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international council on monuments and sites

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Presentation on behalf of ICOMOS at the G20 Culture Working Group

Priority 4 / Thematic Webinar 4: Leveraging Digital Technologies for the Protection and Promotion of Culture

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Good morning, your excellencies, and colleagues.

My name is Gai JORAYEV, and I am speaking on behalf of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)

ICOMOS is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this webinar.

Excellent Issue Note document distributed in advance of the session has already covered some very important points for our priority area of leveraging digital technologies for culture. Based on my experiences and discussions, ICOMOS colleagues and I would like to focus on the need for changing our conceptual framework and overarching approaches when it comes to digital and cultural heritage.

Despite digital technologies being very much 'the everyday' in cultural heritage and culture creative industries, we often hide our activities behind fancy terms, with AI, VR or AR, Geospatial being the main jargon items which, without intention perhaps, create invisible barriers and separations between groups with different initial levels of digital literacy. Digital approaches can be very simple, even when related to complex computational tools, and they can be transferable across communities and institutions at different levels of preparedness. Digital tools are almost always scalable and flexible, which makes them applicable to many different elements of culture and heritage. Digital derivatives can, if properly planned and shared, contribute enormously to the needs of development in a local level whilst also contributing into resolution of global challenges.

With those considerations in mind, modest suggestions from me and ICOMOS focus on concepts and approaches rather than individual tools:

Firstly, moving away from case-study based success stories into conceptual shift: in archaeology, cultural heritage, and community outreach, we excel at producing impressive and specific case studies of the applications of digital technology to cultural studies/projects/initiatives. And this is true globally in my experience. Our host country, India, offers an amazing diversity on this, for example with exceptionally impressive range of successful projects spread across very different social and economic environments. But now is the time to make elements of good practice in digital approaches universal, by summarising the philosophies of approaches and by promoting concepts, methodological considerations and by summarising a new body of digital technology and heritage related works. In establishing a concept-driven framework and prioritising methodological considerations, we must move forward with an understanding that **digital technologies**

are evolving quickly, but elements of good practice stay the same. Doing that with a focus on and contribution to digital literacy and on core concepts of openness of formats, technologies, software and data is crucial.

Making open-data and open-access the requirement within the sector is a necessity. The concepts, tools, and rules for open access are well-known and well-formulated. Globally, we need to overcome data-hoarding and self-imposed sensitivities of sharing data openly, which are often residues of structural challenges. What we observe now is a trend where bigger institutions with their higher capacity and critical mass of knowledge are leading this movement alongside the government institutions of the *developed* world. Institutions in the *developing* world and *marginalised groups* are being left behind once again, even when one of the primary goals of openness is equality. If we do not strive to make a universal push, we risk perpetuating global imbalances further with institutions and communities, who we may consider to be true stakeholders, losing out again.

Avoiding platform dependent solutions in favour of decentralised data sharing is also important. What we see very often is specific platforms dominating the web-based communications and information sharing systems, sometimes creating echo chambers that are removed from a truly global community of users. Consumption of information from dominant and specific mobile applications, deepened by linguistic and geographic traditions of the internet, exacerbate the issues further. *Digital Object Identifier* driven semantic-web friendly information sharing is not only possible but easier technologically, for any contributor, regardless of their proficiency levels, and less resource hungry too. Work in this area is critical if we want to ensure equal access to culture and cultural information as a global public good.

We should also aspire to achieve a **better knowledge transfer that rewards real-life impact.** To encourage the expansion and ongoing maintenance of open-access resources, the digital culture / digital heritage community should prioritise rewarding innovative approaches that have long-term impact and facilitate a wide-spread transfer of knowledge. At present, knowledge-transfers are still primarily limited to those already in the field via academic publications and organisation-specific reports, which often exclude the public, or variety of potential user groups. Again, some institutions already begun encouraging sharing their approaches alongside digital derivatives, while also recognising the impact of work of specialists in different ways, but globally, we should be making this more mainstream.

These are the suggestions that our small group at ICOMOS thinks would translate well to cultural policies across different cultural domains. What we are trying to advocate here is a focus on frameworks, or approaches, or even key concepts of digital literacy rather than individual tools and techniques.

Digital technologies are contributing to the protection and preservation of tangible cultural heritage by enabling better monitoring and understanding of change-over-time. Equally, digital technologies are contributing to better interpretation and dissemination by enabling better documentation and wider access to intangible heritage. Bringing digital and non-digital manifestations of heritage together is in fact massively beneficial for sustainable long-term management of cultural heritage. Therefore, from a point of view of practitioners, we fully recognise the significance of these technological developments.

Similarly, from the point of view of cultural heritage stakeholders – as all of us identify ourselves by our affinity to different elements of local, ethnic, professional, national or supranational elements of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage – we recognise the opportunities, as well as the challenges that digital transformations offer. Particularly, the points that are being raised in this forum in relation to linguistic and cultural diversity, even in places where the diversity is being deliberately ignored or even actively suppressed, and addressing disparities both globally and in localities where those disparities and inequalities are being aggravated.

In other sessions the need for G20 governments to take the lead with investments into culture and digital was mentioned. That is indeed needed, but instead of investment into experimentation with technologies, it is actually needed in addressing the area of a growing digital divide which I view not only as an issue related to internet speeds, paywalls, and linguistic barriers, but also as availability of decent equipment on a long-term basis and the digital competencies needed to use the access and equipment in beneficial manner.

Thank you once again for this opportunity.

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