# Chapter 18
# Revitalising the South African Museum Sector:
## New Museological Trends

**Helene Vollgraaff**
*University of South Africa, South Africa*

## ABSTRACT

*The chapter discusses the South African museum sector in terms of changing museum functions as well as museum management. The research findings confirm the perception of a sector in crisis. Museum professional associations do not have the capacity to promote a professional museum service. Though there are museum professionals that keep up to date with museological trends and technology, a picture is painted of museums not supported by government departments, debilitating bureaucratic structures that hamper creativity and responsiveness to public demands, institutional performance structures that direct museums away from museum functions, problematic recruitment practices, and problematic models assessing the value of museums. Research is based on literature study, a review of the South African Museums Association Bulletin (SAMAB), a peer-reviewed journal dealing with museum matters, an analysis of policy recommendations of museum professional associations and interviews with the museum association leadership.*

## INTRODUCTION

The South African museum scene of the 1980s and 1990s was vibrant and innovative. Yet two decades on as the South African Museums Association (SAMA) and the South African National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-SA) took stock of the status of the sector and its progress in terms of transformation ideals as stated in the 1980s and 1990s, a picture of a sector in crisis emerged. The international museum scene, on the other hand, is vibrant and dynamic as the discussion below will indicate. Museological theory and museum practice continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Traditionally the primary role of museums was focused on the care and interpretation of collections. This has been augmented by a people oriented approach that emphasises inclusivity and museums as places of memory

and, instead of authenticating the past, become agents of social change. In addition, museums had to reposition themselves in an information landscape dominated by digitised information and social media. Lastly, sustainability of museums has also become increasingly under the spotlight which presents a challenge for museums to adopt new management structures and models.

The chapter focuses on status of the South African museum sector through comparing museum practice with theory and documenting the perceptions of South African museum practitioners. In this chapter, it will be shown that the South African museum sector is lagging behind international museum practice. The reasons for this situation is explored and possible solutions are provided.

A theoretical framework is provided through a short overview of museum theory and practice, focusing on aspects that have been identified as problematic by the South African museum sector. The status of South African museum practice in relation to museum theory is explored through a literature review and interviews. Rather than repeating reviews of official policy statements and initiatives, this study focuses on the responses and initiatives of the museum professionals as represented by ICOM-SA and SAMA. Workshop reports are discussed together with articles that have been published in the *South African Museums Association Bulletin*, generally known as *SAMAB*, an accredited journal produced by SAMA, and interviews with the recent and current leadership of the two organisations. Using the museum professional associations as entry point, one also avoids the fragmented nature of the museum sector with no government agency able to speak on behalf of the sector as a whole.

## MODELS, CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

Many of the pressures to South African museums to transform are not particular to the South African context, but experienced by museums worldwide. During the last five decades, museums have evolved from being mainly research and educational institutions to becoming social institutions that not only research, document and communicate cultural and natural heritage, but also actively shape society. Concerns regarding equality, social justice and human rights have taken centre stage (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, p. 1).

The ICOM definition of museums, adopted in 2007, combines the conventional core functions of acquisition, conservation, research, communication and exhibition of collections with the emphasis on the role of a museum as an "…institution in the service of society and its development…" (Mairesse, 2010, p. 19). This role is elaborated on in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) *Recommendation on the Protection and Promotion Museums and Collections* which was formally adopted by the General Conference on 17 November 2015.

*[…] dating back to the Declaration of Santiago Chile (1972), modern museums are increasingly viewed in all countries as playing a key role in the social system and as a factor in social integration. In this sense, they can help communities face profound changes in society, including those leading to the rise in social inequality, the impoverishment of some classes in society and the breakdown of social ties. Museums present themselves as places that are particularly open to all and are highly sensitive to the idea of providing access to everyone; in particular, this entails those who are the most fragile and most alienated and who, due to financial reasons, physical difficulties or education, do not normally visit cultural or natural sites. They constitute places of reflection and transformation for the development of*

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