

FAN approach to the Human Rights Working Group's draft basic principles on the role of archivists in support of human rights

Background

1. The Human Rights Working Group (HRWG) of the International Council on Archives (ICA) prepared in 2015 a set of draft "Basic Principles On The Role Of Archivists In Support Of Human Rights". In summary, the Draft Basic Principles set out proposed statements of good practice for archivists, institutions and governments when faced with matters relating to human rights. The HRWG's introduction to the principles stated that the Draft Basic Principles are not intended to be a "covenant" but are envisaged to be a "professional guideline".
2. At the suggestion of the Programme Commission at the 2015 ICA annual conference in Reykjavik, views on the principles were sought from members of FAN. To this end, a survey was circulated by the previous President of FAN in early 2016 and the results provided to the Interim President in February 2018.

Survey results

3. The survey received a disappointing response rate (just five) and is consequently hard to see categorically what the majority of national archivists think in relation to this matter. There are however some common themes.
4. Several of the responses stress human rights as a key professional issue, in the sense that it is an issue for the archivist profession rather than for national archivists.
5. Two respondents – and this accords with the view of the Interim President of FAN – say or strongly imply that national archivists may be conflicted by any formal endorsement of the principles by the Forum of National Archivists owing to their conditions of employment or codes for their conduct as public employees.
6. One national archivist strongly recommended the removal of references to governments in the draft and warned of the inappropriateness of ICA as a non-governmental organisation seeking to direct sovereign states on issues covered by international conventions. This particular feedback suggests that a small number of changes, if effected in the next draft, might smooth adoption by the ICA.

Differing perspectives according to placement in governments

7. This is naturally a key issue for FAN members: the extent to which as national archivists they operate at arm's length from ministries. Even where they do have an arm's-length relationship the extent to which this signifies independence varies wildly, and they may often report indirectly to ministers.
8. The ability to publicly state private or professional opinions in their official role may be curtailed by overarching professional duties, for example the need to provide politically

neutral service to ministers who may have collective responsibility. For many national archivists, civil service codes rather than archival ones are necessarily their primary professional code.

Options

9. Given the low response rate, it is difficult to base any FAN position purely on the survey. Our options to take this work forward are therefore:

Option 1: Re-run the survey

This is not the recommended option. There is no guarantee that the response rate will be sufficiently high for the results to have significant value.

Option 2: Using what comments have been received and informed by a discussion at the FAN Reboot meeting scheduled for Wednesday 18 April, draft a FAN response for ratification by write-round.

This is the recommended option. Given the concerns outlined above, which we might reasonably expect to be reflected among the wider FAN membership, it is likely that FAN will need to hold back from any formal endorsement of the principles. It may be that there is a more appropriate adoption mechanism within ICA's structures.

10. The Programme Commission is asked for its view on the options proposed.

Draft FAN statement in response to the Human Rights Working Group's draft basic principles on the role of archivists in support of human rights

The Forum of National Archivists (FAN) acknowledges and affirms the vital role of archival holdings in securing and protecting human rights. FAN therefore welcomes the attention paid to this issue by the International Council on Archives' (ICA) Human Rights Working Group and the comprehensiveness of the resulting draft principles.

Overall, FAN notes that the principles are a very valuable addition to the body of professional good practice guidance available to archivists. Recognising that its members are subject to varying local professional and/or legal obligations, FAN encourages its members to each consider the suitability of adopting the principles, to the extent possible in the context of their own local jurisdictions.