

# Community Responsibility and Involvement in Emergency Preparedness and Response: the Case of Congo-Brazzaville

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## Resumen

### **Concienciación y participación de la comunidad en la gestión de situaciones de emergencia - El caso del Congo**

*Para transmitir el patrimonio cultural y natural a las generaciones venideras y propiciar el aprendizaje de las tradiciones y la historia del país, las autoridades del Congo han creado desde 1965 ocho museos con vistas a fomentar la difusión de conocimientos y crear un espíritu de unidad nacional en el seno de la diversidad cultural del país.*

*Por desgracia, en el último decenio estallaron cuatro guerras civiles que han tenido consecuencias desastrosas para los museos y las colecciones (saqueos, pillajes, etc.). La participación de la comunidad local en las actividades de los museos es necesaria para apoyar la consecución de los objetivos fijados y la realización de las actividades proyectadas, y también para lograr que todas las partes interesadas se responsabilicen en la tarea de proteger el patrimonio material e inmaterial.*

## Résumé

### **La responsabilisation et la participation de la communauté à la gestion des situations d'urgence : le cas du Congo-Brazzaville**

*Afin de transmettre aux générations futures leur patrimoine culturel et naturel et de favoriser l'apprentissage des traditions et de l'histoire du pays, les autorités congolaises ont créé à partir de 1965 huit musées permettant la diffusion des connaissances et la création d'une unité nationale dans la diversité culturelle du Congo.*

*Malheureusement, quatre guerres civiles au cours des dix dernières années ont eu des conséquences désastreuses sur les musées et les collections (saccage, pillage, etc.). La participation de la communauté locale au sein du musée est nécessaire afin de soutenir ensemble les buts et les activités mis en place pour responsabiliser les acteurs concernés et les inciter à la protection du patrimoine tangible et intangible.*

## Introduction

The Republic of Congo, or Congo-Brazzaville, became independent on August 15, 1960. A few years later, the Congo felt the need to safeguard and enhance its cultural and natural heritage so that younger generations in particular and the people of the Congo in general could

have access to extensive knowledge of their country, culture and history.

The Congolese national authorities quickly understood the role and relevance of museums for the African continent and decided to establish museums in Brazzaville, the capital, and in rural areas. Between 1965 and 1983, eight museums were founded.

- 1965 National Museum of Brazzaville: ethnography, archaeology, prehistory and history;
- 1966 Museum of Nkankata Croi-Koma, in the village of Nkankata (Pool region): ethnography and traditional medicine;
- 1969 Museum of Natural History, at the Faculty of Science of the University Marien Ngouabi-Brazzaville: geology, mineralogy, entomology and botany;
- 1977 Marien Ngouabi Museum: biographical museum devoted to Marien Ngouabi, President of the Republic of Congo from 1968 to 1977; Marien Ngouabi was assassinated in March 1977;
- 1982 Regional Museum of Owando (Cuvette East region): regional ethnography and history;
- 1982 André Matsoua Regional Museum in Kinkala (Pool region): regional ethnography;
- 1982 Mâ-Loango Regional Museum in Diosso (Kouili region): regional ethnography and history of the Loango Kingdom;
- 1986 Regional Museum of Sibiti (Lekoumou region): regional ethnography.

All these museums are public institutions. Prior to the period with several civil wars from 1993 to 2002, they held objects of great cultural and scientific value; for example, the Museum of Natural History had several collections until November 3, 1993 (when the first civil war broke out), with a zoological collection (crustaceans, 110,000 insects, 200 other invertebrates, 432 saltwater fish, 150 freshwater fish, 214 reptiles and 757 mammals), a botanical collection (400 plant samples) and a geology and mineralogy collection.

The Museum of Natural History had one of the largest and most beautiful collections of geology and mineralogy in Africa. Field study and collecting were conducted by BRGM (Bureau de Recherches Géologiques et Minières), a French organisation specialising in research in geology and mineralogy. The collection was officially handed over to the Congo when the country became independent.

The regional museums were set up as part of the policy for protecting cultural and natural heritage all over the country. The aim of the policy was to promote unity, i.e. national unity through cultural diversity.

### **The Advantages of Community Responsibility and Involvement in Emergency Preparedness and Response**

Four civil wars have had a dramatic impact on the Republic of Congo: the wars of 1993-1994, 1997, 1998-1999 and 2001-2002, the last one being known as the "war of the Pool region". These wars provided opportunities for thieves, bandits and vandals to ransack the museum buildings and loot the collections. Today, we have had to start all over again, building up new collections and restoring damaged buildings. Some examples can illustrate the situation. The Museum of Natural

History lost all its collections and buildings. Shellfire from government soldiers in the 1993 civil war destroyed the museum buildings; one part of the collection was looted and shell and rocket fire destroyed the other part. The Marien Ngouabi Museum was completely looted; all the collections disappeared in 1997; vandals also caused damage to the main museum building. The Regional Museums of Kinkala, Sibiti and Owando lost most of their collections during the 1997 civil war. And the National Museum of Brazzaville did not escape the law of the jungle, with looters taking away 123 ethnographical objects and a large number of historical documents.

Let us leave this painful state of affairs and see whether it is possible for museums to appeal to community responsibility and involvement in emergency preparedness and response. The answer can be in the affirmative for many reasons.

The post-war programme on the reconstruction of the Congo notes that while a museum is an institution in the service of society and of its development, the institution has an important duty to promote peace all over the world for present and future generations. The people of Congo need peace, real peace which will help them build a strong nation where girls and boys and men and women from different regions of the country and different ethnic groups turn away from ethnic discrimination to embrace "unity in cultural diversity".

Museums should become a factor in national unity, particularly in Africa where civil wars are usually caused by rivalry between tribes or ethnic discrimination. The only way for museums to achieve this goal is to develop the educational role and attract wider audiences from all levels of the community, district or group they serve. They should offer opportunities for such people to become involved in the museums and support their goals and activities. Both museums and communities have a high level of responsibility in protecting and enhancing both cultural and natural heritage.

Members of the museum profession in Africa seem to be ignorant of the ethnic tensions and conflicts in different States of the continent (e.g. Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-Kinshasa or the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Burundi and Sudan). They should explore the role of museums in promoting appropriate tools for cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation of communities.

Members of the museum profession must raise the awareness of national and local communities on the importance of museums in order to:

- establish permanent dialogue, joint work and cooperation between museums and communities. This will apply to various museum activities: organising exhibitions, the problem of illicit traffic, making optimal use of traditional knowledge for both conservation and development, and protecting cultural and natural heritage in emergency situations;
- make the community aware of its responsibility for heritage;
- study both traditional and modern techniques for safeguarding and preserving tangible heritage;
- have museums pay more attention to the protection and promotion of intangible heritage;

- compensate for the lack of appropriate national legislation in Africa protecting cultural heritage, and each country must ensure that its legislation is in harmony with neighbouring countries.

The museum, with the help of the community, should preserve the environment and local traditions as part of emergency preparedness and response. The good relations and the strong partnership between the Museum of Nkankata Croix-Koma and the local community is a fine example of community responsibility and involvement in emergency preparedness and response. (We decided to abandon our first choice which was to work on preserving the environment and local traditions in emergency preparedness and response, choosing to focus instead on community responsibility and involvement in emergency preparedness and response. We apologise for having changed the subject).

### **The Community of Nkankata and the Protection of Cultural Heritage During the 1997 Civil War**

We have been asked not to write on this subject for security reasons. The Museum of Nkankata Croix-Koma is in the Pool region which has been under military control since the 2001-2002 civil war.

### **Conclusion**

It is very important to establish permanent dialogue between museums and communities so that concrete cooperation initiatives can be developed. Communities want to know more about the role and functions of museums in society.

While a museum can have several functions, it has but one aim, that of education. Education means everything which gives an individual or group more knowledge about the world we live in, no matter how it is done. The eagerness of the community to have further and more active education is the key setting the future path for museums.

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