

COSIMENA Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa**Cultural Heritage****“Cultural Heritage and Museology”****27-29 November 2020****LONG REPORT**

Within the scope of COSIMENA (Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa), the DAAD Egypt in cooperation with The German Archaeological Institute Cairo, organized a mini-conference on “Cultural Heritage and Museology” between 27 and 29 November 2020. The three days involved a variety of activities where different experts in the field exchanged insights around the topics of museology, cultural heritage, its preservation and digitalization. “It is no doubt that COVID-19 has changed our lives in the past few months and reshaped our reality drastically,” Ms. Isabell Mering, Director of the DAAD Regional Office Cairo, stated at the beginning of the event, “but especially in the field of arts and cultural heritage, countries [...] have been severely impacted”. For this reason, the presentations largely focused on new scenarios for museums and the future directions in the area of preservation and diffusion of cultural heritage. The topics under discussion included the development of museums as a “safe space” for exchange of knowledge and encounter between different cultures, the possible directions for museums to better engage with the audience during and after the global pandemic and the analysis of best practice examples such as the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) and the Archaeological Public Museum of Cherrchell in Algeria. Equally, the speakers of the conference discussed the digitalization of the cultural heritage, the role of social media in spreading knowledge as well as the contribution of technology to identify, analyse, document and spread cultural heritage for future generations. In addition, the final part of each day was dedicated to specific workshops/“World cafés”. During this time, participants could actively engage into fruitful exchanges of ideas starting from pre-defined guiding questions.

Museums constituted the central topic under analysis during the first day of the conference. Initially, Ms. Abeer Elgohary from the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) offered an insightful analysis of the role of museums as a “safe” space for knowledge and dialogue between cultures. Specifically, she explained the importance of creating a safe intellectual platform in museums, which rests on trust among people and encourages contribution, collaboration and co-creation. In a successive interview, Ms. Elgohary specified the different activities and programs that the GEM is designing in view of the official opening under the exceptional circumstances of the current global pandemics. In particular, the team is concentrating on the educational section and on the establishment of collaborations with schools to provide rich programs for children and young people. Furthermore, Ms. Elgohary clarified the importance of extending this inclusive work methods and activities outside the museum. She emphasized the need to effectively engage with the audience and reach out the largest possible share of the population, as museums should not be exclusive places limited to elites. Keeping in mind these goals, Ms. Elgohary concluded by highlighting the necessity to break out of the traditional image of museums and rather advance innovative ideas which take into account recent global, technological and intellectual developments. This view was further affirmed in the following presentation with the specific focus on the development of dedicated spaces for children in museums. Dr. Alaa Khairy from GEM described in her scientific talk “The Grand Egyptian Museum as a best practice example” the

creation of the children's museum as a model of "safe" space for knowledge, education and culture. The idea implies specific spaces and different kind of activities to best engage with children and spread awareness of their cultural heritage. For example, games and events are organized in collaboration with schools to further promote education and knowledge among the young generation inside museums. The conference proceeded with a precise description of another example of museum, the Archaeological Public Museum of Cherrhell in Algeria. After offering background information about the history of the museum, Ms. Kreilinger explained the current projects that the different teams are working on. Remarkably, she highlighted the creation of a virtual system for the museum as well as a space dedicated to children. She also described the progresses during the lockdown in documenting, restoring and digitalizing the museum's material. Keeping in mind these general ideas about the role and possible developments of museums, the attendees of the conference were invited to participate into a final workshop where the topic of museums was further analysed. Divided in three groups, people exchanged ideas around the role of technology in museums, the best way to engage with the community and future perspectives. Proposals like the creation of an umbrella organization overseeing all museums in Egypt were equally discussed. This lively exchange brought to light the will to develop strategies to effectively use technologies to reach out the community. In the speakers' view, the development of the digitalization process has now become a necessity especially due to the current global pandemic context.

The second day of the conference went deeper in the aforementioned topic of digitalization of cultural heritage. In the opening session, a "Tour de Table" conversing around the digitalization of cultural heritage in different countries was organized. Ms. Kreilinger from Algeria, Ms. Mona Nouman from Egypt, Ms. Azza Temessek from Tunisia and Prof. Dr. Hani Hayajneh from Jordan presented the respective situation in each country with regards to digitalization. In all cases, it was highlighted how either the governments or the private sector are intensely investing in digitalization despite the evident challenges due to the high-costs involved. "It will be fundamental the figure of a social media and communication specialist in museums to best interact and engage with people in the digital space," Ms. Mona Nouman from GEM explained in an interview following the event. In the GEM case, she explained the current efforts to offer the best digital services such as the creation of a various and rich website accessible to all.

The second day of the conference then proceeded with a scientific talk on "Cultural Heritage in Cyberspace: preservation, education, and access" by Ms. Hala Ghoname from UMR. Her presentation shed the light on the existing cooperation between Egypt and foreign countries like Germany to exchange knowledge on methods for the digitalization of cultural heritage. She equally presented some future projects such as the institution of a joint Master programme between Germany and Egypt on this topic.

The following presentation examined the role of social media in documenting and spreading knowledge of the cultural heritage in the specific case of Egypt. After mentioning the question of the colonialist effect on the existing documentation of the country's cultural heritage, the speaker Dr. Monica Hanna from the Arab Academy for Science Technology & Maritime Transport (AASTMT) explained the increasing diffusion of Facebook pages engaged into this area of studies. Despite the unavoidable risks of misinformation due to poor verification processes, she views the involvement of civil society in documenting the country's cultural heritage through social media as a positive development for the intensification of interaction with the public. Additionally, the observable growth of hashtags related to historic and cultural places suggests the potential that social media have in raising interest in the country's cultural heritage. The following Q&A time further clarified how social media represent powerful tools for a larger diffusion of knowledge, being able to reach out different sectors of the population and engage with them in innovative ways. The day concluded with a

stimulating workshop primarily discussing the role of technology in the cultural heritage field for future generations. This session shed the light on the ways in which technology represents a vital tool to document and preserve cultural heritage while acknowledging the necessity to make it accessible for everyone. Equally, it was emphasized how cultural heritage and technology can no longer be separated. For this reason, developing strategies to best use the available technological tools represents a necessity of our time.

The conference concluded the third day with a series of talks concentrated on the topic of “Arts and culture (heritage) in the lockdown”. Ms. Ilke Kiral, Cultural Attachée from the German Embassy in Cairo, highlighted the impact of the pandemic on the cultural field and the related challenges, namely under the financial aspect. “Culture is not a luxury, culture is a necessity,” she stated at the beginning of her lecture. She then explained how Germany has been increasing the budget for culture, education and arts while sharing the country’s plans in terms of digitalization. Similarly, Ms. Anne Eberhard from the Goethe-Institut in Cairo detailed how Germany is dealing with the pandemic at the cultural level in her scientific talk “Art & Culture in the lockdown”. Although the Goethe-Institut was not prepared to go digital, it adapted and started operating this shift with success. She therefore acknowledged some advantages deriving from the ongoing digitalization of cultural heritage. Remarkably, it is now possible to reach the entire world as boundaries disappear in the virtual space. Nonetheless, her talk opened the floor to discussion of some crucial challenges undermining the long-term sustainability of this process. Among others, the unequal access to internet in the world constitutes a major defect. Moreover, the attendees acknowledged the need to identify new topics suitable for the online format and for the current changing society. The speakers thus scrutinized options for the future planning of events, such as the organization of physical events accompanied with the online streaming so that the public can choose according to its preference. During the last Panel Discussion examining “Opportunities & Challenges of regional and cross-regional cooperation and collaboration”, the Director of DAAD Regional Office Cairo, Ms. Isabell Mering, recalled the necessity to take not only the touristic aspect, but especially the societal aspect under consideration while discussing the impact of Coronavirus on cultural heritage. Especially, she emphasized the efforts of the DAAD in supporting such comprehensive projects, keeping in mind how culture has a strong impact on society and largely contributes to define its identity. Furthermore, Prof. Dr. Stephan Seidlmayer from the DAI talked about the cooperation between Egypt and Germany in this context. While outlining the numerous collaborations and projects that have been initiated, he equally mentioned fundamental differences between the two countries. For example, with regards to social media, he views Egypt as more engaged in using these new digital platforms. Finally, Ms. Monica Hanna from the AASTMT identified main opportunities in the field of digitalization of cultural heritage. Above all, she highlighted the potential for democratization of cultural heritage reaching out a larger public. Moreover, she expects that more accessibility in digital ways could give a different sensorial perception of the past. On the other side, Dr. Hani Hayajneh shed the light on the difficulties and challenges that people working in the field of cultural heritage are facing in Jordan. In addition to focusing on the preservation of the cultural heritage, he highlighted the required efforts in mediating conflicts and coordinating the various stakeholders and partners involved into this work. Finally, Ms. Boutheina Maraoui from Tunis University underlined main risks for the occurring digitalization process, notably in terms of management and mediation of cultural heritage. The conversation concluded with an overview of current binational projects between Germany and the different countries of the region such as in the case of the Heliopolis Open Museum in Egypt.

During and after the three-day conference participants and speakers shared their enthusiasm for this event. “It was an insightful event and very well-organized,” Alaa Khairy, one of the speakers, shared

in a successive interview. Not only did it represent an opportunity to acquire valuable information about the topics of museology and cultural heritage in the current global pandemic context, but it also allowed participants to actively engage into lively discussions where perspectives from different countries were shared. Equally, the series of scientific talks, workshops and panel discussions provided a comprehensive overview of major issues related to the topic on the agenda, considering both advantages and disadvantages of current developments. Finally, the analysis of best practice examples stimulated all attendees to think about innovative developments and creative solutions. Despite the current challenging context, most attendees are optimistic for future scenarios in the museums and cultural heritage sector. As in Ms. Isabell Mering's words: "Most changes and new circumstances come with the opportunity to reflect and allow us to speed up positive change in order to overcome the challenges".

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