

The UNESCO Memory of the World Program

Promise Postponed

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ABSTRACT Concerned about the preservation of and access to documentary heritage, UNESCO established the Memory of the World program in 1992. As an operational program without formal legal basis, the program has involved an international advisory committee (IAC) of 14 experts appointed by the director-general. In its early years, the program, focused on documents at risk, set an ambitious agenda, addressing this priority and assessing emerging technologies for digitizing, disseminating, and reconstituting dispersed libraries and fonds in various media. Within a few years, the program changed direction and established an international register that emphasized globally significant materials. Through two and a half decades, the Memory of the World program has held a series of international conferences and has influenced the adoption of several key UNESCO policy instruments. In 2017, the advisory committee launched a comprehensive review, seeking to engage UNESCO in realizing the concept of “memory of the world.” This article traces the evolution of the program, analyzing the interactions among the professions, the UNESCO secretariat, and more recently, diplomats. The earnest advice of the IAC has consistently been dominated by the themes of resources, visibility, and unmet potential. Intense political interest in decisions about including certain materials in the Register has highlighted the continuing power of the record in international issues. The Memory of the World program must now manage both professional and governmental interests – a balance normally established in UNESCO’s structures by means of a formal convention adopted by member states.

RÉSUMÉ Préoccupée par la préservation et l'accès au patrimoine documentaire, l'UNESCO a mis en place le Programme Mémoire du monde en 1992. Comme il opère sans base juridique formelle, le Programme a fait appel à un comité consultatif international (CCI) formé de 14 experts nommés par le Directeur général de l'UNESCO. Au cours de ses premières années, le programme, concentré sur les documents à risque, s'est fixé d'ambitieux objectifs afin d'aborder cette priorité et évaluer le potentiel des technologies émergentes pour numériser, disséminer et reconstituer des bibliothèques et des fonds dispersés en différents formats. Quelques années plus tard, le programme s'est réorienté et a mis sur pied un registre international mettant de l'avant du matériel dont l'importance a une portée globale. Durant deux décennies et demie, le Programme Mémoire du monde a tenu une série de conférences internationales et a influencé l'adoption de plusieurs instruments de politique clés de l'UNESCO. En 2017, le comité consultatif a lancé un examen complet afin d'engager l'UNESCO dans la concrétisation du concept de mémoire du monde. Cet article retrace l'évolution du programme, analysant l'interaction entre les professions, le secrétariat de l'UNESCO et, plus récemment, les diplomates. Les conseils avisés du CCI ont été constamment dominés par les thèmes des ressources, de la visibilité et du potentiel inexploité. Le vif intérêt politique dans les décisions portant sur l'inclusion de certains éléments dans le registre a mis en lumière l'influence soutenue des documents dans les questions internationales. Le Programme Mémoire du monde doit maintenant composer avec les intérêts à la fois gouvernementaux et professionnels, un équilibre normalement établi à l'intérieur des structures de l'UNESCO par le biais de convention formelles, adoptées par les états membres.

The 12th biennial meeting of the UNESCO Memory of the World (MoW) International Advisory Committee (IAC) was hosted by the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi in early October 2015.¹ The first day was routine. UNESCO held an orientation for the seven new members on the 14-member committee.² This was followed by the usual expressions of greetings and a series of reports on accomplishments. The disturbance broke out on the second day as the committee began the professional assessment of documentary heritage nominated for inscription on the MoW International Register. When the time came to open the doors to break for coffee, the committee members were assailed by a jostling array of TV cameras and journalists demanding to know of their decisions. The coffee break was a melee of cameras, questions, and confusion until the committee retreated behind the massive doors of the St. Regis Hotel meeting room. At lunch, the media siege continued, and security guards had to push reporters away from the room. A few observers who had been seated around the room circled the table, photographing visible working papers with cell phones. Concerns and suspicions about contested nominations were high – so high that the room was scanned for listening devices and the doors were chained and padlocked while the committee went to lunch.

Two of the 88 nominations, both dealing with actions by the Japanese military during the war in Asia (1937–45), were hotly contested at the highest diplomatic and political levels. The possibility that international recognition of the nominated documents would be seen as supporting one interpretation of events was of paramount significance to differing national narratives on a shared past. Decades of disagreement over this shared past meant that questions about these actions had been elevated far beyond the realm of academic debate and into the realm of national identity. Committee members had been formally approached

1 While this article deals with institutions and policies, not personalities, I do want to commend H.E. Dr. Abdulla M. Alraisi, Director-General of the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates, and David Fricker, Director-General of the National Archives of Australia, for their patient leadership in seeking to reinvigorate and advance the Memory of the World program. I thank my colleagues, Dr. Gregory K. Iverson and Dr. Robert R. Buckley for their encouragement and advice in the preparation of this article.

The agenda documents and decisions of the UNESCO executive board and general conference are conveniently accessible on www.UNESCO.org. The author has been actively involved in the Memory of the World program in recent years, and has drawn on his participation in meetings and discussions to supplement the public record.

2 UNESCO, *12th Meeting of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World Programme, 4–6 October 2015, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates: Final Report*, accessed 2 September 2018, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265143>.

by diplomats from Japan, Korea, and China in advance of the meeting. Official threats were made to end financial support for UNESCO, placing over 10 percent of its annual budget at risk, and the news media were following every nuance. Purposefully ignoring the existential threats, UNESCO had handed a contentious diplomatic issue off to a group of librarians and archivists, at least half of whom were just learning the arcane rules and traditions of the MoW program. Fully aware of the likely media frenzy, UNESCO had not sent a communications officer to assist. UNESCO had created the program yet treated it with benign neglect for two decades. As countries sought to use MoW inscription for political ends, UNESCO was gradually awakening to the reality, familiar to archivists and librarians, that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”³

Founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, UNESCO embodies high ideals, seeking to build peace through the “intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind.”⁴ In addressing its constitutional mandate to assure the protection of heritage, UNESCO’s member states have adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage (2001), and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage (2003), each mobilizing attention and resources, with initiatives coordinated by the World Heritage Centre. The designation and inscription of world heritage sites is the most visible and publicly popular flagship of UNESCO’s heritage programming. Inscription on the World Heritage List instills national pride and brings definite economic benefits from tourism. Similarly, placing properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger causes national concern and usually provokes remedial action. Considering the benefits, the nominations process for world heritage sites is time consuming and expensive, and with limits on the number of sites being assessed, it is also highly competitive. Twenty years ago, the director of UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre admitted, “Inscription has become a political issue. It is about prestige, publicity, and economic development.”⁵ An external audit in 2010 noted that decisions about site inscriptions increasingly reflected political factors rather than expert advice, and diplomats have increasingly

3 William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1950).

4 UNESCO, “UNESCO in Brief: Mission and Mandate,” accessed 9 March 2019, <https://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco>.

5 As quoted in Lasse Steiner and Bruno S. Frey, “Correcting the Imbalance of the World Heritage List: Did the

questioned the perspective and cultural assumptions of heritage professionals.⁶ The following year, Elizabeth Keough, in examining the political processes and bureaucratic proliferation that “derailed” the lofty ideals of the World Heritage Convention, argued that the program requires “concrete and serious efforts at transformation.”⁷ In 2012, the UNESCO director-general, aware of growing criticism, issued an unprecedented admonition reminding the World Heritage Committee that “the credibility of the inscription process must be absolute at all stages” and urging the group to “act and think as visionaries, to rejuvenate the World Heritage Convention and confront the challenges of the 21st century.”⁸ Other scholars, analyzing voting patterns in the committee, concluded that “deliberations over the inscription of sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List has (*sic*) reached a level of politicization similar to that of other UN fora.”⁹

This article will examine the evolution and dynamics of UNESCO’s less visible heritage program, the Memory of the World, intended to address the preservation of documentary heritage. While inscription in an international register came as an afterthought in developing a range of initiatives focused on documentary heritage at risk, the register process has come to eclipse these other approaches. Creeping politicization has underlined the impact of documentary heritage on national historical narratives and identities. Decision making has rested with an expert international advisory committee appointed by and making its recommendations to the director-general. The structure of the MoW has not accommodated the governmental perspective provided by a convention. The efforts of the Executive Board of UNESCO to address the issues at a political

UNESCO Strategy Work?” *Journal of International Organizations Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 29.

- 6 Lynn Meskell, “UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (2013) provides an informed and thorough assessment of this shift. Also see Enrico Bertacchini, Claudia Liuzza, and Lynn Meskell, “Shifting the Balance of Power in the UNESCO World Heritage Committee: An Empirical Assessment,” *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 23, no. 3 (2017).
- 7 Elizabeth Betsy Keough, “Heritage in Peril: A Critique of UNESCO’s World Heritage Program,” *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 10 (2011): 593.
- 8 Irina Bokova, “Let Us Rejuvenate the World Heritage Convention” (speech on the occasion of the opening of the 36th session of the World Heritage Committee, St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, 24 June 2012), accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002167/216700e.pdf>.
- 9 Enrico Bertacchini, Claudia Liuzza, Lynn Meskell, and Donatella Saccone, “The Politicization of UNESCO World Heritage Decision Making,” *Public Choice* 167, no. 1–2 (2016): 125. Also see Lynn Meskell, Claudia Liuzza, Enrico Bertacchini, and Donatella Saccone, “Multilateralism and UNESCO World Heritage: Decision-Making, States Parties and Political Processes,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 5 (2015).

level have led to organizational paralysis and a realization that the program as currently constituted is a high risk to the organization.

Memory of the World Program at 25

The director-general of UNESCO has mandated the Memory of the World to “preserve, raise awareness and promote access to the documentary treasures of humanity.”¹⁰ These thoroughly intertwined, mutually dependent goals are ambitious and difficult to measure, and the manner of their realization has shifted over the life of the program.

UNESCO launched the Memory of the World program in 1992. The impetus and the priorities for its first years dealt with documentary heritage at risk. It sought the careful preservation of original documents and explored the potential of emerging digital technologies to help both preserve and expand access to such materials. This focus was confirmed by the UNESCO general conference in 1993, which resolved “(d) to promote the safeguarding of libraries and archives and particularly endangered and unique collections in order to preserve the ‘Memory of the World’ and to facilitate democratization of access to them.”¹¹ The initial discussions were optimistic, envisioning gradual expansion and “the establishment of a consolidated ‘Memory of the World’ image and bibliographical data bank.”¹² Reflecting its original emphasis, MoW commissioned the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the International Council on Archives (ICA) to undertake a major survey involving more than 6,000 institutions. Their report, entitled *Lost Memory: Libraries and Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century*,¹³ makes troubling reading. It remains a powerful and compelling assertion that the threats to our collective memory are real and continuing.

10 UNESCO, *Memory of the World* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), 9.

11 UNESCO General Conference 1993. 27 C/Resolutions. Vol 1. Resolution 4.1.2 C(D), 50, accessed 6 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000095621>. The full program is summarized in a recent booklet, accessed 2 September 2018 and available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002246/224658e.pdf>.

12 UNESCO, “Report by Director General on the Activities of the Organization since the 139th Session” [1992], quoted in Lothar Jordan, “A First Sketch of the History of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme: Its Beginnings in 1992,” presentation, 11th Meeting of the International Advisory Committee for the Memory of the World Programme, Gwangju Korea, 18–21 June 2013, 17.

13 Hans van der Hoeven and Joan van Albada, *Lost Memory: Libraries and Archives Destroyed in the Twentieth Century* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), accessed 7 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000105557>.

The IFLA commissioned Australian librarians to survey major libraries internationally on their preservation activities. Their conclusion was equally sobering:

Preservation of nationally significant documentary heritage does not have a high priority for many libraries throughout the world. The existence of national policies for the identification and preservation of nationally significant documentary heritage is very low and the number of staff employed to care for this material appears ridiculously small. Regional differences are apparent. Collections in developing countries are most at risk.¹⁴

These two reports provided an urgent imperative for UNESCO.

Driven by concerns regarding materials at risk of loss, MoW prepared and published informative guides on the use of technology in preservation. There was discussion of the potential for using microfilm and then digital copying to reconstitute archival fonds dispersed by war or other circumstances. The MoW Sub-Committee on Technology explored the potential of digitization and online access for archives. Pilot projects began using CD-ROMs for copying and access, and the MoW extended its interests beyond print and manuscripts to include audiovisual and broadcast records. By 1997, 26 national Memory of the World committees had been established, and in 1994 and 1996, the Asia-Pacific region held two meetings of experts in Kuala Lumpur to encourage regional participation.¹⁵

The idea of a register was first addressed at the second meeting of the international advisory committee in May 1995. It does not appear that there was any pressure from the professional associations for a register. The suggestion instead arose from the secretariat, which sought to mirror the respected designation system for world heritage sites. Abdelaziz Abid explained the purpose of the Register: "A world list of endangered library collections and archive holdings is being compiled. More than 60 countries have proposed collections and holdings to be included in this list. The aim of 'Memory of the World' is to ensure that

14 Jan Lyall, *"Memory of the World": A Survey of Current Library Preservation Activities* (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), section 3.1.1, 35, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001091/109150E.pdf>.

15 Abdelaziz Abid, "'Memory of the World': Preserving our Documentary Heritage," *Museum International* 49, no. 1 (1997).

significant material is identified and saved.”¹⁶

The general guidelines for the Memory of the World program, first prepared under the auspices of the IFLA in 1995, envisioned a graduated continuum of international, regional, and national registers adding significantly to the initial goals: “The more information is amassed, the more effective the Programme will be in identifying missing documentary heritage, in linking dispersed collections, in supporting repatriation and restitution of displaced and illegally exported material, and in supporting relevant national legislation.”¹⁷

The first inscriptions to the International Register were made in 1997. Additional inscriptions have been made every two years since, to a total by 2018 of 426. Several regional and national registers of significant documentary heritage have since been launched, affording “opportunity for minorities and sub-cultures within a nation to be appropriately represented” and enabling the development of coordinated strategies for preservation.¹⁸ These international, regional, and national registers are intended to be closely related and complementary. The criteria and processes are fully documented on the UNESCO Memory of the World website.

The early years of the MoW program were active, exploratory, and productive. A five-year evaluation took place in 1997, shortly after the first inscriptions to the MoW International Register. The evaluation was prepared by three respected external experts, based on a survey of key stakeholders and a review of documents and practices. They provided a comprehensive series of recommendations dealing with the program’s processes, products, publications, and web presence. They welcomed the MoW as a UNESCO initiative but came to a clear conclusion: “The Programme has not yet achieved the impact originally hoped.”¹⁹ Using careful, diplomatic language, they observed,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ray Edmondson, *Memory of the World: General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage*, rev. ed. (Paris: UNESCO, 2002), article 4.1.1, 20, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001256/125637e.pdf>.

¹⁸ Stephen Foster, Roslyn Russell, Jan Lyall, and Duncan Marshall, *Memory of the World: General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage*, CII.95/WS/11 (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), article 4.3.3, 16, accessed 7 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000105132>.

¹⁹ Guy Petherbridge, Christopher Kitching, and Clemens de Wolf, “External Evaluation Report – Executive Summary,” Annex D to *Fourth Meeting of the International Advisory Committee of the “Memory of the World” Programme*, June 1999 (Paris: UNESCO, 1999), 36, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001168/116830eo.pdf>.

Many survey respondents also compared the staffing (one Programme Officer only) and funding of the Memory of the World Programme with that of UNESCO's World Heritage Programme. While this comparison may not be considered entirely appropriate from UNESCO's internal organisational perspective, it is a strongly held professional perception with strong political overtones, which the evaluators recommend UNESCO take very seriously.²⁰

The concluding comment was direct:

It is the evaluators' view that the single most important step that UNESCO could take to ensure that the Memory of the World Programme reaches a 'critical mass' to grow exponentially and be seen by potential sponsors as a truly global endeavour, would be to identify and help bring into effective partnership all key stakeholders, particularly the associate NGOs, and those national, regional and international programmes which are already contributing (officially or unofficially) to the Programme's overall objectives. A prerequisite for this endeavour, of course, is increased Programme staffing and resourcing.²¹

The inauguration of the International Register marked a perceptible shift in the MoW program's direction. While the research and projects of the program's first years focused on documents at risk, the original criteria for the Register made no mention of risk. The Register dealt with materials of world significance – usually the prestigious treasures of major libraries and archives – and neither the seven primary criteria nor the two secondary criteria mentioned endangered documentary heritage. This redirection was noted from the start of the Register, as the external evaluation in 1997 cautioned against losing sight of the origins of the program.²² The revised guidelines for the Register (2002) added “threat” as a factor to be taken into account in assessment, but only as an afterthought of tertiary importance.²³ While the rhetoric remained, the program had made a

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Ray Edmondson, *Memory of the World: General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002), 21–23, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001256/125637e.pdf>.

course change, which, over time, would take it into troubled waters.

The most ambitious international project led by the MoW program was the Slave Trade Archives Project (1999–2005). UNESCO launched a feasibility project, with funding from Norway, to be undertaken by the ICA. The focus was on African and Caribbean sources that documented the transatlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. The principal aims were to establish a database of relevant materials and to take urgent steps to ensure their preservation and digitization. The project report stated that 14 institutions had been provided with computer equipment, eight seminars had been offered, eight multimedia CDs had been produced, about 200,000 documents had been digitized, eight websites had been created, and 11 databases referring to over 10,000 documents had been created. The report recommended continuing the project and engaging some of the 40 countries interested in participating; online resources were in turn provided to the UNESCO Associated Schools program to support teaching. More than a decade after the project, some digital remnants remain discoverable online. UNESCO has maintained a page about the project, but the link to the main project web page is defunct²⁴ and few of the eight websites mentioned in the report are active. Similarly, the Memory of the World program launched a series of 11 pilot projects to demonstrate the effectiveness of CD-ROMS for recording and disseminating key documents while avoiding excessive use of the fragile originals. For example, the project for reconstructing the Radziwill archives appears to have involved ten institutions in the eight countries that, in 2008, proposed inscription in the Register. For all this pioneering effort, little evidence remains available online.

Over the past 15 years, UNESCO has taken up key policy issues affecting libraries and archives and has been active in initiatives such as the World Summit on the Information Society and related activities. The Memory of the World program has influenced policy discussions and has helped international professional NGOs articulate shared interests and values. With the generous support of institutions and corporate sponsors, it has organized five major international MoW conferences in France (1992), Mexico (2000), Australia (2008), Poland (2011), and Canada (2012). Specific UNESCO decisions involving the MoW have included the adoption of the *Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage*

24 "Slave Trade Archives," UNESCO Memory of the World, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/projects/full-list-of-projects/slave-trade-archives-project/>.

(2003),²⁵ the *Moscow Declaration on Digital Information Preservation* (2011), and the *Vancouver Declaration on Digitization and Preservation*, which resulted from a UNESCO/University of British Columbia conference, *The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation*, in 2012. The influential *Universal Declaration on Archives*,²⁶ based on an initiative of the Association des archivistes du Québec, was taken up by the ICA and advanced by several national commissions for UNESCO, including that of Senegal. It was endorsed by the UNESCO general conference in 2011 and has been translated into 39 languages.²⁷

The Memory of the World Program Today

With membership changes and meetings that take place for only a few days every two years, the IAC continually has to remind itself of its role and mandate. In advance of the 2005 meeting, three experienced members circulated a discussion paper on “areas of concern,” which was intended to provoke debate.²⁸ The issues of resources and trained staff were central, and the paper compared MoW staffing with that provided under the heritage conventions. The authors explained that the paper was not meant as criticism but as a heartfelt “plea to do more to achieve the aims of the *Memory of the World Programme*.”²⁹ Reviewing the program’s objectives and key strategies, the paper presented a common concern in its comment on the first objective, regarding preservation: “little work has been done to achieve this Objective.”³⁰ It described the results of the Register as

25 UNESCO, “Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage, 15 October 2003,” UNESCO Legal Instruments, accessed 2 September 2018, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17721&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

26 UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference 36th Session: Volume 1 – Resolutions* (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), articles 62, 64, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002150/215084e.pdf>.

27 See “Universal Declaration on Archives,” International Council on Archives, accessed 14 February 2019, <https://www.ica.org/en/universal-declaration-archives>.

28 George Boston, Ray Edmondson, and Dietrich Schüller, *Memory of the World Programme: A Debate about Its Future* (Paris: UNESCO, 2005), accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002340/234097e.pdf>; and Douglas Ross Harvey, “UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme,” *Library Trends* 56, no. 1 (2007): 270–72.

29 Boston, Edmondson, and Schüller, *Memory of the World Programme*, 2.

30 Boston, Edmondson, and Schüller, *Memory of the World Programme*, 3.

“patchy.”³¹ The three IAC members observed that the Register does “not advance the primary reasons for the Programme being set up ten years ago.”³² In a written submission, the International Council on Archives reiterated its concerns regarding the program, emphasizing that, for archives, the fonds and records series, not unique documents out of context, were of greatest significance. The archivists argued that the holdings of all national archives were of importance and urged that all national archives should be included in the Register.³³ The paper, the comments, and the discussion at the IAC meeting called for a more active program with updated structures, more continuous involvement by IAC members, consultation on budget allocation, and slight alterations to the process for considering nominations for the Register. The committee decided to prepare a report to the director-general and to request a meeting. When the IAC met again two years later, there was no mention of a report or a meeting, but there were draft “operational guidelines” for the Register. Most attending the 2007 meeting agreed with the ICA’s proposal that all national archives could be recognized by the MoW “in the form of a statement in the preamble to the General Guidelines.”³⁴ A useful discussion regarding digital heritage ensued, but there was no action, and the urgency surrounding the other 2005 proposals faded away.

With the approach of the 20th anniversary of the MoW, the Polish National Commission for UNESCO hosted the productive Fourth International MoW Conference in 2011. Later that year, Poland sponsored a resolution at the UNESCO general conference calling for an evaluation and strengthening of the program. The resolution noted a fundamental weakness of the MoW: “there is neither a long-term strategy for preserving the precious documentary heritage nor a legal framework for the functioning of the Memory of the World Programme.”³⁵ The

31 Ibid., 4.

32 Ibid.

33 International Council on Archives Executive Board, *The International Council on Archives and the Memory of the World Programme: A Position Paper* (Washington, DC: International Council on Archives, 2005), accessed 14 February 2019, https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the_international_council_on_archives_and_the_memory_of_the_world_programme_a_position_paper_0.pdf.

34 UNESCO, *8th Meeting of the International Advisory Committee of the Memory of the World Programme, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa, 13–15 June 2007: Final Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 2008), accessed 14 February 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234032>.

35 UNESCO, *Records of the General Conference 36th Session: Volume 1 – Resolutions*, articles 59, 63.

secretariat conducted a survey of libraries and archives on issues affecting the MoW, and the results were reported in a 2012 evaluation. While the survey was widely distributed, tellingly, only 25 responses were received. MoW was referred to as “the flagship global programme for documentary heritage preservation,” but specific recommendations were lacking.³⁶

The director-general of UNESCO convened an experts’ meeting in Warsaw in May 2012. The resulting *Warsaw Declaration* reaffirmed the importance of the Register in building public awareness of documentary heritage and advocated a series of initiatives to strengthen the MoW. Several necessary actions to ensure program sustainability were identified; these included building links with other UNESCO world heritage programs and establishing cross-sectoral cooperation and innovative approaches to private sector partnerships.³⁷

The experts’ meeting addressed a key question: whether to seek a convention to protect documentary heritage or make a recommendation to member states. These two normative instruments employed by UNESCO have significant differences in terms of the commitment expected of member states, and this question had echoed through the discussions of the IAC since its inception. The 2002 MoW guidelines pointed to the establishment of a convention as the desirable and expected future of the program. The experts considered a preliminary study on this issue, prepared by the secretariat. The study did not explore the options in any detail but observed that “the binding nature of Conventions is often regarded as particularly prestigious, and a Convention could endow MoW with better status, more support from Member States, more financial resources and more staff as well as give UNESCO National Commissions stronger grounds to persuade governments to support the programme.”³⁸

The study noted that a recommendation was non-mandatory, or “soft law,” but argued it “would equally increase visibility and heighten awareness of MoW within Member States because of the obligation to bring the Recommendation to

36 UNESCO, *Evaluation of the Memory of the World Programme (Resolution 36C/COM CI/DR.2): Survey Results 10*, accessed 2 September 2018, http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/evaluation_mow_survey_results_en.pdf.

37 UNESCO Executive Board, “Recommendations of Experts’ Meeting, 8–10 May 2012,” Annex to Report by the Director-General on the Experts’ Meeting on Strengthening the Memory of the World Programme 190 EX/16 (Paris: UNESCO, 2012), accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002171/217156e.pdf>.

38 UNESCO Executive Board, *Preservation and Access to Documentary Heritage, Part 11: Preliminary Study of the Technical, Financial and Legal Aspects on the Desirability of a Standard-Setting Instrument*, 191 EX/11 (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 2, accessed 7 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219809.locale=en>.

the attention of the relevant authorities and to report on the status of its implementation.”³⁹ It further advised that additional funding and UNESCO staff time would be required to support a convention and that various committee meetings would be a burden for smaller countries. A convention usually requires state parties to meet and submit reports every two years, while the reporting under a recommendation occurs every four or five years. The study did not address the key concern known and expressed within the professional community, which emphasized the vital role of experts rather than diplomats in making decisions regarding inscriptions. Neither did it assess the interactions of expert leadership and diplomatic concerns on the intergovernmental committees established under existing heritage conventions. Nor did it deal with the difficult issues inherent in the continuing power, symbolic and legal, of documentary heritage. The preliminary study actually made a compelling case for a convention. The IAC was divided on the issue, but the decision seems to have been taken based on short-term concerns about the effort required to agree to a convention, the staff resources necessary to administer a convention in lean times, and the secretariat’s timid conclusion that “it seems wise to try to limit the unnecessary use of this complex process.”⁴⁰

The need for action was given further impetus by the influential UNESCO/UBC conference on digitization and preservation in September 2012.⁴¹ The importance of the issue was dramatized by the participation of over 500 specialists from 110 countries. The Vancouver Declaration convincingly linked the authenticity and integrity of documentary heritage to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and urged international and interdisciplinary collaboration to address the challenges posed by digital recordkeeping.

The report of the UNESCO director-general to the October 2012 meeting of the executive board was an accurate reflection of the advice from the experts’ meeting in Warsaw and cogent in its requirements. It urged “reinforcement” of all aspects of the MoW: resources, cooperation, advocacy, and capacity building. It began by noting the reliance of the MoW on volunteer efforts and observed

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 3.

41 Full proceedings are online at “The Memory of the World in the Digital Age: Digitization and Preservation – 26–28 September 2012, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada,” UNESCO, accessed 14 February 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/events/calendar-of-events/events-websites/the-memory-of-the-world-in-the-digital-age-digitization-and-preservation/>.

that this approach had “become unsustainable as retrenchments will inevitably impact on the ability to deliver.”⁴² The report advocated cooperating with other UNESCO heritage programs and strengthening both advocacy and capacity building for documentary heritage. The experts’ advice, reinforced by the director-general, was definitive, clear, comprehensive, and practical. It addressed all the criteria for a successful program.⁴³

UNESCO’s response ignored all but the suggestion to develop a recommendation on documentary heritage. The executive board approved a “Draft Action Plan for Strengthening the Memory of the World Programme” in 2013 on the condition that the “Director-General . . . invite Member States and other funding sources to consider making voluntary contributions in support of the Plan.”⁴⁴ Implementation was explicitly “subject to the availability of the requisite extrabudgetary funds.”⁴⁵ The program remained unfunded, understaffed, and as UNESCO observed, “unsustainable.” The 2012 report on strengthening the Memory of the World program remains relevant, and the issue that remains concerns not the process to implement the program but the will to implement it.

While the proposals to strengthen the MoW program languished, efforts to draft a normative instrument addressing documentary heritage proceeded. Late in 2015, UNESCO’s general conference gave unanimous support to the *Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form*.⁴⁶ While non-binding, the Recommendation, addressed to all UNESCO member states, provides a confident assertion of the role of archives in modern society. The Recommendation calls upon all member states to ensure that the necessary policies and resources are in place to identify and preserve documentary heritage and to enable public access. It encourages international collaboration in areas like the establishment of standards, duplication of documents relevant to shared heritage, copyright, and partnerships with the

42 UNESCO Executive Board, *Report by the Director-General on the Experts’ Meeting*, 190 EX/16, 1. This includes, in an annex, the nine detailed recommendations of the experts’ meeting in May 2012 in Warsaw, Poland.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 UNESCO Executive Board, *Decisions Adopted by the Executive Board at Its 191st Session*, 191 EX/Decisions (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 11, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002207/220725e.pdf>.

46 UNESCO, *Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form* (Paris: UNESCO, 17 November 2015), accessed 7 March 2019, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=49358&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

private sector. It is an essential resource for every archivist in advancing justifications of the archival mission. In approving it, several national delegations asked UNESCO officials about the budget required to give life and substance to this proud recommendation. There was no answer. To emphasize the risks confronting modern documentary heritage, the general conference heard an engaging presentation by the new PERSIST initiative, in which the IFLA and the ICA are collaborating with UNESCO – with strong support from the Netherlands, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates – to advance the Vancouver Declaration, leading the MoW's agenda to preserve digital records.⁴⁷

The Review of the Program

As the Recommendation was moving forward for approval, the IAC held its 12th meeting in Abu Dhabi. Besieged by television cameras, seven new and seven continuing members faced the challenge of fiercely contested nominations under unprecedented media and diplomatic scrutiny. Previous nominations had elicited some diplomatic interest, notably that of the Che Guevara fonds in 2012, but the intensity and lobbying had not approached that provoked by China's nomination of records related to both the Nanjing Massacre in 1937–38 and to “comfort women” and the Japanese army.⁴⁸ These issues touched on two fault lines in several countries' national historic narratives. Only the first of these nominations was recommended for inscription. In wrestling with these unprecedented matters, IAC members began to raise other issues about the structure and effectiveness of the program. Before the meeting adjourned, the IAC resolved to initiate a comprehensive review that would build on previous studies and the new recommendation to renew or reform the MoW. Two working groups were formed: one to address the MoW statutes and rules and the other to revise its guidelines.

⁴⁷ An international experts meeting to advance PERSIST, hosted by the UAE, took place in Abu Dhabi, 14–16 March 2016. For report and subsequent action, see <https://unescopersist.org/publications/>.

⁴⁸ The foreign ministers of Japan and Korea met in late December 2015 with two priority items on their agenda: the islands in the South China Sea and the recognition of “comfort women.” They reached a compromise with an apology from the Japanese prime minister and the establishment of a foundation to assist survivors. (The full text of the statement was published in the *Wall Street Journal*, 28 December 2015.) While it was accepted by the government of South Korea, this settlement was deemed inadequate by popular opinion. At the end of November 2018, the *Financial Times* reported that South Korea had nullified the 2015 compromise by disbanding the foundation (30 November 2018, 4). Reconciliation awaits a future generation.

The UNESCO director-general asked simply that the review process and the outcome ensure that the MoW was transparent and accountable. The MoW program prided itself on its expert-based approach and decision making. It was natural, then, for the IAC to seek broad input and advice about the future of the program in an open consultation process across both UNESCO national commissions and the various interested professional non-governmental organizations. Each working group prepared a thoughtful discussion paper reflecting issues raised by the IAC and asked for guidance from the UNESCO secretariat on how UNESCO normally managed public consultations. Many governments today have interactive websites to enable public input as policy initiatives are considered. UNESCO eventually advised the IAC that, as “an external body,” it could not use the UNESCO website. After further months of delay, the secretariat found it could modify a cumbersome but adequate website. The discussion papers were posted and comments invited. Meanwhile, the working groups asked for expert assistance from UNESCO – from the corporate policy and evaluation unit, the central fundraising and partnership coordinator, and the marketing and IT centres – only to find that UNESCO, unlike most modern governments, universities, and cultural institutions, had not established such corporate centres of expertise.

Late in 2016, the MoW review working groups analyzed the 45 submissions received online.⁴⁹ Along with formal comments from the IFLA and the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives, there were 27 submissions from national commissions or national MoW committees and three from individual professionals: a meagre but meaningful harvest. Fully 78 percent of respondents felt that the MoW program was not meeting its potential and had lost sight of its intent. A number commented that the MoW was not known within the professions or the institutions it was meant to serve. No comments were received from UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre nor from the committees for the Information for All program and the various heritage conventions.⁵⁰

The two working groups held meetings late in 2016 to draft recommendations, especially one dealing with managing contested register nominations.

49 The two discussion papers and the comments received have not been maintained on the UNESCO website. Paper copies are in the author’s possession.

50 Abdulla Alraisi, “Introduction to Annex 1,” in UNESCO, *Final Report by the International Advisory Committee (IAC) on the Review Process of the Memory of the World Programme*, 202 EX/15 (Paris: UNESCO, 2017), 3, accessed 14 February 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000257032>.

One working group circulated a draft report on statutes and rules to the secretariat, all IAC members, and the other working group in late December, seeking comment and amendment. As the draft evolved, the secretariat, at the invitation of the German government, convened an IAC meeting in Berlin (1–4 March 2017) with members of both working groups to build consensus. Given the lack of suitable notice, this meeting was not constituted as an official session of the IAC but as an expert forum.⁵¹ The forum reviewed and asked for amendments to the draft report and its 15 recommendations and received a preliminary report on the guidelines from the working group. Modest changes to the program incorporated in the working group's draft were voted down in a discussion dominated by those active in the program for decades. The requested amendments were made, circulated, revised again, and approved in a teleconference of the IAC. The IAC chair submitted the 15 recommendations to the UNESCO director-general at the end of June.⁵²

When the IAC held its 13th biennial meeting in Paris, 24–27 October 2017, it was still wrestling with the nomination of documents concerning “comfort women.” A few days earlier, the UNESCO executive board forcefully reminded the IAC “to abide by the principles of dialogue, mutual understanding and respect and to avoid further political tensions concerning the Programme.”⁵³ Accordingly, the IAC deferred a decision on the contested nomination and asked the director-general to convene a dialogue among the interested parties.⁵⁴ The executive board itself deferred any decision on the IAC's report, with its 15 recommendations, asking the secretariat to continue the IAC's comprehensive review in consultation with member states and to submit an action plan. The board discussed the review at its meeting in April 2018, again without reacting to the IAC's report, and asked for a revised action plan for its next meeting.⁵⁵ Awaiting decisions, the secretariat postponed the call for register nominations

51 A full report on this meeting was prepared and circulated to the participants. It has not been added to the reports of MoW meetings on the UNESCO website as of November 2018.

52 Alraisi, “Introduction to Annex 1,” in *Final Report by the International Advisory Committee*.

53 UNESCO, *Decisions Adopted by the Executive Board at its 202nd Session*, 202 EX/DECISIONS (Paris: UNESCO, 2017), sections 15, 20, accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0025/002598/259824e.pdf>.

54 UNESCO, *Report of 13th Meeting of the International Advisory Committee* (Paris: UNESCO, October 2017), accessed 14 February 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265145>.

55 UNESCO Executive Board, *Decisions Adopted by the Executive Board at its 204th Session*, 204 EX/Decisions (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), section 8, accessed 14 February 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000262851.locale=>.

in 2018. Thanks to a special contribution by member states and internal reallocation, UNESCO has increased the resources available to the program, and this has enabled it to host several regional meetings focused on implementing the 2015 recommendation dealing with documentary heritage. The secretariat neither consulted with the IAC regarding how best to allocate its new resources nor began work on implementing the IAC's recommendations.

By September 2018, the UNESCO secretariat had a series of documents from the IAC's comprehensive review: its 15 recommendations (June 2017),⁵⁶ revised draft statutes and guidelines, and a draft code of ethics (March 2018).⁵⁷ The main report on the review, discussed by the IAC and amended by the forum in Berlin, had been with the secretariat for over a year and a half and had neither been explicitly adopted by the IAC nor made available. This report is now informally summarized in this article. Without it, the 15 recommendations being considered by UNESCO lack explanation and context. The secretariat convened two information meetings for member states, on 9 July and 5 September 2018, and outlined a two-tiered consultative agenda that was intended to involve independent technical experts outside the IAC and to engage national and regional MoW committees. The executive board discussed this updated action plan in October 2018 but could not agree on the membership of a working group. The process, instead open to all member states, is expected to result in a report to the executive board late in 2019.⁵⁸ The IAC was neither involved nor informed. UNESCO continues to review the comprehensive report and to redraft an action plan for further review. On the urgent matters raised by the IAC, no action is in sight three years after the optimistic launch of the open consultation.

56 UNESCO, *Final Report by the International Advisory Committee*, 202 EX/15.

57 The draft code of ethics together with other documents on the continuing review process are available at <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow/review>.

58 UNESCO Executive Board, *Updated Action Plan for a Comprehensive Review of the Memory of the World Programme*, 205 EX/8 (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), accessed 11 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002656/265604e.pdf>; and UNESCO Executive Board, *Decisions Adopted by the Executive Board at its 204th Session*, 7. The continuing review process is available at "Comprehensive Review of the Memory of the World Programme," accessed 14 February 2019, <https://en.unesco.org/programme/mow/review>.

The Report on the IAC Review of the Memory of the World Program, 2017

The initiative for the review came from the IAC, with lukewarm support from the UNESCO secretariat. For the secretariat, as for the executive board, there was only one issue to address: managing contested nominations for the Register and managing the consequent uncertainty regarding the payment of annual dues by a major contributor. The review went further and strongly encouraged rebalancing the MoW program, reviving its original mandate for action on documents at risk and moderating the preoccupation with nominations for the Register.

In recent years, both the MoW secretariat and the international advisory committee have focused a significant part of their efforts on the process for inscribing documents on the International Register. This has come to be seen as the primary means of raising public awareness of the importance of humanity's documentary heritage. Nominations for the register have increased in number by 50 percent, from 88 in 2015 to 132 in 2017, and have increased substantially in complexity. A quick review of the inscriptions thus far suggests that participation around the world has varied; there has been active involvement from Europe (47 percent of the total) and increasingly from Asia, but minimal interest from North America (3 percent). Broader participation has been hindered by the complexity of the 70-page guidelines.⁵⁹ Of the 97 inscriptions of individuals' records, 87 are of men's records. This gender imbalance may reflect the collecting biases of our institutions or the low priority accorded to women's records when advancing nominations for the Register. The resulting register is an eclectic mix that combines highlights from various cultures, individual documents, entire collections, several documentary media, and materials spanning millennia. It presents a random face, showing that the MoW reacts to local initiatives and has neither the mandate nor the capacity to take a more proactive, coherent approach to the world's extensive documentary heritage.⁶⁰

It has also been argued that the Register embodies specific values regarding humanity's past. Professor Ryoko Nakano has advanced a Japanese perspective,

59 Ray Edmondson, *Memory of the World: General Guidelines to Safeguard Documentary Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2002), accessed 7 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000125637>.

60 See "Memory of the World Register," accessed 14 February 2019, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/>.

taking note of the growing literature on the role played by librarians and especially archivists in constructing the past through decisions about appraisal, acquisition, and now digitization. Assessing nominations for inscription by applying international criteria that are often linked to human rights issues may affect a nation's own choices about what it wants to remember from its past.⁶¹ Dr. Nakano has observed that “MoW thus represents a pinnacle of the solidarist ambition to link memories and human rights in the age of globalization. . . . By ensuring the authenticity and significance of documentary heritage, UNESCO exercises its authority to define what to remember from the past for future generations.”⁶² She could take the argument further. In its support of the “diversity of cultures” across member states – a concept that must include the diversity of historical memory – UNESCO is explicitly “prohibited from intervening in matters which are essentially within their domestic jurisdiction.”⁶³

The MoW Register: Public Access and Impact

Inscription on the International Register is intended to raise awareness of our documentary heritage and to promote public access. For this, the online version of the Register is the visible public face of the MoW program. As such, it must be as attractive, engaging, and informative as the excellent interpretive centres associated with major world heritage sites. At present, the online edition of the Register does scant justice to the time, energy, professional commitment, and cost involved in the nomination process. Inscription has indeed become the focus, with public presentation a distant afterthought. The entries in the register follow no known descriptive, cataloguing, or resource discovery standard. The

61 A former chair of the IAC (2009–13) has emphasized the MoW's role in “providing international visibility to human rights documentary heritage,” Roslyn Russell, “Human Rights Inscriptions on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register,” *Human Rights Defender* 24, no. 2 (2015): 13–18.

62 Ryoko Nakano, “A Failure of Global Documentary Heritage? UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' and Heritage Dissonance in East Asia,” *Contemporary Politics* 24, no. 4 (2018): 481–96, 487. The author sees the solution in a convention that balances expert and political perspectives and concludes, “Only when the contested memories are reconciled among the actors concerned can UNESCO's MoW programme become a space for inscribing global documentary heritage” (493). Cultural nationalism in heritage issues is also addressed in Keough, “Heritage in Peril,” 604–606; and in Harvey, “UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme,” 268–72.

63 UNESCO, *Constitution* (16 November 1945 and amended), Article 1.3, accessed 14 February 2019, http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/UNESCO_E.PDF.

title page for each entry is uninformative. The descriptive pages are edited versions of the nominations, with no story line. Over 60 entries are grouped under one word: the.

The potential for presenting the Register to the public in an engaging way has been amply demonstrated by a well-illustrated book published by UNESCO in 2012, with informative entries that indicate why the documents are important to world history. Similarly, books presenting all MoW inscriptions or selections have been published in Australia, China, and the Asia-Pacific region.⁶⁴ Print editions, though, are rapidly dated as new inscriptions are added. A more accessible and inclusive approach would be to have all inscribed documents available online, linked and searchable through a new MoW website. This would provide essential global visibility, lasting recognition, and growing prestige under the UNESCO banner.

Documentary heritage in all media are suited to the Web. Many libraries and archives are demonstrating the popular interest and research potential of making millions of documents searchable online. The documentary record is shifting from being the least accessible heritage resource, handled with gloved hands in secure reading rooms, to being the most accessible resource for anyone with web access. The IAC has repeatedly urged the development of a modern MoW website to showcase the inscribed documents and to link them to other online resources. To assist with preserving documents at risk, a renewed website might also provide practical advice on how to preserve and digitize documents in all media in areas with limited technical facilities; it might also provide a user-friendly introduction to research and lesson plans designed to involve teachers and students at all levels in the educational system.

The limitations of the existing MoW website mean that the tangible impact of inscription on the International Register remains ill defined. The three evaluations done to date (in 1998, 2012, and 2017) do not present any evidence of enhanced support for preservation or public visibility of the documents. The initial inscription announcement provides a welcome, one-time opportunity for engaging the public. While the need for funding to support preservation

⁶⁴ UNESCO, *Memory of the World* (Paris: UNESCO; Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2012), 607 pp.; Ray Edmondson, Andrew Henderson, Misako Ito, Dianne Macaskill, and Kamonwan Petchot, eds., *Memory of the World: 20 Years of MOWCAP – Documentary Heritage on the Asia-Pacific Register* (Gwangju: MOWCAP Asia Culture Institute, 2018), 109 pp.; Roslyn Russell and Anne-Marie Condé, eds., *The Australian Register: UNESCO Memory of the World Program* (Canberra: UNESCO Australian MoW Committee, 2015).

and public awareness following inscription has been discussed many times, no central UNESCO fund has been established. Contrary to the founding intentions for the MoW, and with the now dominant criterion of global significance, few of the inscribed materials appear to be at risk. Many are clearly national treasures and seem secure. While inscriptions have been made over two decades, the program has never been able to follow up to verify that preservation and access plans have been implemented. Hence, there are no grounds on which to consider revoking an inscription. The threat of possibly revoking an inscription might motivate an institution's funding authority to act, as has been the experience with deteriorating heritage sites.

The MoW Register: Contested Nominations

The 2017 report from the IAC recognized the challenges of dealing with contested nominations. Much of the discussion at the Berlin expert forum meeting in March 2017 focused on this issue and built on the approach proposed by the working group on statutes. The resulting recommendation to UNESCO was shaped by a commitment to transparency: requiring all nominations to be posted online and allowing time for comments and concerns, on-site examination, research, dialogue, and when necessary, mediation.⁶⁵ The IAC chose not to include these processes in the proposed revised statutes, which the executive board would control, but left them to the less formal rules and guidelines, which can be amended by the IAC. The UNESCO executive board, following a lengthy and futile discussion on the matter, resolved to continue the review in consultation with the secretariat and member states.⁶⁶

The chair of the IAC subsequently suggested a more definitive approach to the secretariat. This would recognize the fundamental nature of archival documents as evidence, both legal and historical, and would include in the statutes a provision that documentary heritage that constitutes key evidence in continuing major international disputes or in matters before the International Court of Justice or other international bodies would not be considered for inscription. Seeking

⁶⁵ See *Final Report by the International Advisory Committee*, 202 EX/15, 6, Annex 1, 7.

⁶⁶ UNESCO Executive Board, *Decisions Adopted by the Executive Board at its 204th Session*, 204 EX/Decisions, section 8, 13.

inscription on the Register as a means of reinforcing some national claim or perspective would no longer be possible. Rather, the nominating process should provide an opportunity for reconciliation and healing. The MoW and the IAC remain effectively suspended until UNESCO can resolve this matter.

New Paths and Opportunities

The 2017 report from the IAC is realistic and practical. Equally, UNESCO budget documents clearly indicate that new resources beyond one-time, special contributions must be sought elsewhere. As various major corporations have demonstrated in recent years, in the knowledge economy, information – especially unique, structured, usable information – is immensely profitable. While both librarians and archivists are deeply committed to ensuring open public access to information resources, many are exploring innovative partnerships with the private sector either to achieve this end or to provide value-added information services that would not otherwise be feasible. The MoW program has definite assets: its global network of memory institutions, its database of key documents, its committed professional volunteers, and its experience in preservation and public access. The “memory of the world” is a powerful concept, and while little known, thus far has extraordinary potential as a global brand.

The first MoW marketing committee report (1996)⁶⁷ raised the possibility of developing the MoW brand and licensing use of the logo – for defined time periods and subject to appropriate commitments and standards – to private sector products and services related to documentary heritage. Major corporations or foundations sharing a commitment to permanence of knowledge might be interested in associating themselves with the MoW, either through advertising on a dynamic new MoW website or by licensing use of the MoW brand and logo. There is potential. Investment will be required, to build brand recognition and to establish appropriate conditions, as will administrative flexibility and openness to innovation.

67 UNESCO MoW Marketing Sub-Committee, “Notes from the First Meeting of the Marketing Sub-Committee, Oslo, Norway, 10–12 July 1996,” accessed 2 September 2018, http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/mow/mow_1st_marketing_sub_committee_notes_en.pdf.

Strategic Partnerships

The broad goals of the MoW program are now actively shared by other, successful, international initiatives. Two examples suggest the potential for the MoW if it is willing to move from its splendid isolation and to engage with willing partners.

The World Digital Library (WDL),⁶⁸ an online collaboration involving 193 countries, was launched in 2009 by the US Library of Congress with the support of UNESCO. UNESCO has a representative on the WDL's executive board, and the WDL's objectives are fully aligned with those of MoW. The technology base is robust, the search engine is strong, and the commitment of the Library of Congress ensures sustainability. In fact, the minutes of the MoW International Advisory Committee meeting in May 2011 state that "during the January meeting of the WDL Executive, it was decided that applicants submitting new items for a MoW register would also be required to propose them, subject to rights and other authorizations, for inclusion in the WDL, based on WDL selection criteria."⁶⁹ This decision has not been implemented.

In 2005, the British Library secured significant continuing funding from the Arcadia Fund to launch the Endangered Archives program, which provides a series of "grants each year to enable researchers to locate vulnerable archival collections, arrange their transfer wherever possible to a suitable local archival home, and deliver digital copies into the international research domain via the British Library."⁷⁰ For example, the program has provided multi-year funding to digitize fragile Arabic manuscripts in Djenné, Mali. The program is fully in tune with the objectives of the MoW, and indeed, it is carrying out its original intent: helping to preserve and open access to archives at risk.

Though these examples are limited to Europe and North America, other potential partners are active in other regions of the world. MoW requires resources to be an active partner, but the authority and convening power of UNESCO, coupled with the MoW brand, could extend the impact of these other initiatives, all to the advantage of world documentary heritage.

68 World Digital Library homepage, <https://www.wdl.org/en/>.

69 UNESCO, *10th Meeting of the International Advisory Committee, Memory of the World Programme, Manchester, United Kingdom, 22–25 May 2011: Report*, accessed 14 February 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234043>.

70 "Endangered Archives Programme: Grant Documentation," British Library, accessed 14 February 2019, <http://eap.bl.uk/grants>.

Memory of the World Program within UNESCO

The status of the Memory of the World program within UNESCO has been a continuing concern, discussed by the IAC from time to time since 1995. Unlike in the cultural and natural heritage, intangible heritage, and underwater heritage programs, there is no international convention for documentary heritage. This seems an unusual omission as the 1945 Constitution of UNESCO, article 1.2 (c), explicitly gives priority to the “protection of the world’s inheritance of books” and calls for “the necessary international conventions.”⁷¹ As noted above, the experts who met in Warsaw in 2012 were divided but finally advised “UNESCO to develop a normative instrument in the form of a Recommendation on preservation and access to documentary heritage.”⁷² This was seen as a means to enhance “national legislative and implementation strategies as needed, alongside the strengthening and development of the Memory of the World Programme.”⁷³ The normative recommendation was intended to be accompanied by direct action to reinforce all aspects of the program. The experts again called on UNESCO to provide adequate resources and added ten specific action steps. While the Recommendation has been achieved and provides advice to member state governments, UNESCO has ignored its own responsibilities. Most steps would not be difficult and would simply require the will to act.

The library and archives communities have invested considerable time, effort, and hope in the multi-year process required to adopt the Recommendation, which is a confident assertion of the significance of documentary heritage and of its challenges. It has the potential to raise awareness, among national governments, of the fundamental values of all forms of documentary heritage, and it enables librarians, archivists, and other concerned parties to enlist the influence of UNESCO in advancing policies and initiatives to preserve and make accessible this aspect of national heritage. The UK National Commission for UNESCO has issued an excellent policy brief highlighting this impact.⁷⁴

71 UNESCO, *Constitution*.

72 UNESCO Executive Board, “Recommendations of Experts’ Meeting, 8–10 May 2012,” Annex to *Report by the Director-General on the Experts’ Meeting*, 1.

73 *Ibid.*

74 UK National Commission for UNESCO, *Practical Considerations for the UK in Applying and Communicating the new UNESCO Recommendation on Protecting Documentary Heritage including in Digital Form*, Policy Brief 22 (London: UK National Commission for UNESCO, July 2016), accessed 7 May 2017, <https://www.unesco.org.uk/publication/protecting-documentary-heritage/>.

An implementation plan for the 2015 recommendation is being discussed in regional meetings, and the first national reports are due soon. While it is an invaluable declaration and a definite step forward, the text of the Recommendation hints at compromise. Looking beyond its proud words and sentiments reveals its limitations:

- There is no responsibility on the part of UNESCO – no expectations, no action, no program evaluation criteria – and little involvement on the part of the IAC.
- The MoW program is mentioned, but the necessary legal framework remains missing.
- Action is left to national governments, reporting every four years.
- In asking governments to take action, the Recommendation justifies preservation of documentary heritage largely on cultural grounds, without noting its vital importance to education, science, innovation, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- The Recommendation does not make the compelling case that action on the role of archives in modern recordkeeping systems is essential to the rule of law, accountability, evidence-based decision making, and the legal defence of sovereignty and rights; nor does it make a case for records retention for sustainable governance.

Experience since its adoption suggests that, even within UNESCO, the 2015 recommendation has failed to “equally increase visibility and heighten awareness”⁷⁵ of documentary heritage. Resources have remained minimal in comparison with those of the World Heritage Centre and other heritage initiatives. The chairpersons of the six cultural conventions have been meeting to discuss matters in which librarians and archivists have considerable experience, but

75 UNESCO Executive Board, *Preservation and Access to Documentary Heritage, Part 11: Preliminary Study of the Technical, Financial and Legal Aspects on the Desirability of a Standard-Setting Instrument*, 191 EX11 (Paris: UNESCO, 2013), 2, accessed 7 March 2019, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000219809.locale=en>.

without inviting the MoW.⁷⁶ UNESCO's public presentations in defence of preserving cultural heritage seldom mention fragile documentary and digital heritage. In UNESCO's official vocabulary, the concepts "world heritage" and "cultural heritage" do not include documentary heritage. The dynamic UNESCO #Unite4Heritage campaign has not engaged the MoW or the IAC and ignores the 2015 recommendation. Similarly, the strong UN Security Council *Resolution 2347* (24 March 2017)⁷⁷ makes passing reference to libraries and archives but omits reference to the 2015 recommendation while focusing on other aspects of world heritage. More recently, mention of documentary heritage and MoW is entirely missing from the report to the April 2017 UNESCO executive board on the strategy for the protection of culture in the event of armed conflict.⁷⁸ Initiatives on safe havens for the protection of movable cultural property,⁷⁹ on copyright, on freedom of expression, and on the knowledge society would benefit from the expertise of librarians and archivists.

Reviewing the experience of the MoW IAC also reveals systemic issues within UNESCO. The relationship between the organization and an advisory committee of volunteers is ill defined and open to conflicting expectations. Communication has been limited and explanations are frequently missing. Advisors expect to be consulted. Staff members are as dedicated and motivated as the volunteers, but they must translate the IAC's advice and ambition into an uncertain and shifting administrative structure where policy rests with member states and the executive board. For those accustomed to modern governance, UNESCO appears highly compartmentalized, rule-bound, and inflexible. Well intentioned commitments fade in the corridors, and the enthusiasm of the meeting chills in the face of complex decision making or indifference and despairs of action. Interactions have been at their best in developing policy or normative instruments, but direct

⁷⁶ See their joint statement on common issues at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1305>.

⁷⁷ United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 2347* (2017), accessed 9 March 2018, [http://undocs.org/S/RES/2347\(2017\)](http://undocs.org/S/RES/2347(2017)).

⁷⁸ UNESCO Executive Board, *Follow-Up to Decisions and Resolutions Adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference at their Previous Sessions*, 201 EX/5 Part 1 (E) (Paris: UNESCO, March 2017), accessed 2 September 2018, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002477/247706e.pdf>.

⁷⁹ See "Draft Guiding Principles for Safe Havens for Archives at Risk," Archives and Dealing with the Past, 2 February 2018, accessed 8 January 2019, <http://archivesproject.swisspeace.ch/news/current-singleview/article/draft-guiding-principles-for-safe-havens-for-archives-at-risk/>. The guidelines were adopted by the International Council on Archives in November 2018.

involvement of volunteer experts in program issues has been frustrating for many.

Professor Klaus Hüfner, who has more than 40 years' active involvement in UNESCO governance, has written a book with a sad reflection on his experience. In *What Can Save UNESCO?*, Hüfner observes that, structurally, UNESCO no longer has an intellectual or visionary component to balance or inspire the executive board. The need for reform has been obvious to many for some time, and he seeks to understand the inertia and the resistance to new ideas. While reform is difficult, he pleads, "but someone must dare to try."⁸⁰

Toward Resolution: A Documentary Heritage Convention

Twenty-seven years after the program's launch, Memory of the World remains a powerful concept – a compelling vision motivating the professional commitment of librarians and archivists, deeply rooted in the human compulsion to understand ourselves and the societies we have inherited. Documentary heritage, carrying the words, images, and voices of those who have gone before us, conveys and maintains our intellectual legacy. This is the gift of all preceding generations to us. We learn from the experience, the wisdom, and the dreams of the past; add our modest contribution; and pass it forward to the unexplored future. All our experience – all our knowledge – is of the past; all our decisions are about the future. Our laws and our beliefs have their foundations in books and records. They are our collective memory, increasingly global and available to all who are connected to the Web, and now as fleeting as new technology. Selecting what has enduring value, preserving it, and ensuring its accessibility long into the future are global responsibilities. This is integral to the mandate of all sectors of UNESCO.

The rapid transition to digital recordkeeping systems, data, and communication adds considerable urgency to the need for an effective Memory of the World program. Governments, institutions, scientific research, NGOs, corporations, and media are shifting to digital and now to the cloud. Effective and trustworthy recordkeeping over time enables us to assess the impact of the United Nations' strategic Sustainable Development Goals. However, records in all digital formats are at risk due to obsolescence of hardware and software, and memory is useful only for a few years; analysts are raising the spectre of a "digital dark age," as we

⁸⁰ Klaus Hüfner, *What Can Save UNESCO?* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2016), 35.

forget.⁸¹ Awareness programs, research, training, and tools for memory professions are in high demand.

While the Memory of the World as a concept is brilliant, the program contains a deep flaw: the increasing, now almost exclusive, focus on the Register. The review of nominations must be an intensely professional process, requiring the effort of many experts on and off the IAC, detailed discussions with nominators, and difficult decisions. The recent controversies regarding contested nominations and the persistent efforts by diplomats to be involved have added complexity. Other countries have watched, and most likely, the IAC will soon be considering nominations of documents on various sides of genocides, massacres, border disputes, and human rights issues. While the inscription of world heritage sites has become a matter of diplomatic interest, lobbying, and manoeuvring, the emphasis has been on tourism, economic benefit, and prestige.⁸² Attempts to introduce diplomatic and political perspectives into decisions for the MoW Register reflect different, often more powerful motivations: identity, legal rights, and national narratives. The MoW has repeatedly explained that inscription recognizes the documents and does not imply any endorsement or interpretation of the content. It asserts,

Inscription is not about UNESCO making a moral or historiographical judgement on the content of the nominated item beyond an objective assessment of its influence on the course of history.⁸³

- 81** Vint Cerf, Google Chief Internet Evangelist, has raised public awareness of the fragility of digital hardware and software. Memory remains useful only for a few years, and analysts are raising the spectre of a “digital dark age.” See for example Vint Cerf, “Digital Vellum and Archives,” presentation, FASTER CoP, 12 August 2016, accessed 8 March 2018, <https://www.nitrd.gov/nitrdgroups/index.php?title=DigitalVellumAndArchives>. James Bridle takes a more comprehensive approach in his new book, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018).
- 82** The UK estimates that, while it contributes £11 million a year to UNESCO, it derives £100 million a year in value from the designation of heritage sites. Emily Thornberry, “UK Withdrawal from UNESCO Would Be Historical and Cultural Vandalism,” *Guardian*, 13 November 2018; and Lynn Meskill, “UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention at 40: Challenging the Economic and Political Order of International Heritage Conservation,” *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 4 (August, 2013): 483–94.
- 83** UK National Commission for UNESCO, *UNESCO International Memory of the World Register: Response and Recommendations regarding the International Advisory Committee’s Review*, Policy Brief 23 (London: UK National Commission for UNESCO, February 2017), 4, accessed 19 September 2018, <https://www.unesco.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/UKNC-Policy-Brief-23.pdf>.

Given that documents derive their significance from the context of their creation and use and their meaning from the content, this distinction has been difficult for the professions to articulate and impossible for journalists to comprehend. As any government archivist well knows, archives constitute legal and historical evidence. The past is not a harmonious place. The IAC should not be expected to resolve international historical claims that have been simmering for decades. In fact, UNESCO itself needs to recognize that it is neither structured nor equipped to function as an international tribunal on contentious historical issues.

The contested nominations have provided eloquent testimony to the continuing power of the record and the importance of memory in current international relations. National governments have sought ways to be involved, making it apparent that neither the MoW's structure nor the 2015 recommendation provides an opportunity for consideration of national perspectives. Unlike in other major UNESCO heritage programs, the member states have no forum for discussion or dialogue and no oversight in the direction of the MoW program – and hence, no tangible commitment. Most agree, as they did in approving the 2015 recommendation, on the vital importance of libraries and archives, but they have not been engaged in the wider vision of the program. As an operational program with no legal standing, run by experts and staff without diplomatic involvement, it lies outside the normal structures of the organization. It is an anomaly, often an orphan. The result has been many years of benign neglect, with minimal staffing and funding.⁸⁴

Building on the international concern about the contested nominations, the extensive review led by the IAC, and the momentum from the work to achieve the 2015 recommendation, it is now time to move toward a convention that parallels the other heritage conventions. As currently structured and administered, it is clear that the Memory of the World program represents a critical risk to UNESCO. A documentary heritage convention, informed and cautioned by the experience of other heritage conventions but respecting and seeking the appropriate balance between professional judgment and the engagement of member states, is now urgently needed in the MoW program.

⁸⁴ For comparisons of resources and organizational issues related to heritage conventions, see Michael Heaney, "The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme," *Alexandria: The Journal of National and International Library Issues* 26, no. 1 (2016).

Memory of the World still has power and immense potential. The IAC review, when linked to the comments of other observers, suggests that the MoW program is a microcosm of the challenges that bedevil UNESCO. After repeated false starts, UNESCO needs to be honest about whether it is open to advice on strengthening the program and exploring the obvious synergies across all its heritage initiatives. Can UNESCO, through its current strategic transformation process, allow administrative flexibility in developing a modern MoW web presence, reviving partnerships, and considering new funding models? The UNESCO secretariat, diplomats, and the professions have shown they can work together in pursuit of a shared policy vision. Librarians and archivists worldwide have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to deliver effective programs with minimal resources. All who are concerned about the success of UNESCO now need to collaborate, innovate, and move forward with courage.

BIOGRAPHY Ian E. Wilson began his archival career at the Queen's University Archives. Appointed as Provincial Archivist, first in Saskatchewan (1976–86) and then Ontario (1986–99), he served as the seventh National Archivist (1999–2004) and the first Librarian and Archivist of Canada (2004–09). Active internationally with the Conseil international de la Table ronde des archives, he chaired a series of annual meetings in Reykjavik (2001), Marseilles (2002), and Cape Town (2003), and as President of the International Council on Archives (2008–10), he helped initiate the AtoM open source software project. He is currently Special Advisor to the Director-General of the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates.