

Samdok – from innovation to integration

*Author:
Eva Fägerborg*

CIDOC06
GOTHENBURG
S W E D E N

First, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to this conference. I have been asked to give a presentation of Samdok – the Swedish cultural history museums' network for contemporary studies and collecting – and will take the name itself as a point of departure.

The name Samdok is composed of “sam”, which is the first part of the Swedish word for “samtid”, contemporary, but also the first part of the Swedish words for cooperation and coordination, and “dok”, which is an abbreviation of documentation. The name thus directly refers to the so called “contemporary documentation”, which has been the core of Samdok's activities since the 1970's.

However, “documentation” and “contemporary documentation” are problematic terms, not least in an international perspective. Therefore, as an introduction I think it is necessary to reflect on the concept and term “documentation” before I continue with a general overview of how Samdok is organized and operating.

Documentation – a tricky term

In a Samdok context “documentation” refers to the whole process of generating material to the museums. It encompasses formulating of projects and research questions, choice of phenomena and empirical fields to study and the fieldwork itself that brings a wide variety of material to the museum. The material consists of interviews, field notes and descriptions, objects, photographs, film and sound recordings, drawings, different kinds of documents and printed material – all depending on which phenomenon that is being studied and from which perspectives. So “contemporary studies and collecting” is a more adequate term than “contemporary documentation” – not least in the light of CIDOC's sphere of activities and your discussions on documentation in this conference.

There is also another complication with the word “documentation”, since it sometimes is associated with an unproblematized approach to collecting of “facts” and data – in contrast to problem-oriented scientific research – that leads to descriptive rather than analytic accounts.

The main point I will stress so far is the work of Samdok as production of cultural heritage. Next I will give a brief orientation of Samdok’s work and organization and finally discuss Samdoks’ changing objectives and perspectives.

Organization

Samdok was formally founded in 1977, originally as an association for cooperation in collecting present day artefacts. Soon the focus moved from the collecting of artefacts to the recording of present day life, which still is a basic task.

At present about 75 museums (and some other institutions) are participating, more or less actively. The members compose a heterogeneous crowd of museums with differing missions, principals, competences, needs and working conditions – county museums, municipal museums, national/central and specialized museums.

The participating museums get together in working groups (pools), supported by the Samdok Secretariat and the Samdok Council. (Fig. 1)

Samdok’s perhaps most well-known characteristic is the way the museums cooperate in working groups, the so called pools, which form the “body” of the organization. (Fig. 2)

Now there are eight such groups: the pools for *Leisure, Domestic Life, Local and Regional Spheres, Management of Natural Resources, Politics and Society, Manufacture and Services* represent fields of human activity. One, the pool for *Saami Life*, focuses on an indigenous ethnic minority. Finally, there is the Group for *Cultural Encounters*, with a mission to integrate cultural-encounter perspectives in all pools.

Each museum chooses the pool/s to work with and each museum implements and finances its own studies while the colleagues in the pool is a resource for planning and evaluating discussions. In general, they meet twice a year. These meetings can be described as education days, when the participants have opportunities to analyse and discuss their work. They are often combined with study visits and seminars with invited researchers and/or discussions on recent literature. Some pools organize their own field seminars around specific topics and at specific sites. Such field seminars have been conducted in various settings, for example the Swedish Parliament, a passenger ferry, rural villages, industrial plants and commercial centres. Each pool has also worked out its own guidelines, which chart the situation in the respective field of study and indicate research questions. The pools' activities have, through the years, proved to be of great importance for increasing professional skills.

The work is supported by the Samdok Secretariat and the Samdok Council. (*Fig. 1*)

The Secretariat (1 ½ appointment) is located at and financed by the Nordiska museet. It is the administrative hub of the network, with the task to provide information nationally and internationally, to develop the work in various ways – for example by organizing conferences, seminars and training courses and by specific projects – and to participate in the activities of all pools. The secretariat is also responsible for Samdok's website, the periodical *Samtid & museer* (Museums & the Present), and a database containing facts about the museums' contemporary studies.

The decision-making Samdok Council consists of representatives for national, county and municipal museums. The Research Council, now integrated in the Research Council of the Nordiska museet, is one of our links to the universities.

This organizational structure has lasted since the early 1980s, which indicates that it is reasonably functioning. Of course some changes have taken place. The existing set of pools replaced an earlier one in the late 1990s and in the future other alterations may be needed. In short, we aim

to combine stability and flexibility, in order to develop Samdok as a common resource for the member museums.

Changing perspectives: broader and deeper

Even if the organizational structure is remaining, Samdok's aims and operational nature have been modified and Samdok today is not the same as in the 1980's. Changes in society and academic standpoints as well as in the museums' working conditions and orientations have through the years been reflected in the way we work. I will briefly indicate a few traits.

As mentioned, the original idea of how to organise the collecting of artefacts in the age of mass production soon was abandoned for a much broader ambition, and the concept and practice "contemporary documentation" was established. This in turn, required development of the museum workers' capacities to study present day life in the society. Therefore methodological training courses were organized around different aspects of field work.

Another point is the museum studies' connection to cultural and social science. Although the early pamphlets emphasised the importance of research-oriented documentation, critical voices soon pointed out the lack of problematization in the projects. This led to increasing efforts to relate the work to current academic research, for example by the formation of a research council and expressed emphasis on theoretical perspectives and social issues.

The changes within Samdok also relate to movements in the academic world – away from the positivism behind the idea of systematic "data-catching" of the 70-s, and towards a view of the world as socially and culturally constructed. Furthermore, discussions on reflexivity and representation led to new insights about the museums' power to select and legitimate what are to be included in the collective memory of society. Today there are also many other actors in the sphere of cultural heritage, which forces museums to define their specific role.

These discussions brought about a need to analyse the museums as heritage producers. In the project *Present day as cultural heritage*, closer investigation was directed at museums' contemporary studies and collecting during the period 1975-2000, in terms of choice of subject, problems, methods and results. Seven museums were analysed and the studies are published in the book *Samtiden som kulturarv* (Ed. Eva Silvén & Magnus Gudmundsson, Nordiska museet 2006), along with some thematically oriented articles. The introduction and conclusion are translated to English.

Quite obviously, most of the museum's documentary and collecting work has been directed at the well-organized, familiar and "normal" life, while issues as marginalized groups, unpleasant and nasty things – the darker side of life – tended to be more or less absent. To reflect on these questions, Samdok in cooperation with Swedish Travelling Exhibitions, carried out another project, *Difficult matters: Objects and Narratives that Disturb and Affect*. Both museums and the public were invited to contribute with material to a trailer – a combined "field-station" and exhibition – that travelled through the country in the years 1999 and 2000.¹ Fifty-four museums participated, each with one object and associated narrative, and some 300 of the visitors were inspired to bring their own difficult objects and tell their stories to the curators who worked in the trailer. These objects were not kept, but photographed, described and filed together with the narratives. This project is a good example of entering into dialogues with the public, combining experimental working methods with issues both close in experience to individuals and of general societal importance. The project is presented in the recently published book *Svåra saker* (Ed. Eva Silvén & Anders Björklund, Nordiska museet 2006), with an introduction in English.

Integration approaches

The title of this paper indicates a tendency as well as a specific opportunity regarding the work of Samdok. During three decades it has shifted from a "today for tomorrow"-perspective to "today

¹ Another part of the project was a series of four seminars, focusing museums' role in connection with accidents and major disasters, social marginalization and other difficult and ethically complex themes.

for today and tomorrow”, from holistic ambitions to thematic studies, from an objectivistic outlook to constructivistic conceptions of culture.

Samdok’s activities can also be described in terms of development from innovation to integration. When the idea of contemporary studies and collecting was launched, this was something new and almost revolutionary. Today most museums agree that this is a matter of course and highly important. Still, this work is sometimes regarded as something separate from other duties and participation in Samdok as something besides “ordinary” museum work. Especially in periods of financial scarcity, collecting and investigation compete with other tasks, and risk to be overrun by more spectacular museum projects. We need to constantly underline the importance of integration perspectives. Within the museums contemporary studies can be the key to fruitful cooperation and the bridge that cross the boundaries between different professions and field of activities.

Integration is not only a question of the integration of contemporary studies and collecting with museum work as a whole. It is also a question of bringing together the present and the past, and of connecting the museum with the society and the public through contemporary studies. One of our members expressed that “with our contemporary studies, we are building relations”. This is a good description of the way Samdok activities can be a tool in public work. Many museums produce exhibitions on contemporary topics. Actively directing research into the present society, working with issues of interest for people today, and with a serious interest in people’s conditions, makes the museums visible among other than the exhibition visitors. It can also embrace different forms and methods for developing museum work as a tool in a democratic process. One aspect of contemporary studies and collecting, therefore, is its role as an arena for dialogue, where museum professionals and people in the society meet in a mutual knowledge-building process. *Difficult matters* is one example. In other cases, museums involve people from the field of study in the selection process, to secure that the acquired objects are relevant to peoples’ experiences and ideas. On the whole, development of different forms of dialogic documentary work is a growing field within Samdok.

A final point: Integration implies continuity. By colleagues abroad, Samdok sometimes is described as a project. It is not. A project is limited in time and scope. Samdok is growing middle aged. Perhaps it is the challenge of combining stability and flexibility that keeps it not only alive, but also vivid. It started as an organisation for co-operation in collecting present day artefacts and continued with studying present day life. These basic tasks remain. In course of time, Samdok has also become a forum for scholarly discussions on contemporary culture and society, a forum for reflections on cultural heritage as a product of documentary work and collecting, a forum for professional development and further education. And the network is continually exploring new fields of study and trying new working methods.

In a constantly changing world, museums have to (re-)define their missions and ways of performing their duties. Structural changes, migration, media and technology both challenge and give museums new possibilities as producers and keepers of material and immaterial images of human life. Not least, they need an extended and intensified dialogue and collaboration across the borders. Next year, Samdok has been in operation for 30 years and the anniversary will be celebrated with an international conference in November, focusing international perspectives on collecting. I will finish with welcoming you all to this conference.

Figure 1

SAMDOK

- * Working groups – “pools”**
- * Samdok Secretariat**
- * Samdok Council**
- * Research Council**

samdok@nordiskamuseet.se

www.nordiskamuseet.se/samdok

Figure 2

SAMDOK

Working groups – ”pools”

- **Leisure**
- **Domestic Life**
- **Local & Regional Spheres**
- **Management of Natural Resources**
- **Politics and Society**
- **Manufacture & Services**
- **Saami Life**
- **Cultural Encounters**