

United Nations—The Written Record

OFRA D. CORE

RECORDS ADMINISTRATION is such an integral and vital part of international administration that the thirtieth anniversary of the United Nations seems a suitable opportunity to discuss records management at the UN, why and how the written record is kept and its historical background, and to give an indication of the various types of records maintained.

The United Nations records management system is international in its approach and incorporates multinational influences; it has proved to be flexible and adaptable for use in administrations of varying scopes and backgrounds, in developed and developing countries, for simple and complex organizations, and at headquarters and branch offices. The purpose of the record at the UN is threefold: (1) it serves as a tool of operation for communication between the various offices and as a basis for consultations and decisions; (2) it is an account of the work program of the organization; and (3) it is historical evidence for the future of the operations of the organization, its administration, and achievements.

To serve these purposes, the UN system of records management aims to control the full life span of a record starting even before its birth, through its active life, to its retirement when no longer of active use, and ending with its permanent preservation or its destruction if not of permanent value.

Before the system is described, a few words should be said about the records of the League of Nations, the predecessor of the UN. These are the most important body of records of a defunct international organization, and they reflect the League's complete life story from its creation in 1919 with the Versailles Treaty to its demise in 1946 after the organization of the UN. The League of Nations Archives is located in Geneva in the Palais des Nations and is controlled by the Library of the United Nations Office in Geneva.

The League's records fall into three categories: (1) a complete collection of the printed and mimeographed official documents, most of which were originally made available to governments and the public; (2) the records of the commissions and those maintained by various offices in Geneva and in the field; and (3) the League Registry files, which contain the correspondence, memoranda, and reports, and which are the basic source of information about the League. The Registry was based on a system used in the British foreign office. It is quite complex, requiring various indexes and lists, but it can be used for research. The written record left by the League thus reflects the work and achievement of mankind's first effort at international peaceful cooperation.

Since records are the historical testimony and inheritance of an organization, it is essential that their classification be serviceable not only during the life of the organization but also for future research and assessment of the institution's achievement. Because of the limited size of the League and the relatively restricted scope of its activities, its registry system, though cumbersome, was able both to provide cur-

Ofra D. Core is chief of the Registry Section at United Nations headquarters, New York.

rent services and to facilitate future research. However, the system would have been inadequate had the organization been expanded or its scope broadened. This experience highlighted the need for developing a record system with international scope and growth potential for current use as well as for future research in the work of the United Nations.

The first step in the creation of the UN was the meeting at Dumbarton Oaks in 1944, and this was followed by the San Francisco Conference at which the United Nations Charter was signed. Part of the records of the conference are kept in the UN Archives; however, most conference secretariat files, together with the signed copy of the charter, remain in the custody of the U.S. Department of State, which also has the records of the Dumbarton Oaks Conference.

The next step in the development of the UN was the Preparatory Commission which met in London to prepare the first UN General Assembly, arrange for the transfer of the League of Nations assets, and prepare the shape of the UN Organization. The Preparatory Commission was superseded by the UN Secretariat when the first secretary-general took office. The records of the Preparatory Commission, its committees and secretariat, are kept in the UN Archives. When the UN came into being on October 24, 1945, it had had from the very beginning a records management system for its records both current and archival.

The current records of the UN are controlled by the registry, whose function is to maintain, service, and control correspondence and files. The UN uses the European term *registry*, but in practice the registry incorporates American records management concepts; there are no logs, registers, or summaries; there are, however, central services and control.

With the establishment of the UN Secretariat the question arose whether or not to continue the League's classification system; it was decided to start a new system based on the current needs of the Secretariat.

The UN registry system changed a number of times between 1946 and 1954, but continuity of subjects and files was maintained. A small central registry existed in 1946-47, and this was followed by decentralized branch registries in 1948, based on a British government system. However, this branch registry system proved inflexible and inadequate. Like any organization in a state of creation and change, where the responsibility for programs and operations is shared by many departments and offices, the UN required an overall approach and central management. Therefore a new system, especially designed for the UN, was developed in 1952; the registry was centralized, and the subject classification system, currently used at headquarters and many of the overseas offices, was fully in operation by 1954.

The subject classification system is the backbone of the records management operation. The classification manual covers all subject matters handled by the UN and is a clear reflection of its operations and work program. Subjects are arranged in accordance with their logical relationship; each subject is all-inclusive and exclusive of all others. The main characteristics of the system are its consistency and uniformity of approach, which enable any user to locate the desired subject very quickly and without dependence on auxiliary indexes and lists.¹ Since it is based on subject, it is not affected by the continuous organizational changes of the UN, nor

¹ The classification system is described in an introduction to the subject classification manual, and also in Ofra Core, "The United Nations Correspondence Classification Manual," the *American Archivist* (July 1961): 317-22.

by similarity of work of various departments. Centralization of all correspondence on a given subject assists UN officials in avoiding duplication of functions and work, by making known the activities of any department to all other departments. The growth and development of the subject classification manual, which currently contains about fifty thousand headings, is controlled by checking new (and proposed) subjects for conformity to the general pattern and their relationship to subjects already existing. The system has been easily expandable to incorporate new programs, such as the peaceful use of atomic energy, technical cooperation, and outer space.

Since the system is built on the logical relationship of subjects, and not on organizational structure or name indexing, it is universally applicable and easily understood. Over the last twenty years, it has proved itself adaptable to UN needs, in spite of the growth and diversity of its membership and operation, cultures, and languages. It has therefore been possible to use the system in overseas offices, political missions, information centers, and other functional offices of the UN. It is being used, for example, by the UN Industrial Development Organization headquarters in Vienna; the Regional Economic Commissions in Latin America, the Far East, and Africa; the UN Office in Cyprus; the UN Emergency Force; the UN Truce Supervision Organization; and the UN Environment Programme. The UN Office in Geneva is now changing from its old system, based on the system of the League of Nations, to the new classification system.

In addition to its subject files, controlled by the classification manual, the Registry maintains personnel files for UN staff members, experts, and consultants assigned to headquarters and overseas offices. All official correspondence is received and processed by the Registry; outgoing correspondence is checked, processed, and dispatched through the Registry, which maintains in the files the incoming letters and copies of outgoing letters and interoffice memorandums and cables. The system provides for both clear and confidential files, and it distinguishes among policy correspondence, correspondence of a general nature, and case material.

One of the important functions of the UN Registry is providing advisory services to the UN expanded family—specialized agencies, international organizations, and member governments. The Registry carries our training programs for its staff and the staff of the UN offices which use its services; and its procedures manuals and guides are made available to the UN family.

Current subject files are closed periodically. Personnel case files are closed after the separation of a staff member or expert from the organization, and the files are then transferred to Records Retirement.

That unit accessions all UN inactive records—registry files, office records, commissions, committee records, records of offices away from headquarters—and evaluates or appraises them to determine the duration of their retention, disposes of material no longer required for reference, and transfers to the Archives records of permanent or historical value. In agreement with the originating offices, disposal schedules are developed for the various types of records and provide for the speedy and automatic destruction of noncurrent records of ephemeral value.

In the preparation of disposal schedules for international organizations, it is an especially complicated matter to determine the retention period of records. In financial or legal problems, for example, the UN is bound by regulations that affect the statutes of limitations in about one hundred and forty countries of the world. However, the most demanding job is to determine the value of the records not for the

administrative needs of the immediate future, but to decide what may serve as a precedent and, mainly, what would be of interest and value to the researcher studying, in the future, the work of the United Nations. Even routine records—for example, the applications for jobs from all parts of the Congo during the UN presence there—give an interesting picture of the economic and educational situation in the country at that time. The permanent or temporary value of technical assistance files, economic or social conferences and studies, requires very careful evaluation.

About 30 percent of the records accessioned by Records Retirement are transferred to the Archives for permanent preservation. This is a higher percentage than that kept by many governments, but the international character of the UN, combined with its relative youth and state of growth, warrants a conservative approach in the preservation of its records.

The Archives holdings are controlled by lists and schedules, registration sheets, and indexes, as well as guides and inventories. Records are accessioned in record groups, each representing a major secretariat administrative unit or a single independent agency, and accessions include disc recordings of proceedings of UN meetings, microfilms, and gifts of historic interest.

In addition to the noncurrent records of the UN, the holdings include records of defunct international organizations such as the UN War Crimes Commission (1943–48) and the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (1943–49). Access to archival materials for research is by special arrangement. Other UN records, such as printed documents and films, are not part of the Registry.

Official documents and publications, in printed or mimeographed form, contain the agendas, minutes of meetings, resolutions, and reports of the various organizations, and include the annual reports of the secretary-general, resolutions of the General Assembly, and secretariat administrative circulars. Their identification system is based on the organizational structure of the UN. Documents and publications, available in microfiche form, are maintained and serviced by the UN Library which issues indexes to aid in reference and use. Active audio records are serviced and maintained by the Telecommunications Section. Films and photographic material are kept in the Office of Public Information. There is at the moment no program of oral history at the United Nations.

Other records, including payrolls, personnel rosters, and various inventories, are processed through the UN Computer Centre and recorded through electronic data processing. The same processing applies to statistical information gathered by the UN, and the data is preserved on electronic discs and tapes by the Computer Centre.

The written record is a prerequisite for the operation of any organization and for the inheritance it leaves to posterity. The history of the League of Nations and the first thirty years of the UN has been preserved through effective records management. It is to be hoped that a good records management system will continue to be a vital part of the organization in order to provide future United Nations administrators and historians with the resources for proper administration and meaningful research.