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The International Network of Migration Institutions: Promoting the Public Understanding of Migration.

Marta Severo

The International Network of Migration Institutions is a project born through the collaboration between the UNESCO and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). The project was born in 2006 under the name of “International Network of Migration Museums”. Recently, because of the many new partnerships that we are activating, such as the one with the Association of European Migration Institutions (AEMI), we decided to change our name into “International Network of Migration Institutions. Promoting the public understanding of migration”.

The Network was founded after an Expert Meeting on Migration Museums organised in Rome in October 2006 by UNESCO and IOM. The goal of the meeting was exchanging information on this new type of museums emerging all around the world. The participants were thirty experts including the directors of fifteen migration museums or related cultural institutions, coming from thir-

teen different countries. At the end of the meeting, the participants identified the need for creating an international network of cultural institutions concerned with migration with shared principles and values, in order to facilitate the collaboration through knowledge exchanges and joint projects.

The Migration Museums’ phenomenon

Before presenting the Network, it is important to consider the specificity of migration museums as identified through the expert meeting. It is this specificity that makes our project urgent and worthwhile. What clearly emerged from the meeting was a common need to fight fears and discriminations through actions such as: impacting on image, perceptions and behaviours; developing integration policies based on multiculturalism; facilitating intercultural exchange; challenging stereotypes through individual stories; strengthening mi-

grants' self-esteem especially in second and third generations. Memory has been recognized as a pre-requisite for all these actions, for memory is the foundation of migrants' identity and the basis of cultural exchange with host society. In particular, the role and power of individual stories has been underlined. Individual stories allow building migrants cultural identity, deconstructing stereotypes and developing empathy between migrants and host society. Memory is a bridge between the past, the present and the future of migration.

Migration museums are new institutions emerging to provide physical venues where migrant memories can be expressed and preserved. Migration museums are a worldwide phenomenon. United States, Australia, Canada, and more recently several European countries have been creating such venues to facilitate transmission between generations as well as encounters between migrants and host populations. These institutions fulfil the duty to remember especially through three main initiatives. First, these museums acknowledge the contributions made by migrants to host societies as well as the diversity and wealth of their origin culture. Second, they foster a sense of belonging, enabling communities to feel as an integral part of the nation. Third, they develop empathy by building awareness of the events that induced individuals to leave their countries.

Migration museums not only offer a venue for conservation, archives and exhibitions, but also a lively meeting place, working with communities and schools, giving the floor to second and third generations, organizing forums,

debates and social activities, and offering space and opportunities to young artists.

The challenges of the Network

In carrying out their activities, all migration museums face similar challenges such as: fostering both social cohesion and cultural diversity; reaching larger audiences; addressing sensitive issues; working on new concepts; collaborating with communities; cooperating with other countries and in particular with countries of origin. To cope with these challenges, the International Network of Migration Museums was born on the initiative of UNESCO (in particular the Migration and Multicultural Policies Section within the Division of Social Sciences). Now the Network has 28 members: 18 national institutions from Europe, 7 from other countries and 3 international partners. For each country, the Network tries to identify a representative institution to serve as focal point for other actors in the same country. Our Network aims at four macro-goals:

1. To organize joint activities
2. To extend the Network to countries of origin
3. To build awareness of migration museums
4. To facilitate sharing of practices

1. Organize joint activities

The Network organizes joint activities in order to facilitate the exchange of resources and collections, such as:

- *Travelling exhibitions*. This activity proved to be very successful. The members have exchanged several exhibitions

(such as “Portraits d’Ellis Island, 1905-1920. Augustus Frederick Sherman”). Available exhibitions are also promoted through the website.

- *Forums*. In particular, in the context of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008), members of the Network promoted forums in Barcelona, Fafe and Paris.

- *Scientific activities*. The Network coordinates international calls for contributions, publications and training on common challenges.

2. Extend the Network to countries of origin

The partners work to extend the Network, promoting the creation of migration institutions in the country of origin, especially in Northern and sub-Saharan Africa. In particular we are contributing to the development of a migration museum project in Rabat, Morocco. The Network also tries to collaborate with local experts to develop linkages and joint projects, e.g. exhibitions or researches, between host societies or existing migration museums and countries of origin.

3. Build awareness of migration museums

The Network aims at building awareness around the mission of these new museums and at contributing to attract a wider audience. In order to reach this goal, our project gives further visibility to migration museums:

- by promoting them on the media;
- by building on existing communication tools such as institutions’ websites, newsletters, printed materials as well as IOM and UNESCO websites

and journals;

- by building an *ad hoc* website as a platform for advocacy, information and discussion;

- by authoring publications such as several articles in international reviews and a special Issue of MUSEUM International (May 2007) now translated in English, French and Spanish;

- by presenting the network in international meetings and conferences;

- by participating in international events, such as the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, international days of the UN system (e.g. World Day for Cultural Diversity and International Migrants’ Day), national partners’ events (e.g. inauguration of the French Cité Nationale de l’Histoire de l’Immigration in 2007, the ten years of the Australian Immigration Museum in 2008, and the international conference planned with DOMiT, Germany, in the European Capital of Culture in 2010).

4. Facilitate sharing of practices

The Network is meant to identify common challenges and good practices and to spread them among the members. It also disseminates projects, publications, news and events that are relevant at international level through its website and newsletter. The Network participates, through its representatives, in events organized by migration museums for networking and coordination purposes. It also works to mobilize resources that will enable members to implement shared activities.

The role of the Internet: www.migrationmuseums.org

One of the principal outputs of the

International Network of Migration Institutions is its web portal: www.migrationmuseums.org. This site has been created to offer an online interface to the Network, to support the activities of migration museums and to facilitate the interaction among them. The portal has been developed after a careful recognition of the best practices already existing in the websites of the member institutions. According to our review, the websites of migration museums fulfil two main missions. On the one hand, they gather testimonies, photos, and other documents essential to preserve and diffuse the memory of migrations (e.g. Museu da Emigração e das Comunidades, AltreItalia, Domit etc.). On the other hand, websites have become a meeting point where migrants can share their experience with the community (e.g. Moving Here, Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, 19 Princelet Street). To accomplish these missions, websites employ several different types of tools, such as virtual spaces (virtual exhibitions or museums); catalogues of resources (list of links, publications or others); archives; learning tools (for children and adults); tools for “telling your story” and genealogy tools.

The migration museums web portal intends to gather the best online practices and profit from the experiences of the members. In the long run, this initiative is meant to foster the emergence of a web community around migration themes. Initially and at a first level, such community will be addressed to professionals and will try to build a continuous dialogue and to favour the exchange of experiences, best practices and learned lessons. Later and at a second level, the

web community shall open to a wider audience including the general public and, above all, the migrants. It will promote the role of migration museums, encourage visitors to contribute to the museums' activities thorough online interactive tools and facilitate the sharing of migrant experiences all over the world.

Today the web portal provides the following sections: a presentation of the Network and its activities; a presentation page for each museum; a news section presenting the reports and events signalled by the museums; a catalogue of resources indicated by experts. The long term objective is to create a unique database of news, resources and best practices provided by museums and experts. In this way, the web portal aims to become a global repository of information. Currently, we are also envisaging to add more advanced interactive tools such as a wiki and e-learning instruments. This project, however, is just at the beginning and needs inputs not only from the members of the Network but also from external actors that can help providing resources and best practices or simply letting us know their needs.

Future trends: from migration museums to migration institutions

To conclude this paper, let's consider the future trends that await our Network. Recently, new actors have been born (such as the *Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration*) and the mandate of migration institutions is increasingly widening. The migration institutions phenomenon is becoming more and more complex and new partnerships are emerging among universities and gov-

ernments, communities and associations, museums and the private sector.

Considering all that, we decided to wider the scope of our project from *migration museums* to *migration institutions* and to activate partnerships with other networking initiatives, such as the European Association of Migration Institutions. In tying new relationships, our Network does not wish to duplicate the efforts of its partners, but to facilitate the sharing of resources and experiences among them. The mission of

the International Network of Migration Institutions is to serve as a facilitator, strengthening the relationships among migrations initiatives. Our aim is not to become another node in the net, but to expand and reinforce the circulation of people, knowledge and communication among the existing actors. Our way to promote the public understanding of migration is being at the service of the growing international movement of migration institutions and associations.