1. Statement of principles of museum documentation

1.1. Preamble

This statement of principles has been produced by the Documentation Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CIDOC), as a guide for museums when developing their documentation and collections management policies. It is compatible with the standards in the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2006.

Museum documentation is concerned with the development and use of information about the objects within a museum collection and the procedures which support the management of the collection. This information should be recorded in written or digital form in a museum documentation system and should be accessible to staff, researchers and the public. With effective documentation, a museum should be able to facilitate:

- collection policies;
- collection care and accountability;
- collection access, interpretation and use;
- collection research.

1.2. The principles

1.2.1. Policy

1. As part of its overall collections policy, the museum should adopt a documentation policy which demonstrates its organisational commitment to documentation. The documentation policy should define its documentation procedures and standards, the provision of documentation staff and systems, and the documentation services which it provides to users. The documentation policy should conform to the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* and take account of any national or subject-specific codes adopted by the museum and the museum's collections policy (*ICOM Code of Ethics*, 2.1 and 2.20). If the collection is poorly documented, the policy should incorporate a plan to rectify the problems.

1.2.2. Staffing and systems

2. The museum must employ or have access to staff with appropriate expertise in documentation procedures, standards and systems (*Code* 1.14 and 8.11). In a small museum, this principle may be fulfilled by a curator with appropriate training, while in a large museum there may be one or more documentation specialists working in partnership with curators, conservators and information systems specialists (*Code* 1.15).

3. The museum must implement a documentation system which maintains the information about the objects and supports practical collections management procedures, such as accessioning, loans management and object location and movement control (*Code* 2.20). Some parts of the system may be paper-based, such as registers and object files, and others should be computer-based, such as the primary catalogue records and search facilities.

1.2.3. Standards

4. The documentation system and the information it holds should conform to appropriate standards developed by national and international organisations, while taking account of local needs (*Code* 2.20). The documentation chapter in the ICOM guide to *Running a Museum: a Practical Handbook* has a comparison of a number of these standards, including the *CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CRM)*, the *CIDOC Guidelines*, the *AFRICOM*

Handbook and *SPECTRUM*. The *LIDO* standard should be taken into account when planning the contribution of data to, and interchange with, other systems.

1.2.4. Information access and user needs

5. The museum should evaluate the needs of its users and where appropriate provide services tailored to different categories of user, such as researchers, teachers and students, learners and the general public. These services should include a research area where visitors can consult paper records and files, together with manual or online search facilities giving access to catalogue records, images, contextual information and other resources. The museum should consider widening access by providing information about its collections to central metadata registries such as Europeana (*Code* 2.20, 3.2 and 8.4).

6. The search facilities should enable staff and users to find relevant information about the collection and individual objects, by searching for criteria such as object name, title, object type or classification, material, collection place, producer, production date or period and object number (*Code* 2.20 and 3.2).

7. The system must enable the museum to restrict access to confidential information and details affected by copyright constraints, while respecting Freedom of Information legislation. The restricted information may include details such as identifying marks or defects, valuations, storage locations and the exact find spots of natural history or archaeology objects (*Code* 2.20, 2.22, 3.2 and 8.6).

1.2.5. Information and procedures

8. The documentation must include evidence of the basis on which each object came into the museum. In the case of an object that has been permanently acquired, the documentation must define the acquisition method, date, source and any conditions. The museum must be satisfied that the source has valid title to the object and confirm the provenance of the object (*Code* 2.2-2.4). In the case of an object that has been temporarily brought into the museum, the documentation must establish why it was accepted, the date, source, the anticipated return date and whether it has been returned.

9. The museum must record information about the provenance of an acquired object from its discovery or creation to the present, including - where appropriate - its production, collection, ownership and contextual details about its use (*Code* 2.3). The documentation should cite the source of this information. Source material held by the museum (including documentary photographs) should be considered to be an integral part of the documentation system. Such materials should be managed to archival standards. Details obtained from an external source, such as the previous owner or a researcher, should be verified by the museum. It is particularly important to obtain information about an object's use and history from the donor or vendor as a routine part of the acquisition process.

10. Each object must be assigned a unique number or identifier, which should be recorded within the documentation system. The object should be marked or labelled with the number. The location of the object should be recorded within the documentation system, irrespective of whether the object is in its normal location or has been moved to another location, such as a conservation laboratory.

11. In the event of the loss or theft of an object, the museum should be able to provide law enforcement agencies with information and images that can be used to help with its recovery, such as its unique number, production date or period, maker, materials, measurements, physical condition and distinguishing features. The *Object ID* standard provides guidelines on the concepts that are appropriate for this purpose.

12. The documentation must include information about any intellectual property rights concerning the object. In order to respect these rights, the museum should document the owners of any associated intellectual property rights, and monitor any transfer of these rights.

13. The system should incorporate the results of research and other published material about the object or references to such information, such as exhibition catalogue entries. If the object is cited in published material, the author should refer to the unique number of the object.

14. If the existing collection is inadequately documented, the museum should implement a programme to upgrade the documentation by an agreed deadline. The sources for this information may include a physical stocktaking and a review of any original registers and files. The first priority should be to establish a baseline inventory of the collection, with primary information about each object, such as unique number, location, object name and condition. If objects are found without a number and the old number cannot be traced in the original documentation, they may need to be assigned a new number during this process.

15. In addition to details about individual objects, the museum should develop information about themes and subjects of relevance to the collection. It should develop details about the people, organisations and cultures associated with the collection, such as donors, collectors, producers, and previous owners and users. If appropriate, it should also develop information about archaeological and natural history sites and their surrounding environments and archaeological processes (*Code* 3.3).

16. The system should provide facilities which enable the collection information to be incorporated in resources such as education and interpretation material and online exhibitions and learning resources.

17. The documentation system should provide procedural support for collections management, such as the steps to be followed and decisions to be taken when lending an object to another institution.

18. The system should incorporate information about each significant collections management activity affecting an object, such as conservation (*Code* 2.24), photography, loans-out and its use in exhibitions and displays.

19. If an object is deaccessioned, its documentation should be retained by the museum. If the object is transferred to another museum, a copy of the documentation should be passed to that museum. Details of the basis on which an object was deaccessioned and the formal approval of this action must be added to the documentation about the object (*Code* 2.12-2.17).

1.2.6. Security, sustainability and preservation

20. The system must include provisions for the security, sustainability and the long-term preservation of information, such as storing registers in a fire-proof safe, storing paper files in an environmentally controlled archive, backing-up and restricting access to digital information and ensuring that digital information is transferred from superseded systems and file formats into current systems (*Code* 1.6 and 2.20-2.22).

1.3. References and sources

1. Further information about collections documentation is available from the CIDOC Web site (http://cidoc.icom.museum).

2. International Council of Museums (1996). *Handbook of standards. Documenting African collections*. Paris: ICOM. ISBN 92-9012-029-0. [English-French edition.] (http://icom.museum/afridoc/)

3. International Council of Museums (1997). *Handbook of standards. Documenting African collections*. Paris: ICOM. ISBN 92-9012-639-6. [Arabic edition, ICOM-Tunis.]

4. International Council of Museums (2004). *Running a museum: a practical handbook*. Paris: ICOM. ISBN 92-9012-157-2. (Also in Arabic.)

5. International Council of Museums (2006). *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*. Paris: ICOM. (http://icom.museum/ethics.html)

6. International Council of Museums. International Committee for Documentation (CIDOC) (1995). *International Guidelines for Museum Object Information: The CIDOC Information Categories*. Edited by a joint project team of the CIDOC Data and Terminology and the CIDOC Data Model Working Groups. Editors: Alice Grant, Joséphine Nieuwenhuis, Toni Petersen. Paris: CIDOC. Printed version, ISBN 92-9012-124-6. (http://www.cidoc.icom.org/guide/guide.htm)

7. Collections Trust (2011). *SPECTRUM: The UK Museum Documentation Standard*. Fourth edition. Edited by Alex Dawson and Susanna Hillhouse. (http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/spectrum-standard)

8. International Organization for Standardization (2006). *Information and Documentation - a Reference Ontology for the Interchange of Cultural Heritage Information*. ISO 21127:2006. Geneva: ISO. (http://www.iso.org/iso/en/CatalogueDetailPage.CatalogueDetail?CSNUMBER=34424&scopelist=PROGRAMME) (The CIDOC Conceptual reference Model, CRM, see http://cidoc.ics.forth.gr)

9. Object ID (http://icom.museum/object-id)

10. Coburn, E. & Light, R. & McKenna, G. & Stein, R. & Vitzthum, A. (2010) *LIDO - Lightweight Information Describing Objects Version 1.0*. (http://www.lido-schema.org/schema/v1.0/lido-v1.0-specification.pdf)