SOMUS and SUSTAIN: Social Justice and Sustainability in ICOM's Institutional Agenda

Marcelo Lages Murta[1] and Nathália Pamio Luiz[2]

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1.   Introduction

The Annual Report of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), published in August 2025, highlights the vastness and scope of the international network of museum professionals and institutions, bringing together more than 60.000 members (93% individual members and 7% institutional members), distributed across 120 National Committees in 139 countries and territories. The network continues to grow, with an expansion of 5,6% between 2023 and 2024 (ICOM, 2025). The most recent international documents on museums emphasize the need for the sector to be united around the conviction of the transformative power of museums, viewed as institutions that not only preserve memory, but also play an active role in shaping a future grounded in peace, social justice, and sustainable development. This shared mission is strengthened when embraced collectively. In this sense, it is up to the National Committees, International Committees, Regional Alliances, and Affiliated Organizations to endorse and disseminate this vision, strengthening ICOM's essential commitment to society through empathy, conviction, and transnational collaboration.

The 27th ICOM Conference, to be held in Dubai in 2025, will see the launch of two new committees: the International Committee for Social Museology (SOMUS) and the International Committee on Museums and Sustainable Development (SUSTAIN). Both committees were established out of historical demands that have persisted in the museum world for decades. In the wake of the countercultural and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, demands were addressed in various ways – associated with independence movements, decolonization processes, struggles of social movements, and other confrontations. Reaching the present moment marks a step towards projecting a more just future – whether in social justice, climate action, or programmatic processes of sustainable development.

At this point, events and documents such as the Stockholm Conference (UN, 1972), The Round Table of Santiago (UNESCO, 1972), the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO, 1972), the MacBride Report (UNESCO,

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[1] **Marcelo Lages Murta** holds a PhD in Museology and a Master's degree in International Cooperation and Development. A researcher at Lusófona University, he has over 15 years of international experience with UNESCO, UNDP, OEI, the European Union, and national governments in Latin America, Africa, Europe, and the South Pacific. In 2025, he was appointed member of the jury for the ICOM Award for Sustainable Development Practice in Museums, organized by the International Council of Museums. [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7614-302X /mlmurta@gmail.com]

[2] **Nathália Pamio Luiz** is Project Manager of the Ibermuseos International Cooperation Programme and a researcher with a PhD in Museology, working as a collaborating investigator focusing on "Museums as Social Technology" at CeiED, through the UNESCO Chair "Education, Citizenship, and Cultural Diversity" and the Department of Museology at Lusófona University. She holds a postgraduate degree in Strategic Management of Museums and Heritage Centers from the University of Girona (2021–22). Member of the Board of ICOM Portugal (2023–26) and the Board of MINOM International (2024–27). [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7176-8311 /nathalia.pamio@gmail.com]

1980), The Quebec Declaration (1984), the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies (UNESCO, 1982), the Brundtland Report (1987), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – ECO-92 (UNCED, 1992), the Kyoto Protocol (UN, 1997), the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), the Declaration of the City of Salvador (Ibermuseos, 2007), the Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (UNESCO, 2015), among others, are connected to the conceptual development of ecomuseums and new museology, and converge in contemporary museum processes and in their interconnections with sustainable development agendas. Such processes are directly associated with events such as the recent editions of Mondiacult (2022 and 2025), the new definition of museums debated in Kyoto and approved in Prague (ICOM, 2019; 2022), and the new ethical commitments discussed within the framework of ICOM.

The creation of SOMUS and SUSTAIN reflects ICOM's connection with the most relevant contemporary issues, addressing aspects related to development, social justice, cohesion, and sustainability, aligned with the 2030 Agenda and committed to multilateral processes. This article aims to contribute to the debate on museum networks and their professionals by discussing the formation of the two committees, considering their origins and geographical distribution, and to demonstrate possibilities for joint action by SOMUS and SUSTAIN within the various ICOM discussion spaces, in order to strengthen their actions in the face of contemporary challenges. Therefore, the aim is to enhance the scope of action of the two committees, articulated with regional spaces and networks – whether in Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, or in groups of countries with specific demands, such as the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) and in regions most directly affected by climate change, such as the South Pacific.

2.   Background: cultural, social, and political processes in the 1960s and 1970s

Contemporary discourses on sustainable development and the now widely recognized concept of social museology emerged in a more structured form in the 1960s and 1970s, amid growing concerns over the ecological limits of economic and industrial growth and critiques of the hegemonic postwar development model. During this period, social and political movements connected, ranging from their community and national bases to the establishment of international milestones within the United Nations. Politicians, activists, academics, and leaders from a wide range of sectors gathered at events such as the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment (1972), the starting point for international environmental governance, and in various other forums that reflected the effervescence of that moment of contestation, illustrated by the actions of social movements, counterculture, and processes of independence and emancipation. In the same year, the museum sector and UNESCO mobilized for the organization of the Round Table of Santiago (1972), which is considered the main conceptual and political reference point for discussions on the social role of museums, linking institutions to local development, lifelong education, and the resolution of social and cultural issues. The meeting marked the transition to the concept of the Integral Museum, characterized by a strong community dimension, and opened space for grassroots experiences in Latin America, Canada, France, and Portugal to come together around new museum practices.

In the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development was strengthened by the Brundtland Report (1987), which defined it as meeting the needs of the present time without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, establishing the environmental, social, and economic tripod of sustainability. In this context, the notion of development moved beyond its solely economic link and became more complex due to the need to understand each internal context, associated with the perception of shared problems and needs that articulated the local and the global in an inseparable way. In the field of culture, the MacBride Report was published in 1980, coordinated by Seán MacBride, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974. The document identified profound asymmetries in the fields of information, communication, and culture (Quirós Fernández, 2005). Two years later, Mondiacult 1982 took up this critical context and expanded it to the realm of cultural policies, debating key concepts such as culture, identity, democracy, cooperation, and development amid intense political disputes. Four decades later, Mondiacult 2022 took up this legacy by reaffirming culture as a global public good – an agenda that is projected in Mondiacult 2025, oriented toward the global governance of culture and the formulation of policies capable of addressing contemporary challenges such as inequalities, climate change, and digitalization.

The development of ecomuseums and social museology must be understood within a historical setting of institutional contestation and international articulation that began in the 1970s and unfolded in the 2000s. The ideas of endogenous development, integral development, and multidimensional development are closely linked to the idea of the integral museum, enshrined at the Santiago Roud Table in 1972. These interconnections are important for a broad understanding of the context and the advent of concepts such as 'ecomuseum', 'territory museum', 'community museum', 'neighborhood museum', 'social museum', among others. In the same 1980s, when the concepts of sustainability were under intense discussion, part of the museum community began to criticize the exclusionary nature of ICOM and its museology committee (ICOFOM), which marginalized alternative experiences. The reaction led to the 1st International Ecomuseums / New Museology Workshop, held in 1984 at the Haute-Beauce Ecomuseum (Quebec), and to the Quebec Declaration, which proposed an alternative movement, consolidated in Lisbon in 1985 with the creation of the International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM). This process was reinforced by documents such as the Oaxtepec Declaration in Mexico (1984), emphasizing the triad of territory – heritage – community, and by the activism of intellectuals such as Pierre Mayrand, who denounced the institutional rigidity and the limited impact of the Santiago Round Table resolutions.

Following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (ECO92), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the incorporation of sustainability into multilateral policies and normative instruments has become more prominent. Agenda 21 was consolidated as a central axis of discussions on globalization, equity, and the environment, with the institutionalization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. From 2015 onwards, in processes that generated criticism regarding the effectiveness of the actions taken and their results, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015) and the 2030 Agenda were established in an even more comprehensive manner, aligning sustainable development with human rights, gender equality, climate change mitigation, social justice, and peace, among others. At the present moment, sustainability constitutes a cross-cutting paradigm for public policies and corporate strategies, which adopt the SDGs as a normative guideline in the face of the ecological and civilizational crises of the Anthropocene.

This trajectory has led to the strengthening of museological networks and social movements, which have found in Latin America a fertile ground for community practices and, in the Ibero-American space, a locus of political cooperation. The Declaration of the City of Salvador (2007), drafted during an international meeting of museum professionals and social movements in Brazil, revisited the foundations of the Santiago Round Table and UNESCO's cultural conventions to structure an action plan that gave rise to the Ibermuseos Programme. The document reaffirmed museums as social practices linked to democracy, cultural diversity, and human rights, consolidating the role of social museology as a pillar of regional cultural policies and international cooperation. These processes gave impetus to the establishment of multilateral references, embodied in the Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society (UNESCO, 2015). At this point, although all ICOM committees were already engaging in discussions on the sustainability and social role of museums, the time was opportune for the institutionalization of committees dedicated to more specific discussion on contemporary social and political issues.

3.   SOMUS and SUSTAIN: contemporary institutional responses to historical demands

The establishment of SOMUS – International Committee for Social Museology represents a historic milestone in the international legitimization of museum practices oriented towards citizenship, diversity, and social justice. Its recent origin dates back to previous decades, but it took shape in mobilizations that began in January 2022, when more than 200 professionals and supporters from 30 countries and four continents, in coordination with ICOM National Committees, such as those of Brazil and Chile, formed a Working Group (WG) to draft a proposal for the creation of a committee dedicated to social museology. The proposal was presented in August 2022, advocating the integration of community museums, ecomuseums, favela museums, LGBTQI+ museums, neighborhood museums, and other intersectional initiatives as legitimate partners within the ICOM "museum family," and emphasizing the urgency of recognizing the role of marginalized communities and individuals in the defense of culture and human rights. The favorable response came in March 2023, when the ICOM Executive Committee, during its 165th Session, approved the constitution of SOMUS. The Committee's first General Assembly took place on March 22, 2024, at Museu da

República (Museum of the Republic), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during the 1st International Conference on Social Museology. At this meeting, the members of the governing councils were elected, mainly with Latin American and Ibero-American representatives, given the strong connections with social museology.

ICOM SUSTAIN – International Committee on Museums and Sustainable Development emerged in response to the need to align the international museum framework with the global challenges defined by the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Its trajectory began in 2018 with the creation of a Working Group on Sustainability within ICOM, which operated until 2022, bringing together professionals and national committees around the ambition of integrating the SDGs into museum practices. This group sought to translate into the museum field the growing demand for institutional response to the climate crisis, social inequality, and the need to strengthen community resilience. SUSTAIN includes social, environmental, and economic processes in its agendas in order to address contemporary challenges in line with discussions on the green agenda and the blue economy. In 2023, after its creation, SUSTAIN was entrusted with supporting ICOM in the implementation of the Framework Sustainable Development Plan, structured around the five pillars of the 2030 Agenda, represented by the 5 "Ps": People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships. The mandate of SUSTAIN involves not only fostering existing sustainable initiatives, but also encouraging new projects, connecting members and committees around the world, and disseminating practices that promote more just, inclusive, and environmentally balanced societies.

The creation of the SOMUS and SUSTAIN committees should be understood as the materialization of programs that, since the critical mobilizations of the 1970s, have advocated for a plural museology committed to social justice and sustainability. While SOMUS carries forward the demands represented by the Santiago Round Table (1972) by recognizing and integrating community and participatory experiences within ICOM, SUSTAIN consolidates efforts initiated also in the 1970s through the environmental agenda, linking the museum field to global agendas for sustainable development and climate action. Both committees thus represent a strategic reorientation of the international museum framework, bringing it closer to the contemporary challenges of social inclusion, cultural diversity, climate action, and the fight against inequality. By institutionalizing them, ICOM not only legitimizes a trajectory of insurgent and innovative practices, but also projects museums as social agents of change, committed to human dignity, the protection of the planet, and building more just, plural, and resilient societies.

4. The geographical and regional representation of the new committees

The formation of SUSTAIN and SOMUS reveals distinct and complementary dynamics, with regional specificities regarding the direction of contemporary museology. Both committees had a high number of initial members, with representatives from 46 countries. Examining the regional representation in both committees makes it possible to understand how historical traditions, social movements, and international agendas were decisive in shaping their foundations. The distribution of members goes beyond quantitative dimensions and reflects different genealogies: on the one hand, SUSTAIN is rooted in the green and sustainable development agendas of the Nordic countries, Europe, and Brazil, and extends its reach into Asia and Africa; SOMUS, on the other hand, is grounded in decades of community practices and demands for social justice, particularly in Latin America, from the Santiago Round Table in 1972 to the formation of the Ibermuseos Programme in the 2000s.

The table below illustrates this process: SUSTAIN has representatives from four of the five Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, with Finland absent from the list), while SOMUS has no members from these countries. In the case of Latin America, SUSTAIN has members only from Brazil and Costa Rica, while SOMUS has members from 14 Latin American countries. Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, and England are represented on both committees, which demonstrates the strength of museological debates in these countries and opens up possibilities for direct dialogue in Europe. At the same time, it is important to highlight the role of Portugal and Spain, which maintain strong dialogue with Latin America, given their colonial legacies and the fruitful processes of collaboration developed, for instance, within the framework of the Ibermuseos Programme, which strengthens these Ibero-American networks and opens up possibilities for cooperation in the context of regional networks.

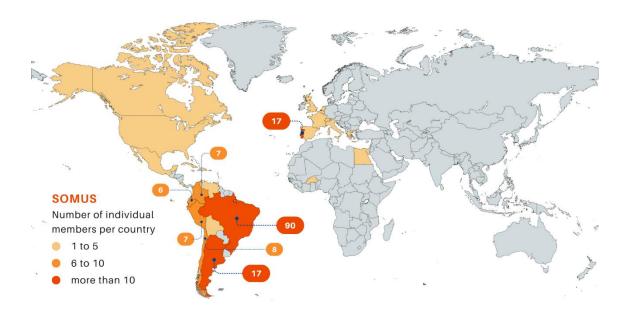| Number of initial members of the new committees					
Country	SUSTAIN	SOMUS		Country	SUSTAIN	SOMUS
Argentina	0	17		Greece	0	2
Australia	5	0		Iceland	1	0
Austria	3	0		India	1	0
Barbados	0	1		Italy	9	4
Belgium	0	5		Japan	3	0
Benin	3	0		Kenya	3	0
Bolivia	0	3		Mexico	0	5
Brazil	9	90		Morocco	2	0
Burkina Faso	1	1		Netherlands	4	1
Canada	0	5		Norway	2	0
Chile	0	8		Peru	0	7
China	2	0		Philippines	1	0
Colombia	0	7		Portugal	1	17
Costa Rica	1	2		Senegal	2	0
Cuba	0	3		South Korea	2	0
Denmark	3	0		Spain	8	4
Dominican Republic	0	1		Sweden	2	0
Ecuador	0	6		Switzerland	2	1
Egypt	0	1		Taiwan	1	0
El Salvador	0	1		United Kingdom	6	1
Estonia	2	0		USA	2	4
France	27	3		Venezuela	0	1
Germany	7	0		Zambia	1	0
TOTAL					116	201

Table 1: Distribution of members – SOMUS and SUSTAIN. Source: ICOM/SOMUS/SUSTAIN[3] .
Author's elaboration.

Although African and Asian participation is limited, six countries from each continent are represented in SUSTAIN, whereas SOMUS shows only minimal representation from Africa (two countries). It is also important to highlight the underrepresentation of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). SUSTAIN does not include any representatives from these countries, while SOMUS counts only Barbados, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic among its members. Notably, the Pacific Island states remain unrepresented in both committees. The SIDS, like African countries, are considered priorities in the United Nations development agendas, yet they do not play a leading role in the new committees. This point should be stressed as a weakness to be addressed in future processes for the effective integration of these countries into the frameworks of sustainable development and the promotion of social and climate justice.

Another point of debate concerns the country with the highest representation on each of the committees. France appears as the country with the highest number of representatives on SUSTAIN, while Brazil is by far the country with the most members of SOMUS. In the first case, one of the hypotheses for this representation relates to Europe's leading role in environmental discussions associated with its green agenda and energy transition, as well as to the strength of French museology itself. Brazil, on the other hand, has become a reference in initiatives related to social museology, with public policies developed specifically for

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[3] Data were drawn from documents available on the official ICOM website on 18/08/2025 and through direct contact with ICOM. In the case of SOMUS, this refers to the initial list of supporters and subscribers, and in the case of SUSTAIN, to the list of members as of that date. Although the number of members may have changed in the first months of the committees' operation, these figures illustrate their regional diversity at the time of data collection for this article.

the sector since the early 2000s (Pereira, 2018; Simão, 2018; Monteiro, 2016). These specific characteristics of each committee, as well as their gaps in representation, warrant further debate in order to understand the reasons for this distribution, its historical and contextual reasons, and the possibilities for improving the performance of the two committees and enhancing their impact.

Map/Sketch 1: Distribution of members – SOMUS.
Source: ICOM/SOMUS. Author's elaboration.

Map/Sketch 2: Distribution of members – SUSTAIN. Source: ICOM/SUSTAIN.
Author's elaboration.

SUSTAIN took shape through debates on sustainable development and the green agenda that gained momentum in Europe in the 1990s and 2000s and were strongly embraced in the Nordic countries, France, and Germany. This trajectory explains why its current configuration concentrates more members in these regions, although voices from the Global South, such as Brazil and African countries, are already being incorporated. Rooted in the European sustainability framework, the committee embodies an institutional character strongly associated with the integration of the SDGs into public policies and with the leading role of environmental and climate practices, while continuing to foster new connections in other continents, such as Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

SOMUS, in turn, has distinct roots: its formation dates back to the Santiago Round Table (1972) and the experiences of social and community museology that flourished in Latin America, directly linked to the creation of MINOM in Canada and Portugal, and the subsequent rise of the Ibermuseos Programme following the Declaration of the City of Salvador in 2007. This genealogy explains the current prominence of the Ibero-American region within the committee, with emphasis on Brazil, whose mobilization is directly connected to the practices of community museums, favela museums, neighborhood museums, and indigenous museums. The central role of Latin America gives SOMUS not only numerical density but also legitimacy built on concrete experiences of cultural and social resistance, now recognized in the institutional space of ICOM.

5.   **Final Considerations: future perspectives for the joint work of SOMUS and SUSTAIN within the 2030 Agenda framework**

Although the SOMUS and SUSTAIN committees have different origins and trajectories, they share fertile ground of complementarities that can evolve into joint processes within the framework of the 2030 Agenda. SOMUS emerges from a markedly Ibero-American context, strongly influenced by experiences of horizontal cooperation and a historical commitment to social justice and community cohesion. SUSTAIN, on the other hand, has roots more closely linked to the European space – with a particular prominence from France, Italy, the Nordic countries, and Germany – and a presence that extends to Brazil, built upon well-established academic and institutional networks, as well as to regions in Africa and Asia. The convergence between the two should seek strategic complementarities, as both committees share a similar interpretation of museums and cultural policies as drivers of transformation aligned with sustainable development.

A comparative reflection highlights the close alignment between SOMUS and SUSTAIN, despite their distinct trajectories. SOMUS places the social dimension of sustainability at the core, treating economic, social, and cultural aspects as urgent priorities in contexts where these remain fragile, with particular attention to the protection of human rights. SUSTAIN, by contrast, gives comparatively greater emphasis to the environmental dimension, often in settings where stronger economic and social foundations, together with established human rights frameworks, are already in place. Robust welfare state structures in these contexts create favorable conditions to advance agendas such as energy transitions and other environmental solutions. Furthermore, contributions from the Global South – such as Latin American countries, which have been advancing sustainability agendas through the Ibermuseos Programme, and Brazil, with its strong representation in both committees and in specific debates on museums, sustainability, and social issues – could enhance the positive impacts of museums by fostering synergies and convergences. In both approaches, however, it becomes evident that the social dimension is transversal, inseparable from the political dimension that ensures coherence and resilience over time.

In this sense, the understanding of museums as a social technology, within an approach associated with social museology (Moutinho, 2014; Primo, 2014; Chagas, 2011), is timely as it opens the possibility of recognizing that the systematization and replicability of low-cost, high-social-impact local practices can have significant effects through transformative innovation processes (Luiz, 2025; Borges, 2021; Pozzebon, 2015; Dagnino, 2014; Bava, 2004). Similarly, it is essential to foster public policies that incorporate this approach, built from the museums themselves and their processes, in order to influence and inspire broader public policies in strategic sectors related to the SDGs (Murta, 2021; Pereira, 2018; Simão, 2018; Monteiro, 2016). These processes have the potential to consolidate museums as active agents of social transformation and innovation, thereby generating positive impacts on the SDGs.

SOMUS can place its emphasis on social justice, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, contributing directly to the SDGs, particularly as those related to reducing inequalities and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies (SDGs 10 and 16). This contribution is not limited to the Ibero-American reality, but can be expanded to other regions where SUSTAIN has greater institutional reach, such as Africa and Asia. At the same time, anchored in a tradition of innovation and intercontinental networks, SUSTAIN can make a significant contribution by strengthening research and infrastructure in the museum sector, in close dialogue with the role of museums as agents of urban innovation and climate resilience (SDGs 9, 11, 13).

Both committees find points of intersection in SDG 4, which highlights inclusive and quality education, enhancing the relevance of museums as spaces for lifelong learning and the promotion of global citizenship based on human rights and cultural diversity. This convergence can be further strengthened by joint work on

projects that cross the dimensions of education, innovation, and social inclusion, allowing experiences consolidated in one geographical context to be adapted and reinterpreted in others. SDG 5, on gender equality, is directly linked to the educational and social cohesion agendas promoted by museums. SDG 8, which addresses decent work and economic growth, can be advanced by considering the role of museums as drivers of creative economies, generators of qualified employment, and promoters of social innovation. SDG 12, on responsible production and consumption, can engage with efforts toward material and symbolic sustainability in the museum sector, opening space for both committees to collaborate in developing methodologies and practices that value both local knowledge and environmental and cultural resources.

The building of synergies also refers to SDG 17, dedicated to partnerships, which is an essential axis for the two committees to work together in network, combining their specific vocations to achieve greater global impact. SUSTAIN's experience in building multilateral networks and disseminating good practices can directly engage with SOMUS's capacity to mobilize communities and integrate historical demands for social justice into institutional processes. In this way, the joint work translates not only into strategic alignment, but also into a practice of cooperation that reinforces the central role of museums and culture in fulfilling the 2030 Agenda.

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