

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Museums and the Way Forward for Resilience*

Neel ANTARA 

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany

Shuvro SEN 

University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the shape of everybody's life. This new pandemic has affected all economic sectors from mining, banking, manufacturing in an individual country to traveling to a foreign country. Among the most affected sectors, the museum is one of them which survival has now in danger. The museums have witnessed the greatest financial loss during the COVID-19 period. The museums have started to move to online museum maintaining social distance. The employees are now working from home though the temporary and freelancers are in the way of unemployment or furloughed. The majority of the museums do not have the capacity to pay the employees legal wages. Thus, the stakeholders need to take different supporting activities with respect to the specific museum conditions so that the museum can survive in the post-COVID-19.

Keywords: Museum, employees, COVID-19, online museum, resilient.

Type: Review Article

Article History

Received: 02.10.2020

Accepted: 26.11.2020

Published: 28.11.2020

Corresponding Author:

Shuvro Sen

SCREENED BY

 **iThenticate**
Professional Plagiarism Prevention



Patara Archaeological Site / Antalya
2020: The Year of Patara in Turkey

Suggested Citation

Antara, N. & Sen, S. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on the museums and the way forward for resilience, *Journal of International Museum Education*, 2(1), 54-61

About The Authors



Ms. **Neel Antara** is currently enrolled as a student at World Heritage Studies, a Master's degree programme at Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany. nirobotaneel@gmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0227-1635>



Mr. **Shuvro Sen** is currently working as a Research Associate with a research project related to public policy development, governance. University of Dhaka Department of Management, senshuvro.du@gmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7481-4515>



INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, known as a pandemic, is a new infectious disease caused by a new virus. This virus affects the activities of museums across the world as this virus can contaminate people easily and transmit from "person to person". The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) named this virus an "epidemic" while the World Health Organization (WHO) called it a "pandemic" (Hughes, 2020).

The impact of this virus is not constrained to a country or area – it becomes global (Cernansky, 2020). As a result, the world is now in unweaving. This pandemic also affects the museum and cultural heritage sectors. (International Council of Museums, 2020). The livelihood of thousands of museum professionals has been financially threatened as the majority of the museums remained closed their activities to prevent the spreading of the virus. This upholding activity impacts the people associated with the museums. These closures do not have only economic, but also social impact. The museums do not only reserve the heritages but also promote education, inspiration, and dialogue to the people.

As per the reports by the UNESCO and the International Council of Museums, it has been predicted that 1 in 8 museums could permanently close due to the COVID-19 (*Museums and Cultural Institutions: COVID-19*, 2020). The American Alliance of Museums reported that about 30% of institutions may not be able to reopen without the government's financial support (American Alliance of Museums, 2020). It has been estimated that ticket sales in museums have been dropped by 80% due to maintaining social distance (Carlsson, 2020). Many people of this sector expected to temporarily or permanently lose job contracts or employment as well as without the legal payment (International Council of Museums, 2020). Sometimes with varying degrees of warning and financial assistance available (*Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Arts and Cultural Heritage*, 2020). Additionally, museum authorities have installed glass barriers at the ticket counter. Some of the museums started to online payment instead of cash payment (Itzkowitz, 2020). To enforce the social distancing as well as oblige the government's rules, the museums have seen to opt the reserving special time slot option. Galleria Borghese museum, Italy, is one of the examples of this which limited the number of visitors to 80 for each two-hour time slot available (Itzkowitz, 2020).

This study has focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the museums, particularly focusing on the impact of this disease on the museums' employees. It has been assumed that most of the people in the museums have worked from home when the museum's activities remain unopened.

The report has based on secondary information. The information has been collected from different reports, journal publications, website information, newspaper. 'The impact of COVID-19' keywords have been used for the data collection. All the related survey results have been read and checked to the acceptability with the research objectives.

This paper begins by providing a short overview of COVID-19 and museums. Later, it will discuss how the museums have responded to the COVID-19 to become resilient. After that, the economic impact of COVID-19 on the professionals of museums will be discussed. Next, the paper will provide a few recommendations to deal with the impact of the forced closure on museum professionals.

COVID-19 and Museums

It is difficult to summarize the impact of COVID-19 on museums (Carlsson, 2020). In a recent survey conducted by ICOM, it has been found that almost all museums around the world (94.7%) were closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic while these museums focused on their digital activities (International



Council of Museums, 2020). About 15% of museums have increased digital communication activities. In another survey done by UNESCO, it has been reported that around 90% of museums or more than 85,000 institutions have closed their doors during the crisis (UNESCO, 2020).

In Europe and Pacific areas, there are about 98% of museums have been closed. This was the highest number of museums closed across the world (International Council of Museums, 2020). However, the closure rate was comparatively low in the African and Asia regions.

The economic impact of the COVID-19 on museums will be enormous regarding finance. Among them, private museums have been affected mostly as they are mainly dependent on the income generated by visitors. In this circumstance, the private museums may be bankrupt in the upcoming months. According to the European NEMO survey, it has been reported that about 30% of museums have lost up to €1,000 per week, and 25% up to €5,000. In the section of large museums, the financial loss might be between €100,000 and €600,000 per week. Due to the shortage of the budget, about 4 out of the 5 activities have been reduced, and almost a third of museums are forced to shrink the number of employees by nearly one third (Network of European Museum Organisations, 2020).

During the COVID-19, many museums adapted the online museum strategy. Now, they are currently focusing on online museum resources, e-learning, and online collections. On the other hand, the revenue of the museum has drastically reduced and the professional people of the sector face layoffs. During the lockdown, museum institutions try to connect with people in many ways - including the provision of humor; escapism; opportunities to express artistic creativity; education opportunities; social connection and collaboration; and "a sense of calm". Museums and heritage organizations have seen to support dementia affected people during the COVID-19 through distributing printed reminiscence packs to enjoy at home, advertise on different virtual tours, hosting online shows (Olorunshola, 2020). Museums, The Philbrook Museum as an example, have started to share museum images and its other collection related to culture with the local community through social media (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2020).

How museums responded to be resilient during the COVID-19

The museums have reacted to the COVID-19 very promptly. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the museums shifted a large part of the activities to promote online museums. For example, the Bangabandhu Museum in Bangladesh has taken the highest advantage of having a digital platform (UNESCO, 2020). Online collections, 360° tours, online museums, online publications, digital exhibitions, are part of online museums (UNESCO, 2020).

Though most of the museum already had an investment to develop an existence online before the lockdowns, during the lockdown, social media activities have increased more. Recently, museums arrange exhibitions, conferences, on digital platforms i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Sometimes, the museums have organized a verities number of special activities like games, coloring activities, quizzes, educational activities, in order to ameliorate the COVID-19 challenges (UNESCO, 2020). GAMeC (Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art) in Italy organized an online radio show, the MUO (Museum of Arts and Crafts) in Croatia launched s online initiatives (UNESCO, 2020). The Children's Museum of Houston and the Children's Museum of Manhattan have organized virtual learning centers. Museum Computer Network (MCN) has prepared a list of hundreds of virtual resources from museums. (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2020).

A few museums opened its door for visitors but with a limited number of visitors. For example, Galleria Borghese, a museum in Italy, limited the number of visitors to 80 for each two-hour time slot available (Itzkowitz, 2020). The museums do not allow any visitors without a face mask as per the government rules in the respective country (Itzkowitz, 2020).



Some other museums established an advanced technology that buzzes and flashes if two persons become close together during the time of wearing it around the neck (Itzkowitz, 2020). The Duomo of Florence is a good illustration of it.

The impact of COVID-19 on the museum employees

In order to stop the spreading of the COVID-19 virus among the people, the museums have remained closed for more than months. The authority of the museums has taken different preventive measures in accordance with the respective government orders. The majority of the museum professionals have started working from home. The report presents that “in 84% of museums, the large majority of the **employees** is working remotely during the lockdowns.” (International Council of Museums, 2020). Despite having the employment status of the permanent employees of the museums remains stable, the situation of the contractual employees along with the freelancers has been changed. It has been reported by the ICOM that about 6% of temporary contracts were either not renewed or have been terminated (International Council of Museums, 2020). In a recent study by NEMO, it has been reported that 3 out of 10 museums have put on hold contracts with freelancers (Network of European Museum Organisations, 2020). However, a majority (73%) of museums reported having to reduce their expenses by reducing costs related to employees and volunteer programs (Network of European Museum Organisations, 2020).

The employees have faced mental pressure when they have to work from home with new circumstances. They started to “Work from home” with the team members who are dedicated to the “Online museums”. The NEMO report shows that $\frac{1}{4}$ of the museums opinioned that they might reduce their employees in the near future. The report has been prepared based on about 1,000 survey responses from the museums in 48 countries. (Network of European Museum Organisations, 2020). Above 50% of the employees are concerned about the future of the museums. The rate is higher among the independent museums’ and local authority museums’ employees (Hadley, 2020).

Future Direction

The impact of COVID-19 on the museums is vast. The employees have started to work from home while they are in fear of job loss. The temporary employees faced layoffs and furlough while the freelancers have been unemployed. The overall budget of the museums has been reduced as they do not have income that is usually generated from the visitors. As a result, it is an emergency to take a holistic measurement in order to support the museums as well as the employees in the short and long run.

Government:

Government is one of the main stakeholders of the museums. To protect the museums from permanent closure, the government can support the museums in the following ways:

- Provide support financially to the museums so that the museums can provide salaries to the employees. Besides, the government can support museums to arrange different online public exhibitions where the museums can exhibit their collection and connect people to their collections.
- The government can support the museums by providing the required infrastructure resources with a keep in mind that the museums will be one of the relaxing points and educational places after the COVID-19.



The museums' authorities:

The museum authorities like UNESCO, ICOM, are the ultimate decision-maker. Their prompt decision can support a museum to survive during the COVID-19 crisis.

- The museums can start the find out the prof earning area from the online museums. Many museums have shifted to the online museum during the COVID-19. As we have no idea how long we have to maintain social distance to prevent the COVID-19 virus, the museums have to start focusing on this platform. Google Arts and project is one of the examples.
- The museums can promote training to the employees on how to be creative, share knowledge and experiences on how to survive during a pandemic with the other local, national as well as international partners.
- Being considered as an educational medium, the museum can now focus on educational purposes. The museums can develop a different genre of educational content which are suitable for the children. In this way, the museum can contribute to social responsibilities as well as earn money from online platforms.
- The authorities can promote flexible working hours and responsibilities to the employees. In this way, the employees can become more creative rather than now which can lead to the way of further development. As it has been reported that employees feel abandoned by the museum's higher authority like management and trustee (Hadley, 2020).
- The museum authorities can organize online training and skills development program for the employees free of cost because of the existing knowledge gap in training and development (Hadley, 2020). Museums have started to increase the online presence, but the digital expertise in this area is scarce.
- The authorities of the museums must have to ensure the employees' rights. Any employees' termination will be a sorrowful thing in this pandemic. Therefore, the museums must have to take no layoffs policy.

Employees:

The employees of the museums have a significantly vital role in the crisis as they are one of the important stakeholders of the museums.

- The employees can focus on creativity – how a museum can become creative in any crisis. This is the highest timing when the employees have the responsibility to support the museum to find out different income sources. The freelancers' engagement may be one of the best solutions in this regard.
- As the museums do not have enough income to pay the employees' salaries, the employees can continue working with a limited salary.

Banks and financial institutions:

The museum needs liquid cash flow to support the retain employees. So, the banks and other financial institutions can move forward to support the museums with respect to support the destitute workforce.



- The banks, other financial institutions, and companies can provide a donation to the museums. This donation will be an advertising strategy to the banks or other financial institutions and in return, the museums can get finance.
- The banks can reduce the interest rate for loan payments taken by any museum authorities. Moreover, the loan installment can be rescheduled in order to support the museums.

Holistic approach:

Besides, the government, banks, and financial institutions, museum authorities, all stakeholders of the museums have to work collaborate to find ways to support the museums as well as ensure the future feasibility of this industry once the crisis has been overcome.

- The museums and society work together to ensuring adequate preparation to trickle any future crisis.
- The overall security system can be improved during this type of epidemic so that all the collections in the museums can be preserved and maintained.
- The people of the country can play a vital role in preserving the museums by ensuring financial support. The elite people can donate money to the museums which can reduce the museums' financial burden. The crowd-funding option can be implemented in this regard.
- The authorities of the popular online media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, can promote the online museum. These platforms can take different projects to support the museums to be digitalized. Google Arts & Culture is one of the classic examples of this.
- The museum authorities along with the government and other institutions can promote the creative working related to the pandemic and its effect. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Historic England, and the University of York, for an instant, arranged art competition (*Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Arts and Cultural Heritage*, 2020).
- The stakeholders of the museums have to think about survival after the COVID-19. The encouragement of the visitors to visit the museum after the COVID-19 is one of the ways along with other options like preparing different business planning, lobbying with government, increasing corporate partnership.

CONCLUSION

Museums are an essential part of our society. The overall situation of the museums was fine. The number of museums has increased by 60% of the total number of museums in 2012 (UNESCO, 2020). However, it is undoubted that the COVID-19 has made a difficult timing for the museums (Carlsson, 2020). COVID-19 has changed the shape of the growth of the museums. Due to the COVID-19, the majority of the museums have temporarily closed down. As a result, the museums do not have generated sufficient income. Some of the museums have been predicted to be permanently closed down. Therefore, it is very emergency to support the museums in order to survive post-COVID-19.



Due to the COVID-19, the museums have been financially lost. The employees of the museums have the fear of furloughed or layoffs. The majority of the employees have started to work from home. Moreover, the security of the museums' collection is of the top concerns.

To be resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic, the museums have shifted to online museums. The digital library has been updated with the latest collection by the museum. Different exhibitions, conferences, are now usually held on the online platform through the majority of the exhibition are postponed until 2021 (Hadley, 2020). There is no accurate information when the museum will come back to its normal working life. Most of the museums reopened in the summer of 2020

Therefore, it is high time to think about how to become more resilient in the upcoming next days. With a view to be resilient, the museums may need to focus on the digital museum. The digital platforms can be an alternative source of income. The museums cannot survive alone during this pandemic which requires support from all the stakeholders.

The government needs to extend the financial support towards the museums so that the museums can ensure the employees' wages at least. The bank and other financial institutions can promote loans for the museums as well as the elite people of the society along with the local people can donate money to the museums. Sometimes, the employees need to work in a critical situation with a reduced amount of salary.

The museums governing authorities like UNESCO, ICOM, can provide urgent support to the museums by providing appropriate policies, mobilizing cooperation to enable the museums to survive economically. All the stakeholders i.e. government, employees, museum authorities, policymakers have to ensure working in a holistic approach so that the museums can survive in the pandemic situation as well as in the post-COVID-19. The role of museums in education, communication, research, heritage preservation, financial, and social is enormous. Thus, it is the responsibility of all of us to support the museums so that it can be face the COVID-19 challenges.

In this changing environment, the stakeholders of the museums have to work together to find out the solution to face the next financial crisis due to any financial loss or by an epidemic. A previous report published by UNESCO titled "2015 Recommendation Concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections" can be used as a guideline for developing future strategies. It is true that the recent pandemic, COVID-19, exposed the fragility of the Sustainable Development Goal's whereas two-thirds are now unlikely to be achieved. Thus, it is required to screen all SDG's from different perspectives in order to support a museum to revive. The top prioritizing point will be to ensure the social safety for the museum employees, to establish a museum in a digital way where all of the collection will be available on online platforms ("Covid-19 Crisis Closes 90 Percent of Museums Globally, UNESCO Plans for Reopenings," 2020). These types of development require huge finance which may not be possible for a museum to arrange. Therefore, all parties have to move forward to save the life of the museum to bring our culture to the next generation.



REFERENCES

- American Alliance of Museums. (2020). *COVID-19 Resources & Information for the Museum Field*. <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/covid-19-resources-information-for-the-museum-field/>
- Carlsson, R. (2020). *Culture, coronavirus and the future of UK museums*. MuseumNext. <https://www.museumnext.com/article/culture-coronavirus-and-the-future-of-uk-museums/>
- Cernansky, R. (2020). As coronavirus spreads, supply chain workers face layoffs. *Voguebusiness.Com*. <https://www.voguebusiness.com/sustainability/coronavirus-causes-closures-and-layoffs-for-workers-bangladesh-india>
- Hadley, W. (2020). COVID-19 impact Museum Sector Research Findings. In *Art Fund*. <https://www.artfund.org/assets/downloads/art-fund-covid19-research-report-final.pdf>
- Hughes, H. (2020, March 13). Five measures retailers can take to fight coronavirus impact. *Fashionunited.Uk*. <https://fashionunited.uk/news/retail/five-measures-retailers-can-take-to-fight-coronavirus-impact/2020031347959>
- Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and cultural heritage*. (2020). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impact_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_the_arts_and_cultural_heritage
- Institute of Museum and Library Services. (2020, April 1). *Facing Challenge with Resilience: How Museums are Responding During COVID-19*. Institute of Museum and Library Services. <https://www.ims.gov/blog/2020/04/facing-challenge-resilience-how-museums-are-responding-during-covid-19>
- International Council of Museums. (2020). *Museums, museum professionals and COVID-19*. <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-Museums-and-COVID-19.pdf>
- Itzkowitz, L. (2020). *How the Coronavirus Pandemic Is Affecting Museums*. Architectural Digest. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/covid-19-impact-on-museums>
- Museums and Cultural Institutions: COVID-19*. (2020). Research and Markets. https://www.researchandmarkets.com/issues/museums-could-face-permanent?utm_source=dynamic&utm_medium=GNOM&utm_code=p69mnx&utm_campaign=1409730+-+Impact+of+COVID-19+on+Museums+-+It+is+Estimated+That+30%25+of+Institutions+May+Not+Be+Able+to+Reopen+Without+S
- Network of European Museum Organisations. (2020). *Survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation on museums in Europe*. https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf
- Olorunshola, Y. (2020, March 26). *Practical ways museums can contribute during the Covid-19 crisis*. Museums Association.Org. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/03/26032020-practical-ways-museums-can-contribute-covid-19/#>