On the occasion of International Museum Day, two studies by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) confirm that museums have been especially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 90% of them, or more than 85,000 institutions, having closed their doors for varying lengths of time during the crisis. Nearly 13% of museums around the world may never reopen.

The two studies, involving Member States and museum professionals, were aimed at assessing the impact of COVID-19 on museums and museum institutions. They also aimed to find out how the sector had adapted to the pandemic and explore ways to support institutions in its aftermath.

“Museums play a fundamental role in the resilience of societies. We must help them cope with this crisis and keep them in touch with their audiences,” said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. “This pandemic also reminds us that half of humanity does not have access to digital technologies. We must work to promote access to culture for everyone, especially the most vulnerable and isolated.”

Within the framework of its ResiliArt movement, UNESCO launched in mid-May a series of debates devoted to museums. The first three debates, in partnership with Ibermuseums, will focus on the situation in the Ibero-American region and will explore strategies to support museums and professionals. The ResiliArt movement aims to support artists during and after the COVID-19 crisis and to analyse the issues at stake, through high-level exchanges between international professionals from the cultural sphere.

The study conducted by ICOM highlights the fact that museums that have been deprived of their visitors will face a decrease in their income. Professions related to museums, their operations and their outreach could also be seriously affected.

“We are fully aware of and confident in the tenacity of museum professionals to meet the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said ICOM President Suay Aksoy. “However, the museum field cannot survive on its own without the support of the public and private sectors. It is imperative to raise emergency relief funds and to put in place policies to protect professionals and self-employed workers on precarious contracts.”
Among the priorities indicated by States in their responses to the UNESCO study are capacity building, social protection of museum staff, digitization and inventorying of collections, development of online content, technical assistance and the equipment of conservation laboratories, all of which require the mobilization of resources.

It should be noted that the number of museums worldwide has increased by almost 60% since 2012 to some 95,000 institutions, according to the UNESCO study. This increase demonstrates the important place that the sector has taken in national cultural policies over the past decade. However, the study reveals wide disparities, with Africa and Small Island Developing States together accounting for only 1.5% of the total number of museums worldwide.

These findings echo the latest report on the implementation by its Member States of the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society, published in December 2019. In it, UNESCO underlines the fundamental role that museums play in education and the dissemination of culture, in terms of social cohesion but also in supporting the local and regional creative economy.

UNESCO and ICOM will soon publish the full results of the two studies and will continue their collaboration to support museums worldwide, with the help of Member States and networks of museum professionals.

https://www.facebook.com/unesco/videos/529612344587919

KEY FIGURES:

- Nearly 90% of museums around the world have closed during the crisis.
- In Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), only 5% of museums have developed online content for their audiences.
- Nearly 13% of museums may never reopen their doors.
- The number of museums worldwide has increased by almost 60% since 2012 to around 95,000.

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