

# Records Management in Developing Countries: Challenges and Threats – Towards a Realistic Plan

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## Introduction

The term developing countries can sometimes be a problematic one. It is a very narrow designation, yet it encompasses a vast multitude of nations, cultures, and value systems, each as different from the next and the one before it. There are however, commonalities, certain issues these countries continually find themselves wrestling with. This gives their Archives, and Records Managing institutions much the same problems to contend with. Thus, using examples from the Pacific (that big blue bit in-between Asia and the America's, and the place where I am from), I will attempt to present the state of "Records Management in Developing Countries: Challenges and Threats – Towards a Realistic Plan."

## The Status of Records Management in the Pacific

The field of records management has traditionally been viewed with little if any significance. This continues today. Records management in developing countries is yet to attain the level of attention and support that it receives in countries of the developed world. The term "Records Management" itself will appear very alien to most people. The "registry" is the closest experience most have with the practice of record management, and although the need to have a good filing system is understood, registries and records management are not viewed as a priority area and invariably registries are manned by new recruits who have very limited experience, and are, in some instances, without the skills to be of use elsewhere in an organisation.

Many archival institutions in developing countries are now governed by Archives and Records legislations. Unfortunately in most cases these laws are outdated and need to be amended. By and large they are focussed only on the end phase of a records life cycle or continuum, providing little support for current or semi-current records. On top of this, the rapid advance of technology, and its growing availability have made these legislations increasingly ineffectual.

## Current Trends

In the past few years Information Communication Technology (ICT) has spread through the Pacific region in a big way. Computers are finding their way into schools and higher learning institutions, government and the private sector, and other organisations. In many cases, ICT has penetrated work and learning environments unplanned. Many governments and users recognize the potential of ICT and the opportunities it provides, particularly for economic and social development where distances and traditional systems have tended to hamper progress.

ICT also presents opportunities for recordkeeping in developing countries. Enhanced retrieval systems and online search facilities to name a couple. Opportunities for compact storage through electronic and digital storage devices, are becoming more enticing to those responsible for records as they offer an alternative to bulky paper records that need a considerable amount of space for storage.

On the other hand there are challenges and issues that will need to be considered. The increased usage of ICT

has decentralized recordkeeping more and more. There is almost no need for proven manual systems as individuals are building their own empires on their computers, creating official records as their own and managing them in their private recordkeeping system that is out of bounds to everybody else.

A number of states in the Pacific are investigating the possibilities of putting in place Freedom of Information Laws that will entitle citizens to public information in domains traditionally considered "no go zones" to the public.



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The absence of policies to provide guidance to creators and users of records poses risks that also cannot be ignored.

But it's not all that doom and gloom. The Public Sector reform programmes occurring globally now place emphasis on accountability and transparency. Agencies are therefore beginning to realise the importance of recordkeeping as tools vital for good governance.

### Challenges, Threats and Opportunities

A number of surveys conducted over the years on the status of Libraries and Archives by UNESCO, and the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) have returned the same problems across the small islands states of the Pacific.

The obstacles facing developing countries, relating to archives and recordkeeping are similar. They include lack of resources, space constraints, ad hoc approaches to Records and Archives Management, high staff turnover, etc. These are compounded by the rapidly changing information environment, and further, what appears to be territorial competition by information stakeholders. These problems are prevalent and over the years very little improvement has taken place.

There are two prominent issues however that need to be highlighted which appear to be the two most important issues that will need to be addressed for archives and recordkeeping to progress and be accorded the recognition that we think our profession deserves. These are the lack of accessible training programmes in the region for archivists and record managers, and the need for concerted and targeted awareness programmes at all administrative levels of any organization, and the public in general.

It is obvious that if you do not attain and maintain the attention of the decision makers, and those responsible for resource allocations; you do not get the funds and resources that you require. If you are not able to convince people of the importance of what you do then your relevance and your contribution to the organisation will not be recognised.

On the other hand, to be able to create awareness and convince people of the importance of recordkeeping one will need the skills to build sound recordkeeping strategies and the ability to tactfully develop strategies to promote recordkeeping as tools that will enhance good governance in the organization.

In the absence of training opportunities in the region, gratitude must go to those that have taken upon themselves to create opportunities for the less privileged.

Riksarkivet, the Swedish Archives, with the kind support of the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), provided one such opportunity for the first time in 2003.

This Advanced International Training Course appropriately titled "Records Management in the Service of Democracy" attracted over 200 applications from all over the world. In the end only 23 archivists and records managers from 18 countries were selected to be the pioneering participants

of the one-month programme. I was fortunate to have been selected to be one of them.

The programme was based on the premise that rational archives and information management is a prerequisite to work efficiency in an organization. The increased usage of electronic means to create records, conduct business and transmit information contribute to a need for global thinking from those who manage records. The vast amount of records that are being created digitally daily, and on paper and other recording formats are facts of the modern environment. One of the aims of the programme therefore was to bring together archivists and records management practitioners to meet and discuss ethical rules, common standards and methods to receive, appraise, handle and destroy the produced records.

The programme was a full time seminar consisting of lectures, discussions, individual assignments and group sessions. A number of education visits were also part of the course.

At the end of the four weeks participants were expected to have gained knowledge about the platform upon which records management dwells. These being values, definitions and governing documents, such as ethical rules of the International Council on Archives, the ISO Standard on Records Management and national legislations and policies.

For many participants, the four weeks shared with experienced archivists, record managers and specialists in related fields, in a totally different setting, was an intense adventure.

Coming from developing countries one of the first realities for participants was the huge gap that exists between the developed and the developing countries. An example of this is that while developing countries, and some developed countries, are still trying to find ways to liberalise access to public records and information, Sweden has in force a Freedom of the Press Legislation that was enacted in 1766. The legislation entitles

citizens access to public records immediately after their creation and capture into the recordkeeping system. This is a far cry from countries with "Official Secrets Act" which forbids public servants from divulging official information that they come across in the official conduct of their business.

The comforting factor is that the programme showed us the way the world is moving in terms of recordkeeping, and alerts us to prepare, or at least be conscious of what the future holds.

### The Way Forward

I believe that training programmes tailored to the requirements of countries and regions in need, and which lead to formal qualifications is a priority area if we are to propel the capacity and increase the stake of the profession in developing countries.

One of the reasons for this is that no one educational programme can fill the needs of all institutions, states and countries given their widely varying circumstances. For example, in the Pacific the needs of developed countries like Australia and New Zealand will differ significantly from the requirements of small island developing states of the region. Further, most small island states do not have national universities and rely mainly on a regional university.

In saying this there is no intention at all to undermine the efforts and generosity of those institutions such as the Riksarkivet, the National Archives of Malaysia and other archival institutions that have worked so hard to secure support in order to develop high quality training programmes from which many of us from developing countries have benefited. Rather I think training programmes that lead to formal qualification will be complimented very well by the excellent short courses that are currently being organised by these institutions.

## Conclusion

Despite the bleak situation in our region, and in many developing countries, there are some bright spots. There are developments such as e-governance programmes, public sector reforms, the pressure from civil society for good governance and other activities happening around us which offers us opportunities to make a positive impact in our institutions and in society. These opportunities should encourage us to reposition ourselves, strategise, develop arguments, and involve ourselves in trying to find solutions to common problems that are related to recordkeeping. We can make a difference. The onus is on us.

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