

# DECOLONIZATION, SUSTAINABILITY AND MUSEUMS. INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION WITH AFRICA FROM EL MUSEO CANARIO.

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## **Abstract**

Museums are inclusive non-profit institutions that foster diversity and sustainability by engaging communities. In their responsibility as actors for reflection and critical thinking, museum institutions have a great potential for social transformation, both in their location and in the territories around them. In this context, it is necessary to confront the processes of decolonization of museums, in order to return to the people the identity plundered during the colonial era. Sustainability cannot be understood without including the decolonizing approach, making protagonists of those communities that were once treated as objects.

Funded in 1879, El Museo Canario is the institution responsible for the conservation, research and dissemination of the historical and cultural heritage of the Canary Islands. The Museum considers Sustainability as a strategic objective both in management and in the content of activities, for which it integrates in all its programs the relationship with the environment and its transformation throughout history. This institution develops international cooperation projects with Africa that promote culture, social innovation, governance, gender, leadership and inclusive migration. This paper addresses decolonization as a process intrinsic to the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, and specifically studies how a museum can carry out cooperation from the Canary Islands with West Africa, through the analysis of the case study of the international cooperation for development activity of the Scientific Society The Canarian Museum, taking advantage of the potential of historical heritage as a vector of integration.

**Keywords:** Africa; Decolonization; Museum; Sustainability; Cooperation.

## Introduction

Decolonization in museums is a strategic process today. In order to effectively deal with it, it is necessary to adopt an inclusive approach, and to implement actions that contribute to the restitution not only of African pieces extracted through plundering by colonial nationals, but also the implementation of innovative channels that restore the identity of individuals and communities. Sustainable development prioritizes the well-being of the people, and to this end a decolonizing approach must be included in the discourse and activities of European museums. International cooperation between institutions must be based on equal relationships in which both parties share knowledge, experiences and cultural wealth.

In the last 20 years, museums have undergone a profound change in their development and management, and in the role they play in our society. Museums are key centres for sustainability both because of the size of their facilities and their power to disseminate culture (ICOM 2022).

The international framework provides for respect for values and traditions (Fribourg Declaration on Cultural Rights, IIEDH 2007), diversity (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN 2015), and culture as a bridge to sustainability (Social & Sustainable Museum Plan, MINCULT 2015, and Canary Islands Agenda 2030, GOBCAN 2021). Academic work has contributed to establishing the relationship between museums and sustainability (Ásványi et al., 2021; Pop, 2015; Ghazanfari 2023).

Authors like Foucault (1992), Quijano (1992), Nogueira (2019) and Bonilla and Finardi (2022) analyse the colonial political, economic and social power relations, finding attributes of institutionalized sexist, patriarchal, homophobic and prejudice behaviour.

The decolonial approach is a way of fostering sustainable development, as the decolonizing process is itself an articulation of sustainability principles, as captured in SDGs 10 "Reduce inequality within and between countries", 11 "Make cities more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", and 16 "Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies" (UN 2015).

## Methodology

The methodological framework of this paper focuses on cultural studies and decolonization processes. In order to carry out the study, objectively verifiable indicators of evaluation of international development cooperation projects contained in the sources of verification and evaluation reports are analyzed, as well as primary sources of expert perception on the impact of the activities.

## Discussion

Sustainability cannot be understood without including the decolonizing approach, making protagonists of those communities that were once treated as objects. The cultural ecosystem promotes sustainable development, through the construction and design of cultural policies for sustainable development. A critical and participatory museum action gives visibility to the subjects and their environment.

El Museo Canario's strategy includes sustainability and social inclusion as fundamental pillars of transversal action. Cooperation with Senegal was chosen as a priority for Canary Islands cooperation, as it is the place of origin of boats carrying migrants to the islands. A multi-year collaboration was established with a series of African institutions with which synergies were found, such as the Ministry of Culture, the Université Cheik Anta Diop in Dakar, the Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire (IFAN) and the Musée Théodore Monod. From the outset, these relationships were conceived on the basis of mutual learning, committing to the search for funding and the implementation of activities that contribute to human development through cultural cooperation.

A technical assistance project called "Between two cultures" was designed, which has been developed since 2020 with funding from the Ministry of External Action of the Government of the Canary Islands. The objectives of the project were to promote the institutions to local and international public audiences, increase skills and generate professional opportunities for young Senegalese cultural managers, and improve the conditions of the museums. This project allowed 30 Senegalese young professionals (mainly women) per year to be educated and trained in cultural management and tourism entrepreneur-

ship, promoting culture, governance, leadership and gender perspective.

In order to complement this activity, the Canary Museum develops in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria the social innovation project called “EMC INNO LAB”, which works with children and adolescents in vulnerable situations to offer them a meeting place where they can make cultural heritage their own as the core of their identity. In particular, it works with unaccompanied minors of African origin, promoting inclusive migration. This project is also an example of private collaboration, as it is financed by the Sergio Alonso Foundation as part of its call for social projects. This project carries out a series of educational workshops in a participatory manner to disseminate knowledge of Canarian culture and promote the healthy use of new technologies.

## Conclusions

The relationship between sustainability and decolonization in museums is interdependent. An inclusive approach helps to energize museums as institutions capable of transforming society, giving visibility to communities and promoting cultural diversity. The experience of cooperation from learning with a decolonizing approach makes equal relations sustainable.

These cooperation projects are a solid basis to continue carrying out actions that contribute to the sustainable development of Africa from the Canary Islands and to the integration of unaccompanied migrant minors, taking advantage of the potential of historical heritage as a vector of integration.

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