A definition of museum in general is not the same as a definition of museum for the governance of a museum organisation

Almost all of the discussion on the proposed new definition of museum, seem implicitly to be about “museum” in general. But the definition it is compared with, and is supposed to replace, is not simply about museum in general. The definition it is supposed to replace is an ICOM governance tool, defining what for ICOM shall be considered an institution worthy of membership.

Definitions
A definition describes criteria that are shared by all those supposed to be included in what is defined.

Some think that the more properties are added to a definition, the more inclusive it is. The opposite is the case. The more properties are added for instance to a museum definition, the fewer museums are included in the definition.

In cases where the definition shall be a basis for correct action, it is an advantage to have as few alternative interpretations of the definition as possible.

The definition of any complex phenomenon is dependent on which context and purpose it is seen as part of. Where this is not understood, definition proposals have a tendency to try to combine elements from different contexts and purposes, with a messy result.

The ICOM Statutes and the museum definition
The purpose of the new museum definition for ICOM was that it should be part of the ICOM Statutes. As part of ICOM’s Statutes the definition shall function as a governance tool.

The Statutes are the laws of ICOM. Even when describing principles, it is as guidelines for action. As guidelines for action, the Statutes function best when they are to the point and give little room for different interpretations. They are supposed to be precise platforms for practice.

According to the Statutes “Membership shall be open to Museums ...” (Article 4. Membership Section 1 – Members)

And which are the “Museums” membership shall be open for?

The answer is found in the Internal Rules. The Internal Rules is the level below the Statutes. They explain how the Statutes shall be interpreted and set into practice. According to the Internal Rules: «Institutional Members are defined as museums ... that comply with the definition of a museum as outlined in the Statutes ...». (ARTICLE 2. MEMBERS 2.1 - Institutional Members 2.1.1 Institutional Members Definition)

Which in short means that the museum definition in the Statutes describes the minimum criteria for what for ICOM is (and implicitly what is not) a museum. Thus all member museums of ICOM must therefore fulfil each and all requirements mentioned in the Statutes’ museum definition.
This may at first glance seem like a circle formulation. But as soon as you start adding new properties to the museum definition, fewer and fewer may be entitled to membership in ICOM.

**Which criteria will reduce the number of museums accepted into ICOM?**

Do the criteria for being a museum in the present definition of museum most likely be fulfilled by all institutional ICOM members? Let us see:

**Are all ICOM member museums non-profit?** If a museum wants to be member of ICOM it must be non-profit.

**Permanent?** Yes, a museum is not temporary.

**Institutions?** Yes, a museum is an institution in the sense that it is organised as such.

**In the service of society and its development?** This borders on a value statement more than a practice statement, but by its mere existence a museum may be seen as practicing this function.

**Open to the public?** Yes.

**Acquires?** Yes.

**Conserves?** Yes, in the meaning of taking care of for the future.

**Researches?** In a wide sense, yes.

**Communicates?** Yes.

**Exhibits?** Yes.

**Exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment?** How can they not?

**For the purposes of education?** Yes.

**For study?** Yes.

**Enjoyment?** Well, that’s the doubtful one 😊.

What happens if we try to apply the same question to the new, proposed museum definition? Does it function as a tool for defining what can be an ICOM member museum or not?

Which criteria will make ICOM lose members because not all museums can follow up:

**Democratising** *(it is not clear what it means but in many countries it may be seen as political activism and many museums cannot follow up this and lose membership)*

**Inclusive** *(possibly yes, if the meaning is the effect of entrance for all)*

**Polyphonic** *(hard to say)*

**Spaces for critical dialogue** *(as with democratising many museums cannot or do not wish to follow up this)*

**About the pasts and the futures.** *(yes to pasts, no to futures)*

**Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present** *(again, not all museums can or will do this)*

**They hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society** *(yes)*

**Safeguard diverse memories for future generations** *(yes)*

**Guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people** *(yes, if meant entrance for all)*

**Museums are not for profit** *(yes)*

**They are participatory** *(if they are not, are they no longer entitled to membership?)*

**Transparent** *(no, whatever it means)*

**Work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect** *(yes if widely defined)*

**Preserve** *(yes)*
A problem with some of the characteristics above is that there are many possible interpretations. Some – like “inclusive” and “equal access” – may mean almost the same or not. How does one measure whether a museum is worthy an institutional membership in ICOM based on whether or not it enhances understandings, human dignity and planetary well-being? Is it really intended that if a museum chooses for instance not to be space for critical dialogue then it is not accepted as a museum and cannot be a member of ICOM?

I would say that the proposed new museum definition fits neither the logic of the Statutes nor of the other governance document of ICOM, the Internal Rules.

What I read out of the proposed new definition is a partly intended fluidity – an invitation to different interpretations – which I see as a quality within the proposal’s internal content, but as a near impossibility if read as a museum definition in the Statutes.

This does not at all mean that the present museum definition n ICOM’s Statutes is ideal and cannot be improved. Of course it can.

The poetics of political declarations
What both definitions have in common is that they are formulated with certain elegance, aiming at increasing the attraction of the content. This may be politically favourable and therefore important, but it may also reduce the clarity of the content. The present museum definition finds a reasonably good balance between what “sounds good” and “legalese”, while the proposed museum definition is beautifully formulated, but falls more into “declarationesque”.

The above may be read as irony, but is not.

Simply speaking, the present definition is clearly a “shall be”, while the new proposal contains several “should be”. This is not wrong if it is followed up with an international political process for museums aiming at turning the “should be” into “shall be”. Such a political process may be carried out in a number of ways within ICOM, but in my opinion not – or not yet at least – in the form of an Article in the present ICOM Statutes.

Anyway, the proposed museum definition is in my opinion a strong argument for what can broadly be called socially engaged museums. Could strengthened references to the socially engaged museum be included in the Code of Ethics?

ICOM’s Statutes are about how to manage an organisation for museums, while the Code of Ethics is about how to manage museums. They have in common to describe “minimum standards” for “a desirable practice” (Code of Ethics introduction statement).
What do we find in the Code of Ethics which could be connected – even as opposites – to statements like “critical dialogue” or “addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present”?

The parts of the Code that describe the museums’ relation with their public are for instance relevant. In the Code 4.2 Interpretation of Exhibitions it is stated:

«Museums should ensure that the information they present in displays and exhibitions is well-founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs»

Today’s reader can perhaps not help asking oneself what it means to be accurate. And what is information? All information is based on selection and accuracy cannot fully be achieved when complex knowledge shall be communicated briefly.

Problem oriented communication seems nowhere to be mentioned in the Code, not even as a possibility, as far as I can judge. Do dilemmas exist anywhere in the Code of Ethics? I cannot find it. The impression is authoritarian and outdated, particularly in the parts where reflections and doubts might have give deeper insights.

When reading the Code, one gets the impression that a museum is nothing but a collection of objects and that an exhibition simply consists of series of objects, each with a label with «accurate information» and the object is the primary object of research. When the possibility of something controversial comes up, it seems solely to be connected to human remains and sacred objects.

The only statement I have found that could be in line with the explicit value statements in the new museum definition proposal, is in 6.7 Use of Collections from Contemporary Communities where it is stated that «Such collections should be used to promote human well-being, social development, tolerance, and respect by advocating multisocial, multicultural and multilingual expression»

The last part is a clear statement about which values a community ought to have (and as such hardly found elsewhere in the Code). But what if the community in question claims that social, cultural and lingual diversity is not in line with their basic values, nor perhaps their religion, which in other parts of the Code is stated shall always be respected?

Probably, the Code of Ethics needs an updating now. Some of the terminology seems outdated, which of course is always inevitable over time. For me at least, the Code seem to have a too single-minded view of the museum as a collection of objects, while the complexity of the present day museum is striking and should be reflected in the Code. An adapted version of mass media ethics for museums should for instance be among new elements. And not least, recognise dilemmas.

By all means, an updating should NOT mean an opening for value statements not connected to principles for practice. In that respect, the Code is very much like the Statutes, and most of the content in the Code is impressively timeless.
I think the new museum definition proposal is neither easily possible to harmonise into being a part of the Statutes, nor really as part of the Code of Ethics. It can be transformed into a marvellous declaration (the Kyoto Declaration of 2019 is a past possibility, but other opportunities will follow) which can play an important role in shaping our thinking about museums in the years to come.

Or of course the Statutes can be altered and a museum definition can be presented as an introduction to the Statutes (a “what is a museum” stressing the potential), independent of the (though eventually necessary elsewhere) criteria for membership. It could be an introduction to the Statutes (somewhat like in the intro to the Code of Ethics) stating ICOM’s duty to be in front in the development of museums and their relation to the societies they are part of, etc (I am not good at finding the right formulations).

It would still have to relate to the rest of the Statutes in a meaningful way and with a clear purpose and context.

With good will, open minds and a generous bit of luck, one may succeed!

Per B. Rekdal 21.00H 13.11.2019