

## **Southeast Asian Collections in Peril: Managing Risks from Climate Change (CollAsia Panel) Museums and their Roles in Engaging the Youth for Conserving Heritage from Climate Change**

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### **Abstract**

It is noted in *The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* that the present number of young people of 1.3 billion is the largest in world history and that this is an unprecedented opportunity for countries to deepen their human capital. The challenge is to provide productive civic engagement opportunities, and if this is achieved, even partially, the results can be significant. It is widely recognized that partnering with youth in development processes can have many benefits for society as well as positive influences on youth peers. As this is also the declared United Nations International Year of Youth, August 2010–2011, it is more than appropriate to acknowledge and promote the role of youth in relation to the world's most pressing problem – climate change.

Recently SEAMEO-SPAFA held “The Asia-Pacific Forum: Youth Action on Climate Change; Exploration through Cultural Expression” in January 2011, and among the training modules it produced was Climate Change and Cultural Heritage. Here, the issues of climate change and cultural heritage converge and the vibrant role that youth can play highlighted. Museums thus have a critical role to play in this merging of concepts and the multiple stakeholders involved.

### **Introduction**

Southeast Asia is the cradle of some of the world's richest and most diverse cultures as evidenced by the existence of approximately one thousand ethno-linguistic groups of people each with their own cultural history. This vast cultural heritage has many guardians. One such guardian is SEAMEO-SPAFA. SEAMEO is the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation, which has nineteen centres in various disciplines, serving eleven Southeast Asian Countries. SPAFA is the Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts and is based in Bangkok, Thailand. As well as serving Thailand, the Centre works in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam.

The work of SEAMEO-SPAFA encompasses all aspects of archaeology, fine arts, heritage and conservation, and culture and development. This includes cultural resource management, cultural heritage management and museology. Culture directs everything SEAMEO-SPAFA does; it is the central or core driver that shapes the Centre's actions and activities undertaken. The Centre's core competencies have a universal appeal as we all have a shared heritage. Culture is not an afterthought or add-on consideration in the programmes that SEAMEO-SPAFA conducts. Quite the opposite in fact, as it is the starting point as we talk and listen to people – their needs and concerns – rather than deciding what we think is an ideal course of action to implement. Working on initiatives, rather than making interventions, is a guiding principle.

The series of activities on culture and development, and heritage and conservation has had the participation of a large number of youth. As part of the heritage and conservation activities, in 2003 SEAMEO-SPAFA and ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Properties) launched the Conserving Heritage Collections in Southeast Asia programme, named CollAsia 2010, in order to improve conservation conditions of Southeast Asian collections by providing much needed training for young professionals working with movable heritage in Southeast Asia. The culture and development programme was launched in 2002 and to date has comprised four conferences, sixteen workshops, two training kits, and has an alumni of over 1000 persons. This culture and development programme explores the link between culture and responsible, and thus successful, development programmes.

### **Involving Youth**

It is noted in *The World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation* that the present number of young people of 1.3 billion is the largest in world history and that this is an unprecedented opportunity for countries to deepen their human capital. The challenge is to provide productive civic engagement opportunities and if this is achieved, even partially, the results can be significant. It is widely recognized that partnering with youth in development processes can have many benefits for society as well as positive influences on youth peers. The largest percentage of this “youth bulge” is to be found in Asia and the figures provided by the World Development Report use an age range of 12–18 years. Not only described as an unprecedented opportunity, the population numbers are also described as a potential threat if not managed well. The actual number of youth is in fact much greater than stated. The figure quoted dates back to 2007, which is four years ago, and additionally, the majority of organizations consider youth to fall within the age range of up to 35 years of age. Bearing this in mind, and SEAMEO-SPAFA’s mandate, which is firmly focused on Southeast Asia, SEAMEO-SPAFA has an obligation to engage with youth in the region on issues on cultural heritage and development.

SEAMEO-SPAFA is not alone in its recognition of the importance of engaging youth. This is also currently the declared United Nations International Year of Youth, August 2010–2011, and so it seems more than appropriate to acknowledge and promote the role of youth in relation to the world’s pressing problems, which include the safeguarding of cultural heritage as well as climate change.

### **Cultural Heritage and Climate Change**

After narcotics and human trafficking, it is widely recognized by an array of law enforcement agencies that the illicit traffic in cultural objects is the third largest, highest grossing illegal income-ranking activity around the world. With the abundance of youth it is logical to enlist their involvement in the safeguarding of heritage. SEAMEO-SPAFA’s culture and development series of activities included ten workshops on Managing the Integration of Culture into Development Programmes. Doctors, monks, teachers, dentists, museum curators, opticians, and students were among the many participants. In fact, it really did include the whole gamut from archaeologists to zoologists. This told us quite a lot about the broad interest across all sectors of society in sustainable and viable development. The next move was to focus the workshops specifically on youth defined as being between 18–35 years of age, for reasons as cited above. During 2009, six workshops with over 250 youth from all of Southeast Asia participated. It became clear and was reinforced during interviews that the most pressing problem identified by these young people was the various impacts of climate change.

Consequently, following the conclusion of the workshops, SEAMEO-SPAFA decided to hold “The Asia-Pacific Forum: Youth Action on Climate Change; Exploration through Cultural Expression” in January 2011 to provide a platform for young people to not only express their concerns but more importantly to elaborate upon what they were doing to address the issues raised. Here, the issues of climate change and cultural heritage converged and the vibrant role that youth can play was clearly highlighted. The effects/impacts of climate change on cultural continuity and identity were explored, as well as the ensuing human rights violations as a consequence. Delegates were requested to provide action solutions and not just outline the problems, and the delivery of the messages had to be through various artistic means: “[O]ne salient image, sculpture or event can speak louder than volumes of scientific data and engage the public’s imagination in an immediate way”.<sup>1</sup> This prerequisite was set because it is an appropriate methodology for youth, but more importantly, as the above quotation explains, messages are indeed remembered and thus more likely to be acted upon when delivered this way. These modalities included drama, role-play, dance, song, original documentary, art works, videos, poetry, film, puppetry, storytelling, etc.

If the question is posed along the lines of “What does heritage mean to today’s youth?” then the answer seems crystal clear; it means a lot. And if the question is posed as in “How to engage youth to conserve cultural heritage from climate change?” the answer seems fairly obvious. Provide space and opportunity. Ask youth what they think rather than prescribe any notions of what they should think. The Youth Forum demonstrated the importance of providing a platform for expression

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<sup>1</sup> [Capefarewell.com](http://Capefarewell.com)

through whatever means desirable, as opposed to a restricted PowerPoint message delivery full of facts and figures. Youth are responsive and in fact are not waiting to be asked; they are taking their own action regarding climate change and cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Museums certainly have a critical role to play in this merging of concepts of cultural heritage, climate change, and youth and the multiple stakeholders involved, but need to be more active, as well as cautious, in the approaches adopted.

### **Intergenerational Justice, Perceptions, & Assumptions**

SEAMEO-SPAFA's mandate in the safeguarding of cultural heritage necessitates the engagement of youth in most, if not all, activities undertaken. If steps are not taken to alleviate and mitigate against climate change, heritage is in greater peril than ever. Climate change is an issue of intergenerational justice. When talking about climate change, environmental issues come foremost to mind, but climate change impacts on every aspect of our society and certainly includes cultural heritage. The world bequeathed to the next generation certainly centres round a safe and clean and healthy physical environment, but without that environment we will lose so much cultural heritage, built, as well as, intangible. So securing intergenerational justice is not just an option but an obligation of our generation to the next.

In this quest there are lessons to be learnt. For example, London's Science Museum, prior to the Climate Change Summit in Cancun, Mexico, opened the Climate Change Gallery in November 2010. Revelations of malpractice or misinterpretation of evidence by climate scientists of the IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change) led the museum to change its name to the Climate Science Gallery to appear to adopt a more neutral position. The public was skeptical, especially following a temporary exhibition that had been set-up, prior to the Copenhagen Climate Change talks, in October 2009 by the Science Museum. This exhibition was entitled "Prove It! All the evidence you need to believe in climate change", and visitors were asked to respond yes or no to the following statement: "I've seen all the evidence. And I want the government to prove they're serious about climate change by negotiating a strong, effective fair deal at Copenhagen". This backfired with 2:1 voting against accepting the scientific reality of climate change. The exhibition was criticized on several grounds, namely prescribing slogans as proof and for patronizing the public. What we learn here is that evidence must be presented in an accessible as well as an in-depth manner. Exhibitions cannot undermine the intelligence of the visiting public or pre-suppose that because this is what the "esteemed" museum advocates, that other people must agree.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Museums must first of all ask themselves, "How green and clean am I?" That is really a question of practising what one may preach. In holding an exhibition on climate change, one's own credentials must meet scrutiny. Secondly, museums must take a stand on how they represent climate change – to be neutral or to position oneself as an advocate? The Science Museum of London experiences highlight the danger of the latter. More worrying is the confusion between natural disasters and their connection (if any) with climate change, and so one must ensure a high level of knowledge on climate change for any personnel planning a programme at a museum, whether it be an exhibition or otherwise. And in terms of involving youth, SEAMEO-SPAFA's experiences have indicated that not only are they willing to participate but also that they are more than able to provide significant inputs. Go to the youth if you are a museum curator; let the youth direct you in what they consider important to be highlighted and featured in your community exhibition on climate change and cultural heritage. This heritage belongs to us all and so all are needed to participate in its safeguarding.

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<sup>2</sup> See "ASEAN Youth Speak Out" on [www.seameo-spafa.org](http://www.seameo-spafa.org).

<sup>3</sup> Archive article from *The Times*, 24 March 2010, "Public skepticism prompts Science Museum to rename climate exhibition" by Ben Webster; and from *The Guardian*, 16 November 2009, "Science Museum: close your climate change show" by Jonathan Jones.

**Web Resources**

SEAMEO-SPAFA [www.seameo-spafa.org](http://www.seameo-spafa.org)

SEAMEO [www.seameo.org](http://www.seameo.org)

CollAsia2010 [www.collasia2010.org](http://www.collasia2010.org)

ICCROM [www.iccrom.org](http://www.iccrom.org)

**Biodata**

Kevin Charles Kettle is a Project Development Officer for SEAMEO-SPAFA. His role is to conceive, design, implement, and raise funds for proposed activities. Acting as the Project Director, he oversees the execution of the project as well as participates as a resource person/team leader.

His main area of interest is the correlation between culture and development initiatives and hence, he has focused his attention on this topic by organising a series of activities that has included sixteen workshops and four international conferences. His publication *Guidelines for Managing the Integration of Culture into Development Programmes* is intended as a practical toolkit for facilitators working in development.

Recently six workshops were held specifically for youth on culture and development. Climate change was cited as a major concern by the participants and thus a platform was provided for youth through the hosting of a Forum “Youth Action on Climate Change; Exploration through Cultural Expression”.

Kevin is also a coordinator and resource person for the CollAsia series of activities on Conserving Heritage Collections in Southeast Asia, which is a joint project between SEAMEO-SPAFA and ICCROM. Kevin is from the Republic of Ireland, holds a BA (Hons) History degree and a MBA Educational Management degree and has been working in Southeast Asia since 1992.