Archives in Developing Countries: A Contribution to National Development

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IT IS REASONABLE to assume that countries in North America and Europe have advanced beyond the stage where it is necessary to justify the very existence of archival repositories. It is true that archivists are inclined to regret that the public and their servants (or masters) who control the purse strings do not see fit to assign a higher priority to archival objectives and programs. Yet there appears to be a general acceptance, at least in principle, of the views that were clearly expressed at the time of the French Revolution—that in addition to their practical uses archives are a cultural resource, a mirror of the past, a collective national memory; and that a fundamental obligation of a community or society is to preserve records of its past and make them available to the public as a cultural heritage.

The concept of records management is of much more recent origin. Chiefly a product of American experiences during and after World War II, its contribution to governmental and corporate efficiency and economy is now taken for granted in North America and is gradually becoming recognized in Europe. There is, however, a large portion of the world's area and population, known collectively as the "developing countries," in which both archives and records management either do not exist or are in a primitive stage of development. In these countries, moreover, the difficulties of establishing and maintaining a records program and of obtaining the necessary resources and popular support are formidable by any standards.

There are many practical reasons for assigning a low priority to

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archival institutions in developing countries. The following list is indicative but not exhaustive.

1. The urgent need for economic development has a clear priority over cultural concerns in the allocation of available resources.

2. The related need to improve standards and conditions of living gives priority not only to economic development and related employment opportunities but also to hospitals, housing, transportation, and welfare.

3. An emphasis on education and training is required, not only to provide needed leadership and professional and technical expertise but also to release the latent capacities of whole populations where illiteracy is high.

4. The desire to transform emergent societies from materially primitive and dependent colonies to prosperous, well-informed, and self-reliant countries places a high value on information. But the urgency of problems of the present and plans for the future reduces the interest in the past and the incentive to study it. Indeed, the colonial experience may be considered in some quarters "a record of disgrace."

5. Unifying diverse racial, religious, and social elements is essential to bringing about cohesiveness and a sense of common identity and united purpose. In attaining this object the printed word and mass media seem to be more effective than unpublished records. Indeed, for the purpose, propaganda may seem more expedient than authentic evidence of the past.

6. Effects of the typically tropical climate in developing countries make the task of preserving original records difficult, expensive, and seemingly disproportionate to the research value of the records.

7. Voluntary nongovernment support from individuals and such groups as local historical societies is lacking.

8. The support of historians, who in North America have been the most effective advocates of the establishment of archival repositories, is divided and uncertain. In the case of developing countries, historians often seem to be more interested in obtaining microfilm copies of records from the archives of former colonial powers than in promoting the establishment of repositories for records that originated locally.

9. The serious lack of trained archives and records management personnel deprives developing countries of local leadership and adds to the difficulty of diverting scarce funds to an area of low priority.

10. Where records management and archival systems do not exist, a need for them and an understanding of their value is not felt and is difficult to explain convincingly without being able to demonstrate benefits.

These and other reasons explain the low priority which has been given to archives and records management in developing countries. If effective support for them is to be provided by the countries concerned, it must be demonstrated that they have practical as well as cultural value and that there is an integral relationship between them and governmental efficiency, economic development, and national unity. In several ways it can be shown that archives and records management indeed do make important contributions to national development.

First, records management can increase the effectiveness of Government departments and agencies in general, and particularly of those having the chief responsibility for economic development. The United Nations handbook of 1961 concluded that "administrative improvement is the *sine qua non* in the implementation of programs of national development." But the key to administrative improvement is good records management, which is the effective handling of information. The effect of improved classification systems with resulting rapid retrieval (and other aspects of good records management practice) on informed decisions and administrative efficiency is undeniable. For example, the introduction of a new classification system in one case reduced the average time of producing information from 2 hours to 20 minutes. In contrast, there are many examples of days and even weeks being spent in searching through disorganized records or in duplicating reports and studies when originals are not readily available.

It is difficult to measure either quantitatively or qualitatively the total impact of records management on governmental efficiency, but in some respects, financial savings can be measured fairly precisely. Through the introduction of disposition schedules that provide for regular records retirement, and in the use of records centres for dormant records, the economies are real. Costs of space, staff, and equipment for storage in offices compared with those in a centre, easily show the financial saving achieved by the transfer of every cubic foot of dormant records. To that return can be added the total saving involved in planned destruction of records that are no longer useful. A final benefit of records management is the identification of records having enduring value for development and other purposes, records whose preservation can be assured by their transfer to an archives. It can be demonstrated that, far from being a luxury, a records management/archives system is an essential instrument for the effective handling of information. Such a program promotes efficiency and economy and can have both direct and indirect effects on national development. It can be shown to be a sound investment, yielding good dividends.

Second, archival information can be of practical use in national development. It is obvious that the application of relevant experience, as an alternative to starting anew, saves time and money, avoids duplication of efforts, and may prevent failures. Recent reports on several years of archival experience in Malaysia and Madagascar contain many examples of the utility of information from archival sources for a whole range of current development projects, especially in planning and operational research.[1] In the field of agriculture the results of earlier studies and experiments have proved of great value. Unpublished reports and notebooks on raising rice and in the culture of silkworms, for example, considerably benefited agricultural development in Madagascar; whereas the loss of records relating to cocoa growing led to long and expensive experiments and costly failures. Old geological surveys and reports, maps and charts, and records of mining companies are exceedingly useful in the development of mining. They have shown, for instance, that proven quantities of ore exist but that earlier development was not feasible because some elements, such as transportation or adequate markets, were missing. When these elements are present, former failures have been reversed. Previous weather records indicating rainfall and the incidence of hurricanes and floods have an obvious value in planning for economic development, as do earlier medical reports of missionaries on the control of epidemics.

Industrialization requires much study of many different factors, a combination of which must be favorable to make investment practicable. Archives can be most useful in indicating trends over a period of time. For example, old police reports have been employed in tracing relations between ethnic groups in a region, an important factor with respect to manpower studies for particular industrial projects. The infrastructure—roads, railways, ports, and other basic facilities underpinning the economy—is essential to national development. Reference to old maps, plans, and surveys has permitted the relocation, repair, and construction of roads, railways, canals, and ports. The accelerated construction of a dam in Madagascar was made possible because old departmental records had been retained and retrieved from a miscellaneous mass of records by archives staff. On the other hand, loss of records relating to a highway in Ghana cost an estimated half-million dollars because work done before the loss had to be duplicated. Archival material is of particular value

[1] See F. R. J. Verhoeven, "The Role of Archives in the Public Administration and the National Planning Policy of Developing Nations," and Jean Valette, "Le rôle des archives dans l'administration et dans la politique de planification dans les pays en voie de developpement." Both unpublished studies were prepared for Unesco by the International Council on Archives.

in long-term planning that requires the use of current resource data to perfect future potential. Such projections have greater validity when reinforced by relevant archival data extending over long periods in which distinct trends were indicated. Even if no records of the past had survived, it would be an obvious duty of Governments to retain certain kinds of current records for future use. An archives could then be justified on future requirements alone. It is safe to say that the preservation and availability of archival sources can facilitate development planning, avoid needless duplication of effort and former errors, promote continuity, and provide the benefits that are afforded by previous experience.

Third, archives can contribute to the growth of national unity. Many new states are artificial creations, because sound ethnic and geographical boundaries were often ignored in the establishment of colonies that have recently achieved independence. The power vacuum left by withdrawal of colonial Governments has led to deep political and personal rivalries; it has encouraged the revival of ancient tribal conflicts; and it has stimulated other negative forces that seriously threaten the survival of many new nations. Hence there is an imperative need to forge elements of unity, to build a sense of national identity. To a considerable extent this identity depends upon the recognition of a common national history, the writing of which is necessarily based largely on research in available archival sources. It is interesting that the United States experience in achieving and consolidating independence has been cited as an example of just such a use of archival material to promote national consciousness. Historical research in the records of the struggle for independence focused attention on a vitally important common experience and background, explained the reasons for building one nation in place of 13 disparate colonies, and highlighted the fundamental principles and goals that first emerged and have since served to guide the Nation's political evolution over two centuries.

Finally, archival material is valuable to national development in the educational process. As new nations attempt to move quickly into the last quarter of the 20th century, there will be much reliance on imported information. In these circumstances, history, which is a native product, can assume more importance than usual. Developing countries, initially short of formal published histories, may well lead the way in popularizing original archival sources, particularly those of an audiovisual nature. Integration and unification are particularly difficult to achieve in countries which are multiracial and multicultural in character. Recognition of the complementary contributions of the various constituent elements can go a long way toward promoting national unity and identity. These efforts need

not be confined to schools. By the use of exhibitions, lectures, slides, films, and radio and television programs based on archival materials, relevant information can be transmitted to the entire population. To reach the truly native roots, it will be necessary to seek evidence that antedates the colonial period. It may exist only in the form of oral tradition: folklore, music, and dance. It may be debatable to what extent archivists should be involved in the entire range of oral history; but in the absence of other programs archival institutions should attempt to preserve all components of an indigenous cultural heritage, including the visual and performing arts.

Once the concrete benefits of an archives/records management system are recognized, one comes face to face with costs. Here the advantages of a single, coordinated, comprehensive system—what has been called the "total archives" principle—become apparent. A single agency, which has responsibility for establishing uniform records management procedures for operating departments, which operates central records centres, and which controls the selection and transfer of records of enduring value for preservation in an archives, has obvious advantages over a fragmented system. The advantages are multiplied if the archives not only contain Government records but also cover the entire range of archival materials—private papers, business records, maps, photographs, films, and others. It is desirable for an archives to become identified with the total documentation of the past and to be regarded as the custodian of the national heritage, serving the population as a whole. Such an integrated records management/archives system, which promotes Government efficiency and provides a wide spectrum of services to Government and public in the entire range of archival materials, has a better chance of receiving the financial support that it needs than the multiplicity of institutions that have developed in an unplanned manner in some countries.

This concentration of archival resources and services is also a partial solution to financial problems posed by the expensive measures required to protect original materials in a tropical climate from the hazards of dampness, vermin, fire, and neglect. Where funds are scarce, it is necessary to avoid duplication. A single air-conditioned archives building, with a small staff and the equipment to provide a central microfilm service to all government agencies, photoduplication services for archives, and facilities for restoration and repair of documents, can be shown to be a good investment in terms of national development.

Against this background, the logical conclusion is that programs for technical assistance to developing countries should accord a high priority to records management and archival development. This priority should be supported not only by those who grant funds but

also by the recipient countries themselves, from which hearty cooperation and matching funds should be forthcoming. It would be naive to pretend that such support exists today. Although a number of individuals, agencies, institutions, and organizations, most important of which are Unesco and the International Council on Archives, have been convinced of the importance of archival development; there is a tendency to regard it as purely cultural. International agencies such as the United Nations Development Program, as well as national agencies like AID and private foundations, all of which expend large sums for technical assistance, have not for the most part considered it an area for profitable investment. This attitude has been reinforced by the failure of emergent countries themselves to recognize the value of records management and archives to national development. What is not known is not missed.

Generally speaking, three factors are necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a successful records management/archives system in developing countries: technical assistance from abroad to provide expertise, leadership, and direction when they are not available locally; commitment of the required resources by developing countries themselves; and training of skilled professional and technical staff in each nation to ensure the continuity of the system, once established, and to adapt it to the particular needs of that country so that it becomes essentially a national institution and not a foreign import. The ICA is attempting to assist in two of these areas by providing short-term consultants, advisors, and instructors and by establishing archives schools in the developing regions of the world for training local personnel.

These observations on the potential contributions of records management and archives administration to national development will remain essentially theoretical unless practical measures are taken to establish the necessary institutions. Judging by the experience of the last few years, this reform will be slow and difficult. It is to be hoped that the effects of the steps that are taken will be cumulative and that support will accelerate as positive benefits are demonstrated. It is most important to stress—to aid-giving agencies and to authorities of developing nations alike—the practical advantages of a records management/archives system for national development, even to the extent of estimating the large financial savings or dividends which can be achieved from a relatively small investment in training, staff, and equipment. It is essential, too, that each country's own needs and requirements be considered paramount and controlling and that the records management/archives system be introduced as a harmonious element within the national governmental and institutional structure. Thus the system will not appear as a foreign transplant but as a beneficial graft on organisms rooted in native soil.