

The future begins today:

Elīna Kalniņa's review of the *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals through Baltic museums and libraries* online conference

The first thing that comes to mind in reflecting on the *Localising the Sustainable Development Goals through Baltic museums and libraries* conference: our museums and libraries are not indifferent bystanders, but willing and powerful participants. Today, the world seems more fragile than ever. It is characterised by unexpected, rapid changes that often make a modern-day person feel confused and threatened. The conference motto – *Ask your library! Ask your museum!* – encourages museums and libraries to become islands of security for their communities, their visitors and is, in my view, extremely inspiring for anyone working in the heritage sphere.

Memory institutions – whose fundamental purpose is to preserve and study the heritage of our past – exist to educate and inspire people through the interpretation and communication of that heritage. In today's world, it is especially important and therefore very gratifying that the Latvian Museum Association, the National Library of Latvia and the Latvian Librarians' Association, joining forces with the Estonian and Lithuanian Museums and Librarians' Associations and the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO, had organised this wonderful conference. Although the aim was to reinforce the role of museums and libraries in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the SDGs do actually encompass the essence of today's challenges. To quote Henry McGhie – one of the speakers at the conference, British museum expert and author of a six-step guide on working with the SDGs: “The 17 SD goals have been created to take on the world's greatest challenges”. At first glance, such ambitions may seem too grand for both museums and libraries, but it is safe to say that the conference succeeded in proving that any memory institution can become a major player in implementing the SDGs and can truly believe that mice can move mountains.

It is significant that the conference took place thirty years after Latvia's accession to two international organisations – the UN and UNESCO – whose activities are aimed at ensuring world peace and security and promoting sustainable development by fostering international cooperation in achieving its goals. This time span coincides with the thirty years since the restoration of independence for all three Baltic States, who shook off the yoke of the occupying totalitarian Soviet regime.

Over the past thirty years, we have gradually learned to live with the legacy of that occupation, consequently active involvement in both UN and UNESCO initiatives is particularly important to us: it makes us aware of our belonging to the Western world and its fundamental values, lobbying for democracy, freedom, peace and security; and enables us to be active members of the UN and UNESCO.

Listening to the lectures on the first day of the conference, I wrote down in my notebook that back in 1958, American politician and human rights activist Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the co-authors of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, wisely pointed out: all universal human rights begin in small, local communities. I think that is a powerful insight to bear in mind. The presentations by Henry McGhie, Uģis Zanders, NEMO representative Elisabeth Rosenberg and IFLA representative Stephen Wyber all affirmed that all 17 SDGs are, in essence, interrelated and this message was affirmed repeatedly during the rest of conference. Consequently, it is particularly important to help people today to grasp this connection, to localise the objectives by linking them to local communities, our environment, everyday lives and social interactions. The conference content strongly emphasised this conclusion, as it presented lectures by both local and international industry experts, real-life, tested examples of SDG integration in both museums and libraries, and, most commendably, hands-on workshops where valuable knowledge could be gained, useful tools tried out, while networking with colleagues and like-minded people in the Baltic States. The creativity and responsible attitude of the workshop leaders towards their work spoke volumes. I would like to highlight in particular the *Wheelchart of Sustainability* workshop, led by Leena Marsio, Senior Adviser at the Finnish Heritage Agency. It was a real pleasure to meet these passionate pioneers in the field and to realise how resolved they are to continue what they have started. The findings and summaries of the conference expressed during the closing panel discussion confirm that none of the participants see themselves as lone wolves but are aware that the SD goals can only be achieved in close and diverse cooperation, not only with other memory institutions, but also with other like-minded groups and communities, businesses and organisations.

Sustainability is unimaginable without a vision for the future. This is perfectly reflected in all the official documents, both international and national, and in every small, local, vitally important initiative that has already been implemented or is still being planned. Concern for the future, naturally, permeated the conference programme, because, in their deepest essence, memory institutions exist for the future. The way memory institutions operate today largely determines the quality of

the legacy that will be passed on to future generations. It is important to realise that not only is the heritage-conservation aspect important, but also the extent to which professionals in the field are able to harness the potential of that heritage in resolving both local and global problems. Today, it is vitally important for memory institutions both to understand their place and role in this new, changing world and to be able to balance their basic functions so as to fulfil this role in a high-quality and meaningful manner. Yes, that is a challenge, but those of us working in the heritage sector know better than anyone that human history has never been lacking in challenges and they have often been a driving force helping our ancestors achieve their goals. Sustainability is not an end in itself, to be reached at a given time, but rather a path, a new approach and set of values to follow in planning and doing our work in good conscience and in accordance with the core mission of our professional code of ethics – to serve society. We, who have chosen to work in the heritage field and strive for professional development, serve very specific communities that are important to us, first and foremost, our local people. Therefore, in doing our job, it is important to consider their needs and interests, to actively communicate with them and to involve them in our work. Serving local people means constantly and keenly communicating with them, so getting to know them. Only by knowing them can we understand those we serve. Only in this way can we improve our service quality. Providing a service is a sense of mission and the fulfilment of the real mission in our lives. In my opinion, the two are closely linked, complementary and inseparable values, especially in the context of sustainability. Thank you to the organisers of the conference, who gave us the opportunity to think again about the mission and nature of memory institutions, to not lose sight of landmarks and to be inspired to act today, here and now, so that in the future it will be a pleasure to look back at our achievements.