

# Rethinking Emergency Preparedness for Museums

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## *Resumen*

### **Replantearse la preparación ante los desastres en los museos**

*El coloquio internacional sobre la prevención y gestión de desastres que ponen en peligro el patrimonio cultural ha impulsado de manera significativa la sensibilización y responsabilidad de los profesionales de museos e instituciones dedicadas al patrimonio.*

*Además de examinar una serie de casos teóricos y prácticos, los participantes en el coloquio tuvieron la posibilidad de asistir a un simulacro de desastre –la explosión de una bomba– en el museo Salar Jung de Hyderabad, lo cual permitió que los profesionales de distintas disciplinas, allí presentes, estudiaran sobre el terreno una situación de emergencia, así como las medidas que han de adoptarse para afrontarla. El hecho de que los países de Asia y el Pacífico hayan sido víctimas en los últimos años de toda una serie de desastres debidos a los conflictos armados (Timor-Leste, Afganistán e Iraq) o las fuerzas de la naturaleza (terremotos en India e Irán, inundaciones en China y Viet Nam) justificaba aún más si cabe la celebración de un coloquio de este tipo en la región. A este respecto, es esencial destacar la importancia que reviste el proyecto interdisciplinario denominado “Museums Emergency Programme” (MEP) en el contexto de una perspectiva de protección a largo plazo de todas las formas de patrimonio material e inmaterial, mediante actividades de cooperación y coordinación entre profesionales e instituciones, realizadas en el marco de ese proyecto concebido por el ICOM.*

## *Résumé*

### **Repenser la prévention face aux situations d'urgence dans les musées**

*Le colloque international sur la prévention et la gestion des catastrophes menaçant le patrimoine culturel a impulsé un élan de sensibilisation et de responsabilisation significatif de la part des professionnels des musées et du patrimoine.*

*Outre les études de cas théoriques et pratiques, une mise en situation a été organisée au sein du musée Salar Jung : l'explosion d'une bombe. Cet exercice a permis aux participants de profils professionnels variés de bénéficier d'une expérience de terrain face à une situation d'urgence et d'étudier les mesures à mettre en place.*

*La région Asie-Pacifique a connu ces dernières années de nombreuses catastrophes liées aux conflits armés (Timor-Est, Irak, Afghanistan) et aux aléas de la nature (tremblements de terre en Inde et en Iran, inondations en Chine et au Vietnam), renforçant ainsi la légitimité de cette conférence. Dans ce contexte, il est primordial de souligner l'interdisciplinarité du projet intitulé “Museums Emergency Programme” (MEP) dans le cadre d'une*

*perspective de protection à long terme du patrimoine matériel et immatériel, sous toutes ses formes, dans un processus de coopération et de coordination entre professionnels et institutions.*

The professional field of emergency preparedness to protect cultural property is in urgent need of critical examination so that the capacity building programmes can be made more relevant and applicable in the 21st century. Recent disasters such as earthquakes, armed conflicts, floods, fires and burglaries have demonstrated across the world that new approaches to prevention and preparedness have become imperative. We should continue to strive to minimise the impacts and develop appropriate training, infrastructure and responses. The Hyderabad conference is an important step by the professional stakeholders towards that end.

This conference was originally planned to be held in Gandhi Nagar in the State of Gujarat in western India which had experienced several calamities in recent times, ranging from earthquakes to communal disturbances that have had a major negative impact on cultural heritage resources. However, due to logistics, the event has been organised in Hyderabad. The support of the Indian Government, the State Government of Andhra Pradesh, the Salar Jung Museum and the National Institute for Security Assistance is gratefully appreciated.

The structure of the conference programme has been negotiated from the perspective of workers in the field who need to address everyday concerns and realities. In the lead-up to the conference it was felt in the Asia Pacific region that much in the current curricula for training is developed from an academic and western institutional point of view, with assumptions of an ideal situation for emergency response. It was also considered that capacity building assumes the kind of infrastructure support that is taken for granted in countries with large economies and budgets. There is a certain naiveté in current training programmes. To shift the paradigm in current thinking, the conference called for a diverse range of papers from people who have firsthand experience in dealing with museum and heritage emergencies.

In addition to theoretical and practical case studies, the programme included a well planned mock exercise that gave several participants from administrative, academic and heritage backgrounds first-hand experience of the logistics required during an emergency and the measures needed to be ready for an emergency. The majority of participants confirmed that it had been an outstanding experience and that they had never taken part in a mock exercise carried out in such detail and with such an impact on their own learning experience.

The Director of the National Emergency Training Centre, Shri P. Krishna Reddy, and the Director of the Salar Jung Museum, Dr. A.K.V.S. Reddy and their staff organised a carefully planned mock exercise involving a bomb explosion inside the Salar Jung Museum. A temporary gallery was constructed for the exercise. The emergency services of the city of Hyderabad were brought into full action to respond to the emergency that was created. The event has had a huge impact and no other

museum conference in India has received such extensive attention. Media coverage was in four different languages and several formats. In fact, one newspaper reported the event as featuring a real bomb explosion.

The outcomes of the conference have several implications for future directions in building the capacity of museum and heritage personnel in emergency preparedness. In this respect, the organisation of the conference in the Asia Pacific Region by ICOM has been of particular significance. We have experienced at least three major armed conflicts in the past three years: in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan; devastating earthquakes in Gujarat, India, and Bam, Iran; plus several major floods in China and Vietnam. Large-scale illicit traffic in cultural property has also reached emergency proportions with disastrous consequences for the cultural diversity of the heritage of the region. I sincerely hope that the international professional community, and especially partners involved in the MEP programme, will make their efforts relevant to the realities in the field. Some of the concerns that need to be considered, in addition to the general approach of the MEP programme, are summarised below.

One of the first steps to be undertaken is a critical review of the existing training materials, case studies and curricula. This will only be useful if it applies best practices in social research methods, going beyond conventional survey formats. It is now well-recognised that the cultural translation of what has been taught into cross-cultural contexts will only work if it is embedded in the diversity of the world and localized realities. The latest Human Development Report from the UNDP recognises that all developmental concerns need to include culture in all its diversity as an integral part of local area planning to facilitate sustainable development. Museum emergency preparedness will only be successful if it moves away from the conventional hegemonic framework to one that is developmental and reorients the discourses of sustainable heritage development.

The interdisciplinary nature of the Museums Emergency Programme process needs to be recognised. In an emergency, movable and immovable heritage resources in all forms have to be protected, irrespective of any institutional and professional division of responsibilities. Moreover, studies of the earthquakes in Bam and Gujarat have shown that the loss concerns not only tangible heritage resources, but also the loss of intangible heritage resources through death, displacement and loss of the means of passing on heritage values. Field experience in Gujarat shows that centuries-old craft traditions have been virtually destroyed. In response, the Indian Government has taken emergency measures to rehabilitate some of the famous textile traditions, providing infrastructure and material support for artisans and crafts people. It is clear that the kind of cooperation and collective effort of the Blue Shield Committee is needed to make Museums Emergency Programme a productive and meaningful exercise.

Following through with an audit, the whole museum emergency preparedness process requires cooperation and coordination. My own personal experience in two emergency situations involving landslides and floods demonstrated the challenges faced by museum and heritage personnel to work in sync with emergency services and other civil society

institutions. The cross-sectorial and critical nature of operations under duress requires preparedness that is yet to be adequately addressed in the heritage industry. Such efforts need to be coordinated with local and supra-local emergency services through an ability to engage across a range of operational services. The mock exercise at the Salar Jung Museum was a good example of this critical requirement.

Leadership should be a major concern for the museum emergency preparedness. One of the major criticisms encountered in the Asia Pacific region is that leadership in emergency preparedness is poorly addressed. The mock exercise in the Salar Jung Museum demonstrated the significance of reconciling the leadership conflict between the incident commander and the director of emergency services. The curriculum for the exercise was deliberately planned to highlight the challenge. An overview of emergency response in recent times in Asia Pacific shows that often the hierarchical nature of bureaucracy and its ability to engage with those who have the capability to respond in emergency situations is a major concern. The MEP programme needs to locate the kind of leadership culture required to apply the curricula; it needs to translate relevant modules into effective training and systematic programming with clear measurable learning outcomes.

The majority of the museum and heritage emergency training programmes reviewed show little understanding of the importance of psychographics and demographics in an emergency. Training programmes need to be contextualised and emergency preparedness should be relevant to the stakeholder population. The question of the relevance of current training programmes is a major concern, as they are often held under ideal conditions, far from the realities out in the field.

Resourcefulness is another major issue. The imperatives and indicators of sustainable development require emergency training to take into consideration the social ecology of heritage conservation and community engagement is required for efficient application. Maximizing on local or community-grounded wisdom during emergencies requires a capacity based on a range of cross-cultural skills. It is a truism to say that museums have been learning to be community-centred, shifting from an object-centred position. The shift has been fraught with challenges yet to be adequately understood and addressed. Local knowledge systems, which have the wisdom of centuries of observation and response, are extremely useful. Emergency planning is both a strategy and process. Training programmes tend to emphasize clinical planning and consider the process of community engagement as secondary.

This community engagement means being able to work in multicultural environments where the ability to act in relevant ways is critical. A search for such engagement in the current training literature shows inadequate understanding of the real issues; most trainers have a technical background, including conservators who often provide disaster preparedness training, with inadequate capacity to engage in a community context.

The planning and organisation of the conference demonstrated the poor quality of databases and knowledge of case studies across the world. Networking together with the quality of participation in professional

activities from critical emergency agencies is a major concern. A considerable amount of research is required even to locate case studies by the members of the professional bodies. As emergency preparedness has become a popular line in consultancy business, it was difficult to extract relevant information from different agencies. MEP should ensure the commercial-in-confidence nature of emergency preparedness case study materials and training materials need to be more readily available. Mention is often made of train the trainer programmes which should be incorporated into museum and heritage emergency training programmes. The ability to facilitate learning outcomes based on informed knowledge, skills and attitudes requires a team approach. However, most training programmes conducted at a national or regional level involve institutional participants not able to deliver the multiplier effect so critical for the dissemination of training outcomes within the museums concerned and their associated emergency services. This is often because of the small number of employees and the lack of delegation for making decisions affecting their place of work. Several countries in the Asia Pacific region provide training, but employees move on to other positions, leaving the institutions vulnerable, without adequately trained personnel. Effective, successful planning and the integration of emergency preparedness in the corporate culture of museums and heritage agencies are of critical importance.

Developmental literature shows that case studies and demonstration projects provide excellent resource materials for capacity building. Hence the emphasis in this conference is on case studies from a variety of emergency contexts. Such case studies need to be developed within a pedagogical framework. Templates are needed and should be interrogated and translated into a local application process for the individualised reality of museum and heritage institutions. MEP needs to develop case study approaches that are not mono-cultural or mono-contextual but rather multi-purpose, multi-contextual and multicultural.

In conclusion I would like to emphasise that Museums Emergency Programme offers a wonderful opportunity for us to rethink our way of doing things to protect cultural heritage resources. Such rethinking needs fresh inputs and applications. It also means retraining trainers and consultants who have been delivering training programmes. The organisers of the Hyderabad Conference have provided an excellent experience to facilitate this process. The proceedings of the conference are only a beginning to make the current emergency programmes relevant, efficient and accountable. The success of the MEP programme will depend on the extent to which it is driven and developed from those places in the world through real experience and professionals who have had their fingers in the dirt dealing with actual museum and heritage emergencies.