

**ADVISORY COUNCIL
100th SESSION**

24 June 2026, 15:30 – 18:00 (CEST)

Hybrid meeting

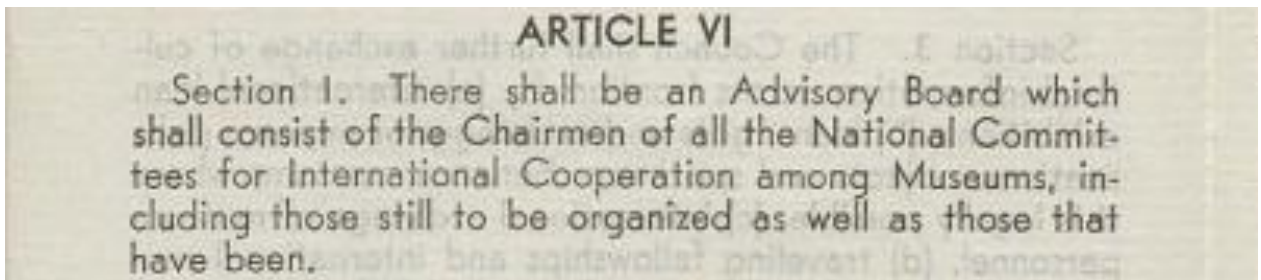
(at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France, and online on AGORA)

ITEM 8. Marking the 100th Session of the ICOM Advisory Council

Chairperson: Yvonne Ploum

Vice-Chairperson: Eunice Báez Sánchez

The wonderful story of the Advisory Council



Excerpt of ICOM Constitution and by-laws, 1946 © ICOM Archives

A beginning: hope after rupture (1946–1966)

It began in a world that had just been broken.

In 1946, when the first Advisory Council gathered, there was no grand system, no complex governance, no global reach. There were simply people—museum professionals from different countries—who believed that culture could help rebuild trust between nations.

They created a structure: a central leadership, national committees, and a small Advisory Council connecting them.

But more importantly, they created a **space for dialogue**

In those early years, the Council was not yet powerful. It listened, it advised, it connected. But quietly, something profound was happening.

The world changed—and ICOM expanded. National committees multiplied, crossing borders and continents. International Committees emerged, bringing together expertise from every domain of museum work.

Then, in 1959, a decisive moment: these international experts were fully integrated into the Advisory Council.

From that point onward, ICOM was no longer just a network of countries. It became a **living system of shared knowledge and responsibility**.

The Council began to shape programmes, prepare decisions, guide the organisation's direction. And at the heart of it all was a powerful idea:

Museums are not only about preserving collections.
They are about connecting people.



Advisory Council 38th session, 1981 © ICOM Archives

A growing voice: learning to lead (1966–1986)

But growth brings complexity.

From the late 1960s onward, ICOM expanded rapidly—more members, more committees, more initiatives. The Advisory Council felt the weight of this expansion. What once felt organic now required structure.

There were tensions:

- committees working in isolation
- financial fragility
- unclear governance
- an organisation growing faster than its capacity to manage itself

Yet these tensions became the engine of transformation.

The Council changed. It moved from simply **talking about the organisation** to actively **holding it together**.

By the early 1980s, it was reviewing decisions, identifying weaknesses, shaping policy debates. It became the place where the organisation reflected on itself.

And then came a turning point.

In the mid-1980s, faced with complexity and uncertainty, the Advisory Council stepped into a bold new role. It became what many began to call the “**parliament**” of ICOM.

No longer just a consultative body, it became the arena where strategy was debated, identity was defined, and the future was imagined.

It embraced big questions:

- What is ICOM becoming?
- What should museums stand for?
- How do we respond to a changing world?

These were not easy questions. Financial challenges remained, reforms were incomplete, and disagreements persisted.

But something had shifted forever:

The Advisory Council had found its **voice**.



Advisory Council 53rd session, Stavanger, Norway, July 1995 © Archaeological Museum, Stavanger

A turning outward: responsibility and courage (1986–1999)

With that voice came responsibility.

In 1989, after years of reflection, the organisation adopted new statutes—a kind of constitutional moment. Governance was strengthened, ethics embedded, roles clarified.

ICOM had matured. And with maturity came engagement with a rapidly changing world.

The 1990s were not calm years. Wars, political transformations, and globalisation reshaped societies—and museums were no longer protected observers. They were part of the story.

The Advisory Council responded with urgency and conviction.

When heritage was threatened in conflict, it spoke of protection.

When cultural objects were looted, it spoke of restitution.

When destruction spread across regions, it helped mobilise collective action.

From these crises emerged lasting innovations:

- early systems for emergency response
- the creation of the Blue Shield network
- global cooperation in protecting cultural heritage

At the same time, another transformation unfolded—quieter, but just as important.

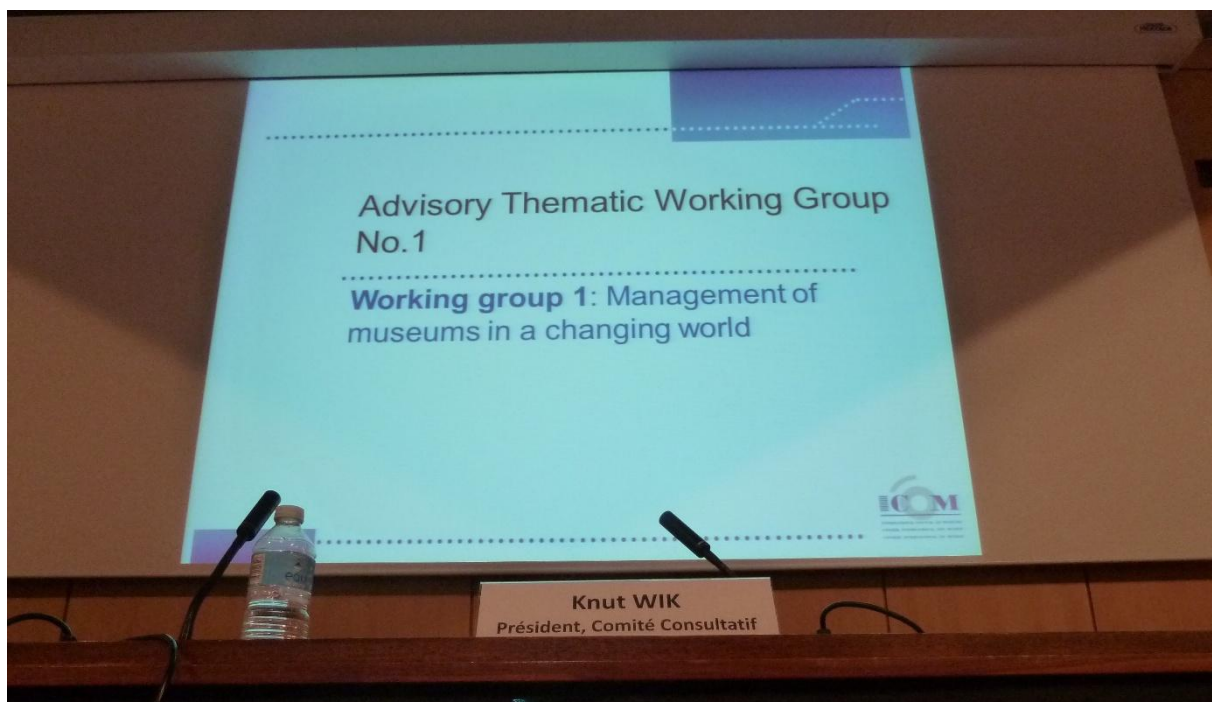
The Council began to embrace change:

- the first steps into the digital world
- a growing inclusivity of voices from all regions
- a stronger sense that museums must engage with society, not stand apart
- And then, in 1999, a simple but revolutionary idea emerged:

Museums are not only about objects.

They are about **intangible heritage**—memories, traditions, living cultures.

That idea would ripple across decades.



A new century: complexity, identity, transformation (2000–2025)

As the new century began, the Advisory Council stepped into an even more complex world.

The organisation grew larger, more structured, more interconnected than ever before. National, international, regional, and affiliated bodies formed a dense global architecture.

New instruments appeared:

- strategic plans
- working groups
- observatories
- training centres
- global partnerships

ICOM was no longer just a professional network.

It was becoming a **global institution**.

But with growth came new tensions.

Governance reforms followed one after another.

Statutes were revised, rules adjusted, models rethought.

Yet questions persisted:

- Who holds power?
- How democratic is the system?
- How can all regions be equally represented?

The Advisory Council remained at the centre of these debates—sometimes challenged, sometimes reaffirmed, always essential.

Meanwhile, the organisation transformed internally.

Digital tools reshaped communication and collaboration:

- online platforms
- global databases
- new forms of participation

But digitalisation was not a simple solution. It brought its own challenges—fragmentation, inequality, and the need for new skills.

At the same time, ICOM invested in people:

- new training programmes
- new avenues for knowledge exchange
- global capacity-building

It became not only a network—but a **driver of professional development**.

And then the world shifted again.

Crises multiplied:

- natural disasters

- armed conflicts
- climate change
- global pandemics

The Advisory Council responded by strengthening:

- risk management
- emergency preparedness
- international cooperation

The role of museums itself was reimaged.

No longer just institutions of preservation, they became:

- actors in social change
- spaces of inclusion
- voices for human rights
- platforms for dialogue and participation

This transformation culminated in one of the most symbolic moments of the entire journey:

In 2022, a new museum definition was adopted—reflecting decades of debate, tension, and aspiration.

A definition that embraced:

- diversity
- participation
- sustainability
- responsibility toward society

At the same time, new challenges emerged—perhaps the most pressing yet:

- global inequality within the organisation
- unequal access to resources
- the need for truly inclusive governance

And a new horizon appeared:

Sustainability.

Climate responsibility.

A commitment to become carbon neutral.

The Advisory Council once again found itself asking fundamental questions—not just about museums, but about the future of the planet.

Where we stand

Looking back from 2025, the story of the Advisory Council is not linear. It is a journey of transformation, shaped by tension, ambition, and reflection.

From 1946 to today, it has:

- grown from a small consultative group into a global platform of governance
- evolved from coordination to strategy, from strategy to leadership
- accompanied the transformation of museums from repositories of objects to agents of social change
- helped shape global norms, ethics, and practices

But more than anything, it has preserved something essential:

A **spirit of questioning**.

It never stopped asking:

- Who belongs?
- What is a museum?
- What is our responsibility?
- What kind of world are we building?



The continuing story

And so, the story continues.

Because the Advisory Council is not just a structure. It is a **conversation across time**—between generations, between regions, between visions of what museums can be.

A conversation that began in the shadow of conflict,
grew through complexity,
faced crises with courage,
and continues today with renewed urgency.

A conversation driven by a simple but powerful belief:

That museums—and the people who shape them—
can help humanity understand itself,
care for its heritage,
and imagine a better future.

And that belief, carried across nearly eighty years, still burns
at the heart of every meeting.