ICOM COMMS AWARDS · BEST CRISIS MANAGEMENT

From Mud to Method

Structuring Crisis Communication for Cultural Heritage

Doris Couto

Museologist & Coordinator, State Museum System (SEM/RS)
Member, ICOM Brazil

THE CATALYST

A Climate Disaster Without Precedent

In May 2024, floods struck the Rio Grande do Sul state, Brazil — the largest climate tragedy in the country's history. Physical lifelines were severed: airports submerged, roads collapsed, postal services halted.

431

municipalities affected across the state

1.74M

people impacted by the floods

107

confirmed deaths

58

cultural institutions directly affected

8 million archival documents and **100,000** public library books were damaged or lost.

Historic Porto Alegre, May 2024 — MARGS and Correios buildings submerged.

Mobilizing in the Dark, Then on the Offensive

Before official logistics could intervene, grassroots digital communication became the first lifeline. SEM/RS then moved from spontaneous response to proactive, data-driven outreach.

"SOS Acervos" WhatsApp Channel

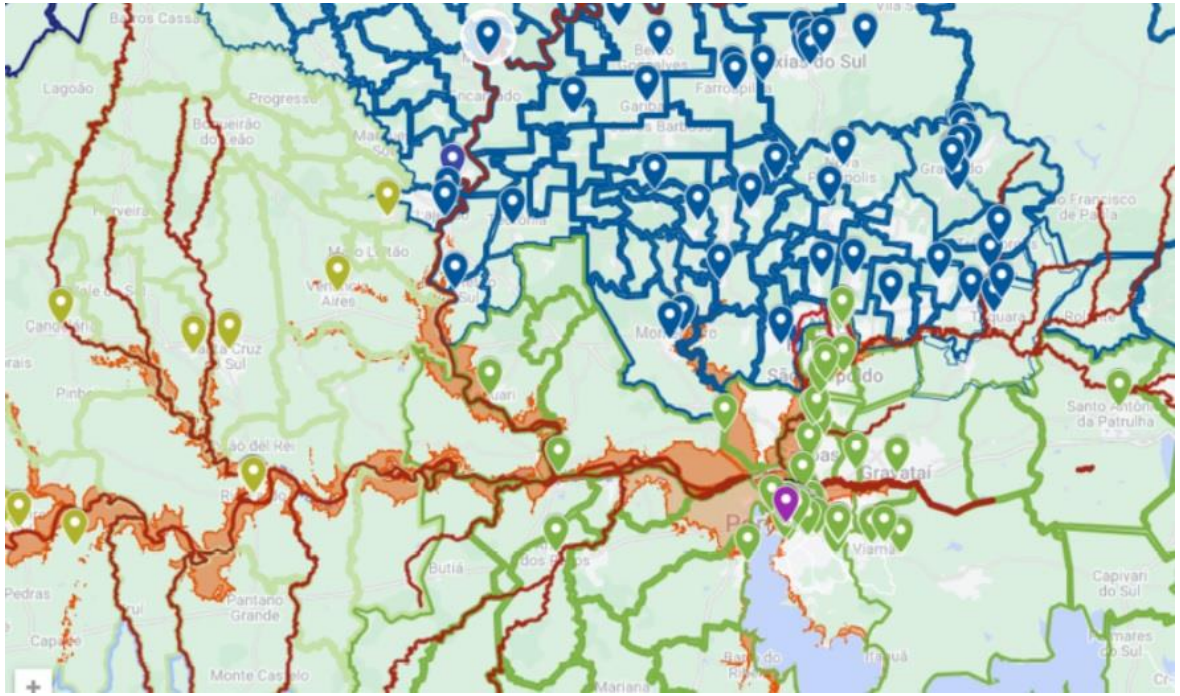
Created by ACOR-RS and UFPel, instantly connecting 500+ professionals and volunteers for real-time field triage.

SEM/RS Digital Triage

An agile online volunteer form captured 571 registrations of professionals and students, enabling strategic allocation to critical zones.

Proactive, Data-Driven Outreach

SEM/RS overlaid the flood-extent map with its registry of collections statewide, cross-referencing municipality-level flood data to proactively identify and contact affected institutions.



Purple: SEM/RS headquarters (Porto Alegre) **Other colors:** the state's museological regions

Flood extent overlaid on the SEM/RS museum registry. Map: Mônica Wiggers, geographer, SEM/RS.

Doris Couto (SEM/RS) coordinates volunteer teams by radio, Porto Alegre, May 2024.

STRUCTURING THE CHAOS

From Frantic Field Tactics to Validated Protocol

RAW INPUTS

WhatsApp audio messages containing information and technical support regarding document preservation and paper drying. Difficulties in securing PPE supplies. Working with collections contaminated by sewage.

THE SEM/RS TRIAGE FILTER

Orientação diária por meio de videochamadas remotas · tradução dos protocolos internacionais do APOYOnline · avaliação por especialistas brasileiros em conservação. Elaboração de um guia rápido e simples que descreve possíveis práticas para a recuperação e estabilização de acervos por uma equipe em São Paulo.

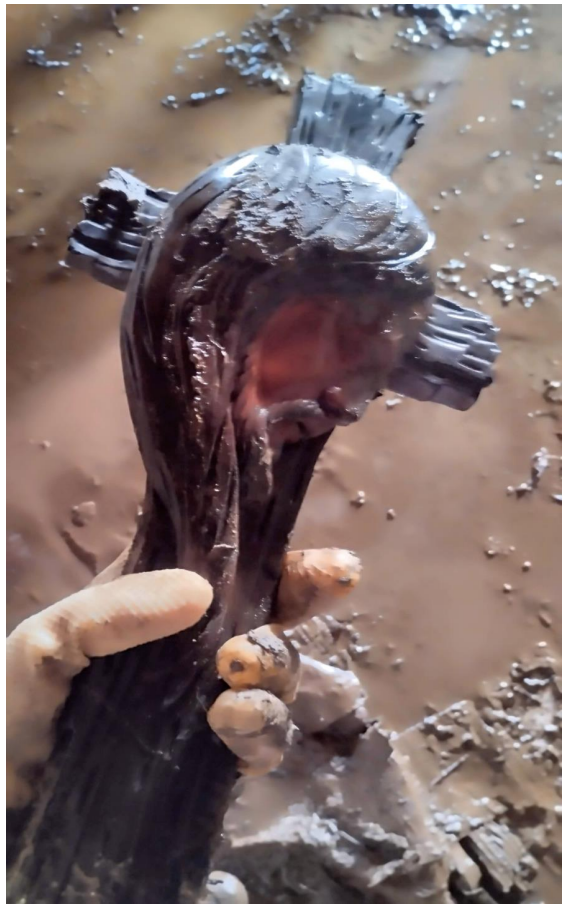
STRATEGIC OUTPUT

Validated, systematized cultural policy · open-access rescue knowledge

Volunteers sanitize 500 water-damaged records in Igrejinha. May 16, 2024.

Documents laid out to air-dry, historic archive, in Montenegro, May 29, 2024.

Mud, Method, and the People In Between



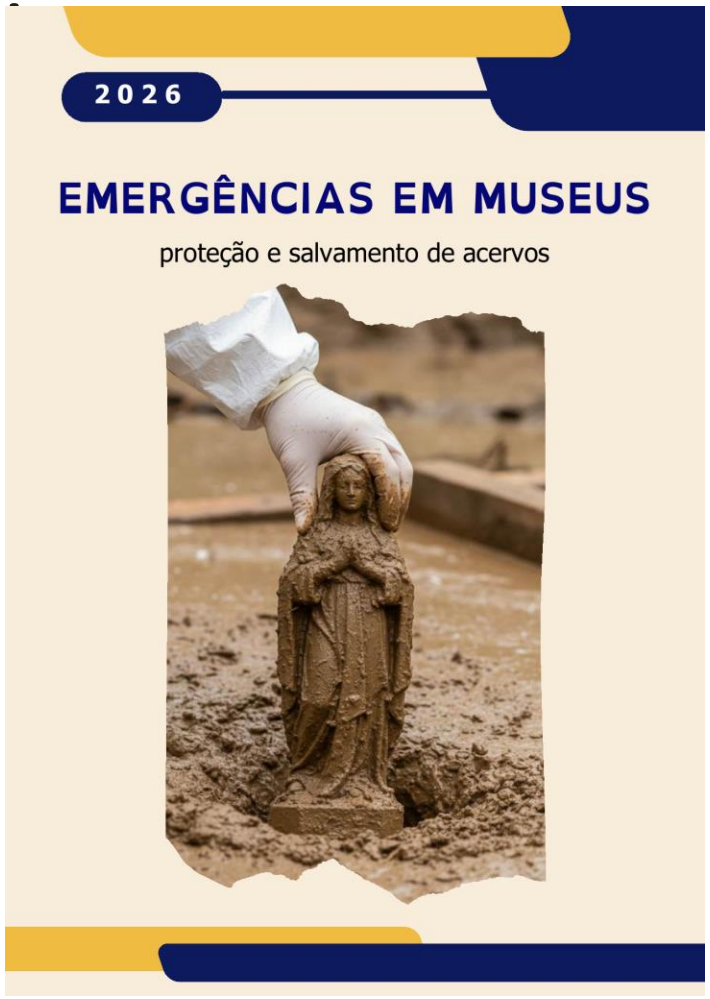
A mud-covered sculpture recovered from a flooded collection, in Igrejinha,May 17.

Doris Couto after a rescue shift, Porto Alegre, May 21.

Conservators stabilize a water-damaged print, June 1.

An engraving removed from a wet frame. Museu do Trabalho. Porto Alegre, June 7.

News of the emergency became common knowledge



Emergências em museus: proteção e salvamento de acervos

Open-access publication · 2026

Launched at the VI ICOM Brazil Meeting
Recife · April 2026

O e-book transforma a experiência do desastre em conhecimento compartilhado, reunindo memória, resposta a emergências, recuperação, lições aprendidas e estratégias para fortalecer a resiliência dos museus diante de crises futuras.

OPEN ACCESS
ICOM Brazil

A Pilot Framework — the Heart of This Candidacy

Field teams improvised without a shared command language during the floods. Doris Couto developed a color-coded internal communication framework, adapted from meteorological alert systems, now entering pilot testing at the Museu de História Julio de Castilhos.

A universal internal system that triggers pre-approved security protocols at all levels of institutional risk—first tested as a proposal in the management of crises related to cultural heritage. It uses a color-coded system to indicate status, based on the colors used by Civil Defense.

THE ESCALATION FRAMEWORK

From Prevention to Recovery, Five Coordinated States

GREEN · Normal	YELLOW · Attention	ORANGE · Imminent Risk	RED · Extreme Danger	BLUE · Recovery
Routine operational monitoring. Preventive equipment maintenance, periodic evacuation drills, daily weather monitoring.	Escalated vigilance on weather alerts. EPI kits prepared, vulnerable areas restricted, at-risk collections covered.	Evacuate the public. Trigger external services. Prioritize protection and removal of high-priority artifacts.	Total mandatory evacuation. Absolute focus on human life. Full coordination with Fire, Police, Civil Defense.	Restricted access. Expert structural assessment. Emergency conservation begins; official communication with press and public.

Each museum follows a pre-approved protocol—replacing improvisation with a common institutional language.

Specialized Conservation Work

The Blue Level moves beyond crisis response to a specialized and practical recovery effort—stabilizing, restoring, and documenting each surviving item. In 2024, the government of Rio Grande do Sul contracted specialized services for the restoration. Volunteers helped stabilize th e collections. An investment of 50 million reais was made to restore the collections and buildings.

Conservators lift a water-damaged print from its frame, June 1, 2024.

The same piece cleaned of mud residue, ready for drying, June 1, 2024.

CASE IN FOCUS

MARGS — Museu de Arte do Rio Grande do Sul

One of the state's most important art museums, MARGS was among the hardest hit institutions. Roughly 4,000 artworks were affected by the flood.

~4,000

artworks affected by the flood

Recovery work included the UFPel Conservation and Restoration lab, a new flood-safe technical reserve, and systematic restoration of the artistic collection — a model of the pilot framework's Blue (Recovery) tier in action.

MARGS conservation team triages paintings and paper works, July 3, 2024.

THE PARTNERSHIP CONSTELLATION

Local Expertise, National Reach, Global Support

INNER ORBIT · Local & Regional

- UFPel
- UFRGS (GADH / Sépia)
- UFSC (Conservation Lab)
- ACOR-RS
- COREM 3R

On-the-ground technical manpower, academic backing, and remote training (UFSC: 3 livestreams, ~4,000 viewers).

MIDDLE ORBIT · National

- ICOM Brazil
- IBRAM
- FAB (Military Airlift)

IBRAM coordinated two FAB airlifts from São Paulo, moving donated supplies into the state.

OUTER ORBIT · International

- Smithsonian Institution
- UNESCO

Smithsonian funding (via ACOR-RS) supplied rescue kits; UNESCO sponsored an expert mission and 4 regional workshops.

International cooperation translated into field capacity

MATERIAL MOBILIZATION

Support from the Smithsonian Institution, mobilized through a project submitted by ACOR-RS, provided PPE and essential equipment for salvage operations. A central supply hub was organized at Museu Julio de Castilhos, where SEM/RS coordinated distribution according to the needs of affected institutions.

UNESCO HERITAGE EMERGENCY FUND

UNESCO's Heritage Emergency Fund supported an international technical mission to Rio Grande do Sul and four regional workshops, training 60 participants in emergency preparedness, risk reduction, and first-response procedures for cultural heritage.

International cooperation became supplies, technical assessment, and training.

Emergency supply hub at Museu Julio de Castilhos. PPE and equipment were centralized and distributed to affected institutions according to need.

UNESCO technical mission at Fundação Pão dos Pobres, Porto Alegre, July 16, 2024 — on-site assessment of flood-damaged maps, documents, and collections.

BEYOND THE EMERGENCY

Sustained Field Presence

The response was not limited to the emergency phase. Beginning in July 2024, the State Systems for Culture, Libraries, and Museums—with Doris Couto present on site—visited all affected regions, prioritizing the municipalities with the highest concentration of damaged collections.

25

municipalities visited

2

months of continuous outreach work during the rescue of the collections

Casa de Cultura Mario Quintana, home to MAC/RS, flooded by the rising waters.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

From Reactive Chaos to Systematized Resilience

	Reactive Chaos (Pre-2024)	Systematized Resilience (The SEM/RS Standard)
Alert Mechanisms	Word of mouth, chaotic WhatsApp messages	Universal, automated color-coded risk framework
Resource Allocation	Ad-hoc, disorganized local donations	Centralized hubs · Smithsonian / UNESCO pipelines
Knowledge Transfer	Isolated trial and error, reinventing the wheel	Open-access e-book: Emergência em Museus
Policy Focus	Isolated institutional risk, reacting case-by-case	National climate-preservation integration

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

From Emergency Response to a Culture of Preparedness

THE MICRO

Immediate communication networks connected professionals, institutions, and urgent needs — turning dispersed information into coordinated action for affected collections.

THE MESO

Lessons from the emergency were systematized in Emergências em museus: proteção e salvamento de acervos and translated into a proposed color-coded framework for preparedness, response, and recovery.

THE MACRO

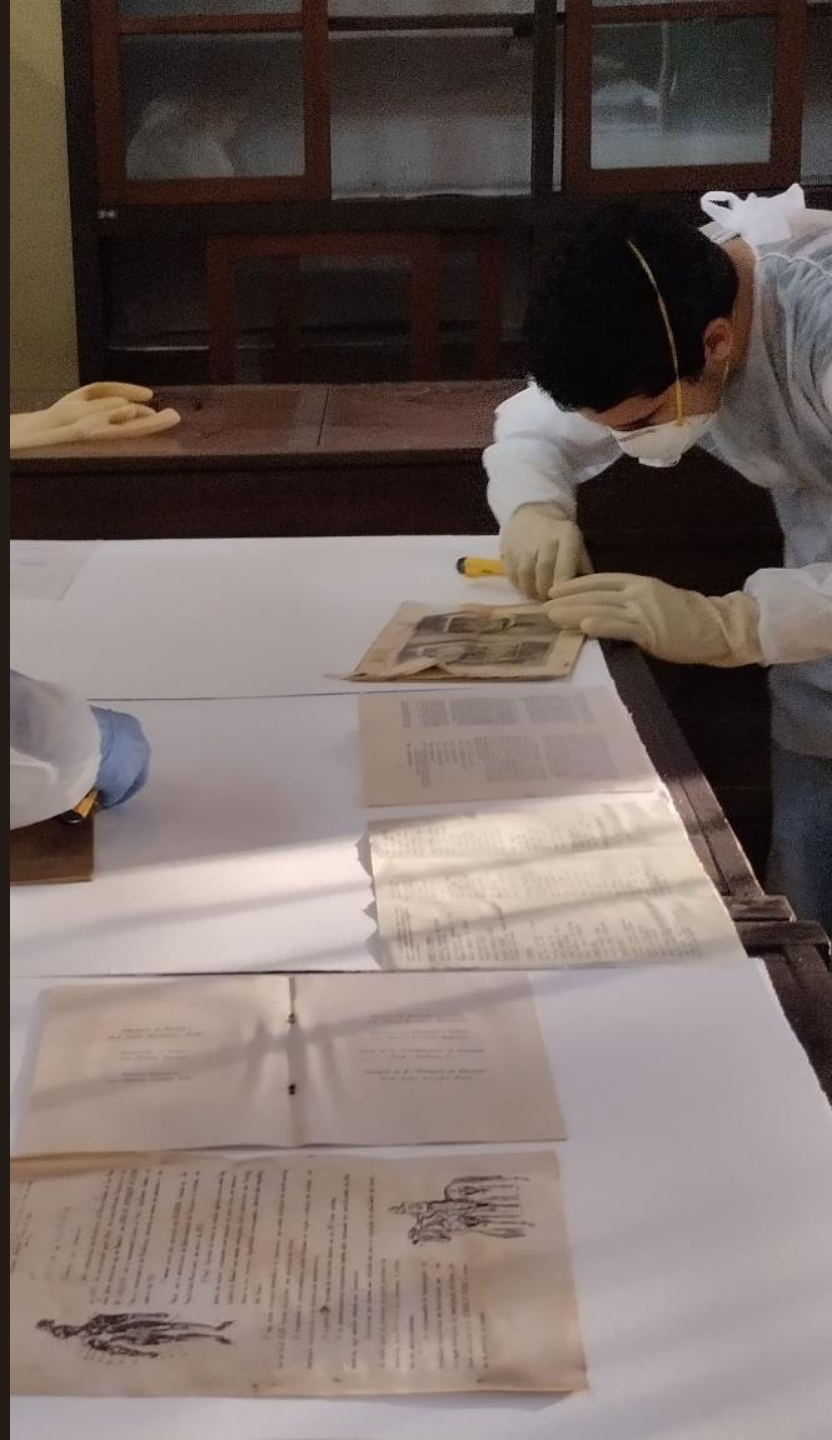
The experience became part of a broader Brazilian museum and heritage agenda increasingly focused on climate risk, preparedness, cooperation, and institutional resilience.

The legacy extends beyond the collections rescued in 2024: experience became shared knowledge, and shared knowledge became a tool for future preparedness.

From Mud to Method.
From Reaction to Resilience.

The 2024 Rio Grande do Sul floods proved that in the face of unprecedented climate disaster, the survival of cultural memory depends on the clarity of our communication. SEM/RS transformed chaotic rescue efforts into a permanent, globally-backed framework — establishing a new paradigm for cultural heritage preservation.

Open Access, Democratized

Scan to download Emergência em Museus free of charge from ICOM Brazil — because knowledge built in crisis should not stay locked away in a climate-changing world.

Presented for the ICOM COMMS Awards by Doris Couto, State Museum System (SEM/RS).