

**INCLUSIVENESS IN THE MUSEUM AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE STORM,
THORN AND TURN**

EVELYN I. OSUAGWU
National Museum,
Old Residency,
Calabar.
Email: eiosuagwu@yahoo.com

&

ESTHER UZOH (PhD)
Department of Social Work
University of Calabar
Cross Rivers State.

Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant containment measures has undoubtedly affected the museum and tourism sector. Doors of the museums have been shut to visitors amidst the pandemic. While many have embraced a new approach towards meeting their obligations, some has virtually remained unresponsive to the dynamics of this challenge with a huge gap in achieving audience inclusiveness in the museum. Museums in Nigeria with total dependence on public fund are struggling to leverage on this pandemic to engender an inclusive museum services. This paper presents an opportunity for a critical evaluation of the pandemic as a storm; the attendant thorn, and the expected turn in the museum profession with the hindsight of Nigeria's experience

Keywords: Museum, inclusiveness, COVID-19, Tourism sector and Pandemic

Introduction

The global pandemic has frantically unsettled the world economy. It has undoubtedly created socio-economic, political, religious, medical and cultural imbalance in a manner that has characteristically left the entire globe utterly helpless and despondent.

Amidst this turbulence, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) celebrates the international museum day alongside with other museums and cultural organizations on 18th of May every year. For several reasons not unconnected to the pandemic, the year 2020 celebration is unique. Under the theme: “museums for equality: diversity and inclusion” the unpleasant situation that the museum has found itself appear to have been ominously presaged.

The museum has found its services kept in check measurably. With the counter pandemic measures like the lockdown and social distancing, having visitors through the gallery has become impossibility; yet, the museum must engage the audience. Some museum audiences have not been able to maximize their visits. Some of the museums have not adequately taken care of the people living with disabilities. Very many have their exhibitions stereotyped against their weaknesses. Some too, have limited facilities to productively engage diverse audiences and create memorabilia impact. These challenges have been unfolding but, the present pandemic has provided opportunity for a paradigm shift; a turn in the art of museum management and professional services.

This paper presents an opportunity for a critical evaluation of the pandemic storm; the attendant thorn, and the expected turn in the museum profession with the hindsight of Nigeria's experience.

Conceptualization of terms

Museum: The International Council for Museums (ICOM) defines it as thus: Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

The organization further clarifies:

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing (ICOM, 2019 in Fraser, 2019).

Inclusiveness in the museum: Wendy, Syrus and Alyssa (2017) defined this as the ‘Museum’s structural and functional capacity for creating meaningful experiences across lines of social difference’. It simply refers to museum allying to social justice in their profession by making their services useful and meaningful to people of all races, colours, creed and abilities. Inclusiveness in the museum abhors all forms of racist, Islamophobic, xenophobic, homophobic, and misogynistic rhetoric. It equally makes efforts towards connecting their exhibitions with people living with disabilities (PLWDs) and all remotely marginalized members of societal stratum.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a storm

The COVID-19 pandemic is considered as the most devastating global health calamity of the century and the greatest challenge that humanity faced since the World War 11. Little was known about this disease until December 2019 when a new respiratory infectious disease reportedly emerged in Wuhan, Hubei province, China and was named by the WHO as COVID-19 (Corona virus disease 2019). A new class of corona virus, known as SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2) has been found to be responsible for occurrence of this disease (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020).

At present, there has not been any known cure or clinically approved vaccine for this disease that has ferociously infected almost all countries in the world. Rather, hotchpotch of immune boosting mechanisms and isolated management approaches differing from one country to another leaving at its wake, humongous death toll. According to the report of the WHO as of April 18, 2020, the disease has affected over 2,164,111 people and killed more than 146,198 people in more than 200 countries throughout the world (WHO in Chakraborty and Maity, 2020).

The devastating effect of this pandemic has been monumental. Having spread to almost all countries of the globe, the pandemic is endangering the global economy with attendant health, economic, environmental and socio-cultural challenges. Virtually all the affected nations are struggling to slow down the pace of transmission of the disease by adopting different containment measures. Most of these measures revolve around tracing, testing and treatment of patients; quarantining of suspected persons through contact tracing, restricting large social gatherings, compulsory wearing of face/nose mask, insistence on personal hygiene, maintaining complete or partial lockdown etc.

Nigeria as one of the developing nations with challenges of poor health infrastructure is not insulated from the storm caused by this pandemic. All the prescribed containment measures have been effected by the country with emphasis on maintaining social distancing, restrictions of inter-state movements, lock-down of the mostly affected states, restrictions on social gatherings etc. Available data from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) as at May 17th shows that a total of 5,959 cases and 182 fatalities have been recorded in Nigeria. In this figure, a total of 1,594 cases have so far been discharged after making full recovery. All but two states of the federation have so far recorded cases with Lagos, Kano and FCT the worst hit states (Reliefweb, 2020).

Is inclusiveness an issue in the museum?

Inclusiveness in the museum is a matter of social justice, equity and fairness. The relevance of the museum is a function of public patronage and adequate use by the people to satisfy their curiosity for education, research and entertainment. To make museum stay relevant is therefore a task that requires diversity in collection but inclusiveness in audience use of the museum facilities and services.

In Nigeria and elsewhere, there is the growing fear that the museum is meant for the elites. The peculiar needs of some segments of the society are believed not to be well served. The migrants, People Living With Disabilities (PLWDs), the remote poor rural dwellers etc readily comes into focus. The experiences of the PLWDs in using the museum is founded more in reality in Nigeria.

There are conflicting figures for the number of people with disabilities in Nigeria. Data from the World report on disability, published in 2011, said about 25 million Nigerians had at least one disability, while 3.6 million of these had very significant difficulties in functioning (Christian Blind Mission, 2013). The 2006 Nigerian census reported 3,253,169 people with disabilities, or 2.32% of the total population of 140,431,790 in that year (NPC, 2006). In 2018, the National Population Commission, NPC estimated that no fewer than 19 million persons are living with disabilities in Nigeria (Vanguard, 2018). The figure released by the NPC seems to be far short of the appropriate figure of the disabled in Nigeria. The Industrial Training Fund (ITF) had said that one in every ten people in Nigeria suffers from one form of disability or the other. Quoting the Centre for Disability and Development Innovations, the agency approximated the number of disabled people in the country to be as high as 25 million (Daily Post, 2018).

The conflicting figures notwithstanding, the reality is that a significant number of people live with visible disabilities in Nigeria. The number of mentally deranged persons in our major cities and town is a clear indication that the quoted figures here might be an under estimation. What is however not disputable is that most of these disabled persons are not optimizing opportunities that the non-disabled are enjoying partly as a result of their condition and largely due to the society that they found themselves.

The disabled face stereotypes and stigmatization in the larger society nay the museum. In the museum, they face these peculiar challenges:

- **The structure of the exhibitions:**

The structural outlay of most of our museums is an impediment for use of the disabled. This can be considered a stereotype in the sense that it does not give room for their participation in our exhibitions neither do they maximize museum services. Staircase to some of the museums are built in such a manner that the visually and physically impaired cannot easily access. The national museum of colonial history, Aba and the National museum old residency, Calabar are some examples. In most cases, there are no alternative routes to the galleries where wheelchairs can be used. This gives first hand impression suggesting that the museum does not want them or that they do not have a place in museum's programmes.

For the visually impaired, they can hardly see pictures as depicted in our pictorial exhibitions. This is because so much of what is presented in the galleries is visual. Absence of poor sign language professionals makes their visit to the museum nightmarish and unrewarding.

- **Stereotypes on the personality of the disabled**

The public perception of disability has ranged through the emotions of 'imaginative concern, mawkish sentimentality, indifference, rejection and hostility' (Thomas, 1982:4). In our society, the sight of the disabled evokes some empathy and sympathy that often inveighs and suggests stereotypes. Oliver captured this well, "throughout the twentieth century, whether it be in the novel, newspaper stories or television and films disabled people continued to be portrayed as more than or less than human" (Oliver 1996:61). He goes on to say that 'these portrayals see disabled people either as pathetic victims of some appalling tragedy or as superheroes struggling to overcome a tremendous burden' (Oliver 1996). In fact, Barnes (1992) identified commonly reoccurring stereotypes as: the disabled person as pitiable and pathetic, an object of violence, as sinister and evil, as a curio, as a super cripple, as an object of ridicule, as their worse and only enemy, as a burden, as sexually abnormal, as incapable of participating in community life and the disabled person as 'normal'. These derogatory perceptions still subsist even in the museum.

Outside the fact that our exhibitions are not usually accessible to the physically challenged, the attitudes of the frontline staff to the tour guides reflect this stereotypes. For instance, a cripple coming into the museum might sight some form of pity expression on the faces of the museum tour guides. Some staff may readily

even want to offer help to such a person whereas this might not be needed by the disabled as it suggests helplessness. In this circumstance, at once, the disabled may begin to feel unnecessarily being pitied. The rest of his/her stay in the museum may make little or no sense in this circumstance.

Optimization of museum services by all is a matter of social justice. Regrettably, the present pandemic has incrementally added to the burden of the museum in delivering its mandate.

COVID-19 and the Museum: the storm, thorn and turn

Unarguably, the COVID-19 pandemic came as a hit, pang and storm to the economy and the museum sector in particular. According to the studies conducted by UNESCO and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), “90% of museums worldwide were forced to close their doors and stop in-person operations during the crisis. Of the more than 85,000 museums that have closed, an estimated 13% are at risk of never reopening because of the heavy financial losses incurred during this time” (VOA, 2020).

In Africa, most museums rely on public funding for sustenance. Virtually all the museums in Nigeria are owned and maintained by the government. Most of these museums render physical services with their gallery exhibitions. With the dwindling revenue to the country’s economy with the inevitability of economic depression, funding of the museum will be more difficult. The UNESCO and ICOM reports that: “only 5% of the museums in Africa and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) were able to offer online content to their visitors. Even museums with digital capabilities will face a substantial decrease in income if they are not able to host visitors in person, debilitating their ability to support their employees and continue operations and outreach”. This explains the problem better.

The economic loss arising from this pandemic to the museum sector is in itself humongous. According to estimates by the American Alliance of Museums, museums nationwide are collectively losing at least \$33 million daily due to COVID-19-related closures. As many as 30%—mostly those in small and rural communities—will not reopen without emergency financial aid (Voon, 2020).

The existential reality is that museums are operating in a very difficult situation. With patronage turning to a zero point, the issue of inclusiveness by widening access is unimaginable. Restrictions in movement and physical distancing amidst other containment measures have manacled effective museum outreach programmes and rendering of services to the public.

Notwithstanding, the situation presents ample opportunities for a TURN in professionalizing museums’ practices in Nigeria.

1. The opportunity of coming up with unique approaches and responses to museum practice. A way to go is to digitize the museum content with their websites rapidly updated to focus on their "virtual museum resources, e-learning, and online collections.
2. The opportunity to focus on widening access by a vigorous outreach to remotely served people especially, the rural dwellers and PLWDs. This can be done by setting up a rural museum outlets or contact centres. Hosting of e-museum fair with cinemas is necessary to whet the appetite of these people towards appreciating the physical museum collections.
3. The opportunity to enrich their collections by emphasizing on research and collections of objects associated the COVID-19 pandemic. Various herbal remedies of roots, herbs and floral assets remotely used by local communities in mitigating the impact of the pandemic are worth documenting. Also important are those artistic expressions, music, folklore etc that were developed in response to the pandemic should be documented.
4. The opportunity to divest the museum’s funding away from the public sector. A public-private partnership in the funding of the museum is crucial at this stage of museum development in Nigeria

Conclusion and Recommendation

Doubtless, the COVID-19 pandemic is having a devastating effect on the museum and tourism sector, and our own museum is no different. Crises highlight gaps in policies, plans, and procedures—but also provide opportunities for a TURN in museum practices. This time calls for museum to review, rethink, re-imagine, and revise them, and reassess what the museum will look like going forward.

Event so significant in the history of the world like this, also calls for enriched collections, researches and strategic planning for the future. It is possible that the effect of this pandemic will last longer than imagined and could further exclude some segments of the public into periphery. Again, since the museum has a place in the sanctuary of people's history, a community-based initiative that invites Nigerians to contribute digital records that document their experience and tell a story of the city's communities during the COVID-19 pandemic is not out of place.

At dawn of this pandemic, the museum should prioritize inclusiveness that will support the maximization of museum experience by the PLWDs and other remotely unreached audience. Their stories, unique experience and perspectives to our collections are necessary in deepening museum professions. After all, museums are places where we convene to make sense of our shared human experience. They are part of humanity and their experiences count.

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