



The Role of the International Council on Archives in Disaster Preparedness and Emergency Response Management

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Speech pronounced by David Leitch, Secretary General of ICA, during a meeting of experts organized by the City of Cologne and the Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen entitled : *Der Kölner Archiveinsturz und die Konsequenzen.*

I am very pleased to be here with you in Köln today at this important experts' meeting. By way of background, I should explain that the International Council on Archives (ICA) is the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that has represented the cause of archives and of archivists on the world stage since 1948. Today we have about 1,400 institutional and individual members in 195 countries and territories throughout the world. The organization is run by a small secretariat based in Paris but we largely depend on the voluntary efforts of our members for our achievements. We are officially recognized by UNESCO and work closely with our partner NGOs in the related fields of libraries (IFLA), museums (ICOM), and sites and monuments (ICOMOS).

At the outset I should like to express the solidarity of the entire international archival community as colleagues in Köln cope with the disaster of 3 March. More practically, my presence today indicates that ICA wishes to give all possible help and support as a start is made on learning the lessons of this disaster. Many of these lessons will be relevant not just for colleagues in Köln, Germany and other European countries, but for institutions holding archives and other cultural property throughout the world.

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Before I offer you some initial thoughts on the areas where may we draw lessons from this tragedy, I should say just a little about my

personal reactions when I visited the site of the archives, and saw at first hand the results of the extensive rescue efforts, on 29 April. When I first approached the site, I found it difficult to believe that an archives building had once stood there, so complete was the collapse.

I had previously seen the photographs of the huge piles of rubble, in which the archives were mixed, that were so striking a feature of the landscape in the first weeks after the disaster. I noted that these piles had now considerably diminished, thanks to the tireless labours of an army of workers.

I was surprised at the depth of the abyss, far below ground level, into which some of the archives had fallen. As the day went on, my admiration for the way that the staff at the city archives were carrying out the rescue of their unique and irreplaceable holdings grew steadily. I was amazed that they were able to continue their work in such a professional manner. They had taken a series of sensible decisions over several weeks, in circumstances that must have been entirely unexpected but were certainly very stressful. I also learnt about the massive organizational efforts coordinated by the city authorities with considerable speed and efficiency. I was left in no doubt about the concern of the citizens of Köln about the

damage to their precious archival heritage, many of them having volunteered to help the recovery efforts. And I saw the enthusiasm of the volunteers from abroad, supplied by the Association of National Blue Shield Committees, who were engaged in the painstaking tasks of identifying and

repairing rescued documents under the supervision of archives staff. I was privileged to see colleagues from a wide variety of cultures and professional backgrounds working together

in a common cause and maintaining a high level of morale in adversity.

It is encouraging to know that about 85% of the holdings of the city archives have now been saved. Although the extent of the catastrophe must not be minimized, I must say that I was in many ways heartened by what I saw during my first visit to Köln. There are a number of practical actions that can be taken, both to reduce the likelihood of such a disaster happening in future and to put full emergency response programmes in place in advance of disaster striking again.

It should be emphasized that archives meriting permanent preservation should be kept in a location that is as secure as possible. However, the claims of archives must not take precedence over the safety of human beings and other services that are important for the efficiency and welfare of society. In addition, archive institutions must live and breathe, and make their holdings accessible to all those who wish to consult them. A remote location may be ideal in terms of security but may result in the archives languishing in complete obscurity, consulted only by very determined researchers.

The gradual development of online services is unlikely to result in the total disappearance in the public demand for reading rooms, where they can consult original documents and have face to face conversations with expert staff. Although there should be punctilious checks whenever the site of a new archives building is determined, and the risks of disaster reduced as far as possible, it will rarely be possible to eliminate these risks entirely. One important way of managing these risks is to have back-up copies of at least the most significant archives, whether on microfilm or in digital format, stored at another location.

Disasters and armed conflicts are among the most obvious enemies of archives, but there are others which may cause, albeit in more subtle ways, almost as much damage. For example, if documents are not stored in the right environmental conditions – within given ranges of temperature and relative humidity – then they may deteriorate to such an extent that they cannot be easily repaired. Major and sudden fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity are especially damaging. It is now generally accepted that attainment of the right storage conditions does not mean the installation of a full-blown air-conditioning system that is both expensive to maintain and wasteful of energy. The Bundesarchiv in Kolbenz is a distinguished example of a solution that relies on thick walls, insulation and the principle of high thermal inertia. Putting archives into cheaper accommodation that does not fully respect this principle may be superficially more attractive in the short-term but will turn out to be a false economy in the long-term. This principle should be a major factor whenever the housing, or re-housing, of any major archives institution is being considered. However, it cannot be pretended

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that, in the early 21st century, any credible solution for the housing of archives of enduring historical value will be inexpensive. What needs to be remembered is that this is an investment, not just for the present or the next few years, but one that will be appreciated by many

generations stretching far into the future, perhaps for hundreds of years. And in the case of Köln it will also be necessary to provide a major injection of funds for a conservation programme to repair the many damaged documents.

Even if archives are managed by qualified professionals in conditions that meet all the relevant professional standards, inevitably they are still at some risk, albeit a comparatively small one in some cases – from armed conflicts, man-made disasters and natural catastrophes. ICA strongly advocates the development of the Blue Shield network as the most effective means of coordinating measures to protect archives and all forms of cultural property. The Blue Shield, which is the official symbol of cultural heritage protection specified in The Hague Convention of 1954, has the laudable ambition to act as the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. ICA, together with IFLA, ICOM and ICOMOS, was a founder member of the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS) in 1996, and the Coordinating Council of Audiovisual Archive Associations (CCAAA) joined them in 2005. The 2nd Protocol of The Hague Convention (1999) established an intergovernmental committee of States to monitor and review the operation of the Convention. ICBS was successful in being given a specific advisory role to this Committee.

At the present time there are over thirty national Blue Shield Committees either in operation or under construction. National Committees have most recently been set up in Israel, the United States, Senegal, Austria and Indonesia. It is interesting to note that threats or damage to cultural property stimulated the creation of national committees in some of these countries. Ideally, there should be representatives from each of the five organizations represented on

ICBS, but this provision needs to be interpreted sensibly. Members of national committees should support joint actions with each other, but also respect the interdependence of their partners; national committees should remain politically neutral; should uphold the highest professional standards; respect the diversity of cultural identity; and must always work on a not for profit basis. There are strong advantages in having a national committee. Many disasters, for example severe flooding, can affect many institutions across the cultural sectors, and do not respect artificial demarcation lines between libraries, archives and museums. Even in cases where only a single service is affected, as was the case in Köln, other cultural and civil institutions are very often willing to help, and a national Blue Shield Committee can provide an effective mechanism for co-ordination. A national Blue Shield Committee should lead to improved training for disasters, a pooling of resources, and closer relations with the civilian administrators and military personnel, who would play a crucial role in real-life cases where archives and other cultural property are under threat.

Of course the National Blue Shield Committees have to fit into the political structures of the country, rather than imposing a template solution. It is interesting to note that Blue Shield Committees have been set up in countries which have a wide variety of systems. For example, one of the most active Blue Shield Committees is based in France, a country which has traditionally had a high degree of centralism, now tempered with a dash of regionalism. But the Blue Shield network has also taken root in countries with a federal structure, such as Australia and the United States.

The resources available to the Blue Shield are at the present time tiny in relation to the challenges that it faces. However, national committees have been set up at a steady rate in recent years and there is every reason to suppose this progress will be maintained or even accelerated. The creation of the new Association of National Blue Shield Committees (ANCBS), which was agreed at The Hague in December 2008, provides cautious grounds for optimism. ANCBS has offices in The Hague and maintains a website, which posted a great deal of information about the situation in Köln in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, and on which the original appeal for volunteers was published. ANCBS organized a first mission to Köln in the last week in April, and a second one is planned for August. As a constructive alternative to organizing its own missions, ICA has decided instead to support the work of ANCBS and thereby avoid duplication of effort. ICA looks to the other partner organizations in the Blue Shield to adopt a similarly collaborative and co-operative approach, making use of the Blue Shield network wherever possible, rather than emphasizing the needs of one specific cultural sector to the exclusion of the others.

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One final point to make about the Blue Shield network: it is not entirely a matter of disinterested philanthropy that motivates professionals from one country to come and help in another country where a disaster has

taken place. Who can be entirely confident that disaster will never strike in their own country or institution? Nobody is entirely immune from the risk of disaster. There may well be a future occasion when archivists in another country, trying to recover from disaster, would really appreciate help from their colleagues in Germany. In other words, involvement in the Blue Shield may be based just as much on reciprocity and enlightened self-interest, as pure idealism, although the power of the latter should never be cynically discounted.

ICA's strong commitment to the development of the Blue Shield network does not mean that it proposes to take no actions of its own in the crucial area of disaster preparedness. ICA has recently provided funding for an ANCBS project, which will enable some of our members to receive training in how to handle paper based materials in emergencies and then to write general guidelines which will be disseminated throughout the ICA network. We have recently recruited to the ICA Secretariat an Emergency Response Management Officer, who is a member of the French National Blue Shield Committee and who has been also very active in organizing the two ANCBS missions to Köln.

There are issues in this area that are specific to the archives sector and ICA wishes to try and fill a significant gap. We need to enable archivists throughout the world to receive training in devising and implementing emergency response plans. Even in Europe, it does not suffice merely to have a list of contact telephone numbers and an arrangement with a local freeze-drying facility. It is about developing co-operation with a range of civil and military institutions to cover various scenarios.

The case of Köln, where the building was subject to a comprehensive collapse, is one possibility; partial damage (for example, a fire

confined to one floor of a building) is another; in the case of an imminent military conflict, there may be at least a little time to move the vital records and other historically valuable archives to another location before hostilities start; or the archives may be one of a large number of cultural institutions overwhelmed by severe flooding. There are many other scenarios that may be envisaged. Archive institutions need to develop a range of responses to meet the needs of specific cases; they should develop greater co-operation with other archives at the national and international levels; and they should capitalize on the resources that other cultural institutions may place at their disposal in multi-lateral agreements.

Emergency Response Plans need to deal not only with immediate measures to mitigate the worst effects of disasters, but also with actions to recover and offer at least a basic service to the users of their institution, who are the creating agencies that have transferred their records, as well as the researchers online and in the public search rooms. Of course it is absurdly premature to think about re-opening a public search room in the aftermath of a total disaster, when many documents remain to be rescued. But archives should, after a certain period of time, be able to offer a basic service as part of their recovery plan. This could be based on copies of the vital records and most heavily used collections, which are kept not in the main building, but in another location. The City Archives of Köln, in opening a microfilm reading room to the public on 22 June, has recognized the importance of continuing to offer a service. Although there will be a wave of sympathy for any archive institution that suffers a major disaster, this will gradually fade if it remains totally non-operational. The archives simply cannot afford not to function for a lengthy period, because otherwise its profile will inexorably decline. In addition, archive

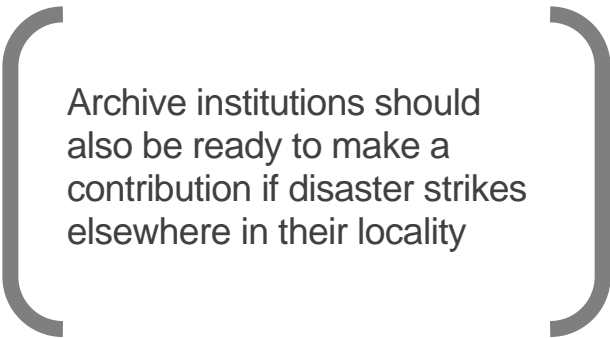
institutions should also be ready to make a contribution if disaster strikes elsewhere in their locality, for example by providing timely copies of building plans or lists of residents.

There is an English saying that 'every cloud has a silver lining' – that negative events can have positive consequences. Although an immense cloud most unfortunately descended on the city archives of Köln on 3 March, we can see that there are, even in the face of this tragedy, quite a few silver linings, in terms of lessons that we can all learn. It is important not only that colleagues present today should draw conclusions from recent experiences, but that the findings of this and other meetings on the subject should be brought together and publicized as widely as possible. Today ICA offers to put its expertise and global network at your disposal in order to make this happen.

David Leitch

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International Council of Archives



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