

SJAM

Social Justice Alliance for Museums

BM
network

Network Background

The museum network was established in April 2006 at Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala, Sweden. The original network is facilitated by the Swedish based organisation Cultural Heritage without Borders. The participants were museum directors and key staff from eleven museums in the Western Balkans region (from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). At the workshop, it was also determined that a special network for female museum directors was required in order to address the specific needs of this group.

The museum cooperation is based on strengthening the contacts and collaboration between museums in the Western Balkans. It aims to enhance cultural understanding, develop staff competence, facilitate exchange of ideas and exhibitions and make the museums more inviting to the public. Several workshops and seminars have been organized on a wide variety of topics, such as museum management, strategic planning, exhibitions, communication, conservation and education. A series of major projects around access for disabled people has led to improvements in museum access.

In 2010 the museums decided to form their own network, the Balkan Museum Network and it is an ongoing process.



Balkan Museums without Barriers Conference, 28th October 2014

Inclusion of Deaf and Disabled People in the Museums of the Western Balkans

The Balkan Museum Network and Cultural Heritage without Borders are dedicated to increasing disabled people's access to arts and culture. In the period 2011 – 2014 together we have implemented the project "Spreading the word: sustainable accessible museums for disabled children and adults in the Western Balkans" (funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation), building on an earlier initiative started in 2007. One of the most important results is the creation of The Balkan Museum Access Group made of museum professionals working from the social model of disability and cascading learning, skills and knowledge around inclusive practice across the Western Balkans.

The Challenges of the Project

- Isolation, marginalisation and exclusion of marginalized groups in the western Balkans, particularly from arts, heritage and culture. Difficulties in building sustainable partnerships with Deaf and disabled people.
- Political influence on museum management (following elections ministries are keen to change directors and this can mean that progressive leaders are stopped from developing the museum services).
- Critically low and reducing government funding and investment in museums.
- Lack of support often demotivated staff and limited creativity, innovation and development of new services and approaches.
- Conservative nature of many museums and lack of engagement with civil society. Lack of co-production.
- The lack of understanding of the social model of disability in the western Balkans.
- To ensure sustained and creative inclusive practice of museums by changing the approach of museum professionals and enabling Deaf and disabled people's contribution.



The Overall Success of the Project

- The shift in the organisational culture of participating museums based on the changes in attitude, practice and policy.
- The formation of The Balkan Museum Access Group
- Creation of an annual conference across the western Balkan countries (Meet, See, Do) as a forum to share and learn good practice, common challenges and strengthen networks.
- Dissemination of good practice to wider audiences through seminars, publications, joint working and training, and the first museum conference in the region dedicated to access and inclusion.
- Development and support of outreach projects for Deaf and disabled people (through schools, universities, NGOs, and community cultural centres).
- Improvement to the physical museum environment based on the social model of disability and principles of universal design.
- First conference on disabled people in museums “Balkan Museums without Barriers”
- Developing interpretation based on new and low technologies (e.g. handheld guides with sign language, Braille information, accessible websites, portable chairs, tactile replicas).
- Supporting museum workers in the principles of equality for Deaf and disabled people so that the knowledge can be cascaded through the museum’s staff and volunteers (training the trainers).
- Production of a Disability Tool Kit translated into 5 languages: Albanian, Bosnian, English, Macedonian and Serbian.



Project Development

- Dissemination of results
- Geographical enlargement to other countries
- Further strengthening The Balkan Museum Access Group through training, networks, and the opportunity to practically develop their skills.
- Continued small grants programme