

2007 Emmett Leahy Award Acceptance

Anne Thurston

I am very grateful to receive the Leahy Award in recognition of my work. I am even more pleased that in honouring my work, you have honoured the network of professionals across the world with whom I have worked closely and who are your colleagues.

My entire working life has been dedicated to serving records and archives management in developing countries in support of democracy and good governance. During my 16 years at the School of Library, Archive and Information Studies at University College London, I focused on strengthening the study of records and archives management for international students and on empowering the students to feel confident in addressing new challenges. This work overlapped with the 18 years that I have spent developing the International Records Management Trust as a vehicle for introducing new ways of collaborating and cooperating in applying global good practice to local requirements in developing countries. Taking these two phases of my career together, it has been possible to develop an international network of professional contacts as a basis for building awareness, capacity and infrastructure for managing records.

Over the years, my interest in and support for my students and colleagues from developing countries has changed in only one significant way. Originally, my intention was to find ways of fixing the problems that I had observed. Later, my intention changed to a simpler wish to join the people with whom I worked, to experience together our mutual wish to be of service and to enjoy the process. I remember the day that I became aware that this had happened. Walking into a records office in Sierra Leone, I saw the heaps of unfiled papers and the broken shelves and cabinets that are so familiar to me; but that day, as I greeted each of the records staff sitting around the room, my focus was on their eyes and on their kind warm welcome. Being of service has brought me much greater happiness in the context of joining.

Against this background, I want to talk about how this work began and how it has developed, about the challenges that records managers face in developing countries across the world, and about what the records profession internationally might want to consider contributing toward the objective of building a global network of good practice.

In 1984, with generous help from the Leverhulme Trust, and on behalf of University College London, I began a series of international study visits to English-speaking countries, in the Caribbean, in all regions of Africa, and in South and Southeast Asia, in order to understand how records were created and preserved so that we could develop a relevant educational programme at University College. Travelling with colleagues from the university and from the UK National Archives, I set out to visit at least five ministries and the national archives in each of the 32 countries that we visited. I think that this was the first time that anyone had examined the management of records in developing countries on an international basis. As the study progressed, I realised that we were looking at a major issue for international development.

Later, a government official in West Africa described very well the situation that we saw when he said: 'Over the years, important records have deteriorated considerably, been tampered with or even disappeared. The lack of accurate and accessible information hinders efficient personnel administration as well as long-term staff development. It also hampers effective planning and implementation of development programmes and leads to mismanagement of finances and the inability of government to maintain accountability. Reform in this area will lay the basis for other public sector reform programmes, the introduction of computerisation and the restructuring of manual information systems.'

Specific conditions varied from country to country, but the issues and the consequences that we observed during the study were broadly similar. We noted that officials could not easily locate the information they needed to take decisions; that vast quantities of closed records with no ongoing value were being kept at great expense; and that historical records were not being protected or preserved. The countries we visited did not have national strategies, policies, frameworks or systems for managing the records needed to support national development, and the status of

the records profession was low. National archives had statutory responsibility for official records, but they were isolated from the management of the government and often they played virtually no role in managing active records. All of this created an environment in which corruption could flourish and citizens' rights were not protected by written evidence.

In the years that have followed, the significance of these findings has become increasingly clear to me. Reliable and trustworthy records are fundamental for public sector accountability and effectiveness, and for the protection of citizens' rights. International efforts to reduce poverty, control corruption and support democracy all rely on authentic and reliable records. Weak records systems provide opportunities for fraud, corruption in procurement and money laundering. Access to justice is obscured, citizen participation is limited, human rights cannot be protected, freedom of information laws cannot be implemented and entry in financial markets is hindered. The lack of attention to records management has left many countries without the evidence they need to make the transition to electronic government.

Just as University College London used the findings of our study to develop relevant new courses, the International Records Management Trust has used them as a basis for supporting governments and records professionals in moving forward in an atmosphere of rapid administrative change. Early on, the focus was on the management of paper records, but the extremely fast growth of information technology has presented major new global challenges for capturing and preserving fragile digital evidence over time. As technology has had an increasing impact on the way that records are created, used and stored, we have placed ever greater emphasis on supporting the transition from paper to electronic records.

Records management is not typically incorporated in electronic government programmes, and although governments and donors around the world recognise the tremendous benefits of computerisation, very few understand the discipline required to manage electronic records. Nor is there adequate understanding of the need to manage paper and electronic records together to provide complete information and legal proof of compliance. Many government officials and development advisers do not yet realise that computerisation will only provide the basis for informed decision-making, effective service delivery and tackling corruption, if the information generated is reliable and trustworthy over time. They do not yet understand the need to build frameworks of laws, policies, systems and skills to ensure that electronic records can be captured and preserved in a reliable form, accessible over time.

Very few records professionals, no more than several dozen across the whole of the developing world, have had experience in actually managing electronic records, and the growing body of experience from developed countries has not been adapted for use in lower resource environments. Recognising these issues, the Trust has developed a range of programmes and projects that are informed by a continuous cycle of research, education and training, and practical application.

Our research projects have examined the realities of introducing records management in relation to development priorities, focussing on key areas of public resource management, and exploring how records management can be integrated in ICT strategies. Since the management of money and people is fundamental to the accountability, efficiency and effectiveness of all governments, the Trust has given particular attention to financial and personnel records, both in the paper-based and electronic environments.

In terms of education and training, we have been working since 1994 to develop appropriate study materials and to make them available free of charge through the Trust's website; educators are free to download this material to develop new courses, supplement existing courses or develop new teaching materials. Anyone may download the materials for self study. We also have been able, with support from ARMA International, to give hard copies to national archives and training institutions in 60 developing countries. A new programme is underway to develop an additional suite of ten training modules along with good practice guidance material aimed at supporting the transition to the electronic working environment.

The Trust's consultancy projects are designed to support governance objectives, strengthen local professional capacity and build awareness among government officials of the significance of records. Our projects support both paper and electronic records systems, particularly in relation to financial, human resource, legal and judicial, and healthcare management as well as to freedom of information. They seek, for instance, to strengthen records control systems to reduce fraud and strengthen payroll control.

These programmes and activities have helped foster a new awareness of the importance of well-managed records for international development and have highlighted the value of international cooperation. However, given the commitment by the international development community to using technology to support accountability, transparency and good governance, it is clear that a new level of global cooperation is essential to building capacity for managing records in the electronic environment. If this can be achieved, expensive computerisation projects will be much more likely to succeed, e-government will be based on information that can be trusted, citizens' entitlements will be better protected and the national collective memory will be more likely to be preserved.

A decade ago, in 1997, the Trust signed an Accord of Agreement on the Management of Modern Records with ARMA International and the International Council on Archives. Perhaps now is the time to really put the Accord into effect and to consider how the international records professional community can collaborative toward harmonising the spread of capacity across the world.

If the international professional community wishes to help facilitate a wider set of international initiatives, perhaps we could explore, through a creative brainstorming forum, coordinated actions that would make a real difference. These could include, for instance, developing and endorsing a clear set of functional requirements for records management to be incorporated in the computerised systems that donors and lenders fund. Other examples might include an ongoing programme for developing and sharing relevant educational and training material; developing a new approach to mentoring professionals from developing countries in introducing electronic records management programmes; and introducing a series of online electronic and video based teaching and discussion programmes.

The challenges for the profession and the scale of the opportunity are unprecedented. It gives me great pleasure to know that you have reached out, through giving this award, to the hundreds thousands of records professionals across the world whose goals are the same as yours.