate]*

We wish to highlight the resilience and creativity embedded in the culture and heritage of local societies and how this knowledge and these values gives all of society hope for the future.

## Reflections

The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting cultural heritage sites and communities across the globe. Poignant images are circulating of monuments, landscapes and town squares without a living soul. The contribution of cultural heritage to well-being becomes visible at these times of crisis as does the inequity of the world. At the same time, many cultural heritage sites appear to benefit from reduced human and pollution impacts. The crisis raises the immediate need to support those communities who sustain this heritage and longer-term imperatives for equitable transformation to sustainable models which uphold the rights and dignity of these communities.

The ICOMOS *Our Common Dignity Initiative- Rights Based Approaches working group* at this point in time expresses

concern for the health of vulnerable communities and peoples – many who are living in cultural heritage sites

support for transparent communication and strong community engagement to maintain public trust in the systems to safely meet their essential needs and to control infection risk in health facilities and communities

concern about the immediate and long-term impact of this pandemic on the livelihood of cultural heritage communities and vulnerable people earning their living from activities and enterprises linked to cultural heritage. This crisis reveals the often unsustainable approaches to maintenance of many sites and the vulnerability of their communities

concern not only because the virus is a threat to urban heritage and cultural landscapes, but also to the human rights and personal security of those who inhabit and work in them

concern for the many already marginal heritage groups, including many indigenous peoples, at risk of being further marginalized by this crisis and the approaches taken in responding to it

concern that the Arts, Culture and Heritage sectors, including intangible culture, are threatened in times of crises whatever their reason - pandemics, natural disasters, conflicts, economics, reminding us of the importance of risk preparedness

ambition that this crisis becomes an agent for positive change and enlightened solutions and practices, enabling sustainable approaches which aid security and resilience of cultural heritage communities.

As concerned experts and human beings committed to the ideas of sustainability, human rights, dignity of communities and global solidarity, and keeping a long-term perspective of our societies' evolution and continuity,

we take inspiration from the history of human and urban development, where many radical reforms and innovations have come out of the lessons learned in crises of health and safety, while traditional practices, evolved over centuries, guide and inspire new collective awakening

we support inclusive strategies for risk management where capacity building of local communities and stakeholders is developed through mutual dialogue

we urge the recovery measures after the pandemic to fully embrace the needs, rights and dignity of local communities and we encourage ICOMOS members to do whatever they can to support this

we urge all concerned to be conscious of how adjustments and innovations in social and spatial management systems may affect cultural heritage practices and places, and to ensure that these changes are implemented in the recovery process with a view to the safeguarding and survival of heritage values, tangible and intangible, cherished by communities

We urge those responding to this crisis to avoid exacerbating existing cultural and ethnic divisions and inequalities and seek instead the promotion of inclusive dialogue and cooperation of all related parties in enhancing solidarity measures and support mechanisms for fragile heritage communities, including indigenous peoples

We encourage ICOMOS members and committees to lead and support initiatives which empower and resource communities in the recovery process to develop and implement sustainable plans for cultural heritage and cultural practices at all stages of this crisis and after

ICOMOS OCDI-RBA is committed to the respect, protection and fulfilment of the rights to culture for individuals and communities, the achievement of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the promotion of Rights Based Approaches in its work. In this we encourage ICOMOS members, Committees and groups to:

- *Build strong relationships with communities and peoples in their work;*

- *Embrace the principle of free, prior and informed consent of source communities before adopting measures concerning their specific cultural heritage;*
- *Offer all possible assistance so that communities and right holders are consulted and invited to actively participate in the whole process of identification, selection, classification, interpretation, preservation and safeguarding of, as well as stewardship and development of cultural heritage;*
- *Empower dialogue between duty bearers and rights owners*

We note the fluid nature of the Covid-19 situation across the world and commit to reviewing this background paper on an ongoing basis.