Fostering dialogue in divisive times

A guide for museums regarding engagement with community forums on climate action

A publication by the NEMO Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action!

NEMO
Network of European
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Introduction

In today's increasingly polarised world, museums bear a crucial responsibility for fostering dialogue between communities. As trusted spaces of cultural preservation, museums have the unique ability to bridge divides by hosting community forums that offer a safe environment for meaningful conversations on complex issues like climate change. These forums are essential to ensuring that all voices are heard and that the transition to a sustainable future is fair and inclusive. This need becomes even more urgent in light of the global shift towards the far right. The dialogue spaces that museums can offer will be increasingly vital in safeguarding or restoring our challenged democracies.

This guide, developed by the NEMO Sustainability and Climate Action Working Group (WG SAC) and authored by Giulia Valentina Paglia, offers practical tools for museums to organise and facilitate critical conversations, and it recognises the expanding societal role of museums, not only in safeguarding heritage but also in actively shaping the future through community engagement. The guide is divided into two sections: a theoretical framework based on research and case studies, and a practical step-by-step guide for organising community forums. This toolkit is designed to help museums create forums that align with their missions while fostering community engagement and collaborative problem-solving.

The societal role of museums extends far beyond their traditional functions. By embracing community forums as a long-term process, museums can rethink their practices and ensure that they remain connected to their communities and relevant in an ever-changing world. This guide provides the necessary tools to help museums fulfil their mission while deepening their connection with the communities they serve.

– Estelle De Bruyn
Leader of NEMO's Sustainability and Climate Action Working Group and Head of the Sustainability Unit at the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA), Belgium

About the working group

The Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action (SAC!), made up of institutional members of the Network of European Museum Organisations, contributes to the sustainable development of European museums through research and advocacy and provides a space to exchange knowledge and experience aligned with tackling the climate crisis. The group contributes to sustainable development research and best practice within the European museum sector and advocates NEMO's key messages on the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals and other relevant initiatives.

About NEMO

The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) was founded in 1992 as an independent network of national museum organisations representing the museum community of the member states of the Council of Europe. NEMO's members speak for thousands of museums across Europe. The Network helps connect European museums and their national organisations, promotes European policies that help museums to fulfil their role as keepers of cultural heritage, and supports European museums in their aim to learn through networking and cooperation. The NEMO Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action (SAC!) contributes to the sustainable development of museums through research and advocacy and provides a space for the exchange of knowledge and experience aligned with tackling the climate crisis.

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The evolving role of museums: Building trust and creating community hubs

Amid rising concerns over community fragmentation and distrust of government, museums are increasingly recognised as pivotal in fostering societal dialogue and cohesion. They have evolved from passive observers to proactive platforms that engage communities in addressing key local issues (Graham Black 2010). The 'Museums and Trust' report underscores this role, revealing that museums are highly trusted institutions, second only to friends and family, with a trust score of 6.6 out of 10. This trust is founded on their reputation for presenting fact-based, authentic, and independent information, making them vital spaces for inclusive storytelling and social cohesion (American Alliance of Museums 2021).

This transformation is especially pertinent in the context of growing climate activism, with organisations such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO), and the Climate Heritage Network (among many other cultural networks) collectively acknowledging the pressing need for museums to participate actively in climate change discussions. In 2023, over a hundred cultural organisations campaigned for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to embed cultural solutions into climate policy, successfully securing the establishment of the 'Group of Friends of Culture-Based Climate Action' at the UNFCCC. Even though museums are primary targets for climate activists seeking to draw attention to environmental issues, many cultural networks have positioned museums as critical allies in climate action, advocating for collective initiatives like those seen at COP27 to cut carbon emissions. Additionally, Stephen Long (2013) has pointed out the financial and logistical challenges associated with this active community role. He suggested that these could be mitigated through strategic partnerships and a strong organisational commitment, which would not only enhance the role of museums as community centres but also as agents of substantial change.

Museums are uniquely positioned to serve as moderators and influencers due to their trusted status and ability to foster empathy and engagement. The Greater Good Science Center (2021) highlights that by allowing visitors to view the world from different perspectives, museums excel in creating immersive and interactive experiences that promote empathy. For example, the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta uses simulations to help visitors understand the struggles of civil rights activists, thereby fostering empathy and understanding. Furthermore, museums engage diverse audiences through targeted programming and partnerships. The Hammer Museum's collaboration with UCLA, as mentioned by Getty Iris (2021), involves students in various activities, ensuring the inclusion of younger and more diverse voices. This inclusivity helps museums stay relevant and responsive to community needs.

The storytelling abilities of museums make them powerful venues for community forums. Exhibits that tell stories of different cultures and historical events challenge biases and promote understanding, making museums effective in creating informed and empathetic communities (Greater Good Science Center 2021). By leveraging their strengths in trust, empathy-building, engagement, and storytelling, museums can effectively moderate community gatherings by acting as catalysts for dialogue and social cohesion. They provide safe

and trusted spaces where diverse community members can come together to discuss and address critical issues, enhancing their role as vital public institutions.

As stated above, museums are well-suited and experienced in developing engaging content and providing open and democratic spaces for thought and discourse. Through community forums, museums take those existing skills to new levels. By bringing people together, they actively impact their local communities, showing that they have more in common than that which divides them. Furthermore, museums that host community forums benefit from expanding and deepening relationships with their audience, acknowledging their public as citizens who can express themselves on every social, cultural, and environmental aspect of their lives, and gain external perspectives on important topics that may otherwise remain unappreciated. Such forums allow active participation and enhance connections, challenging in a non-didactic way people's preconceived ideas on the topic under discussion.

While community forums can be hosted on many different important subjects, the human-planetary relationship, which encompasses, among many things, climate change adaptation, mitigation, and a sustainable transition, is a crucial topic to address, and museums are uniquely suited to create such opportunities for public discourse and benefit from them. It is due to this impulse, discussed and considered by international museum professionals in various settings during 2022 and 2023, that the NEMO Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action (SAC!) has commissioned the research presented in the following pages. The Working Group seeks to support more museums to develop their capacities and expand their potential to serve local communities, engage with new (including politically-engaged) audiences, and address the climate crisis as well as other related or, as yet unknown, future challenges, guided by democratic and egalitarian principles, which are also core to the continued success of the European integration project.

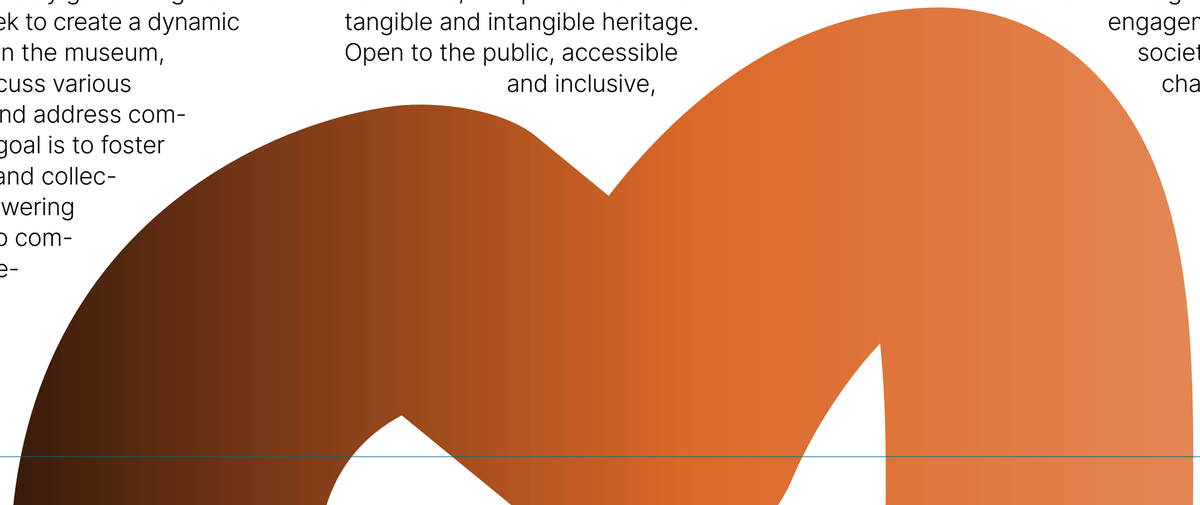
Purpose of the research project

This research project aims to develop a comprehensive guide that empowers museums to foster civic engagement by hosting 'community forums' focused on environmental and societal issues, tailored to their unique missions and visions. When we refer to 'community forums', we mean a structured public meeting or gathering that provides a space for open dialogue among community members. These forums are distinct from other gatherings as they are designed to offer validated information while simultaneously generating debate and dialogue. They seek to create a dynamic and lively atmosphere within the museum, allowing participants to discuss various topics, share information, and address communal issues. The primary goal is to foster participatory engagement and collective problem-solving, empowering participants to contribute to community development and decision-making processes.

In this specific context, community forums focus on environmental issues and climate action, but the community forum model proposed in the guide can lend itself to various topics such as local governance, education, and health, and help to build stronger and better-informed communities. The guide is envisioned as a practical and adaptable toolkit, designed to assist museums in efficiently organising and conducting community forums that stimulate meaningful dialogue on critical contemporary issues, particularly the human-planetary relationship. In doing so, museums can enhance their role as dynamic hubs of community engagement.

The significance of this research lies in recognising that museums are already undergoing a transformation from traditional repositories of objects to active facilitators of public discourse. Since 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has updated its official definition of a museum, emphasising the focus on the public and the community. According to ICOM, 'A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.'

The significance of this research lies in its potential to transform museums from traditional repositories of objects into active facilitators of public discourse. One of the reasons people may hesitate to engage with museums is their perceived inaccessibility, since, until a few years ago, museums were considered places for the elite (Moffit 2017). This guide endeavours to overcome this obstacle by furnishing museums with transparent and user-friendly resources to establish inclusive community forums. It is imperative that the promotion of these forums is accessible and comprehensible, and that it emphasises the significance of community impact and actionable steps in addressing climate change or enhancing sustainability. By providing practical tools for creating community forums within the museum sector, the developed methodology draws attention both to the potential of museums as catalysts for change and the significance of community engagement in addressing crucial societal and environmental challenges.



Theoretical foundation

A growing body of research highlights the evolving role of museums as civic spaces, emphasising their potential to foster community engagement and address broader societal issues. Below are some notable examples that illustrate this shift. Museums are increasingly seen as vibrant centres for community life, akin to communal living rooms where open dialogue and engagement are encouraged (Long 2013). This perspective aligns with broader discourses suggesting that museums should transcend their traditional roles of preservation and education to become active, dynamic participants in civic life (Graham 2010).

Illustrating this point further, the research paper 'Participatory practices in museums: a seismic shift?' (Smith and Fouseki 2015) critiques the hierarchical structures of large museums that often hinder participatory practices. This work highlights the importance of fostering internal empowerment and collaborative cultures to engage effectively with external communities. Similarly, Nina Simon's 'The Participatory Museum' (2010) discusses how museums can become more interactive and community-focused by inviting visitors to contribute to exhibitions and discussions.

Moreover, articles such as 'Museums as Agents and Settings for Climate Hope' highlight the potential of museums to address global issues such as climate change by transforming climate grief and anxiety into positive actions through educational and engaging exhibitions (Sutton 2010). The American Alliance of Museums (2021) also underscores that museums play a critical role in fostering well-being, civic participation, and social cohesiveness, particularly in an era of social fragmentation and governmental distrust.

The report 'Measuring the Impact of Museums on their Communities' provides empirical evidence of how museums contribute to the social fabric of their communities by promoting social inclusion, education, and cultural understanding (Kelly 2006). The findings highlight that local museums are integral in fostering a sense of belonging and involvement among community members. Local museums do this by offering opportunities for social interaction, educational programmes, and cultural events that cater to a wide range of age groups and cultural backgrounds. The report also identifies several key benefits provided by museums, including the development of community pride, the preservation of heritage, and the promotion of cultural appreciation. Moreover, and most importantly for the present research, museums serve as vital community hubs where individuals can engage in lifelong learning and participate in cultural exchange. For instance, the study of an Aboriginal Keeping Place in northern New South Wales demonstrated how museums could foster community pride and educate visitors about Indigenous cultures, thus playing a significant role in promoting reconciliation and cultural understanding. Furthermore, the quantitative phase of the r esearch, which included surveys conducted with 294 local residents, revealed that museums are highly valued for their contribution to tourism, history, culture, and education. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that museums develop pride in local traditions, involve people in local projects, and promote social networks across different cultures and age groups. These findings suggest that museums are not only centres for preserving

Photo: Sergio Azenha/Alamy Stock Foto/MAAT Museum

and presenting history and art but are also active participants in the social and cultural development of their communities (Kelly 2006).

Long's view that museums should act as living rooms for the community, providing a space for diverse groups to come together and engage in meaningful discussions, is echoed in Kelly's findings on how museums have an educational role and thus can address pressing social issues, including climate action and social inclusion. By collaborating with local organisations and adapting their programmes to community needs, museums can enhance their relevance and impact within communities. This approach not only enriches the role of museums, but also ensures that they remain vital and responsive to the changing dynamics of their audiences.

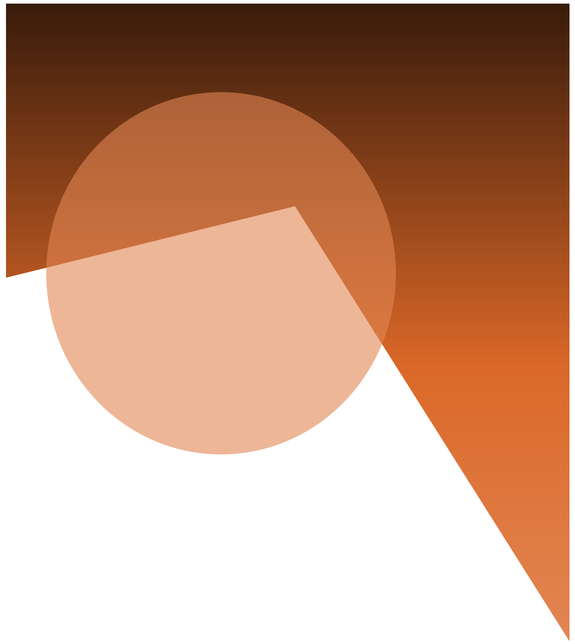
Integrating these perspectives into a cohesive approach requires museums to rethink their strategies and structures. Museums are encouraged to move away from traditional silos and adopt a more integrated and collaborative approach in their operations and activities. This could involve more inclusive programming, community partnerships, and ongoing dialogue with visitors and local residents to ensure that museums truly reflect and serve the needs of their communities. These findings affirm that museums are in a unique position to act as moderators and multipliers of public discourse, bridging the gap between society and science and promoting a more informed and engaged public.

In 2023, Museums for Climate Action introduced the 'Mobilising Museums for Climate Action: Tools, frameworks and opportunities to accelerate climate action in and with museums' guide, which underscores the dual role of museums in environmental and community engagement. This guide encourages museums to implement sustainable practices and reduce environmental impacts, while also using their platforms for community education and empowerment. It stresses the importance of aligning museum activities with global sustainability goals like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advocates for continuous community engagement to cultivate lasting relationships and ongoing dialogues. Additionally, it emphasises the need for museums to support community and ecological resilience through educational and participatory programmes. This strategic approach positions museums as active participants in mitigating climate challenges and enhancing civic engagement.

Furthermore, in 2024, NEMO published the 'Climate Protection in Museums' guidelines which highlight the role of museums in advancing sustainability and community engagement, aligning educational efforts with the SDGs. The guidelines suggest practical measures for museums to become interactive hubs for learning and action on sustainability. Key recommendations include integrating SDGs into educational content, fostering participatory learning, involving staff in sustainability efforts from the start, and promoting community collaborations. Museums are encouraged to communicate transparently about their sustainability initiatives to build trust and encourage community participation. These steps are aimed at transforming museums into active players in sustainable development.

However, despite the recognition by a growing number of studies advocating this expanded role for museums, the reality on the ground is often quite different. According to the museologist and director of the Civic Museums of Verona, Francesca Rossi, it is clear that current participatory models in museums often fall short of genuinely engaging communities. New models are needed to bridge the gap between museums and citizens, making cultural institutions more accessible and inclusive. She emphasises the necessity for museums to rethink their strategies to foster closer connections with the public (2023).

Furthermore, from the interviews conducted on this topic, it has emerged that while some museums have indeed made efforts to integrate community-focused practices, they remain in a minority. Even those that have ventured into this area often do so through one-off events. Although open to all, such events typically attract the same demographic repeatedly, failing to forge new connections or engage diverse community segments continuously. As a result, they do not establish a lasting bond with the community but remain isolated instances of engagement. This disparity between the theoretical benefits of museums as active community hubs and their practical implementation highlights the challenges museums face in evolving beyond traditional roles to integrate themselves truly within their local communities. These challenges will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter. Below are some case studies of best practices adopted by museums so far.



Case studies of best practices

The *Gesellschaftsforum*: Citizen assemblies in museums to foster democracy

The project of the Gesellschaftsforum (Society Forum) brought a citizens' assembly, selected by lot, for the first time to a museum environment. It was initiated by the curators Amelie Klein and Vera Sacchetti and commissioned by Bundeskunsthalle Bonn and the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD), two major cultural institutions in the West and East of Germany. The project took place in preparation of the exhibition All In! Re-Designing Democracy, which both institutions hosted in 2024 and 2025. It was guided by Democracy-Next, a global platform for democratic innovation, and executed by the Nexus Institut. The Gesellschaftsforum took place in autumn 2023, and aimed to re-evaluate the relevance of cultural institutions in regards to their broader role in society, and ultimately to create museums that are more democratic, welcoming and inclusive spaces for everyone.

The Bundeskunsthalle and SKD employed a lottery system to select participants, ensuring diverse representation from the local community. Approximately 2,000 invitations were sent out. This process resulted in a 10% acceptance rate, highlighting strong citizen interest. Each assembly comprised 35 people who met for four days of informed deliberation on museum-related questions posed by staff. This diverse group included individuals who rarely visit museums, providing unique and valuable insights that would have been difficult to capture otherwise.

The Gesellschaftsforum generated numerous recommendations for museum operations, particularly emphasising the need for museums to act as inclusive spaces that encourage social dialogue and address contemporary issues like environmental sustainability. Specific suggestions included creating dedicated children's exhibitions, providing inclusivity training for staff, increasing seating in exhibition halls, using simpler, jargon-free language for exhibit descriptions, and developing interactive exhibits that engage visitors' minds and bodies.

Participants also recommended co-creation processes where visitors and museum team members collaboratively create pieces, allowing visitors to vote on the types of exhibitions they would like to see. Additionally, the idea of establishing a permanent Citizens' Assembly to advise the Bundeskunsthalle on strategic decisions more systematically was proposed, ensuring ongoing community involvement in museum operations. This inclusive approach ensured broad representation of local perspectives and demonstrated the potential for citizen assemblies to contribute meaningfully to the future direction and relevance of museums. The Gesellschaftsforum highlighted the importance of continuous community engagement to cultivate lasting relationships and sustained dialogue within the museum space (Herz 2023).

Despite its success, such an initiative also presents challenges. Organising such deliberative events is often costly: as Democracy Next has pointed to in their comprehensive Assembling an

Assembly Guide, 'the size of budget required will depend on the context, size, and length of the Assembly, ranging from 47.500 USD for a small local level Assembly in Brazil to several million euros for a large national level Assembly in France'. These engagements tend to be singular events rather than continuous interactions, limiting their potential to foster long-term relationships and sustained dialogue within the community. Indeed, citizen assemblies differ from community forums in both purpose and structure. Community forums are informal gatherings designed to facilitate open dialogue on a wide range of topics, allowing all community members to participate and share their views. They focus on fostering engagement and discussion but may lack ongoing interaction and diverse demographic representation. In contrast, citizen assemblies are formal, structured processes involving participants selected through a lottery system to ensure a representative sample. These assemblies focus on specific issues, involve multiple sessions of informed deliberation, and produce concrete recommendations or actions.

More on Citizens' Assemblies

- The Democracy Next Guide mentioned above outlines practical steps for organising and conducting assemblies to promote inclusive dialogue and actionable community engagement. The 'Assembly: A Guide for Organising Deliberative Civic Engagement' is structured into three main sections: Before the Assembly, During the Assembly, and After the Assembly.
- Before the Assembly: The initial phase involves meticulous planning and preparation. Key steps include defining clear objectives, engaging stakeholders, and using a lottery system for participant selection to ensure representation. Logistics planning covers venue arrangements, facilitators, and materials. A robust communication strategy is also essential to inform the public and participants about the assembly's goals and procedures.
- During the Assembly: This phase focuses on implementation and facilitation. It starts with welcoming participants and creating an inclusive environment. Participants are provided with comprehensive information on the topics to be discussed. Structured deliberation processes encourage open dialogue and respect diverse viewpoints, guiding participants towards consensus. Documentation of discussions, decisions, and recommendations is critical throughout the assembly.
- After the Assembly: Post-assembly activities involve evaluation and reporting. Feedback is collected from participants to assess effectiveness. A detailed final report is compiled that outlines the findings and recommendations. This report is then disseminated to the public, stakeholders, and media to ensure transparency. The implementation phase develops action plans to enact the recommendations, and ongoing engagement maintains communication with participants and stakeholders to foster continued involvement and support.

In an interview secured by the NEMO SAC Working Group with Nora Grunwald, project manager for special exhibitions at the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, who was involved in the project, she provided insights into the complexities of organising citizens' assemblies. Grunwald noted that while the assemblies provided valuable findings and fostered community involvement, the high costs and logistical demands pose significant barriers to making such initiatives a regular feature of museum operations. She emphasised the need for continuous engagement strategies to build lasting relationships with the community, rather than relying solely on one-off events. This underscores the necessity for museums to develop sustainable and ongoing methods of engaging with their communities to maintain meaningful dialogues.

The citizen assembly project was commissioned by the Bundeskunsthalle and the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD) in Germany and executed by Democracy Next. Launched in autumn 2023, this initiative aims to transform museums into vital community hubs by implementing citizens' assemblies. Bundeskunsthalle and SKD, two major cultural institutions – one in the east and one in the west of Germany –, each commissioned a citizens' assembly on democratising the museum that took place in the autumn of 2023. Their aim was to re-evaluate the relevance of cultural institutions in regard to their broader role in society.

Focus group study at the 'Museum and Gallery' Tivat

In a similar vein of community engagement, a focus group study was conducted at the 'Museum and Gallery' Tivat, led by Professor Miloš Milenković, Ph.D., an ethnologist-anthropologist at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Belgrade. This study, executed in cooperation with the Institute of Social Sciences from Belgrade and the Ethnographic Institute of the National Academy of Sciences of Belgrade, aimed to gather insights and opinions from various stakeholders in Montenegro regarding the inclusive and participatory preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

The discussions delved into perceptions, challenges, and opportunities in managing intangible cultural heritage within a multicultural and multi-ethnic context, emphasising reconciliation and coexistence. This project is significant as it addresses the tensions between the ethnic attribution or appropriation of intangible cultural heritage and state systems in the Western Balkans. It also examined the potential for initial disputes to evolve into cooperation and trust-building. The goal was for key stakeholders to discuss and resolve issues within the institutional frameworks provided by international organisations led by UNESCO, with two small focus groups conducted.

‘A tu per tu con la ricerca’ science educational project

The ‘A tu per tu con la ricerca’ project at the Museo Nazionale della Scienza e della Tecnologia in Milan, Italy, exemplifies an effective practice in engaging the public with science and technology. This initiative offers a variety of activities designed to make science accessible and stimulating for various audiences. Key features of the project include hands-on laboratory experience, which allow participants to engage directly with scientific experiments and technologies, thus fostering a deeper understanding of scientific concepts through practical application. Additionally, the project includes a ‘Speed Date with Researchers,’ where attendees can interact with researchers in quick-paced discussions, ask questions, and gain insights into the latest scientific developments, thereby encouraging dynamic and personal exchanges of knowledge. The ‘3 Minutes of Fame’ competition challenges researchers to present their work engagingly and succinctly within three minutes, making complex scientific ideas understandable and exciting for a general audience. These varied formats are designed to make scientific research engaging and relatable, catering to different interests and learning styles. They highlight the innovative approach to public engagement taken by science museums. Due to varying thematic focuses and resource capabilities, such comprehensive and dynamic programming may not be directly replicable in all museum settings. Transferring this model to other contexts would require adaptations tailored to the specific mission, resources, and audience of other museums. The effectiveness of such programmes also depends on a museum’s ability to sustain these engagements beyond one-off events, integrating them into its regular programming to maintain audience interest and involvement over time. This initiative has been successful in fostering curiosity and understanding of science among diverse groups, highlighting the museum’s role as an interactive and educational community hub.

EU-LAC Museums: Fostering cultural sustainability and intercultural dialogue

The EU-LAC Museums project is another exemplary initiative focusing on community engagement and promoting cultural sustainability and intercultural dialogue between museums across Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. By leveraging digital tools and bi-regional knowledge exchanges, the project enhances the educational and societal role of museums, connecting diverse communities and fostering mutual understanding. This approach not only supports local museums but also strengthens their capacity to address global challenges through cultural exchange and community-focused programming. Moreover, the project highlights the importance of cultural diversity and the exchange of ideas, fostering a global perspective on heritage and sustainability. By involving local communities in the dialogue, the project ensures that the voices of diverse populations are heard, thus contributing to a more inclusive and representative cultural sector. One of the significant benefits of such networks is the increased confidence and capability of museums to tackle complex issues.

For instance, NEMO’s 2022 Survey on Museum and Climate Action revealed that museums involved in networks are much more confident in addressing climate issues. These networks provide a platform for sharing best practice, resources, and innovative strategies, enabling museums to implement more effective and impactful climate actions. Furthermore, being part of a network allows museums to collaborate on large-scale projects, access diverse funding sources, and amplify their voices in global discussions on sustainability and climate change. This collective effort not only enhances the resilience of individual institutions but also contributes to a more unified and powerful response to global challenges.

As museums address the complex demands of modern society, they increasingly act as key facilitators of community engagement and environmental advocacy, embracing their potential as vital platforms for public discourse. Initiatives such as ‘Assembly: A Guide for Organising Deliberative Civic Engagement’ and ‘A tu per tu with research’ demonstrate innovative approaches to integrating scientific learning and participatory culture that prove essential for educating and engaging the public. Despite challenges related to coherence and resource allocation, these programmes underline the evolving role of museums not only as custodians of history, but as active participants in shaping a sustainable and inclusive future. These examples witness the ongoing transformation within the museum sector, underlining the need for continuous engagement and adaptation, and also highlighting the challenges museums face in reaching out to their communities.

Interviews with experts

This section provides key insights from interviews conducted with a range of professionals across the international museum landscape. These interviews serve to inform the subsequent chapter and provide a foundation for developing practical guidelines. The cluster of respondents includes directors and board members of both large and small cultural institutions as well as museum consultants and curators. Some participants, who are directly affiliated with specific cultural institutions, will be considered as case studies for the present research, while others offer a broader perspective on the museum sector.

In the semi-structured interviews, a series of core questions was followed, designed to explore the role of museums in society and their engagement with community forums, particularly on environmental issues. The questions cover three main areas: the evolving role of museums in society, the planning and execution of community forums within museums, and the role of museums in addressing the climate change crisis. They explore how museums can engage communities, the challenges faced, and the importance of sustainable practices and activism (Appendix).

The main objective of these interviews was to gain an overview of the museums' own perception of their role as facilitators of dialogue on environmental issues specifically. Subsequently, they established whether museums were accustomed to hosting community forums and engaging with the public on issues such as climate change.
The interviews were conducted over a two-week period, with each interview lasting an average of 40 minutes.

The interviewees included:

- **Saša Srećković**, Ethnographer and museum counsellor at the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, actively involved in the field of intangible cultural heritage in Serbia and internationally through projects with UNESCO.
- **Marjan Doom**, Director of GUM & Plantentuin in Ghent, Belgium; Ted Talk Speaker.
- **Luísa Santos**, Independent Curator, Researcher and Assistant Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Lisbon, Portugal, Co-founder of Institutionings.
- **Rita Ouédraogo**, Co-founder of Buro Stedelijk, Amsterdam, Netherlands, and Curator.
- **Giulia Gregnanin**, Director and Curator of Timespan in Helmsdale, Scotland, UK.
- **Olga Van Oost**, Director of FARO and museologist at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium.
- **Ximena Jordán**, Projects and Sponsorship Coordinator for the Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera Anahuacalli Museums, Mexico.

Each of these individuals provided valuable contributions to the research, and their insights, combined with existing literature, have been instrumental in shaping the guide that follows.

In analysing the responses, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify shared and specific themes relevant to the present research. This approach allowed us to extract significant insights that reflect both the shared challenges and diverse strategies employed by different institutions. The findings from these interviews will be presented below, offering a detailed understanding of current practices and potential areas for development in museum community engagement on issues such as the climate change crisis.

The concept of reciprocity is essential; museums must focus on what the community wants from them, fostering a two-way dialogue rather than a one-sided approach.

Luísa Santos, Curator, researcher and Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal

Findings

The interviews collectively underscore a significant shift in the role of museums from static repositories of artefacts to dynamic centres of community engagement and dialogue.

Shared recognition of the evolving role of museums

Most respondents agree that today, museums serve as critical hubs for fostering public discourse and education. Rita Ouédraogo, co-founder and curator of the Buro Stedelijk, a hybrid art space that celebrates community, encourages experiment and boundary-pushing art and fosters collaboration between artists, communities, and institutions, aims to inspire new perspectives and active civic participation. Ouédraogo highlights the importance of inclusivity and safety, stating, 'Museums should be safe for everyone, but often they are not perceived as such by marginalised communities.' Her emphasis on continuous engagement and transparency is echoed across several interviews, pointing to a broad consensus on the need for museums to connect actively with diverse audiences. For instance, Luísa Santos states that many museums have good intentions, but their projects often fall short because they don't adequately listen to their communities. 'To truly engage with the community, it is crucial to first define one and then to understand its needs and wants.' This requires a reciprocal relationship and an exchange of knowledge, where both the museum and the community benefit and learn from each other. Santos continues: 'The concept of reciprocity is essential; museums must focus on what the community wants from them, fostering a two-way dialogue rather than a one-sided approach.' Additionally, Ouédraogo emphasises that, given the changing social role of museums, the physical spaces of museums also need to be reconsidered and expanded: 'To attract diverse audiences from the community, it's important to reach out directly, outside the museum, on the streets, in the places they frequent.'

Marjan Doom, director of GUM & Plantentuin, advocates for museums as democratic forums. She elaborates that GUM aims to 'facilitate multivocality and discussion without being part of the discussion themselves,' through provocative exhibitions and public debates designed to challenge societal norms and stimulate critical thinking.

A notable concern raised by Saša Srećković is the impact of the political environment on museum operations. In Serbia, he explains, the political climate heavily influences the capacity of museums to engage with communities. 'Political agendas can dominate civic engagement initiatives, making sustained community forums challenging to maintain,' Srećković observes. This highlights a significant barrier to the broader implementation of community-focused activities in politically constrained environments.

Ximena Jordán provides insight into the Latin American context, where museums play a more integrated role in community life. She notes that 'museums in Latin America are very communal and social, functioning as vital points of cohesion.' However, she also points out that environmental awareness has only recently gained prominence, while other social issues have traditionally been prioritised.

Overall, the responses revealed a consensus among respondents regarding the broadening of the social role of museums, although the degree of their impact and the challenges they face vary significantly according to region, size of the institution, and political context. The responses highlight the need for museums to adapt their strategies to local circumstances, ensuring that they remain relevant and effective as community hubs. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of how museums can navigate their evolving societal roles, emphasising the importance of inclusivity, political awareness, and regional adaptability.

Community forums: potentialities and barriers

The concept of community forums within museums elicited diverse reactions from the interviewed experts, indicating a range of perspectives on their importance and implementation. Saša Srećković highlighted eco-museums as ideal platforms for these forums, serving as intermediaries for informal education and civic engagement. Marjan Doom described them as democratic

spaces that facilitate multivocality and open discussion; Luísa Santos viewed them as tools for systemic change within museums, involving community input at all organisational levels. Olga Van Oost focused on practical aspects, stressing clear objectives and co-creation with communities, while Ximena Jordán noted the integral role of community forums in Latin American museums as vital points of cohesion.

From the interviews, it is evident that many museums already engage in interactive community initiatives that differ from the traditional concept of community forums. These initiatives, while valuable, often focus more on interactive exhibitions, educational programmes, and public events rather than structured forums for dialogue. For instance, Buro Stedelijk in Amsterdam engages in a variety of community initiatives, prioritising inclusivity and proactive outreach. One notable example is their collaboration with local artists and communities to create dynamic art projects that often extend beyond the museum space. During the Keti Koti celebrations, they display works by different artists, focusing on archival material and feminist groups, both inside and outside the museum, reaching diverse audiences by bringing art to public spaces.

Regarding community forums specifically, two contributions are particularly significant. The first is from Marjan Doom, the director of GUM (Ghent University Museum). As a university museum, GUM places a strong emphasis on fostering critical thinking and public debate. Doom highlights how GUM facilitates multivocal discussions through structured forums, making it a vibrant platform for community engagement. GUM's forums are carefully curated to ensure diverse perspectives and robust dialogue, often linked to their temporary exhibitions. Doom identified an initial barrier when not all museums were willing to discuss issues outside their immediate scope. For example, their debate on gender issues was tied to an exhibition theme, which helped attract relevant organisations and audiences, enhancing the discourse. This approach allowed GUM to overcome the reluctance some museums have in addressing broader social issues by directly linking the forum topics to their current exhibits, making the discussions more relevant and impactful. She elaborates: 'We always try to have 4 people on stage to allow multivocality and multiperspective. We are a science museum, so it is difficult to talk about social topics, but we try to invite speakers from different fields that are able to provide a unique perspective on the theme.'

We always try to have 4 people on stage to allow multivocality and multiperspective. We are a science museum, so it is difficult to talk about social topics, but we try to invite speakers from different fields that are able to provide a unique perspective on the theme.

Marjan Doom, Director Ghent University Museum

The forums at GUM are designed to be inclusive and dynamic, often involving external moderators to ensure neutrality. They maintain a focus on evidence-based discussions and keep the ticket prices low to encourage wide participation (5 euros, a visit to the museum is included). The typical audience is young, reflecting the university's community, and the museum uses various communication channels to reach different demographics. These include traditional methods such as posters and flyers distributed around the university and city, as well as modern digital platforms. The museum employs social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to engage with a broader audience and keep them informed about upcoming events and exhibitions. Additionally, they utilise their website and email newsletters to provide detailed information and updates directly to subscribers. Collaboration with relevant organisations, as Doom pointed out, and community groups also helps in reaching specific target audiences interested in particular themes or topics. Monitoring and feedback are integral parts of the process, with tools like city code data collection and online surveys helping to understand the audience better and refine future events.

The second important contribution is from Giulia Gregnanin, the Director of Timespan, Helmsdale, Scotland. Gregnanin emphasises the need for museums to serve as spaces for inclusive community interaction, drawing on Timespan's extensive local engagement initiatives. Timespan organises a range of activities, including workshops, screenings, and reading sessions, aimed at fostering community dialogue and participation. One notable initiative is their 'People's Mobile Archive,' which started during the pandemic to reach isolated individuals and has since evolved into a co-production project involving regular community activities. Gregnanin highlights the importance of adapting to the local context, especially in a remote area like Helmsdale.

Timespan's engagement strategies include diverse programmes targeting different age groups and addressing various social issues. Feedback sessions are a regular part of their events,

ensuring continuous community input and involvement. Despite financial challenges, Timespan remains committed to its mission of promoting social and environmental justice through cultural initiatives, emphasising resilience and sustainability in its operations.

Gregnanin stresses the museum's pivotal role within the local community: 'The museum is everything for our community. We organise activities that engage all age groups, from children to the elderly, trying to meet everyone's needs and interests.' Timespan's holistic approach reflects local history and aims to address social issues through culture. However, engaging a small, rural community presents challenges: 'People have very different and entrenched political views. It's difficult but necessary to provide guidance while also understanding their needs.' To reach everyone, Timespan employs various strategies, such as home delivery of books and regular activities during the pandemic. As Gregnanin explains: 'We created a mobile library delivered directly to homes and organised activities every six months, involving and engaging people.' This has led to ongoing dialogue and genuine co-production work, such as the 'Recollection' project, which aims to empower the community through workshops, screenings, and exhibitions. Gregnanin emphasises the need for continuous adaptation and resilience: 'We are trying to slow down work rhythms in a sustainable degrowth perspective, despite economic challenges.' Overall, Gregnanin's approach at Timespan demonstrates the crucial role museums can play in fostering a sense of community and addressing social issues through inclusive and adaptive cultural initiatives.

People have very different and entrenched political views. It's difficult but necessary to provide guidance while also understanding their needs.

Giulia Gregnanin, Director of Timespan, Helmsdale, Scotland.

Photo: Norman Eggert/Alamy Stock Foto

Climate change

The interviews revealed several key insights into the role of museums in addressing climate change through community forums. All interviewees agreed on the significance of these forums, highlighting museums as potential hubs for fostering dialogue and raising awareness of environmental issues. Saša Srećković from the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade emphasised that eco-museums are particularly well-suited for hosting forums on this topic, given their specific focus and purpose. He noted, 'Eco-museums are the proper hub for hosting forums devoted to climate change. Of course, other museums are also responsible, but eco-museums are the best instrument; that is why they are created. This is not an excuse for other museums; I see this possibility for a museum to act as some kind of intermediary.'

However, implementing these forums effectively presents numerous barriers and challenges, even if the topic is relevant across the world. Ximena Jordán, for example, explains the situation in Mexico, where museums are truly community focal points and frequently organise community forums: 'Museums in Mexico are very community-oriented. Until recently, I did not perceive a widespread awareness of climate change within Mexican society. This is also because Mexico has been relatively untouched by the severe weather and seismic activities that Chile, for instance, faces. However, this year, there has been a noticeable shift, with both society and authorities becoming more aware of climate change issues. Previously, this awareness was limited primarily to environmental museums, while other museums and artists were not as engaged with the topic.'

They see in museums the potential to imagine action to create new images of what the world could be like.

Marjan Doom, Director Ghent University Museum

Common obstacles include political and systemic barriers, logistical constraints, and issues of inclusivity and accessibility. Luísa Santos emphasised the potential of museums in climate activism, noting that activists often choose museums to draw attention to their causes because 'they see in museums the potential to imagine action to create new images of what the world could be like.' She explained that museums are perceived as safe places, which is why activists choose them as venues for protests. To overcome these challenges, several strategies were identified. Effective strategies include presenting topics from various angles to engage diverse groups, continuous community engagement, and fostering inclusivity.

In the specific context of climate change, many respondents believe that museums have the potential to address these issues, but that the extent

to which they do so varies. Science museums, in particular, are in a privileged position to address the topic and are perhaps more inclined to do so. Therefore, it would probably be useful to approach a science museum on this issue. In any case, respondents agree that all museums, regardless of their subject area, should deal with this topic together with the community, precisely because of their role within it.

For example, Giulia Gregnanin noted the importance of the heritage curator as a liaison between the community and the museum's programme, which includes activities aimed at fostering community dialogue on climate change. Gregnanin explained, 'In the Timespan, we have initiatives directed at the climate industry, such as the Recollection project. These include open-debate meetings and currently organising reading sessions every Thursday, where we read articles on climate justice together. Understanding what causes climate change and its effects is crucial before we can determine our actions. It's not easy to understand climate change effects for those of us living in a privileged context, which is why it's difficult to talk about it.'

Gregnanin further elaborated on their strategy to engage the audience with the theme of climate change, which can seem distant to many: 'We start with archival screenings, beginning with the changes in the North Sea and its industrialisation. This involves documentaries related to the area, helping older people relate. Then we move to the second screening about rising sea levels in the Pacific Islands to provide a transnational perspective. The third screening continues to broaden this view. You need to mediate by providing a local entry point and then invite them to take a further step.' This approach has proven effective in mediating local debates and providing suitable tools for the local context, despite significant local debates around transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy. Olga Van Oost suggests a strong consensus on the importance of museums engaging with climate change and the potential benefits of doing so through well-structured community forums. Van Oost mentioned that, although forums on climate issues face substantial logistical hurdles, they play a critical role in transforming museums into spaces of active civic participation.

In conclusion, while there are significant challenges to organising community forums on climate change in museums, the potential benefits of fostering dialogue and raising awareness make it a worthwhile endeavour. Continuous engagement, inclusivity, and leveraging digital tools are essential strategies for overcoming these barriers and ensuring that museums can effectively contribute to climate action and community engagement.

Photo: BJ FlavioMassari/Alamy Stock Foto

Guide to organising community forums in museums: Fostering dialogue on climate change

The community forum guide is a practical resource for any museum interested in organising public gatherings together with experts and the community. Indeed, museums are increasingly recognised as vital platforms for fostering community dialogue and engagement on various societal issues, particularly those related to environmental sustainability and climate action.

This guide aims to empower museums to organise community forums that facilitate open dialogue among community members, enabling participatory engagement and collective problem-solving. A community forum is a structured (or semi-structured) public meeting or gathering that provides a space for open dialogue among community members. These forums are distinct from other gatherings as they are designed to offer validated information while simultaneously generating debate and dialogue. They seek to create a dynamic and lively reality within the museum, allowing participants to discuss various topics, share information, and address communal issues. The primary goal is to foster participatory engagement and collective problem-solving, empowering participants to contribute to community development and decision-making processes.

The significance of addressing climate change in these forums lies in raising awareness, fostering community resilience, and promoting sustainable practices. By engaging communities in discussions on climate change, museums can play a crucial role in educating the public and encouraging proactive measures to mitigate environmental impacts. The guide that follows can be applied to topics beyond climate change, though we exemplify topics concerning the human-planetary relationship, as community forums provide an excellent setting to discuss such crucial issues, uniquely impacting all of our communities.

This toolkit has been prepared by the NEMO Working Group Sustainability and Climate Action (SAC!) that focuses on promoting sustainability and climate action within European museums. The Working Group develops guidelines, shares best practice, and supports museums in addressing environmental and climate challenges.

Organising a community forum: step-by-step

1. Getting started

Outline the goals of the community forum: decide which audience you want to reach and determine why this forum will be relevant for your community.

It is about reciprocal relationships; knowledge exchange. If you want to work with the community, you need to listen to them.

Luísa Santos, Curator, Researcher and Professor at Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Portugal

Define what you hope to achieve regarding climate change awareness and community engagement.

Draw on already existing visitor research findings to determine your current audience, as well as to which groups you should reach out.

Conduct surveys or focus groups to understand the community's interests, concerns, and knowledge gaps about climate change (or any other topics). This will help tailor the forum to meet community needs.

Identify and involve key stakeholders early in the planning process. This includes representatives of your community, including but not limited to local leaders, environmental experts, local government representatives, and potential partners (especially for the promotion of the initiative).

Determine an appropriate timeline that considers the planning phase, execution of, and follow-up or continuation of the forum. Community forums can start as bi-monthly events and then increase in frequency. Ideally, begin organising the event, including conducting surveys, at least three months before the first community forum takes place. The initial phase is lengthy, but once established, the forums do not require extensive time commitment.

Draft a budget (1st phase): Organising and running a community forum doesn't require a substantial budget, but it does need a clear commitment from your team. At least one team member (depending on the size of the museum and the scope of the community forum) should dedicate a significant portion of their time to researching the topics to be discussed, contacting the moderator(s) and speaker(s), and managing the timeline determined by your team.

2. Getting specific

Capture your community's attention and align with your museum's mission by selecting a relevant and engaging topic. Focus on the human-planetary relationship by highlighting how climate change impacts both local and global environments. Start by addressing issues that are close to your local community, ensuring the topic resonates with their everyday experiences and concerns.

Gradually develop subsequent sessions that expand from a local perspective to national and then transnational levels. This progression helps educate the community on broader climate issues while keeping the discussion relevant to their lives. Engaging the community in this way is essential for fostering awareness and understanding climate change.

Even if your team is initially unfamiliar with the topic selected, there are ways forward

- Consider selecting a topic that relates to your museum's collections, a recent or upcoming exhibition, or recent research project for which you have already begun the research.
- Investigate challenges or risks related to climate change that impact your region specifically; invite an expert that can address the unique scenario faced by your community.
- Explore how and which element(s) of intangible cultural heritage are related to this topic or select museum object(s) relevant to the topic, around which you can build a fruitful discussion.

Tools to enhance climate change knowledge and inspire sustainable action

- Guidelines climate protection in museums (NEMO)
- Videos: Taking action on climate change (ICOM)
- Climate central's climate change guide (CLIMATE CENTRAL)

Incorporate audio-visual elements: In the initial sessions, consider including audio-visual materials such as documentaries and videos to capture attention and enhance engagement. These elements can make complex topics more accessible and relatable, providing a compelling starting point for discussions.

Prioritise speakers or panellists who provide meaningful insights and stimulate discussion. This may include climate scientists, activists, policy makers, and community members with lived experience related to environmental issues. To engage the usual museum audience, try to invite artists and curators focused on the study of climate change and the human-planetary relationship as well.

Ensure that the panel represents diverse viewpoints, including those of marginalised communities, who are often disproportionately affected by climate change.

3. Getting excited

Attract a diverse audience using various channels, including social media platforms, local newspapers, radio stations, and community bulletin boards. Develop a comprehensive communication plan that reaches beyond your standard audience.

Confirm that the forum is accessible to all community members. Provide language translation services to cater to non-native speakers and ensure that all promotional materials and session contents are accessible. Adapt the planned programme and space so that it is suitable for people with disabilities and consider whether you will need a sign-language interpreter. Additionally, consider providing childcare services during the event to allow parents to participate without concerns about their children's supervision.

Foster active participation through engaging and interactive formats ... this is key!

Tips to host an interactive session:

- Q&A sessions where your audience can ask questions and receive an immediate response.
- Organise small group discussions after the forum to allow for more in-depth conversations and personal engagement.
- Include, if possible, interactive activities such as workshops, brainstorming sessions, and hands-on projects that encourage attendees to participate actively and contribute their ideas.
- Consider using objects in your museum as conversation starters.

Tips for partnerships and communication:

- Partner with local organisations, schools, and businesses to broaden outreach and ensure the event reaches different segments of the community.
- Consider involving representatives of your municipality, ministries, or ambassadors in your country to raise awareness and connect the topic to local policy making.
- Create a dedicated website to share information, progress updates, evidence, and learning materials, informing public debate and raising awareness about the forum and its goals.
- Organise press briefings to provide regular updates and insights.
- Live-stream sessions to allow remote participation and ensure transparency.
- Invite journalists to interview participants and organisers to offer diverse perspectives.
- Disseminate press releases to highlight key outcomes and announcements.

4. Getting the details in order

Re-evaluate your timeline, including milestones for planning, promoting, and executing the forum. Ensure all team members are aware of their responsibilities and deadlines.

Determine how long the forum should be: It depends on the size of the museum and the topic of the session. The more complex, salient, or controversial an issue is, the bigger the forum will be and the more time will be needed to discuss the issue. A successful community forum should last no more than 2 hours.

Review your budget to be certain that it covers all aspects of the forum, including speaker fees, venue costs (if you are hosting outside of your museum), marketing expenses, refreshments and materials. Seek sponsorship or grants to offset costs if necessary.

5. Ready, set, go!

Create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere where all attendees feel comfortable and valued.

Provide clear instructions and support throughout the event, including accessible entry points, signage, and assistance as needed.

Share information about the event on the website and other communication channels, including agendas and logistical details.

Facilitate structured discussions that encourage open dialogue and respect diverse viewpoints. Set clear ground rules for discussions at the beginning to foster a respectful and constructive environment.

Refresh and re-energise your participants by organising a coffee break or similar as well as a space to talk informally after the forum.

Record the discussions and key points raised during the forum through various means: Note-taking by designated scribes, audio or video recording.

Ensure that all recordings and notes are stored securely and take necessary steps to confirm consent of participation and publication, in order to respect the privacy of participants.

Summarise and disseminate the key outcomes and recommendations from the forum through press releases, social media updates, and reports published on a dedicated website.

Engage local journalists and media outlets to cover the event, providing interviews with participants and organisers to amplify the forum's impact.

Enjoy the event you have carefully crafted for your community and be ready to embrace the learnings that await you and your team!

The community work we do isn't just for today—it's for the long haul, built on trust, inclusivity, and a commitment to making everyone feel welcome.

Giulia Gregnanin, Director of Timespan Museum, Scotland

6. Staying engaged

Evaluate feedback from participants to assess the effectiveness of the forum. This step is crucial: Use surveys to gather insights on what worked well and what could be improved. This evaluation will help refine the following forum and address any issues identified by the participants.

Share the outcomes and recommendations from the forum with the broader community, stakeholders, and policymakers. This can be done through detailed reports, social media posts, and public presentations. Transparency in sharing findings helps build trust and ensures that the community feels their input is valued.

Monitor the implementation of accepted recommendations with regular public progress reports. Track specific indicators that potentially highlight the long-term benefits of the forum, e.g. demographic data assessing possible changes in the museum's usual community, community awareness and engagement levels. For example, an initial report could be released one month after the forum, with subsequent updates if necessary. This ongoing communication helps maintain accountability and demonstrates the forum's lasting impact on the community and the museum.

Establish a follow-up committee of forum participants to continue the work they have begun. Your participants should be encouraged to stay in touch and involved following the initial session. And don't forget to embed the contributions of museum staff or volunteers responsible for the forum into your museum's future workflow.

Listening to participant feedback is crucial. It's how we evolve and adapt, making sure that we're truly meeting the needs and expectations of our community.

Marjan Doom, Director of GUM and Plantentuin, Belgium

Research methodology

The methodology encompasses a blend of theoretical and practical approaches:

Literature review

This consists of a thorough review of the existing literature on museum studies, focusing on the role of museums in community engagement and public education on social and environmental issues. The review explores various models and theories related to museum practices, including those proposed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the results of recent conferences, such as The NEMO European Museum Conference 2023 'and ... ACTION! Museums in the climate crisis' that took place last November in Lahti, Finland, with the participation of 300+ museum colleagues from nearly 40 countries.

This part of the research presents different examples of good practice implemented by European museums, the strategies employed, and the results obtained. By showcasing various examples of successful practices from both European and non-European museums, this section details the specific strategies used and the outcomes achieved in engaging the community beyond the traditional exhibition space. These case studies include initiatives aimed at fostering public dialogue, promoting sustainability, and integrating community feedback into museum programming. Examples of good practices include:

Initiatives where museums have successfully organised **forums and workshops** that involve local communities in discussions about pressing social and environmental issues. These events often feature expert panels, interactive sessions, and collaborative projects that encourage public participation and feedback.

- **Educational programmes and partnerships:** Programmes developed in collaboration with schools, universities, and other educational institutions to create curriculum-based activities and resources. These partnerships enhance the museum's role in public education and community outreach.

- **Sustainability initiatives:** Examples of museums that have integrated sustainable practices into their programming. These initiatives often involve hosting community forums on sustainability topics, promoting recycling and waste reduction, and educating the public about sustainability through specific actions, such as offering sustainable products in museum cafés and shops to encourage visitors to adopt eco-friendly practices in their everyday lives.

- **Inclusive programming:** Efforts to make museums more accessible and inclusive for all community members, including marginalised and underrepresented groups. This can involve multilingual exhibitions, programmes for people with disabilities, and partnerships with local community organisations.

By detailing these strategies and their outcomes, this section provides a comprehensive and practical framework for developing effective museum guidance strategies. The goal is to equip museums with the tools and knowledge needed to enhance their role as active facilitators of public

discourse and community engagement. Through these examples, the research offers concrete insights and actionable recommendations for museums looking to expand their impact and relevance in society.

Interviews and case study analysis:

Interviews with diverse stakeholders (museum directors/board members, sustainability and museum consultants, researchers and curators) provide substance regarding practical challenges and opportunities in organising community forums.

The selection of interviewees was based on three specific criteria designed to ensure a representative cross-section of European (and non-European) museums:

- **Geographic diversity:** People born/who work in different regions/ with different realities to reflect a variety of cultural and societal contexts.
- **Institutional size:** Selections vary from smaller, niche museums to larger, internationally-recognised institutions, highlighting scalability and adaptability of practices.
- **Thematic focus of the institutions:** Museums with different core themes (e.g., art, technology, social issues) are included to examine how community forums can be tailored to different subject matters and audience interests.

These criteria are aimed at demonstrating how the guide can be universally applicable across different types of museums.

Data analysis:

This involves assessing whether selected museums have implemented community forums or similar assemblies focused on climate issues or other topics, understanding barriers, and gathering suggestions for potential implementation. These data, combined with literature, have informed the development of the guide. Additionally, the analysis explores the effectiveness of these initiatives in fostering community engagement and their impact on public awareness and action regarding climate change. The findings are contextualised within the broader literature on museum practices and community engagement, providing a well-rounded understanding of the current landscape and future potential.

The guide is structured to provide step-by-step instructions for museums, covering all aspects of organising a community forum – from the initial concept and planning stages through to execution and follow-up. Key sections of the guide include:

- **Choosing topics and speakers:** Guidelines on how to select relevant and engaging topics related to the human-planetary Relationship that resonate with the community and align with the museum's mission. This section also covers the selection of speakers or panellists who can contribute meaningful insights and stimulate discussion.
- **Participant engagement:** Strategies for marketing the event to attract a diverse audience and techniques for facilitating active participation during the forum.
- **Logistical planning:** Best practices for setting timelines, managing budgets, and addressing logistical challenges that may arise during the planning and execution phases.
- **Post-forum activities:** Recommendations on how to maintain momentum after the forum, including follow-up activities and ways to measure the impact of the event on the community and the museum itself.

Glossary

- **Citizens' assembly:** A citizens' assembly is a group of people selected by lottery who are broadly representative of a community. They spend significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to find common ground and form collective recommendations for policy makers, decision makers, and the community. These assemblies are sometimes called citizens' juries, panels, or councils, depending on their size and the country in which they take place.
- **Community forum:** A community forum is a structured or semi-structured public meeting that provides a space for open dialogue among community members. Distinct from other gatherings, these forums offer validated information while simultaneously generating debate and dialogue. They create a dynamic and lively environment within the museum, allowing participants to discuss various topics, share information, and address communal issues. The primary goal is to foster participatory engagement and collective problem-solving, empowering participants to contribute to community development and decision-making processes.
- **Human-planetary relationship:** The human-planetary relationship refers to the complex and interdependent connection between human societies and the Earth. This relationship encompasses how humans interact with, impact, and depend on the planet's natural systems, including its ecosystems, climate, and resources. It involves the ways in which human activities, such as agriculture, industry, and urbanisation, affect the environment, and how environmental changes, in turn, influence human health, well-being, and socio-economic development. This relationship highlights the need for sustainable practices to ensure the long-term health and balance of both human communities and the planet's ecological systems.

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Appendix

Semi-structured questionnaire

1. **Role and evolution of museums:**

   - What do you think is the role of museums in society and community in this era? How has it changed in recent years?
   - What are the limitations of the roles of museums in society?

2. **Community forums:**

   - What is, in your opinion, a community forum?
   - Have you participated in organising or moderating any community forums? If so, what were the main objectives and outcomes?
   - What are the essential elements involved in planning and executing a successful community forum, especially in a museum setting?
   - How do museums budget for these forums? Are there common funding sources or partnerships that help facilitate them?
   - What are the main barriers to organising gatherings with the community such as forums?

3. **Climate change and museums:**

   - What do you think is the role of museums within the climate change crisis?
   - Why do activists choose museums to attract attention?
   - Do you think it is important to use museums as hubs to promote dialogue and knowledge about the climate change crisis?
   - What sustainable practices do you think museums should adopt to continue playing a proactive role in climate change activism?

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