

## The Memory of the World Programme – The ICA Perspective

I am sure that you are aware that the International Council on Archives (ICA) brings together national archive administrations, professional associations of archivists, regional, local and other archival institutions, as well as individual archivists and is the professional organisation for the world archival community. Since 1948 it has been dedicated to promoting the preservation, development, and use of the world's archival heritage. It now has a global network of more than 1,400 institutional members in 190 countries and has over 200 archivists and records managers as individual members. It is a non-governmental organisation that maintains its independence from the political process and its members include public and private archive institutions and individuals.

I will introduce a little later a precise definition of records and archives, but at this stage, I want to emphasise how important they are to 'society'. They are not just artificial collections of papers or parchments and electronic or other media. They are a vital part of our collective memory and without them we would be much diminished. Archives document our development as a society and provide us with a particular understanding of our past. They document our history and help us to understand better the present. In short, they form an integral part of our cultural heritage, as important as books, manuscripts, works of art and music.

Just as it is important to preserve and provide access to heritage sites of national, regional and international significance, so it is with our written heritage. However, archives and records possess particular qualities that warrant further careful consideration.

The existence of archives and records is one of the necessary mechanisms that allows an organisation, be it a government, a company or an association to be held accountable. Records and archives are evidence of activity and of responsibility. They may be and often are of great interest to the historian, but, as importantly, they are essential working tools for the normal functioning of society. How can we have accountable government, for example, without archives and records? How can business or commerce function in our complex economies without access to financial and other records and the data they contain?

Let me pose some hypothetical situations for us to consider regarding the importance of archives and records to the individual. Suppose a tsunami destroys the civil registration records of a small country and, in the course of the disaster, many are driven from their homes, without an opportunity to collect their personal belongings, let alone an identity card or birth or marriage certificate. When the water recedes, how does an individual prove her or his identity, in order to demonstrate eligibility for citizenship, a passport to travel, health care or other social benefits? Do family members or neighbours survive who could attest to that individual's true identity? What if such vital records are destroyed in an inter-ethnic conflict? The lack of authoritative records provides an ideal opportunity to continue that conflict by more subtle means. How does a citizen stand, say, with regard to criminal trials and appeals, when judicial or police records have been destroyed by catastrophic flooding? Do you try the accused,

or hear their appeal, even though the evidence and court records no longer exist, and, if so, on what basis do you decide the issue?

I may be posing hypothetical cases, but in real life such things have occurred in recent times. Without records or archives, we are at the mercy of collective or individual recollection, with all the attendant discrepancies that can occur. Beyond such immediately practical uses, archives provide an opportunity to discover how communities and individuals functioned in the past and why cultural differences and similarities have evolved. They can help to tell us why we are as we are and to plan for the future.

In many cases we take our written heritage for granted. For many, the constituent materials are readily available and accessible. They are everyday objects and, if familiarity does not breed contempt, it does facilitate complacency. Many people fail to realise how fragile and vulnerable that heritage is, even today.

The Memory of the World Programme (MoW) was established by UNESCO in 1992 to guard against the many dangers which frequently threaten the long-term preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world that together constitute our collective documentary heritage, in effect our collective written memory. The programme also aims to ensure the wide dissemination of documentary materials.

An integral part of that programme is the maintenance of the Memory of the World Register, which lists that part of the documentary heritage that has been identified by the International Advisory Committee (IAC) and endorsed by the Director-General of UNESCO, as corresponding to the selection criteria for world significance. There are also registers at national and regional, as well as at international levels.

In short, both the ICA and the Memory of the World Programme are engaged in preserving and affording access to our archival heritage. It may, therefore, seem surprising that when the ICA discussed UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme at a meeting in 1997, reservations were expressed about the application of that programme to records and archives.

Those reservations persisted until recently, and I believe it is worth exploring the background to the differences of view, if only to increase our understanding of some of the fundamental characteristics of this part of our documentary heritage. In this exploration I will draw on an ICA position paper considered by its Executive Board in Washington in 2005.

There were a number of reasons for the reservations of the ICA about the programme and they centred on the very nature of archives. It is necessary at this point to consider some definitions of both records and archives.

*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. Archives are records ....preserved specifically because of their wider continuing value.*

In effect, before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the act of preservation was often the result of chance, where records had survived despite neglect, war, theft, or possibly natural disasters. It is only in a minority of cases that one can recognise the application in the past of the principles of what is commonly known as 'records management'. Almost any archivist will be able to tell you horror stories about the so-called 'selection criteria' which were previously operated by some organisations, before the introduction of a records management system.

Fortunately, there has been an increasing tendency to preserve records following a conscious appraisal of their enduring value as part of a wider historical or cultural memory. It has been suggested that often a public administration is likely to retain as little as 10% of its records for permanent preservation.

It is important here to recognise that records and archives are organic accumulations. For any item, or group of them, their evidential value is as much determined by their context as by their content. To be more precise, *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.* All archival documents are unique in their context, which is to say in relation to other documents within that structure of documentary units, even if their content is duplicated within the fonds or elsewhere.

The archivist, as custodian of an archive, is concerned not only with preserving an individual document, but also with preserving it within its fond. The integrity of the fond is of vital importance to them. The focus of archival operations is on the total fonds.

It was for these reasons that the notion of selecting only the "most important" documents for inclusion in a World Register was initially seen as incompatible with archival practice and ethics. In a particular sense, for the archivist each individual archival document is as important as any other, since archival documents are unique in their context and irreplaceable. What is more, each is only fully understood within the context of the fond to which it belongs. If researchers evaluate an archival document out of its context, they risk misunderstanding both the meaning and/or significance of the information it contains.

All national archive institutions, and some at local or specialist levels, have extensive holdings which relate not only to their own country, but to other nations and cultures and, in that sense, form part of the World's memory. It could be argued that all should be registered as such. From the standpoint of the International Advisory Committee administering the Memory of the World Programme, this was neither acceptable nor practicable. The various arguments were rehearsed on both sides, but no solution was agreed.

Nonetheless, a number of individual archival institutions had in the meantime considered it advantageous to nominate selected documents or documentary units from their holdings for inclusion in the World Register, despite the

reservations of the archival community as a whole. Archival institutions are part of national systems, and obviously pride and prestige could be enhanced both nationally and internationally by the inclusion of elements of the national archival holdings in the World Register. Resources tend to be under the control of politicians, or subject to market forces and, however patriotic or cultured, there are few politicians who put preservation of cultural assets at the top of their political agenda.

UNESCO is a strong, worldwide organisation and MoW recognition can offer significant advantages in 'selling' archives and securing third-party support for aid for preservation measures. Notwithstanding the reservations expressed in 1997, ICA has continued to collaborate in the programme, recognising the potential to enhance the profile of all parts of the documentary heritage.

There has been discussion for some years about the need for Operational Guidelines within the programme, particularly in the area of the selection criteria for documentary heritage nominated to the Memory of the World Register. Such Guidelines would be for the guidance of the Registration Sub-Committee (RSC) and the IAC, as well as for the use of those preparing nominations. Draft Operational Guidelines, prepared by Ray Edmondson and Roslyn Russell already exist.

At their meeting in Pretoria in June 2007, the IAC for the Memory of the World Programme considered those Draft Guidelines. Part of that discussion included a consideration of the position of the ICA, which had been evolving in relation to the MoW Programme.

In the past the IAC had decided that the World Register could not include all the records in public archives, no matter how noteworthy. This clearly excluded the fonds of national administrations, but left uncertainty between that level of aggregation and the individual document. The ICA requested an explicit recognition or acknowledgement within the MoW Programme that the holdings of all national archives are *de facto* a part of the Memory of the World, and that on the Register are inscribed documents or fonds of particular importance, note or significance. This, it was stated, might overcome the ethical objections of some ICA members to the notion of selectivity, which would otherwise be incompatible with archival practices and ethics, in particular the principle of integrity of archival fonds. Acceptance of this principle, it was argued, would enable the ICA to use its global network to take a more active and productive role in encouraging nominations to national, regional and international Registers. It would raise substantially the profile of the MoW Programme within the international archival community at all levels and represent a significant advance towards the ultimate goal of preserving and making accessible the world's documentary heritage.

The majority of those at the IAC meeting agreed that there was, in principle, no objection to holdings of national archives being recognized by the Programme, in the form of a statement in the preamble to the General Guidelines. The Chair of IAC stated that there was no reason that all the concerns of ICA, and reservations expressed by some speakers at the Pretoria meeting, could not be accommodated. The IAC Bureau will advise members of progress on this.

Clearly more work is to be undertaken on the Draft Guidelines, but they will now clearly reflect the distinctive nature of archives and state that the holdings of all national archives are *de facto* a part of the Memory of the World. Inclusion of particular items in the Register will thus be viewed in that context.

There is room for fine tuning other aspects of the Draft Guidelines to give better assistance to those preparing applications and it clear that this is needed. For example the scope of national archive administrations varies from one country to another. ICA would be pleased to offer advice on this and other issues thrown up in the revision process. From the ICA perspective, however, it is clear that a significant problem now seems to have been overcome, clearing the way for the promotion of registration on the MoW as a means raising the profile of archives and records in the public consciousness and as a way of leveraging more resources to aid access and preservation in the long term.

ICA now looks forward to receiving confirmation of the progress made in Pretoria by the completion of Draft Guidelines which acknowledge the importance of the holdings of all national archives as part the Memory of the World. Once satisfactory confirmation is received, ICA will be able to set its previous reservations aside and to recommend that its members engage more positively with the Memory of the World programme.

The ICA Congress is held every 4 years and brings together in excess of 2,000 individuals engaged in archives. The next Congress will be in Kuala Lumpur in July 2008. It is hoped that this new understanding reached at Pretoria will allow the ICA to promote the MoW Programme and that this will begin to accelerate the number of applications from the archival sector for registration of material on the World Register. A healthy development and a useful building block could include the creation of National Committees in various countries to promote the Programme and to establish National Registers. With acceptable Draft Guidelines in place, ICA will actively encourage its members, during and after the Kuala Lumpur Congress, to participate in the creation of National Memory of the World National Committees in countries where these do not already exist.

Ken Hall

Chargé de mission, ICA

Member of the RSC