



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Information  
for All  
Programme

IFAP Working Group on Information Preservation

*Proposal 2 for the Preparation of the Draft Programme and Budget for 2012-2013 (36 C/5)*

***Safeguarding the Hidden Documents of Linguistic and Cultural Diversity***

**Background**

Proper documentation of spoken language, and also of many other cultural manifestations such as music, dance, or ritual, became possible towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the advent of audiovisual technology. Early phonographic and film documents are rare, however a worldwide breakthrough in the technology that led to the availability of portable recording equipment – in the 1950s for magnetic audio tape and during the 1980s for video – resulted in a massive increase in the audiovisual documentation of languages and orally transmitted cultures. Over the decades since, a remarkable stock of audio and video tapes have been recorded by universities, cultural institutions, and private researchers that today forms the primary sources for one of UNESCO's focal points, namely the cultural and linguistic diversity of human kind. The importance of these documents exceeds by far the academic publications that came from them: In times of rapid cultural changes, these recordings are of the utmost importance for the historical and cultural identity of the many societies that were so documented.

**The Issue**

Audiovisual documents are at risk. In particular tropical environmental and climatic conditions accelerate their decay, but audio and video documents are additionally threatened by the inescapable disappearance of dedicated replay equipment, which vanishes from the market as new recording technology arrives. Today, all analogue and specific format digital audio and video recordings found in collections are obsolete. Experts unanimously agree that the time window to keep the old equipment in operation in order to transfer these vital documents into safe digital repositories is not more than 15 years.

The greater portion of the primary documents of cultural and linguistic diversity are outside the archival custody of the well organized collections such as is found in national and broadcast archives. Rather, they are hidden on the shelves of research and cultural institutions without preservation plans and adequate budgets. A considerable proportion remains in the hands of the researchers who recorded them.

Partly because of lack of awareness, partly because of notorious lack of funds, all these documents will be lost unless a global concerted initiative is taken to identify these highly endangered hidden collections and develop plans for their systematic safeguarding.

**Recommendation:**

The IFAP Information Preservation Working Group, therefore, recommends that the Director General responds to this extraordinary threat to this documentary heritage by developing an efficient policy which will, within the relative short time constraint of the next 15 years, safeguard these hidden collections and their invaluable and irreplaceable contents. In particular we recommend that the following measures are taken within the next biennium (36 C/5):

- Alert members states to the pending threat and raise awareness through publications and seminars
- Identify and assess the dimensions of hidden collections
- Develop a mid-term plan for the safeguarding of the materials for implementation in the forthcoming biennia.

All measures should be established in close intersectoral cooperation between the CI and the Culture Sector. Within the CI sector, measures should be implemented within the framework of the Memory of the World Programme.

Planning and implementation should be made in close cooperation with relevant NGOs, inter alia IASA (International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives), SEAPAVAA (South-East Asia Pacific Audiovisual Archives Association), ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music), FEL (Foundation for Endangered Languages), and others. Measures should be prepared to attract extra budgetary funding by UNESCO member states as well as by the private sector.

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