

Museums and community involvement:
A case study of community collaborative initiatives
- National Museums of Kenya

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Abstract

Most museums in the world have been transformed and taken communities as partners in their programmes and activities. This new approach has created a favorable working condition between museums and communities as museums are about people and created by the people themselves. However, introducing participatory management depends on the museum's commitment. This requires time and resources to develop: to develop consensus among stakeholders; to establish new institutional arrangements; to ensure appropriate rules and incentives for local involvement, and to build organizational capacity at the local level. In this paper, community engagement is taken in the context of 'active partners and participants (herein referred to as community involvement)'. A community refers to a group of people with ethnic bonds that are linked into a unit with a common cultural identity, defined by racial origins, religion, nationality or tribal affiliation.

This paper begins by examining principles which guide museum professionals while engaging communities in their programmes. These include principles of prior rights, honesty, traditional guardianship, full participation, full disclosure, confidentiality, respect, active protection of their knowledge, compensation and equitable sharing of resources. Next it presents case studies from Kenya and in particular the National Museums of Kenya engaging the local communities in activities taking into account the community's diverse cultures, environments, and traditional practices. In this context, community engagement is a process whereby members of a community participate directly in decision making in museum programmes and activities.

This paper also give some suggestions on how to 'build bridges' between museums and communities, to provide an opportunity for the people living in such communities to find out about their own heritage and to help them realize that it is through their active participation in museum activities that heritage is kept alive.

Keywords: Museums, Community, Involvement, National Museums of Kenya

Introduction

As mentioned before, this paper will analyze how and why community involvement in museums is an important factor in bridging the gap and improving relationship between the two institutions. The social inclusion leads to trust, understanding, a sense of identity, and creating a museum that is more relevant to the community.

Museologists have for quite sometime been trying to answer some of the following questions: How should the museums and communities relate? What do museums and communities have to offer each other? When and how should the museums and communities work together? What should be put in place to ensure that relationship between museums and communities is healthy?

The museum must create its base in the community, i.e. work with the local community to expand the operation base of the museums and become more relevant. The museum managers should understand the community they are serving and at the same time have roots in the local community or, at least, identifiable links with it. When a museum brings a community on board, and in all manner of interactions with indigenous people, and in accessing community resources, the museum should at all time endeavour to the highest levels of moral principles of consistency and honesty. This is done by fully respecting the community's traditions, recognition and acknowledgement of their contribution to a museum's development and at all times to act in good faith and for the common good of all the stakeholders. In recognizing the inherent value of community contribution, museums should at all times endeavour to reciprocate that contribution, to enable the communities share in the benefits.

The concept of community involvement is supported by various scholars and museum professionals. One such scholar is Alpha

Oumar Konare (former president of Mali and now Chairman of the African Union Commission of the African Union), who says, "It is with the leaders of our villages, of our cultural tradition that we have to work with to find the solution." This implies that museums can change their perceptions and have new models, to meet their challenges through community involvement. Therefore, through community partnership the museum will have a perception on 'which and how' community issues should be addressed.

A community is a group of people living within the same geographical area, sharing certain characteristics and common interests, values, customs and beliefs. A museum community consists of people who visit the museum, live and work in its vicinity, are stakeholders to it, or have donated or have collections within the museum. Engagement is the level of involvement in museum activities in the areas of ideas, material and in-kind contributions, publicity, communications and exhibitions as provided for within the museum policy.

The community involvement concept is important because a community has shared common characteristics, aspects and attributes. Museums play an important role as custodians of a cultural heritage. They, however, have an added responsibility to assist national and civic governments as well as the civil society in responding to community and societal problems and developmental needs. The relevance and strength of a museum should lie in its ability to respond to the needs of its community and contribution to solving societal problems. Community involvement enables museums to get access to the community and becomes sustainable through feedback, ideas, views, new insights and relevance.

One way to involve the community in museum activities is through heritage conservation and management programmes. There are two levels the communities can get

involved, either (i) a museum taking the initiative and moving closer to the people on the ground and work together in the heritage programmes, or (ii) where the local community comes to a museum space and display their heritage through exhibitions and performing arts.

There are various advantages when museums involve the community in its heritage conservation programmes. For instance: a) promotes a participatory approach - the community will be directly involved in making decisions, decide on the use of resources thus accruing direct benefits from their involvement; b) sustainability purposes - unless the community is directly involved in museum programmes, it becomes difficult to sustain such programmes; c) ownership - when museums involve communities, they can claim ownership of their heritage; d) for capacity building - by training the local people they are equipped with skills to manage museums programmes at the local level; e) creates awareness of the importance and value of their culture.

Today, most of the museums have shifted their focus and policies in order to bridge the gap between the museums and local communities. But the thorny issue has always been how to effectively involve the community and maintain the relationship? Museologists suggest that museums can contribute positively to the development of communities by eradicating poverty and empowering them economically.

Community involvement strategies- National Museums of Kenya

National Museums of Kenya is a statutory body empowered by the National Museums Act chapter 216 and the Antiquities and Monuments Act chapter 215 of the laws of Kenya to oversee all cultural heritage sites in Kenya (1983). The same acts confer authority to the same state body to protect sites and monuments of both national and international

importance. In application of this Act, the National Museum of Kenya has on several occasions been caught in conflict with the communities it is supposed to serve. As a national institution, the National Museums of Kenya has tried to involve local communities in various activities ranging from employment in regional museums to involvement of community members in archaeological excavation, building conservation, to community projects aimed at eradicating poverty (Abungu, 1998).

The National Museums of Kenya has since its inception been inviting the local communities to participate in its activities. However, due to the changing role of museums, the trend has changed and the museum is now 'visiting' the communities through various programmes at a community level. To actively involve the community in its programmes, the National Museums of Kenya created the Public Programmes and the Research Divisions. Under the Public Programs division we have the Education, Exhibition, Public Relations, Marketing Departments and the Directorate of Regional Museums Sites and Monuments. These are the support departments of the National Museum of Kenya, and they promote and market the institutions programs to the public and the local communities. The Research Division comprises the Natural and Social Science research departments which undertake research and collection management. Through these divisions, the National Museum of Kenya has initiated several programmes that directly involve the community.

Through its education programmes the museum is able to reach the public, teachers and students. This is achieved through National Museum Kenya's outreach programmes where the museum is more or less taken to the people. These programmes are meant to assist the local community to develop and sustain pride in their numerous

historical, cultural and natural heritage starting at primary level. In this, the department of Education runs a continuous series of lecture films, tours and courses at the museums, in schools and colleges. The outdoor activities involve a participatory approach where students are involved in cultural or research activities such as drama, dances, poetry recital among others.

The National Museum of Kenya plays a major role in curriculum development and providing educational services to the public who visit various departments. A number of schools visit the museum every year for lectures and hands on experience activities. For example, the Education Department through its interactive programme is involved with young people in popularizing science through interactive learning using museum specimens. The programme is for children between the ages 8 and 13 who come every month to work with museum researchers behind the scenes in museum departments and laboratories. Through this programmes the National Museum of Kenya has also identified the weaknesses of the education services within the country, especially at lower levels where students are perceived as listeners. This issue is being addressed through workshops for primary schools teachers to develop their skills and to promote analytical teaching. This provides students with the ability to be analytical in their approach to learning. The interactive approach therefore gives benefit of the various communities.

The National Museums of Kenya has also extended its services to the less able members of the society whereby a number of programmes involving the street children in Nairobi have been carried out. One of these involved engaging the street children in painting and carving, photography and subsequently exhibiting the end products within the museum. The Education department has also successfully organized

school competitions in art and essay writing, traditional dances, songs and poetry recitals, all acting as a communication link between the museum and the people.

In the NMK structure, there are Regional Museums spread throughout the country and developed to cater for specific needs of various communities. These regional museums include: Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Kisumu Museum, Meru Museum, Kitale Museum, Kapenguria Museum, Hyrax Museum and Lamu Museum.

Every year during the celebration of the International Museum Day, there is free admission to the National Museum of Kenya including Regional Museums, aimed at encouraging the public and local communities to participate in museum activities. This has brought the museum closer to the general public through hands-on learning of different museum activities. For example, at the coastal Kenya (Lamu), the museum hosts an annual dhow (traditional sailing boat) race and painting competition, events that are used to explain to the public the museum's activities.

In most of the Regional Museums including the Nairobi Museum, the National Museum of Kenya has constructed homesteads of some peoples of Kenya. These have become spaces where various communities come and revive the past through dances, and songs, on particular days of the year. The traditional homesteads also provide knowledge on the African architecture and how the African societies were organized. This kind of presentation is quite valuable, especially to those who have less access to rural life.

The regional museums focus on different issues: For example, Lamu Museum which is situated along the Indian Ocean, represents material culture and local history of the coastal people; the Meru Museum in eastern Kenya focuses on cultural and agricultural development, with special exhibits such as beekeeping; the Kisumu Museum illustrates

cultural and natural history of the western region; while the Nairobi Museum (the main museum), give general representation of natural sciences, prehistory and ethnography. In addition, all these museums have very active and vibrant public programmes, especially on education.

In Lamu Museum, the activities involve outreach education programmes to remote areas, involving film shows, education programmes using cast pieces and slide shows. The museum has also developed a traveling library, where museum education officers move from school to school with reading material. This is a good service to the disadvantaged communities in this remote part of the country.

Similarly, in Lamu and Mombasa, the National Museums of Kenya has joined forces with the community to conserve the built heritage of the towns. This has been done through among other things, rigorous education campaigns, public participation and joint participation programmes such as the Swahili Cultural Centre that strives to revive and develop the dying traditional crafts of the coastal Swahili people. In all these, the Education Department has formed a central part of the organization to inform and educate the public and ensure that the museum's message is passed on and the community sees these activities as their own.

The National Museum of Kenya realized the important role communities play in the preservation of cultural and natural heritage through their observation of traditional cultural practices, which is guided by their indigenous knowledge and folklore. Considering that Indigenous Knowledge is developed and maintained by communities within a nation, and that it represents an important part of the living cultural heritage, the Museum established the Kenya Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (KENRIK) in 1992. The centre was created to research on and provides a resource for indigenous

knowledge. Through research and documentation, the centre aims at preserving and maintaining knowledge and practices of indigenous and local communities in Kenya, embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

To link the National Museums of Kenya and communities in biodiversity conservation several programmes have been initiated in close collaboration with local communities. These include:

-Conservation of cultural landscapes

Cultural landscapes, and in particular, sacred forests are important components of local peoples' culture and history - serving as places for appeasing the spirits in the event of looming calamities, sacrificing for rain, peace making and conducting certain traditional rites. By virtue of the respect accorded to them, sacred sites have been left undamaged and therefore act as refuge sites for plants and animals. In realizing their cultural and biological value, the National Museums of Kenya, has initiated programmes aimed at conserving sacred landscapes in Kenya in collaboration with local communities. Through this programme several sacred landscapes have been given legal status under the custodian of the local communities. Three units at the National Museums of Kenya have been actively involved; the Coastal Forests Conservation Unit (CFCU), the Directorate of Regional Museums, Sites and Monuments (DRMSM) and the Kenya Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (KENRIK).

-Conservation of the bottle gourd diversity in Kenya:

In 2001, the National Museums of Kenya teamed up with a local community - Kamba of eastern Kenya, to conserve the diversity of bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), locally known as *Kitete* and its associated

Indigenous Knowledge (IK). The project was initiated to create awareness, increase cultivation, documentation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge associated with the bottle gourd. The bottle gourd is grown to produce a great variety of traditional containers used by local communities and is also consumed as food. Its use and value in recent times has been greatly undermined by the use of plastic and other related manufactured containers. This has caused an erosion of local knowledge, therefore threatening the local varieties of the gourd with extinction. Kamba culture is intertwined with the bottle gourd and therefore loss of its knowledge and the species means the loss of the key items of the Kamba culture.

-Kipepeo butterfly farm:

The National Museum of Kenya is also engaged in economic activities within rural communities such as pupae (butterfly) breeding and export. The Kipepeo butterfly farm Project was set up in 1993 to help farmers earn money from the nearby Arabuko-Sokoke Forest - Gede Museum. Farmers who live next to the forest collect butterfly larvae (caterpillars). The farmers raise the caterpillars on leaves on forest trees and when the caterpillars change into pupae (the resting stage in the life of a butterfly), the farmers sell the pupae to Kipepeo project. The Project then ships the pupae to live butterfly displays in Europe and North America. This is a good example of a museum utilizing the community's natural heritage for the well being of the surrounding communities.

-Kaya Kinondo Ecotourism project:

As the state agency responsible for the management of national heritage, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) - Coastal Forest Conservation Unit (CFCU) in partnership with the local community has initiated ecotourism programmes to conserve

and utilize the kaya sacred forests along the southern coast of Kenya. The initiatives are aimed at reviving traditional knowledge and practices, and enable the local community to have access to alternative economic livelihoods that don't exploit the sacred forests. One such initiative is the *Kaya Kinondo Ecotourism project* which was started in 2001 and is working with communities to develop culturally sensitive tourism activities. For example the local guides conduct tours of the kaya forests, educating visitors about the forest's medicinal plants and the traditional practices of the community. Entry fees charged aid schools and other community projects, and women's groups operate a craft market besides the ecotourism activity.

In conclusion, activities that involve communities demonstrate the role of museums on the issue of culture and development. Rather than being confined to a defined museum space, it goes beyond the traditional boundary to look at issues such as poverty reduction, conflict resolution, conservation of building heritage, community participation, tourism and which is all done within the community context and community space. It can also be noted that communities should be involved from the planning stage of any museum activities that require community input and not the community to come in as a substitute. This creates a sense of trust between museums and communities. Museums should also have clear vision of what it is expected to deliver and promote new ideas and strategies to meet the community needs and not clinging to the past. Lastly, any museum should not operate like a 'foreign' institution in the midst of local communities with little significance to the communities it serves. The public and the community will always demand quality products and question the relevance of its museums.

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About the author

Mr. Jacob Mhando Nyangila was born in Kenya thirty seven years ago. He undertook his education (primary and high school) in Kenya. He joined the prestigious University of Nairobi in 1990 where he graduated in 1993 with an honourable degree in Anthropology. In 1997, Mr. Mhando joined the National Museum of Kenya - Kenya Resource Centre for Indigenous Knowledge (KENRIK) Department as Research Scientist, a position he holds now. In 2005, he got a scholarship to undertake further studies in Heritage Management at the University of Nairobi, Institute of African Studies. Mr. Mhando studied among others: Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Community Involvement, Management of Museums and Heritage Institutions, Principles of Conservation and Project Design for Museum Development.

Mr. Mhando has spent more than ten years in research and documentation of Indigenous Knowledge in Kenya. Among the programmes he has initiated addressing the relationship between museums and communities include: Conservation and management of sacred/cultural sites by local communities; Research on biodiversity-related aspects of culture and language, a participatory process where local communities map aspects of their own culture; and research on safeguarding endangered oral traditions focusing on endangered cultures in East Africa. Mr. Mhando has also published papers in relation to his work and includes, the Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Conservation and Management of Heritage, *The African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, Vol. 4, Issue 1. 2005. He has traveled widely attending workshops, seminars and conferences where he has presented his works.