



Libraries and the Paris Agreement

An Overview of Connections and Contributions, 2 December 2019

Starting today, governments, experts and activists from around the world will be meeting in Madrid for the 25th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)) better known as [COP25](#).

In line with the [Paris Agreement](#), they will be assessing progress, and discussing how best to meet the goals of raising ambition to tackle climate change, promote adaptation, accelerate mitigation efforts, and reduce loss and damage.

As was clear when the Paris Agreement was signed by Heads of State and Government, efforts to address climate change need to engage not only all ministries, but also all stakeholders. This of course includes libraries.

The Heritage Contribution to Climate Action

Fortunately, there are already comprehensive efforts in the broader cultural heritage sector to reflect on the different ways in which the work of professionals and institutions connects with the Paris Agreement, and the contributions they can make.

Leading the way has been the International Council on Museums and Sites (ICOMOS), which in July of this year published an overview of how the heritage sector could engage in climate action: [‘The Future of Our Pasts’](#).

This shares a number of useful essays setting out how heritage can be an asset for climate action, how heritage can intersect with climate science, the role of good conservation practice, and how equity and ethical questions come into play.

Four Priorities

The report then runs through the four Climate Action Priorities included in the Paris Agreement, and outlines how, in each case, action by heritage actors can make a difference.

First of all, **High Ambition** refers to the need to motivate and mobilise governments and others to take the steps necessary to address climate change. The situation of heritage sites and practices can help concentrate attention on the effects of global warming, bringing it to life for people, while professionals in the sector can help highlight good practices and show that a response is possible.

Secondly, **Adaptation** concerns efforts to cope with those impacts of climate change which are already inevitable given emissions to date. In addition to efforts to ensure that adaptation activities also protect heritage (both tangible and intangible), the knowledge in the heritage sector can serve both to support decision-making and planning, and help with monitoring of the effectiveness of policies.

Thirdly, there is the parallel obligation to define and carry out **Mitigation** activities in order to limit global temperature rises overall. Greater efficiency in the built heritage sector, the application of



appropriate practices, and visible leadership can all help. Collecting and sharing information about effective approaches, including those based on indigenous knowledge, also plays a key role in better decision-making.

Finally, the limitation of **Loss and Damage** covers not only adaptation efforts aimed at avoiding the irreversible destruction of heritage, but also how the heritage sector can help communities facing major changes to retain as much as possible, as well as the bonds and sense of identity that build social capital.

Across these, it is clear that there are strong synergies in what libraries and other heritage actors can do. Often housed in heritage buildings, or offering ideal spaces for storytelling and community building, the lessons of the ICOMOS report are directly applicable. Indeed, libraries may be able to learn much from the planners and architects who supported its production.

Where libraries have a particular role will be around the documentation, collection, organisation, and use of information around all aspects of climate action, from creating the motivation, through adaptation and mitigation to reducing destruction and loss.

In annex, you will find more detail about the individual types of action that fall under each Priority, and suggestions on how libraries contribute on each. Clearly the ICOMOS Report provides a much fuller overview of the issues, and should be a first step for anyone wanting to think more about how our institutions can play a role in discussions around COP and beyond.

Conclusion

The ICOMOS document is a rich one that offers many valuable lessons for anyone in the library field looking to think about how our institutions can play their part in climate action. It is also a stimulus to think about what more libraries can do, drawing on their unique role in collecting, preserving, organising and giving access to information.

Hopefully, on the basis of this paper, there can be deeper discussions around what libraries – individually and collectively – can do to deliver on our responsibilities under the Paris Agreement.

The work of those members of the library community focused on sustainability – not least IFLA's own Environment, Sustainability and Libraries Special Interest Group – will have a key role to play in delivering on this potential.

ANNEX: THE ICOMOS MAPPING EXERCISE, AND RELEVANCE FOR LIBRARIES

1) High Ambition

The first Priority is to create the motivation for action in the first place. With some denying climate change outright, and many others simply unwilling to change, it is necessary to build a sense of urgency.

- 1.1) Heritage Places and Climate Communication:** the ICOMOS report highlights the potential of heritage to create possibilities to tell stories about climate change which help convince of the need for action. With a well-recognised role as places for story-telling and discussion, this is a role that libraries are well-suited to take on.
- 1.2) Heritage, Research and Climate Science:** ICOMOS underlines that heritage sites can provide excellent sites for observing climate change at work, including from a historical perspective. To this, libraries bring their own collections, including, for example older texts that may contain observations about landscapes and weather patterns. Moreover, of course, research libraries provide the backbone for modern-day climate science, while public libraries are increasingly acting as centres for citizen science.
- 1.3) Climate Change, Heritage and Education:** through clear explanations and story-telling, as highlighted, ICOMOS notes how heritage can become a tool for education. Libraries provide an excellent site for education, using both their own collections and materials from elsewhere.
- 1.4) Integration of Cultural Heritage Management with Climate Science in Policy Development:** ICOMOS underlines the need also to make sure that there is understanding and readiness amongst policy-makers to integrate cultural and heritage concerns into their action. Libraries are well-placed to help with this, both through research and university libraries bringing together research from different disciplines, as well as the government and parliamentary libraries which look to ensure that decision-making is well-informed.

2) Adaptation

The second priority is to ensure we are as well prepared as possible for those impacts of climate change which are already inevitable, reducing both tangible and less tangible costs.

- 2.1) Values-Based Approaches and People-Centred, Participatory Governance:** the ICOMOS report underlines that for adaptation efforts to be most effective, it is important that they take account of what people value and see as significant. The universal, democratic nature of libraries makes them a potentially effective place for discussions about value, while their collections can help build efforts to understand cultural and social as well as economic significance of sites and collections.
- 2.2) Using the Data Collection Aspects of Heritage to Support Effective Adaptation:** ICOMOS underlines the potential of heritage sites and landscapes to act as sources of baseline data, for example concerning agriculture, risk factors, or tourism. Libraries of course not only host collections which contain much relevant data, but are increasingly developing their capacity to store and organise data for the benefit of researchers.

- 2.3) Using Heritage Monitoring to Support Effective Adaptation:** linked to the gathering of baseline data, heritage sites can also provide great observatories of the effectiveness of adaptation actions. ICOMOS also underlines the potential of citizen science, drawing on the interest and energy of individuals to help. Libraries are already developing expertise in citizen science, and have the potential to serve as sites for monitoring a variety of trends.
- 2.4) Harnessing Heritage as an Asset for Climate Change Adaptation:** the ICOMOS report underlines that traditional (heritage) ways of managing land can represent a source of ideas for how to adapt in future, for example in response to significant changes. Libraries are often the institutions that hold this sort of information, and are improving their focus on traditional knowledge, which may hold key ideas for supporting future adaptation.
- 2.5) Sharing Good Practice Examples:** linked to the above, there is strong scope for heritage professionals to share their experiences and ideas with others. Libraries, as a pre-existing network focused on sharing information, can support the collection and sharing of this knowledge.
- 2.6) The Role of Heritage in Supporting Disaster Risk Reduction:** while efforts to reduce the risk of disasters on heritage have existed for some time, it will be important to ensure that these interact with climate change adaptation planning. Libraries can both benefit from such efforts, and help ensure joined-up decision-making in governments.
- 2.7) Adaptation Planning for Heritage – Policy and Actions:** the Paris Agreement calls for the creation of ‘Adaptation Pathways’, in order to think clearly and holistically about actions to be taken. The ICOMOS report suggests that heritage considerations should be taken into account in these, both as something to be protected, and a source of strength. Libraries are of course part of the heritage to be protected as far as possible, but again, as repositories of data can inform the best possible decision-making.
- 2.8) Coordination of Heritage Adaptation within Wider Policies:** connected to the planning point above, the ICOMOS report also highlights the value of exchange and learning between policies at different levels, in order to ensure coordination and sharing of good practices. Again, this is an area where research and government libraries have the potential to make a major contribution.
- 2.9) Managing Change:** it may of course not be possible to save everything, and policy-makers and heritage professionals will need to make clear the choices being made. Libraries are affected by this obligation, but also through preserving records of what risks being lost, also help to ensure that key heritage is not forgotten.
- 2.10) Uncertainty:** the ICOMOS report underlines that predictions and projections are far from perfect, and recommends a readiness to be flexible. It also argues that gaps in understanding should be identified – something where library-supported research can help.
- 2.11) Costs and Benefits of Adaptation Activities:** in order to support decision-making, full information about the benefits and disadvantages of different courses of action is

necessary. This implies using knowledge from various sources and disciplines – something that libraries can be well suited to achieve.

- 2.12) Existing Management and Conservation Methods and Approaches May Need to Change:** evolutions may be needed not only in the wider world, but also in the heritage professions. In some cases, conservation techniques may need to be strengthened, in others abandoned because of their impact on the climate. The same lessons may be valuable within the library field, and of course libraries will be at the centre of efforts to document history as a priority.
- 2.13) Existing Barriers to Adaptive Management of Heritage that May Limit Attempts to Address Climate Change:** as in any sector, a failure to explain changes and actions may lead to resistance. Libraries can provide an excellent place for open dialogue around adaptation actions, and to lead to acceptance.
- 2.14) Sustainability:** the ICOMOS report underlines the value of the concept of sustainability in making the connection with the SDGs, amongst other things, and argues that the heritage sector should be clearer about how historic buildings and practices can be beneficial for the long-term. Libraries can contribute both through their own practices, and of course through supporting the research which demonstrates sustainability.

3) Mitigation

The need for adaptation activities will, in part, be determined by how successful we are in reducing CO₂ emissions in the first place. The more we can do to limit global temperature rises, the better. Heritage actors have a role to play in this.

- 3.1) Living Sustainably:** the ICOMOS report underlines that heritage can both be a source of good ideas and practices, notably through traditional knowledge and approaches that focus on the long-term. It underlines the value of documenting and interpreting these in particular – an obvious role for libraries, which of course also reduce consumption by allowing for the sharing of books.
- 3.2) Carbon Mitigation Through Demand-Side Measures: Built Environment:** ICOMOS shares extensive reflections on how the heritage building sector can both improve its own environmental performance through techniques and practices, as well as pointing out that this expertise can support wider efforts to assess sustainability. Libraries themselves are often housed in historic buildings, and can certainly do their part in reducing emissions and aiding research.
- 3.3) Carbon Mitigation Through Demand Side Management in Agriculture, Land Use and Other Sectors:** just as in the case of adaptation, heritage can be a major source of ideas for how best to use land and energy, as well as for transport, industry and cities. The knowledge held by indigenous and traditional communities, if respected and put to use, can make a major contribution. Once again, libraries' role as centres for information and enablers of sharing makes them key players here.
- 3.4) Heritage and Carbon Dioxide Removal:** techniques such as carbon capture and storage are likely to play an important part in mitigation efforts by taking CO₂ out if the

atmosphere. ICOMOS underlines that while some heritage activities (traditional farming and forest management) may help, others (peat harvesting) may not. It will also be important to ensure that wider carbon removal actions do not cause needless harm to heritage. Libraries, and research libraries in particular, can bring together the knowledge necessary to understand effective ways forwards.

- 3.5) **Carbon Mitigation Through Supply-Side Measures: Renewable Energy:** supporting green forms of energy generation plays a key role, but often faces resistance when this appears to conflict with heritage values. The ICOMOS report underlines the need to work with the heritage sector to respect these values and encourage uptake, including through electrification of heritage sites, and making use of traditional knowledge. Once again, libraries' own energy choices can make a difference here, as can the research that they support.
- 3.6) **Cultural Tourism:** ICOMOS underlines that while tourism can be a major source of emissions, it can also serve to educate people about the impacts of climate change, as well as provide a vital livelihood to communities which may have few other sources of revenue. It suggests producing further guidance on the ethical dimensions of cultural tourism, in order to meet concerns. Libraries themselves can be tourist destinations in themselves, and again support education.
- 3.7) **Heritage Sector as Driver of Mitigation Ambitions:** echoing the first Priority, the heritage sector can serve to increase ambition on mitigation by leading the way, both in practice and communication. Libraries too of course can play their part by acting as showcases for new approaches, and highlighting these in their engagement with wider processes.

4) Loss and Damage

The ICOMOS report gives particular attention to this dimension of the Paris Agreement, which incorporates prior work from 2013 (the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage). This of course overlaps to some extent with adaptation efforts, but this focus it possible to explore issues in more depth which are of particular relevance to the heritage sector.

- 4.1) **Slow Onset Events:** first of all, ICOMOS looks at the impact of gradual changes, such as land degradation, ocean acidification and rising temperatures. It suggests that a key challenge is to look at which objects, buildings and landscapes may be most at risk, and that citizen science can help in monitoring impacts. Given how vulnerable paper and other materials can be, libraries are already playing close attention to changes in their collections, and identifying where threats are most serious.
- 4.2) **Non-Economic Issues:** the ICOMOS report reminds us that the UN highlights the need to bear in mind the social and cultural impacts of climate-related events, going beyond pure financial calculations, and notes that existing work in the heritage sector can help understand these costs. The role of libraries in building social capital and community is increasingly well recognised, while through supporting research, again, they can help find new ways of measuring and demonstrating value.
- 4.3) **Comprehensive Risk Management Approaches:** there is plenty of scope both to integrate risk management into heritage practices, as well as incorporating heritage into wider risk

management plans at all levels. The identification of risks, the sharing of experiences, and the mobilisation of indigenous knowledge can all help. Libraries of course benefit from comprehensive risk-management practices and as repositories of information and data which can support more effective approaches.

- 4.4) Migration, Displacement and Human Mobility:** climate change will inevitably force some groups to choose between leaving their traditional homes and disaster. Before, during and after displacement, ICOMOS underlines, heritage actors can play a key role in limiting the trauma and loss associated with such movements. Libraries can be key players both in ensuring preservation of materials about natural and built heritage at risk of loss, but can also engage in helping ensure the survival of intangible heritage. Furthermore, their potential to act as community centres can create opportunities to ensure that community bonds remain, as far as possible, intact.
- 4.5) Action and Support:** finally, ICOMOS underlines that the experience of the heritage sector can motivate and inform actions elsewhere to reduce loss and damage, including in small and developing countries. Libraries of course too contribute to this work in general, as well as developing capacity-building efforts across borders through organisations such as IFLA.