

The International Council on Archives and the Memory of the World Programme: A Position Paper

1. When the International Council on Archives (ICA) discussed UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme (MoW) at its meeting in Edinburgh in September 1997, reservations were expressed about its application to records and archives.
2. There were a number of reasons for those reservations:
 - a. Records are documents which have been created or received by a public administration or a private institution in the transaction of its affairs and maintained to provide a corporate memory.
 - b. Archives are records which have been preserved specifically because of their wider continuing value. Historically their preservation has been largely as the chance survivors of war, theft, neglect, natural disasters, etc., but since the mid-20th century they have more often been preserved as a consequence of a conscious appraisal of their enduring value as components of a wider historical or cultural memory and may comprise ten per cent or less of the total quantity of records created originally by an administration or institution.
 - c. All national archives have extensive holdings which relate to other nations, cultures, etc., and hence form part of the World's memory.
 - d. Records and archives are organic accumulations in which value rests as much in the aggregation of contextual information embedded in the hierarchical structure of documentary units of the same provenance (files, series, sub-fonds) which make up the holdings of the archival institution (fonds) as in the content of any individual document.
 - e. All archival documents are unique in their context (i.e. in relation to other documents within that structure of documentary units) even if their content may be duplicated within the fonds or elsewhere.
 - f. Consequently the focus of archival operations is on the total fonds and to select only the "most important" documents for inclusion in the World Register is seen as incompatible with archival practice and ethics.
3. Nevertheless a number of individual archival institutions have in the meantime considered it advantageous to nominate selected documents or documentary units from their holdings for inclusion in the World Register.
4. The chief advantages of inclusion appear to be:
 - a. Archival institutions are part of national systems, and pride and prestige are enhanced both nationally and internationally by the inclusion of elements of the national archival holdings in the World Register.
 - b. UNESCO is a strong, worldwide icon and MoW recognition may offer significant advantages in 'selling' archives and securing third-party support (e.g. aid for preservation measures).
5. Notwithstanding the reservations expressed in Edinburgh, ICA has collaborated in the MoW programme and, in view of the patent interest of certain members of the archival community in securing MoW status for some of their holdings, it seems appropriate that ICA should reconsider its approach to MoW. At the same time experience of dealing with archival applications for inclusion in the World Register has made it apparent that the present MoW criteria are difficult to apply consistently to archives.
6. Accordingly it would be beneficial to both ICA and UNESCO, improve archival participation in MoW and thereby advance the MoW programme if the distinctive nature of archives could be recognised by harmonising MoW structures and archival practice and ethics and establishing more relevant criteria for the inclusion of archives in the World Register.
7. In the past the International Advisory Committee of MoW has decided that the World Register cannot include all the records in public archives, no matter how noteworthy they may be. This has clearly excluded hitherto the fonds of a national administration, but it leaves too wide a margin of uncertainty between that level of aggregation and the

individual document. For example, it is not clear whether a discrete but substantial documentary unit within the national archives is eligible if it is of world significance (e.g. the entire sub-fonds of the foreign or colonial ministry or the entire series of archives of the trade ministry relating to foreign trade).

8. To conform with archival practice and ethics, it seems essential that this decision should be reversed and that all national archives should be included in the MoW World Register (if necessary as a special category). Administratively this would be a simple exercise, which could be done by ICA. It would allow national archives, if they so wished, to publicise their MoW status and gain the benefits set out above.
9. The definition of what constitutes the 'national archives' or the 'national archival fonds' varies from country to country. In several countries the archives of local authorities are outside the national archives system yet may be of world significance and hence an integral part of the world's archival memory. It should, therefore, be left to the discretion of national authorities to determine what other repositories of public archives should be included with the national archives in its World Register entry.
10. At the same time it should still be possible for archival institutions, manuscript collections or other holders of archival material outside the national archives system to nominate specific documents or documentary units of world significance for inclusion in the World Register.
11. But even there it is essential to enhance the criteria in order to clarify a number of issues which are clearly not apparent to recent applicants:
 - a. It should be clearly stated that nominations for the World Register will be accepted only where the coverage or influence of the materials being nominated extends beyond a single UNESCO region.
 - b. Uniqueness should be interpreted in terms of rarity (e.g. of content, form or style) or novelty (e.g. the earliest surviving example of a document in a particular medium, of a particular type or documenting a particular activity), in each case in a worldwide context.
 - c. Nominations should be at document, folder, file or series level for archives or at document or collection level for manuscripts; institutions which hold sub-fonds or fonds of world significance will normally be covered by the register entry for the national archives.
 - d. Museum and heritage objects containing recorded information in media and formats which differ from those commonly found in archives and libraries (e.g. carved stones, incised tablets or wall paintings) are clearly documents and it seems appropriate that the World Register should extend to them where they meet the necessary criteria.
 - e. Even when not individually of world significance or unique in the above terms, documents or documentary units may qualify for inclusion in the World Register if they supplement or complement archives of world significance already included within one of the experimental projects (e.g. Slave Trade Archives).
12. One other issue which is of particular difficulty in the archive field is that of 'migrated', shared or disputed archives, which may be subject to explicit or implicit claims under international law. By their very nature such archives are likely to be of world significance and to merit inclusion in the MoW World Register and the institutions which currently hold them may claim to be the legal owners. It would be clearly invidious (and impractical) for the precise legal status of specific documents or documentary units to be investigated by ICA or UNESCO. Hence, it should be clearly stated that inclusion in the MoW World Register is an acknowledgment of the world significance of the archives and in no way implies any recognition of legal ownership.

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