

Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description

by INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES*

Introduction

- 1.1 The work of the ICA Commission on Descriptive Standards had its origin in an Invitational Meeting of Experts on Descriptive Standards held in Ottawa, Canada, 4-7 October 1988. The meeting was hosted and sponsored by the National Archives of Canada in cooperation with the International Council on Archives.
- 1.2 Among a number of resolutions passed at the end of the meeting, resolution number 2 called for the International Council on Archives to

establish a working group consisting of archivists knowledgeable in descriptive theory and practices to develop international standards for the description of archives (for application in both a manual or automated system), oversee the appointment of members of the working group in consultation with the Executive Committee, regularly inform ICA members of the activities and progress of the working group on topics relevant to the purpose of drafting such international standards for archival materials of all media, and submit to the consultation of users those drafted standards.

The resolution went on

That the International Council on Archives working group on descriptive standards prepare draft standards and rules for the description of archives at the fonds/group/collection level for the consideration of the international community.

- 1.3 The Executive Committee of the International Council on Archives responded positively to the resolution. In cooperation with Unesco, a consultative meeting was organized in Paris in December 1989 to develop a long-term plan of action for the development of international descriptive standards for archives.
- 1.4 To set the parameters for the development of the standards, the Unesco consultative group identified as a priority the development of a statement of principles on which the international rules for description would be based.

- 1.5 The plan of action included, as subsequent tasks, the development of general rules for archival description and the long-term, specific rules. Existing standards would be taken into account in the development of international rules.
- 1.6 To coordinate the work, the International Council on Archives negotiated an agreement with the National Archives of Canada to establish a Secretariat. The contract between ICA and the National Archives of Canada, establishing the Secretariat, was signed in 1990.
- 1.7 At its meeting in Wroclaw, Poland, in September 1990, the ICA Executive formally established the working group as the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. It appointed a Project Director and Secretary, Dr. Hugo L.P. Stibbe of the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, and a Chair, Dr. Christopher J. Kitching of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, London, England. The former working group members became the members of the Commission.
- 1.8 In October 1990, the Commission held its first plenary meeting in Höhr-Grenzhausen, near Koblenz, Germany. A draft *Statement of Principles*, prepared by H. Stibbe, was discussed and amended. This draft was subsequently sent out for a world-wide review. The Commission met for its second plenary in Madrid, Spain, in January 1992. It examined the draft again, and, in the light of the comments received from the review, amended the document substantially. This *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description, First Version Revised* is the result of that process.
- 1.9 The ICA Commission on Descriptive Standards acknowledges and thanks Unesco for its financial support for this project. It also wishes to thank Unesco for its continuing support of the next stage of the long-term plan now underway, the development of the general rules, "ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description."
- 1.10 The Commission also thanks the National Archives of Canada for its support of the Secretariat.

The Secretariat,
Hugo L.P. Stibbe
Project Director and Secretary

The Chair
Christopher J. Kitching

Preface

- P.1 The *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description*, hereafter referred to as the *Principles*, which was adopted by the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards at its meeting in Höhr-Grenzhausen, Germany, October 1990, was circulated for comments to all "B" Members and regional groups of the International Council on Archives.
- P.2 In the light of comments received, the Commission prepared this first revision of the *Principles* at its meeting in Madrid, January 1992, when it also adopted a draft of a "General International Standard Archival Description ISAD(G)" based on these principles. A list of respondents appears below.

- P.3 Comments are welcomed and should be sent to the Secretariat of the Commission at the National Archives.
- P.4 Many of the comments received reflected issues which the Commission had discussed when preparing the *Principles*, but did not elaborate in the formal document. In order to set the *Principles* in a wider context and allow some of these points to be explained, this preface has been added to the first version.
- P.5 The Commission recognizes
- that elements of information about archival material are required at each stage of its management (e.g., accessioning, conservation, arrangement) if the material is to be, on the one hand, securely preserved and controlled by the custodian, and on the other hand, made accessible at the proper time to all who have a right to consult it;
 - that 'archival description' in the widest sense of the term covers every element of information, no matter at what stage of management it is identified or established;
 - that at every stage the information remains dynamic, and may be subject to amendment in the light of further knowledge of the archival material or its provenance; and
 - that computerized information systems in particular may serve to integrate or select elements of information as required, and to update or amend them.
- P.6 But the Commission has focused its attention on one particular aspect of archival description for the purposes of these *Principles*, namely the description which serves, as far as possible, as the definitive representation of the archival material and which is required to establish intellectual control over it and promote access to the information which it contains. This means that the Commission has taken its stand at a point *after* the archival material has been selected for permanent preservation and arranged. As a result, for the purposes of these *Principles*, a narrower definition of 'archival description' has been adopted as explained in the Glossary of Terms.
- P.7 This does not imply that standards may not be applied to information captured at other stages of the management of archival material. On the contrary, it is expected that such standards will be developed, and that standards developed based on these *Principles* will be an integral part of the larger universe of standards affecting information about archives.
- P.8 The Commission further recognizes
- that, especially in view of the increasing complexity of administrative structures, an explanation of the context in which the material was created is an important aspect of archival description; and
 - that, also in view of this complexity, it may sometimes be necessary for the archivist to regard the fonds as an intellectual rather than a physical concept.
- P.9 The Commission nevertheless considers the concept of the fonds to be both helpful and necessary. The Commission encourages national initiatives to determine how in practice the concept may best be applied.

- P.10 In the Appendix, the Commission has set out a hierarchical model of the levels of arrangements for the fonds and its constituent parts. These are levels of description, with differing degrees of detail, appropriate to each level of arrangement. It is expected that these will be the subject of rules to be developed from these *Principles*. Thus, there may, for example, be a fonds-level description, a series-level description, or a file-level description. Intermediate levels, such as a sub-fonds or sub-series, are to be expected. Each of these levels may be further subdivided according to the complexity of the administrative structure of the organization which generated the archival material and the organization of the material. As the model shows, it is possible in a given case for some levels to be absent. By contrast, repositories may sometimes need to introduce other descriptive groupings to serve a particular management need, such as groups of fonds within a given repository (for a guide) or accumulations of individual documents received together as one accession; these 'management levels' are not the concern of the present *Principles*.
- P.11 The Commission has tried in its Glossary of Terms to indicate the meanings given to words and phrases used in the *Principles*. It has not attempted to identify possible international variants of those terms, for which the reader is referred to the relevant national and international lexicons of archival terminology.

List of respondents

(in alphabetical order of the names of their countries)

Australian Society of Archivists	Australia
Arquivo Nacional, Serviço Público Federal, Rio de Janeiro	Brazil
Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Archive und Bibliotheken in der Evangelischen Kirche - Nürnberg	Germany
Roberto Cerro <i>Archivi & Computer</i> San Miniato	Italy
Vereniging van Archivarissen in Nederland (VAN)	Netherlands
Archives and Records Association of New Zealand (ARANZ)	New Zealand
Associação Portuguesa de Bibliotecários Arquivistas e Documentalistas (BAD)	Portugal
The Southeast Asian Regional Branch, International Council on Archives (SARBICA)	
Antonia Heridia, Archivo de la Diputación Provincial de Sevilla	Spain
Society of Archivists	United Kingdom
Association of County Archivists	United Kingdom
Scottish Record Office	United Kingdom
Society of American Archivists (SAA)	USA
David Bearman (<i>Archives & Museum Informatics</i>)	USA

0. Glossary of terms associated with the Statement of Principles

- 0.1 The following glossary with terms and their definitions forms an integral part of this *Statement of Principles*. The definitions are to be understood as having been formulated specifically for the purposes of this document.

Access point. A name, term, etc., by which a description may be searched, identified and retrieved.

Archival description. Creation of an accurate representation of the fonds and its component parts by the process of capturing, collating, analysing and organizing any information that serves to identify archival material and explain the context and records, systems which produced it.

Arrangement. The intellectual operations involved in the analysis and organization of archival material.

Authority control. The control of standardized forms of terms including names (personal, corporate or geographic) used as access points.

Authority data. Standardized forms of terms including names (personal, corporate or geographic) used as access points, together with other relevant information associated with the terms, such as the source of a name, the relationship with other terms, etc.

Corporate body. An organization or group of persons that is identified by a name and that acts, or may act, as an entity. Typical examples of corporate bodies are associations, institutions, business firms, non-profit enterprises, governments, government agencies, religious bodies, landed estates and conferences. One corporate body may consist of a number of other corporate bodies.

File. A set of related records, usually within a series, capable of being handled or processed as a unit.

Fonds. All of the documents regardless of form or medium, naturally generated and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family or corporate body in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.

Item. A single indivisible unit in an archival entity.

Levels of description. Representations of the internal divisions of a fonds established during the process of arrangement. For the purposes of this statement, the levels of description are as illustrated in the accompanying model (See Appendix).

Principle of Provenance *see* Respect des fonds.

Provenance. The office or person of origin of archival material, that is, the particular person, family or corporate body that created and/or accumulated and used the documents in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.

Respect des fonds. The principle that the documents created and accumulated by a person, family or corporate body by reason of its functions or activities must not be mixed or combined with the documents of another individual or corporate body.

Unit of description. Any archival entity being described.

1. Scope and Purpose

- 1.1 This *Statement of Principles* aims to provide a foundation for the development of internationally applicable standards of archival description. It is formulated as a set of structured and numbered paragraphs dealing with issues strictly relevant to archival description.
- 1.2 The purpose of archival description is to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote its accessibility. This is achieved by creating accurate and appropriate representations and by organizing them in accordance with predetermined models.
- 1.3 The purpose of archival descriptive standards is to:
 - a) ensure the creation of consistent, appropriate and self-explanatory descriptions;
 - b) facilitate the retrieval and exchange of information about archival material;
 - c) enable the sharing of authority data; and
 - d) make possible the integration of descriptions from different repositories into a unified information system.
- 1.4 Archival descriptive standards must be based on accepted theoretical principles. Indeed, the prior need of a theoretical foundation is the very reason for formulating these *Principles* before developing standards of description.
- 1.5 These *Principles* are based on archival principles, such as *respect des fonds*.
- 1.6 Certain practical principles, which are the logical outcome of theoretical ones, must be considered during the process of describing archival material. For example, the principle that archival description proceeds from the general to the specific is the practical consequence of the principle of *respect des fonds*. These principles must be articulated if a generally applicable structure and system of archival description is to be built which is not dependent on the finding aids or systems of any given repository, whether in a manual or automated environment.
- 1.7 Elements of information about archival material are required at every stage in the management of the documents (when they are taken into custody, conserved, arranged¹ and so on). These *Principles*, however, are concerned with the formal process of description after the archival material has been arranged and the units or entities to be described have been determined.

2. Units of Description

- 2.1 Any archival entity which has been arranged, regardless of form or medium, may be considered a unit of description.
- 2.2 The broadest unit of description is the fonds.

- 2.2.1 Although it is theoretically possible to regard all the archival material of a country's central administration as one fonds, this is rarely done. Instead, each ministry or other principal unit of administration is normally regarded as generating its own fonds. This applies equally to non-governmental corporate bodies.
- 2.2.2 All the archival material of an individual office, committee, etc. which is subordinate to the principal unit of administration or carries out some of its functions may be treated either (a) as a fonds in its own right, or (b) as a sub-fonds of the principal fonds, according to local preference reflecting the nature and complexity of the material and of the organization which created it. A sub-fonds may be further divided to take account of subordinate functions. This applies equally in the case of a family and its individual members.
- 2.2.3 As a first step towards standardized archival description, each country should develop guidelines for defining the fonds. These should take full account of the administrative structures and should be consistent with the principle of provenance.
- 2.3 Other units of description, e.g., series, files, are the component parts of the fonds, established in the course of arrangement of the material and reflecting that arrangement.

3. Organization and Structure of Description

- 3.1 Although, in practice, information for the description of the whole is obtained and compiled from analysis of the parts, description proceeds and is laid out and displayed from the general to the particular. A description is presented for the fonds as a whole before any of its parts.
- 3.2 A fonds may be described as a whole in a single description, or represented as a whole and in its parts at various levels of description. The fonds forms the broadest level of description; the parts form subsequent levels, whose description is often only meaningful when seen in the context of the description of the whole of the fonds. A hierarchical format is convenient for showing the different levels of description, but each level represented may be equally important to the unified whole. (*See Appendix.*)

4. Elements of Descriptive Information

- 4.1 Each description, regardless of level, is composed of an ordered set of elements.²
- 4.2 To explain the context of the fonds and its parts it is necessary to present together, or to link, information about the provenance with information about archival material.

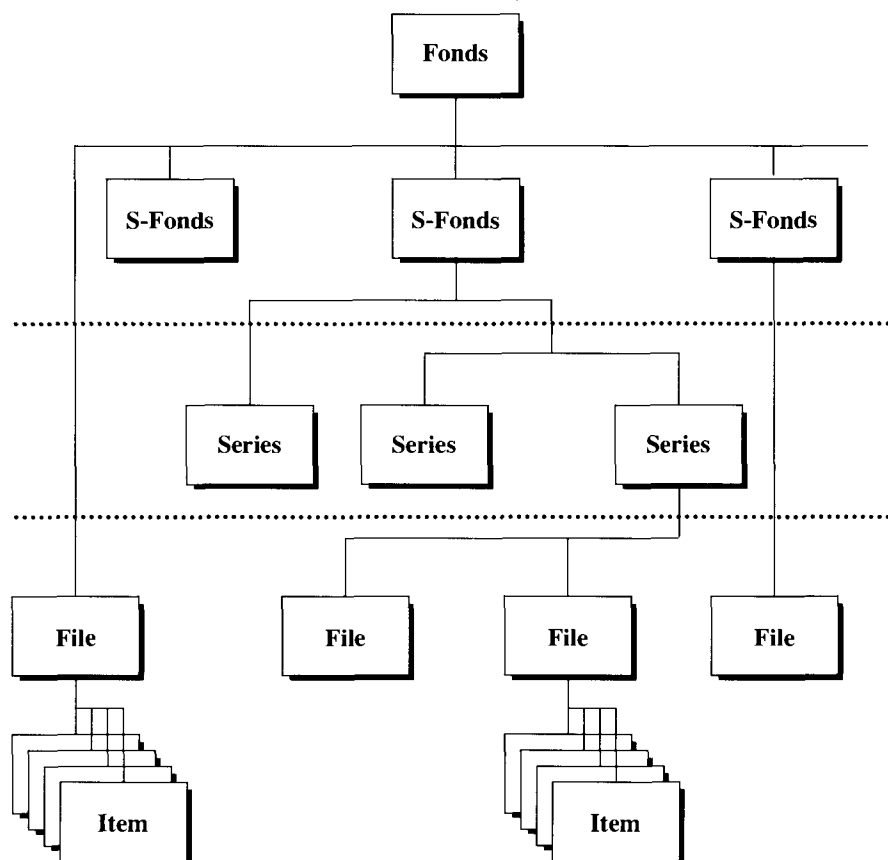
5. Retrieval of Descriptive Information

- 5.1 The structure and content of representations of archival material should facilitate information retrieval.
- 5.2 Retrieval of provenance must be provided for.
- 5.3 An important means of providing for retrieval of provenance and other elements of description is the creation of access points, which should be subject to authority control.
- 5.4 A fully developed system of archival description should include controlled vocabulary for retrieval purposes.

Appendix

- A1 The model shows some typical situations and does not include all possible combinations of levels.
- A2 Any number of intermediate levels are possible between any shown in the model.

Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds



Legend

S-Fonds = Sub-Fonds

Notes

- * First version revised; adopted by the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, Madrid, January 1992, and edited in its final form by the Secretariat of the Commission, 28 February 1992.
- 1 Arrangement may be an intellectual rather than a physical process. Electronic records, for example, may not go through a physical arrangement process.
- 2 The Commission has identified data elements needed for the description of archival materials in the ISAD(G). Manuals considered by the Commission to date have included Steven Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts, A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1989); Michael Cook and Margaret Procter, *Manual of Archival Description* (Aldershot, 1989); and the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description/Règles pour la description des documents d'archives* (Ottawa, 1990).