

Liberating Knowledge: Removing barriers to evidence-based policy and decision making.

The archive practitioners' perspective

Policy Paper

Heather Faulkner, Senior Archivist - Research and Access
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Abstract

Refugees' lives are to a considerable extent affected by decisions taken by others, in so far as they rely on the support of host communities and governments, NGOs, international organisations, private sector sponsors and others to find protection, assistance, shelter and improved livelihoods. These decision-making bodies make choices every day. Such choices include policy direction, investment and funding decisions, resource allocation, adoption and interpretation of legal positions and the targeting of advocacy and communication pieces. The debates around those choices, and the decisions that are reached, form part of the historical record.

Reflecting on reliable evidence of experience, impact and outcomes of previous refugee situations to inform decisions **can make future measures, operations and interventions more effective.**

This can also **foster public dialogue based upon recorded experience and source-driven knowledge**, as opposed to hindsight, assumption and potentially misleading or biased information sources.

Encouraging refugees, the displaced and stateless persons to access source material to help them tell their own stories is a way of **empowering those communities to contribute to the public discourse.**

Many organisations are custodians of institutional knowledge which is often under-exploited and inaccessible to those who would be well placed to analyse the information contained therein. In this policy paper, **the ways in which the archives have been managed and made accessible for research by UNHCR are examined, and the potential impact of that accessibility is assessed.**

Committing to archival accessibility requires overcoming obstacles and barriers, including policy gaps, archival obscurity due to lack of knowledge, metadata or finding aids to assist with the identification, location and navigation of collections, lack of resources or tools to run an archives service and the lack of political will to commit internally-produced content to public scrutiny. Agencies with resources, expertise and leverage should use means at their disposal to encourage adoption of basic pillars of accessibility to archives.

1. The UNHCR Archives - Background

UNHCR has been creating permanent records (archives) since its foundation in 1951 and since then has systematically relied upon that recorded knowledge in its internal decision making and operations, at HQ and the field. The UNHCR Archives as an institution, however, is a more recent creation. Responsible for information management policy, platforms and content, physical and digital preservation, and access to institutional knowledge and memory, the Records and Archives Section was created in 1996 at the instigation of former High Commissioner Sadako Ogata. The first major task was to create some order to UNHCR's newly decentralized recordkeeping after the abolition of the Central Registry (a HQ, paper-based centralized filing regime), and Records Management quickly gained a prominent role in the work of the Section, whilst the repositories – physical and digital - steadily filled with records acquired from Headquarters divisions, regional bureaux and the field. Significantly, at the end of Ogata's tenure in 2000, UNHCR opened its archives for public research for the first time, under the terms of a policy specifying the conditions for declassification of UNHCR's internal records for general access¹².

Archival consultations have increased steadily year-on-year and as more records are declassified for public review; the number of published academic studies on refugees, displaced and stateless persons has seen a corresponding, and remarkable upward trend³. Furthermore, the archives team have regionalized records management operations to provide enhanced support to records creators in regional bureaux; country, field and emergency operations, as well as continued support to functions in Headquarters locations.

An innovative programme of Digital Preservation has been launched to ensure that wherever possible contemporary digital records are created, captured and maintained in a manner that enables the research resources of tomorrow to be protected against format to the use of convenient obsolescence, corruption, reader-software incompatibility and straightforward data loss due but transient digital communication and storage tools and platforms⁴⁵.

¹ Ayako Kobayashi. "Sadako Ogata and UNHCR Archives". Cosmopolis. 2023. 17 <https://digital-archives.sophia.ac.jp/repository/view/repository/20230330012>, accessed 29 June 2023.

² The UNHCR archives access policy has evolved slightly since 2000 to take into account changes in the data protection legal landscape, but the conditions of access remain largely unchanged in 2023. The current access policy is available on the website: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/36900>, accessed 29 June 2023.

³ Filippo Dionigi and Domenico Tabasso "Academic Trends in Forced Displacement" 2020 (UNHCR Reference Paper) https://www.unhcr.org/people-forced-to-flee-book/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2021/10/Filippo-Dionigi-and-Domenico-Tabasso_Academic-Trends-in-Forced-Displacement.pdf Figure 5, page 8. Accessed 29 June 2023.

⁴ Further exploration of this subject can be found in "The Lives and After Lives of Data" Christine L. Borgman. Harvard Data Science Review, Issue 1.1 Summer 2019. <https://hdr.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/4giycvuj/release/8>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵ Profile of UNHCR Archives and Records on the Digital Preservation Coalition Website <https://www.dpconline.org/events/digital-preservation-awards/dpa2020-unhcr>, accessed 29 June 2023.

1.1 UNHCR's ITHACA Objective: Liberating knowledge

UNHCR's involvement in the Horizon 2020 funded ITHACA project is slightly unusual for a Research Consortium, insofar as that the UNHCR Archives does not employ researchers, per se, but archivists. Rather, the archives team has worked to remove obstacles to research by acquiring, organising, documenting, preserving, and making accessible institutional knowledge so that researchers may draw upon these unique primary resources.

The term 'researcher' is a generic one which belies a diversity of interests and informational needs. It can apply to internal UNHCR staff and affiliate workforce in all functions and global locations; operational partners including NGOs, IGOs and governments; external researchers including academics, educators, journalists, writers, documentary makers, biographers and occasional artists; and of course, refugees, forcibly displaced and stateless persons seeking information about themselves, their families and the experiences of their communities and diaspora.

The archival fonds within scope of the documentation project include:

UNHCR Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry 1951-1994; Series 3 (1985-1994)

UNHCR Fonds 11 represents the most important source of knowledge created by UNHCR during the first 43 years of its existence. As a largely centralized agency during this period in its history, all correspondence incoming and outgoing through the Geneva headquarters mail room – including correspondence with and reports from UNHCR's field officers and operations as well as with external parties; was copied, coded according to subject and geographical relevance, and filed in accordance with an alpha-numeric filing structure. As such, files exist containing primary source material on almost every refugee situation within UNHCR's mandate during the period covered.

Catalogues and finding aids for records of the Central Registry up to 1985 (comprising Series 1: 1951-1970, and Series 2: 1970-1985) have been publicly accessible to public researchers through the UNHCR webpage since 1999 and 2007 respectively⁶. The remaining unpublished series (1985-1994), the subject of the cataloguing project, was split into two sub-series; the 1985 microfiche and the remaining 1986-1994 paper registry files⁷.

- **1985 Microfiche (inventory, arrangement and digitization)**

In 1985, UNHCR experimented with a space-saving initiative, and chose to transfer to microfilm all registry content received that year, destroying the corresponding physical records. The experiment quickly failed due to the frustrations of staff unable to access their

⁶ Catalogue development was funded by the Ford Foundation for Fonds 11 Series 1 (1951-1970); and the Geneva International Academic Network (GIAN) for Series 2 (1970-84).

⁷ The Central Registry was abolished as a filing system in 1994 and replaced with decentralized filing practices. These records are outside the scope of the ITHACA project.

records without ready access to the microfiche reader machines, and the Central Registry returned to paper filing practices in 1986.

The microfiche content has remained largely inaccessible. No reliable inventory of fiche had been created, and declassifying microfiche content proved problematic due to the impossibility of redacting pages containing data-protected refugee biodata from a file fixed in a microfiche format.

Project funding sought to remove these access barriers by:

- Creating an accurate inventory of microfiche files
- Digitizing the microfiche to PDF(A) format, for future accessibility and redactability
- Ingesting the digitized content to UNHCR's Digital Preservation System (DPS)
- Publishing the catalogue in UNHCR's online catalogue for research dissemination.

The digitization of 15,000 microfiche is now complete; the ingest of content to the DPS and preparation of the catalogue will be finished during 2023.

- **1986-1994 Registry paper files (inventory and arrangement)**

The files of the Central Registry 1986-1994 comprise more than 21,000 individual files, occupying 1,319 linear metres of shelf space. This represents an eight-fold increase in volume from the equivalent series from 1971-1984⁸— largely due to advances in communications, reprographics and distribution technology leading to a greater frequency of information exchange, hence a greater volume of archival content and available source material.

An accurate inventory of this extensive series was created as part of the ITHACA project and arranged into logical subseries in accordance with the original subject file plan. The finalized catalogue was uploaded to UNHCR's online archives catalogue in February 2023⁹.

Together, the microfiche and paper files of the third series of the Central Registry represent the largest public catalogue release in the history of UNHCR archives. As a result, source material relevant to research subjects such as the immediate period after the Cartagena Declaration in November 1984, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988, the Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees in 1989, the Namibian repatriation of 1989, the wars in the Former Yugoslavia 1991-1995 and the Gulf War of 1991 have been made accessible for study.

⁸ Fonds 11 Series 2 (1971-1984) occupies 166 linear metres of shelf space. Whilst some of the volume difference may be explained by repackaging and appraisal/destruction of some subseries in the earlier collection, the increased size and number of volumes in the later series is marked.

⁹ The catalogue is available at the following URL: <http://adlib-ras.unhcr.org/ais5/Details/archive/110015600>, accessed 29 June 2023.

UNHCR Fonds 17: Records Relating to Protection; Sub-Fonds 2 – Records of the Division of International Protection (1954-1994)

The second archival collection processed as part of the ITHACA project was the records created by offices within the UNHCR Headquarters Division of International Protection. These records were created in parallel with the UNHCR Central Registry, and represent the day-to-day working files of those charged with implementing UNHCR's legal mandate to offer international protection to refugees, stateless persons and the displaced.

The archival collection comprises 1,495 individual files, and was created without a predictable or organized file plan, and minimal supporting metadata about the provenance of the files. The project archivist created an inventory of content, analysing dates, file types, subject matter and researching the history of the Division of International Protection to restore an order to the archival sub-fonds that would allow researchers to understand and access the archival content with an awareness of the records' original context.

The catalogue arrangement of the files described give a historical window into the legal work UNHCR conducted during its first 40 years; including the records of the Indemnification Programme (predominantly 1960s-1970s) by which persons persecuted by the Nazi regime could apply for reparations; information on UNHCR's efforts to persuade countries to accede to both the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The Assets Records Unit files gives a unique perspective on the compensation scheme offered to Stateless Ugandan Asians expelled from their homes, properties and businesses in the early 1970s. Subject files containing UNHCR's work on and analysis of emerging issues affecting the implementation of refugee law including but not limited to Rescue at Sea, Statelessness, and the emerging AIDS epidemic of the 1980s provide a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the work of those tasked to find solutions.

The catalogue will be published, and the files made accessible for research by the end of 2023.

2. Archives and research as tools for decision makers

Having established the scope and objectives of the project, it is a logical next step to assess the impact of having an open and accessible archive regime upon the way refugee issues are discussed and debated, and the effect that has upon policy makers, advocates and refugee communities¹⁰. Examples of how the records catalogued as part of the ITHACA project have been used by the UNHCR research community will be examined, but as some of these catalogues have yet to be published, the uses of files released under previous UNHCR archival access projects and initiatives will also be considered in order to demonstrate the value of archival accessibility in the humanitarian sector. The following analysis will address this question:

How can humanitarian archives, such as those made accessible by this project, be used to support evidence-based policy making?

This will be illustrated by considering several real-life research enquiries handled by the UNHCR archives in recent years.

2.1 Use case #1 Incorporation of experience into future strategy

An obvious way in which the archival record can be put to good use by policy and decision makers is to reflect on records of past experiences to evaluate the successes and failures of past operations, anchoring current operations within a historical context. In doing so, the viability of options going forward can be tested against similar past endeavours and assessed based on recorded evidence and impact.

Example 1: Rescue at Sea

One such example received by the UNHCR archives in 2022 was a request from the UNHCR operation in Tunisia, from the team coordinating UNHCR's response to the Western and Central Mediterranean situation and the alarming increase in dangerous journeys departing to Europe from the north coast of Africa for Europe¹¹.

The archivists were requested to locate records of initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s to save lives at sea of those fleeing Vietnam – the “Boat People” of whom an estimated 796,310 arrived primarily in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines having left Vietnam aboard small vessels between 1975 and 1995¹². The numbers lost at sea during this

¹⁰ The use of records in their primary capacity for the immediate protection needs of refugees registered by UNHCR, in civil and criminal legal cases and tribunals, and for administrative purposes are outside the scope of this policy paper.

¹¹ UNHCR Briefing Note 10 June 2022 “UNHCR data visualization on Mediterranean crossings charts rising death toll and tragedy at sea” <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-data-visualization-mediterranean-crossings-charts-rising-death-toll-and>, accessed 28 June 2023.

¹² UNHCR: “The State of the Worlds Refugees” OUP (2000) page 89 figure 4.2. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/state-worlds-refugees-2000-fifty-years-humanitarian-action-chapter-4-flight-indochina>, “accessed 29 June 2023.

perilous journey may never be known, but estimates put the numbers at between 10 and 15% of all those who attempted the journey¹³.

Colleagues in Tunisia were interested in an initiative established in the mid-1980s to provide insurance to shipping companies for the financial costs incurred for deviating from their commercial route to rescue refugees at sea. Whilst costs of initial deviation for the rescue would normally be covered by insurance, deviations from their route to deliver the refugees to shore would typically be uninsured, creating a disincentive for commercial shipping companies to intervene, which the international community attempted to rectify. The scheme was initially called the 'Rescue at Sea Reimbursement Project' and was later turned into a Trust Fund¹⁴. The colleagues consulted physical and digitized copies of available records, including records of meetings with various government and donor stakeholders, the International Chamber of Shipping and the Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO), the records of a Meeting of Experts on Rescue Operations for Refugees and Displaced Persons in Distress in the South China Sea Operations held in August 1979, Records of Anti-Piracy meetings and Guidelines for Disembarkation, amongst other archival sources^{15 16}.

UNHCR officers in the Mediterranean operation were therefore able to assess the obstacles to rescue at sea as experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the contemporary arguments for and against the compensation program, the financial cost to donors at that time and the practicalities of operating such a scheme. Considering the written experience of UNHCR in the 1980s, the operation for the Central and Western Mediterranean are in the process of assessing whether any of the lessons learned in the South China Sea would be suitable for application to the Mediterranean context in 2023, with the objective of creating conditions whereby lives of those taking on this very dangerous journey might be saved¹⁷.

Whilst this piece of research may have been instigated by UNHCR staff members, it is worth noting that the files consulted by colleagues in Tunisia have now been made available for public research as a product of the ITHACA funded cataloguing projects, permitting external parties the opportunity to analyse these same records with similar conditions of access and opportunities to amplify lessons learned from UNHCR's

¹³ W Courtland Robinson: *Terms of Refuge* (Zed Books, London, 1998) cites two sources, for 10-15% and around 10% (p 59). Given the number of arrivals, this would translate as 80-120,000 people although no records exist to verify with certainty how many people attempted the journey.

¹⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20221014142522/https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae68cbc20.html>, accessed 28 June 2023.

¹⁵ UNHCR Archives Fonds UNHCR 11: Records of the Central Registry; Series 2: "Resettlement Possibilities for Vietnamese Refugees - Rescue at Sea" [Vol.40] 1984 (11/2/52-528[an]); "NGOs - International Chamber of Shipping" 1975-1979 (11/2/41-410.ICRC.ICS); "International Conferences - Rescue at Sea" 1979-1981 (11/2/39-391/48).

¹⁶ UNHCR Archives Fonds 17 Sub-Fonds 2 Records of the Division of International Protection. "Law of the Sea – Rescue at the Sea, DISERO, RASRO" (1980-1994) (17/2/2/1/4-5); "Piracy 1" (1980- 1983) (17/2/2/1/5-1); "Piracy 2" (1983- 1984) (17/2/2/1/5-2).

¹⁷ Email correspondence between UNHCR Archives and Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Special Envoy for the Western and Central Mediterranean situation, June-November 2022.

recorded past experience. The Indochina situation of the 1970s-1990s is already an established and growing subject of research interest¹⁸, and such further analysis of internal UNHCR source material – for both this operation and others like it - can subsequently be drawn upon by policymakers both within and outside the agency to inform future strategies, actions and operations.

2.2 Use case #2 Media and Public Information

Beyond the immediate operational needs of UNHCR's operations, declassified archives can be used to engage with the media and public information outlets, to ensure that information driving the current affairs discourse is fact-checked, evidence driven and reliable.

Example 2A: Statistics of Displacement in the Former Yugoslavia

A recent example of this relates to the sudden and massive departure of civilians fleeing violent conflict in Ukraine in February/March 2022, whereby news outlets were keen to make comparisons between the displacement and emergency needs of the Ukrainian refugee caseload with the displacement caused by the wars in the Balkan region during the 1990s. The UNHCR archives team were contacted by UNHCR News and Media colleagues to ensure that responses given to reporters were accurate and evidence-based to the greatest degree possible.

Using statistical data and public statements released both during the immediate Balkans conflict and at the point of the Dayton agreement found in statistical databases, public information and the working records of the High Commissioner Sadako Ogata, figures of approximately 1.8¹⁹ displaced were provided to the media team, to allow the reporting of the developing Ukrainian situation to be placed within a recent European historical context, to help communicate the suddenness and gravity of the developing situation along Ukraine's borders.

Example 2B: Biafran Repatriation of Unaccompanied Minors

Another example of historical fact checking relates to the ability to supplant incorrect, or misinterpreted or incomplete information in the public domain with a critical revisiting of original source material.

UNHCR archives were contacted through a media officer in 2018 with an enquiry from a journalist writing an article on the 'lost children of Biafra'. Citing statistics available in academic papers²⁰ and NGO²¹ published material, the journalist wished to verify that 5,000 children had

¹⁸ UNHCR Archives Fonds 10c/PRE Press releases: "UNHCR to push for refugee returns in the former Yugoslavia" 25 June 1998 (UNHCR 10c/PRE-1998) cites a figure of 1.8 million displaced.

¹⁹ Email correspondence between UNHCR Archives and Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Special Envoy for the Western and Central Mediterranean situation, June-November 2022.

²⁰ Nathaniel H. Goetz "Humanitarian issues in the Biafra conflict" New Issues in Refugee Research, working paper 36, 2001.

²¹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230612134615/http://igboleague.org/global/echezona-project/>, accessed 28 June 2023.

been evacuated from the secessionist region of Biafra in the late 1960s, and yet only 3,900 were believed to have been repatriated and reunited with their families in Nigeria once the conflict had ended in the 1970s. The journalist wished to know whether over 1000 children had indeed been lost, and whether the international community had made efforts to trace the missing?

Using contemporary correspondence and reports in the files, the research results established that the number of children evacuated to Gabon and the Ivory Coast under the care of various aid agencies was reported as 4,600 in UNHCR correspondence (although the accuracy of this reported figure is unclear as UNHCR did not conduct the evacuation); the figure quoted in press articles was often given as 5,000²².

The repatriation, being a UNHCR operation, was more accurately documented, with a figure of 4,506 children returned to Nigeria on flights chartered by the agency between 9 November 1970 and 8 February 1971. Furthermore, attempts by UNHCR officers to ensure the full caseload had been accounted for led to further details – one child remained behind in Côte d'Ivoire and 16 had been sent to Europe for medical care. Attempts to identify with any certainty the number of children who had sadly died following their evacuation, many of whom had arrived severely malnourished due to the devastating conditions in their homeland, were in vain due to an absence of consistent or reliable recordkeeping. Nevertheless, estimates of between 12 and 25 deaths in Côte d'Ivoire and between 294-532 deaths in Gabon were reported back to HQ following a tour of local hospitals and correspondence with aid agencies²³.

Having processed these numbers, even within margins of error, it is possible to conclude that the story of 1,000 missing children does not correspond with the raw data held within these contemporary resources. No doubt more accurate figures could be acquired by undertaking further analysis of the archives of the voluntary agencies who undertook the evacuation and healthcare provision, should they be made available for research consultation²⁴.

²² For example, Bonny Ibhawoh relies on the New York times when discussing numbers of evacuees – the figure given as 4978 in an article from 1970. Ibhawoh, B. (2020). "Refugees, Evacuees, and Repatriates: Biafran Children, UNHCR, and the Politics of International Humanitarianism in the Nigerian Civil War". *African Studies Review*, 63(3). A comparison of NY times reported figures (page 576, with footnote page 590) with the archives of the aid agencies would be an interesting and valuable exercise but is outside the scope of this paper.

²³ UNHCR Archives: Fonds UNHCR 11 Records of the Central Registry Series 2: "Repatriation - Unaccompanied Children from Nigeria – General" 1970-1976 (11/2/61-610.GEN.NIG.UC[a]-[e]). 3626 children were repatriated from Gabon and 880 from Cote d'Ivoire.

²⁴ The archives of Terre des Hommes were transferred to the Cantonal Archives of Vaud in Switzerland in December 2017. <https://www.vd.ch/toutes-les-autorites/archives-cantonaux-vaudoises-acv/actualites/news/10478i-lhistoire-de-l-organisation-humanitaire-terre-des-hommes-passe-dans-les-mains-du-canton-de-vaud> Access to the archives of Caritas Germany, the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Order of Malta by researchers can be requested by contacting the relevant agencies directly.

These research case studies reconfirm the strong potential of source-based analysis to encourage reflective assessment and reassessment in public media outlets, whose reporting has the potential to influence public opinion, academic research, and policy makers alike. This is all the more important as the Biafra experience was largely responsible for UNHCR putting child welfare at the forefront of their recommendations in the first Emergency Handbook, in which third country resettlement and adoption of unaccompanied minors was explicitly discouraged²⁵. As this document has served as a foundation for UNHCR's protection principles in action, making the source material that influenced it available for widespread study enhances the knowledge available for those working in the field of refugee child protection to draw upon in the present. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis will be the subject of many studies to come, and therefore it is important that any information available to make contemporary reporting as free from misinformation as possible is well utilized.

2.3 Use case #3 Community memory and empowerment

The final use case for the UNHCR archives relates to the UNHCR's role as an 'accidental' custodian of community and personal memory. Unlike some archives which actively seek to acquire, record and document refugee experiences, such as the Archive of Migrant Memories²⁶ and the Living Refugee Archive²⁷ at the University of East London, UNHCR's archives are predominantly the by-products of the agency going about the pursuit of its mandate.

For example, a series of reports from the field may give the contemporary reader a window into the past, through the transcription of an interview with a refugee or a situation report cabled back from the field to HQ, but the primary purpose of that record was to deliver a determination of refugee status, to register a family for shelter and food, or to inform diplomats back in Geneva and New York what humanitarian needs and challenges existed on the ground. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the records created in the course of UNHCR's work do exert a powerful pull upon the imaginations and psyche of those affected by the historical events described in those texts.

Example 3A: Community Narratives

On a community level, for example, the curators of the Vietnamese Museum in Australia due to open in 2025 have requested access to the UNHCR archives to help them curate and

²⁵ UNHCR Archives: Fonds UNHCR 10c/PUB/1 (General Publications) "Handbook for Emergencies" 1981. Relevance of the Biafra experience to the recommendations made in the Emergency Handbook was confirmed in a conversation between the author and Nicholas Morris, former UNHCR staff member and one of the authors of the document, in May 2023.

²⁶ <https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/?lang=en>, accessed 29 June 2023.

²⁷ <https://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/>, accessed 29 June 2023.

tell their story²⁸, similarly the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum²⁹ have requested copies of documents to host within their museum, as UNHCR were very active there in 1971 – indeed the independence of Bangladesh took place against the backdrop of an intense refugee crisis – with an unprecedented influx of some 10 million refugees from East Bengal (then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) into neighbouring India³⁰.

Whilst the texts of the documents were authored by United Nations civil servants, their descriptions are undeniably powerful witnesses of the events that led to boundaries being redrawn and 10 million displaced.

Have now visited reception centres hospitals camps crossing points in Calcutta area Tripura and Assam depressed by situation and reign of terror which is obvious in faces of people which are stunned and some cases almost expressionless’ – so read an urgent cable to HQ from Charles H Mace, Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees from Calcutta on 15 May 1971. ‘...major upheaval has occurred which has created panic and flight. Saw many bullet wounded men, women and children also some dead. Arson rape and dispersal the common topic’³¹.

Clearly this record is not just a part of UNHCR’s institutional memory, but a recording of a highly traumatic and significant event in the history of the post-colonial Indian subcontinent. Where affected communities wish to tell their own histories, giving access to source material is an effective way to support their initiatives.

Example 3B: International Tracing

Beyond the collective community narrative, the importance of the archives to the individuals affected by the events described in the records cannot be overlooked. A recent piece of research by the International Committee of the Red Cross to involved a thorough search of available archives to find clues as to the fate of over 10,000 missing persons unaccounted for at the end of the Balkans wars of the 1990s³². As UNHCR was the lead humanitarian agency in the Former Yugoslavia during the period 1991-1996, an immense amount of documentation was generated by UNHCR’s officers at HQ and particularly in the field – from the highly political negotiations with leaders of armed factions, to the daily situation reports on the ground from UNHCR officers based in the field throughout the warzone.

Files consulted from the offices in Geneva, Pale, Banja Luka, Belgrade, Mostar, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Osijek and Topusko resulted in additional leads or information on the fate of 21 persons, and additional information or leads to 10 graves³³, some potentially containing dozens of bodies. Leads for further investigation were generated from diverse source material

²⁸ <https://vietnamesemuseum.com.au/>, accessed 29 June 2023.

²⁹ <https://www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/>, accessed 29 June 2023.

³⁰ Ria Kapoor: “Making Refugees in India” (Oxford Historical Monographs) Chapter 5: “10 Million Reasons for Self-Determination: the 1971 East Pakistani Crisis and its many Solutions” (2022).

³¹ Incoming Cable, Charles H. Mace to HQ 15/5/1971. UNHCR Archives, Fonds 11 Series 2 “Refugees from Pakistan in India” 1971 (11/2/10-100.IND.PAK[a] folio 99).

³² <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/missing-bosnia-herzegovina-croatia-serbia-kosovo>, accessed 29 June 2023.

³³ Data received by UNHCR Archives from ICRC Senior Researcher by email on 5 May 2023.

– sometimes originating from transcripts of displaced persons interviews with protection officers, other times from correspondence with UN, civil society and NGO partners.

It is difficult to know the impact upon a family who finally receives information on the fate of their loved one after some 30 years of uncertainty. But it is another example of how the repatriation of knowledge to affected communities as a result of archival research can have a meaningful impact. The archives originating from the operations in the former Yugoslavia are currently undergoing documentation and preservation tasks, with the objective of opening the files for general research under the regular terms of the UNHCR access policy.

Example 3C: Personal Reckonings

Other communications with former refugees seeking information from the UNHCR archives to tell their own stories have had happier outcomes. In 2018, UNHCR archives was contacted by a television company in Canada, seeking information on the identity of the captain that rescued a Vietnamese family at sea in 1981, in order for them to offer their belated thanks for saving their lives. The research resulted in a television programme during which the daughter, who was an infant at the time of the rescue, was reunited with the family of the Argentinian ship captain who brought them to safety in Singapore³⁴. Another enquiry received in 2014 from a former Vietnamese refugee, long since resettled in the USA, resulted in some records from the archive being shared; in particular, the report sent from Singapore to HQ detailing the experience of the refugees on this particular boat as told to a UNHCR officer. 104 refugees had been rescued, following 4 days at sea. During that time, they had run out of food and drinking water, been chased by pirates and were passed by 12 boats before finally being rescued by the thirteenth – a Bahamas-flagged vessel called the Tunisian Reefer³⁵.

The refugee in who had been in touch responded:

I was overwhelmed with emotions when I reviewed the information you provided. It's very important to me and my family ... The file you were able to find is the only document about a very personal event that has only existed in my memory up to this point. It is no less than my second birth certificate.

Again, it is difficult to quantify the impact of such personal refugee archival journeys on the overall landscape of creating a world in which the refugee can find protection and assistance at their moment and place of need. But as custodians of these 'second birth certificates' it certainly appears that the repatriation of this knowledge to those that lived through the events of the records is much appreciated by the recipients.

³⁴ "Deuxieme chance", ICI-Radio Canada, 12 January 2019 <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/tele/deuxieme-chance/site/episodes/423747/xuan-refugiee-vietnam-stephane-rencontre-camionneur-accident-route> accessed 29 June 2023

³⁵ "Boat Report" Memo from Welment van Aradenne, Acting Representative UNHCR Singapore, November 1987. UNHCR Archives Fonds 11 "Resettlement Possibilities for Refugees Rescued at Sea" 1987-88. (11/3/52-528 vol. 14).

By offering this kind of written memory back to affected populations and individuals, the power of story-telling passes beyond the boundary of the UNHCR sphere of control – giving the community the ability to ‘control the means through which stories about their past are constructed’³⁶. The potential of this knowledge sharing is immense – for example recent research is opening, for the first time, records relating to UNHCR’s earliest individual case files, **restoring the ‘narrative voice’ of the refugee to the historical debate**³⁷.

Whilst this may not directly affect the policy direction of an institution or agency, supporting the means of refugees, displaced and stateless persons to be vocal and active narrators of their own experiences empowers them to enter and influence the public discourse in their own words.

2.4 Obstacles to Archival Accessibility

As an institutional archive with an established and relatively open access policy, examining the ways in which UNHCR archives have been used for research purposes by various information consumers can be an enlightening exercise; increasing understanding of the multiple ways that the accessibility of archival records – directly and indirectly – can support the development of knowledge and evidence-based reflexes in decision making.

Showing the impact of archival research can serve as the foundation of a business case for action to overcome obstacles to archival accessibility.

There is no obligation for agencies to open their archives, however, and across the humanitarian sector, access arrangements are far from uniform³⁸. Many statements have been

³⁶ Michael Moss and David Thomas, eds: “Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and, Uncreated Archives” Routledge, 2021. Chapter 12 “Filling the gaps” page 233

³⁷ Peter Gatrell: “Raw Material: UNHCR’s Individual Case Files as a Historical Source, 1951–75”. History Workshop Journal Volume 92, Autumn 2021. NB this research was made possible due to a specific non-disclosure agreement negotiated between UNHCR and Professor Gatrell. Whilst UNHCR archives are keen to maximise the research potential of archival collections, compliance with UNHCR’s Data Protection Policy is a necessary precondition.

³⁸ Recent surveys are lacking on the exact state of access to humanitarian archives. Information can be gained from the following sources: Peterson, T (2005) “CWIHP Archives Update: Access to Archives of Intergovernmental Organizations” <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/cwihp-archives-update-access-to-archives-intergovernmental-organizations>; UNESCO, “Guide to the archives of intergovernmental organizations” 1999: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000115937>; and the report of the UN Joint Inspection Unit “Records and Archives Management in the United Nations” 2013: https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_document_files/products/en/reports-notes/JIU%20Products/JIU_REP_2013_2_English.pdf UNESCO published an updated directory between 2009 and 2014, after which it was taken offline but still accessible through the internet archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20161020141854/http://www.unesco.org/archives/sio/Eng/unfamily.php> All websites accessed 29 June 2023.

made and endorsed over the years recognizing the value and importance of archival records to global scholarship, including the International Council on Archives 2010 'Universal Declaration on Archives' adopted by UNESCO in 2011³⁹ and the Council of Europe's Recommendation No. R (2000) 13 on a European Policy on Access to Archives⁴⁰. Public accessibility has become a standard principle in many European government archives, but not necessarily in the humanitarian sector where investment in recordkeeping might appear a budgetary distraction from the core mission or mandate.

A record from the recently declassified files of High Commissioner Ogata sums up UNHCR's dilemma when considering whether to invest in the creation of an archives function, and to open the archives for public research.

The problem is, first of all, that UNHCR actually, you are absolutely right, destroys files; secondly that the files which are outside the public domain (the interesting documents, that is) are not properly recorded and thirdly, the main obstacle, that no one will be willing to take the risk of giving some researcher access to the files. In addition, UNHCR has no clear policy as regards what documents are open to the public and which ones are classified⁴¹.

Whilst this extract exposes the obstacles encountered by UNHCR in the early 1990s - retention policy, archival obscurity and disorganization, the lack of clear and impartial access rules, and unwillingness to invite scrutiny from outside remain clear and present obstacles to the creation of an open and transparent archives regime for many agencies and organisations. Budgetary concerns are also an ever-present factor - a telling conversation between a former UNHCR Director and UNHCR archivists in 2014 exposed this thinking very clearly – he advised that a business case for a Digital Preservation system should be water-tight and convincing, as budget controllers would consider how many 'Plumpy Nut' (Ready to Eat Therapeutic Food) bars could be purchased for malnourished child refugees with the funds required to purchase and implement the system⁴². With UNHCR experiencing a funding deficit of 700 million dollars in 2022⁴³, resources for recordkeeping functions are only committed after careful consideration of the risks, benefits and impact of the service on the realization of UNHCR's core mandate. For agencies without a history of observable research impact,

³⁹ The International Council on Archives Universal Declaration on Archives, 10 November 2011 <https://www.ica.org/en/universal-declaration-archives>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁴⁰ Recommendation No. R (2000) 13 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on a European policy on access to archives" (adopted 13 July 2000) <https://rm.coe.int/16804cea4f>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁴¹ Correspondence between Sir Michael Palliser (a UK Diplomat) and UNHCR HC Sadako Ogata, 26 October 1992 (Palliser is quoting from a letter to an academic in Oxford which is not included in the file). Records of the UNHCR Central Registry, Series. 3. "Communications and Records Management- Storage and Disposal of Old Files". 1987-1994. (11/3/25-253) The archives section was subsequently created in 1996 and the archives opened for public research in 2000.

⁴² Meeting between UNHCR Archivist and former Director of the UNHCR Division of External Relations. The business case was approved and the system successfully implemented in 2017.

⁴³ UNHCR Press Release "UNHCR's unprecedented US\$700m funding gap spells catastrophe for millions" 24 October 2022 <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/unhcrs-unprecedented-us700m-funding-gap-spells-catastrophe-millions> accessed 29 June 2023.

persuading management to take the risk and commit funds to research interests will be a challenge.

From the perspective of archivists fielding demand for information, we would argue that under-investment in archives – in a humanitarian, business, private or government archives, particularly at the current time, represents an unmanaged risk and a missed opportunity. In particular, the steady ascendancy of digital recordkeeping since the 1980s has created a body of knowledge which will, in most cases, not survive neglect as a box of paper might have done in the past. In 2015, UNHCR archives began a lengthy project to document unsorted archives transferred from UNHCR’s former field offices in the former Yugoslavia, which had been transferred to HQ shortly after the Dayton agreement was signed in 1995. If digital content was left unmigrated, unmanaged and unchecked for 19 years before an inventory was conducted, it would almost certainly be found to be unreadable.

Similarly, a recordkeeping mission to UNHCR Kinshasa in 2022 uncovered a previously undocumented and unresearched archive of individual case files documenting the arrival of refugees from throughout Africa since the 1960s, with personal tales of statelessness, persecution and freedom fighters finding refuge in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) against the backdrop of African decolonization. There was rodent and environmental damage, but the content remained legible, and plans are taking form to rescue the records for their research value. One could not expect the same time-tolerance for neglected digital content⁴⁴. Indeed UNHCR Archives have rescued a variety of at-risk digital resources, including an online computer game created as an advocacy tool created in Flash Player⁴⁵, the Resettlement Database of the Division of International Protection containing more than a decade of refugee biodata created in an obsolete version of Microsoft Access⁴⁶, and numerous websites which have since been taken offline⁴⁷.

Moss and Thomas identify a lack of records management and digital preservation as one of the factors contributing to ‘archival silences’ in the record of the 21st century, alongside the political power structures that might render certain sources inaccessible for research either through design or omission of non-establishment information resources by the recordkeeping

⁴⁴ Patricia Sleeman "It's Public Knowledge: The National Digital Archive of Datasets" Patricia Sleeman, *Archivaria* 58 (Autumn 2004) <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12483/13600>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁴⁵ See Tom Wison, Charlie Barbe and Patricia Sleeman "Against All Odds" (Digital Preservation Coalition Blog) October 2021 <https://www.dpconline.org/blog/wdpd/blog-patricia-sleeman-wdpd> for details of the preservation. The archives reference for the preserved computer game is UNHCR 10c/MM/AAO. Website accessed 29 June 2023.

⁴⁶ UNHCR Archives: Fonds 17 Subfonds 1 "Division of International Protection Resettlement Statistics Report". (UNHCR 17/1/DB-RSR).

⁴⁷ For example Kora; Voices of Refugees in West and Central Africa: <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20171225020402/http://kora.unhcr.org/> and https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/*/http://refugee-photo-project.unhcr.org/ This content was captured in the UNHCR web archive and has since been taken offline; the captured versions are the only content still accessible. Websites accessed 29 June 2023.

establishment⁴⁸⁴⁹. By extension, this can be read as a warning of a depressing future paradigm whereby only the records of institutions that have wealth to spare are able to commit the funding required for their records to endure.

The availability of future institutional knowledge for research, to the benefit of policy makers, refugees, communities and the delivery of the UNHCR's mandate, **depends upon timely interventions to ensure that records are captured early, maintained in systems that support their durability and accessibility, protected against obsolescence, corruption and loss**, as maintaining inventories of the technological environment required to access a record – the source code and operating systems – is **another layer of metadata crucial to the future readability** of the record in question, whether that is a database, an email, a digital report or a post on a website or social media.

⁴⁸ Moss, Michael S., and David Thomas (eds). "Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and, Uncreated Archives": Routledge, 2021. Chapter 12 "Filling the Gaps".

⁴⁹ See also Verne Harris "Archives, Politics and Justice" pages 173-182 in Political Pressure and the Archival Record Margaret Proctor, Michael Cook and Caroline Williams, eds. 2005 (The Society of American Archivists).

3. Policy recommendations

Having explored UNHCR's use cases for archives and explored the benefits of removing barriers to accessibility of records of research value held by voluntary, humanitarian and not-for-profit institutions, some proposals for overcoming these barriers follow.

1. PROMOTE ACCESSIBILITY STANDARDS IN ORGANISATIONS HOLDING RECORDS OF RELEVANCE TO HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH

The success of standard-setting in funded research projects, such as FAIR data principles⁵⁰ and open research data models⁵¹, has had a strong motivational effect on recipients of funding to upgrade their information management practices incorporating some of the basic principles of good data management and future research accessibility to their project plans. The basic pillars of archival recordkeeping - records management, preservation (especially digital, where the risks of loss are highest) and commitment to future accessibility - should be likewise promoted to encourage creators and custodians of currently inaccessible archives to secure and make their institutional memory available where possible to researchers, thereby informing future dialogue and public discourse, and enabling policy makers to base their decisions on evidence-based sources.

Bodies such as ARMA international have practical measures available for organisations to assess the maturity of their recordkeeping infrastructure⁵²; the International Council on Archives has guidance on basic principles for archive accessibility⁵³ and the Digital Preservation Coalition offers a handbook for organisations getting started in the daunting task of making their digital records future-proof⁵⁴. Encouragement of funding-receiving bodies to assess their compliance with international best practice and guidance in recordkeeping would prove motivational for organisations considering investment in recordkeeping, and it is here recommended.

⁵⁰ FAIR principles for data management <https://www.go-fair.org/fair-principles/>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵¹ Daniel Spichtinger and Jarkko Siren, "The Development of Research Data Management Policies in Horizon 2020" (2017)

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321169300_1_The_Development_of_Research_Data_Management_Policies_in_Horizon_2020, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵² ARMA International: The Principles@ Maturity Model <https://www.arma.org/page/PrinciplesMaturityModel>, accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵³ International Council on Archives: Principles of Access to Archives (2013) <https://www.ica.org/en/principles-access-archives> It is worth highlighting that commitment to access principles does not require the provision of unrestricted universal access to all records. Rather privacy and confidentiality concerns should be built into access policies, and the existence of closed archives collections acknowledged by their custodians (see principle 2). Website accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵⁴ Digital Preservation Coalition: The Digital Preservation Handbook, 2nd edition (2015) <https://www.dpconline.org/handbook>, accessed 29 June 2023.

2. SUPPORT DISCOVERY PROGRAMMES TO ELIMINATE ARCHIVAL OBSCURITY

The first phase of an archival programme usually involves a records survey, to obtain an overview of existing records – digital and physical – and to establish the scope of the work required to establish a recordkeeping infrastructure that ensures information is available, sustainable, complete, and reliably captured in a way compatible with the retention of authenticity as a record of the events or transactions it documents.

At the point of departure, prior to the preliminary records survey, it is generally impossible for an archivist to offer a reliable business case for the potential benefit of an organisation's archives to the research community, insofar as it is difficult to promote access to an unknown and undocumented resource. A recommendation to overcome this obstacle is to facilitate the creation of a source of support for institutions wishing to take on this preliminary groundwork; for example, a network of professionals available for secondment, or the direct funding of inventories of undocumented resources, surveys or information discovery projects.

Existing archives project funding often features accessibility of research material as the realized project benefit or output⁵⁵. A focus on digital access to archives is understandable as it provides highly visible research benefits. However digital, on-demand access is usually the last stage in an archives maturity model, and results in already-available archives becoming more visible, when the priority perhaps should be a **project to remove the access barriers to the truly undocumented archives that have never been surveyed.**

3. INVEST IN INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT DATA SUSTAINABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

As described above, the creation of a recordkeeping infrastructure - to capture and sustain content to allow for its survival and subsequent accessibility, requires the investment of resources. The purchase of a digital preservation system for UNHCR was ultimately accepted as an operational necessity for the agency, but UNHCR is one of only four UN bodies or specialized agencies to have acquired and implemented such technology⁵⁶.

Similarly, tools such as online browsable archives catalogues are not present across the board in all record-holding agencies, with six UN bodies or specialized agencies having launched such portals to date, although others have put substantial information on their

⁵⁵ The forthcoming ITHACA platform is an example of this kind of online accessibility resource, as is the League of Nations LONTAD project <https://libraryresources.unog.ch/lontad> and the European Digital Treasures project <https://www.digitaltreasures.eu>. Websites accessed 29 June 2023.

⁵⁶ Most UN-family agencies are taking diverse measures to secure and sustain their digital content, however UNMICT, UNOG, the World Bank and UNHCR are to date the only agencies to have acquired and implemented integrated digital preservation systems based upon the Open Archive Information System (OAIS) reference model (ISO 14721).

websites to allow researchers to begin their enquiries⁵⁷⁵⁸. The development of open-source software is a positive development, allowing institutions to acquire and implement products at low cost, including but not limited to the digital preservation tools Treesize, Archivematica and DROID, and the Archival description software AtoM. Employing these tools however requires technical expertise, project management and hardware, and the necessary server and/or cloud hosting of digital content comes at a cost. Technology in a vacuum will not suffice to secure the archive of today – record creators and users within the agency need to be trained and made aware of the importance of the records they create, and the risks of mishandling their management.

We recommend therefore that when allocating research funding, consideration is given to both the generation of available research content, and to the development of a recordkeeping infrastructure that allows knowledge to be collected, sustained, and eventually made accessible. Such investment could be realized in different ways – by facilitating the creation of a network of professional consultants to support implementation projects; by funding the purchase of tools for management, preservation and accessibility of content; or by sponsoring the cost of hosting in digital preservation environments digital content otherwise at risk of loss.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, the potential benefits of archival research and accessibility have been presented, as a business case for best practice in recordkeeping and archive management. Our recommendations are centred around the need for an increased focus in the research sector on the construction and development of recordkeeping capacity, institutions, and processes, alongside the well-acknowledged need to promote the accessibility of research content. In short, there is often an appreciation of accessible archives as an end in itself, whereas the means to that end is less well understood and financially supported. To encourage the recognition of the value of institutional memory, it must first be acquired, organized, preserved and documented.

“Archives are the factories and laboratories of the historian”, writes Alexandra Walsham in her article on the social history of the Archive in early-modern Europe. As ‘historians of the now’, the UNHCR archivists have observed first-hand how the institutional archives are the factories and laboratories for decision and policy makers as well, both directly – when

⁵⁷ Most UN-family agencies have information concerning their archives on their webpages, including FAO, ILO, WHO, ITU, WTO, OPCW and the IAEA. UNESCO, UNARMS, UNHCR, UNOG, the World Bank and the IMF have browsable online ISAD(G) archives catalogues. UNMICT’s online ISAD(G) catalogue is in the development stage.

⁵⁸ This brief and non-definitive survey of the UN system is here included to give some insight into one sub-set of organisations that hold archives of relevance to humanitarian actions. Other IGOs, NGOs and not-for-profit agencies, as well as academic, business and private archives have various recordkeeping structures and systems in place which have not been explored as part of this paper, but are no less relevant to the recommendations.

consulted by colleagues in their day to day work; or indirectly – through the published scholarship of researchers that have used these resources in their studies. Investment in their effectiveness is a means to secure a knowledge resource that can contribute to better policies and increase the quality of the political, economic and social discourse surrounding refugees, the displaced and stateless persons.

Acknowledgements

The following people provided valuable specialist advice and offered their time in reviewing the text of this paper, for which I am grateful.

- Montserrat Canela Garayoa – Chief of Records and Archives Section - UNHCR
- Patricia Sleeman – Senior Archivist (Digital Preservation) - UNHCR
- Hilde-Elisabeth Haaland – Senior Archivist (Records Management) - UNHCR
- Nicholas Morris – Former UNHCR staff member
- Vincent Cochetel – Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation – UNHCR
- Dr. Trudy Huskamp Peterson – Archival Consultant and Fellow of the International Council on Archives
- Prof. Ayako Kobayashi – Sophia University, Japan
- Prof. Peter Gatrell – University of Manchester, UK
- Dr. Ria Kapoor – Queen Mary University of London, UK
- The ITHACA research team at University of Modena and Reggio Emilia
- The ITHACA research team at Leiden University
- The ITHACA research team at ARCS Tunisie.

And would not have been possible without the team working on the ITHACA project deliverables at UNHCR:

- Anna Haward – Associate Archivist (Research) – UNHCR
- Ndahambelela Hertha lipinge – Associate Project Archivist – UNHCR
- Tom Wilson – Associate Archivist (Digital Preservation) - UNHCR
- Thierry Taberner – Senior Archives Assistant – UNHCR
- Laura Louise Bernier – Senior Archives Assistant – UNHCR
- Kanthasamy Karunakaran – Archives Assistant - UNHCR
- Antonio Garcia Madrigal – Archives Project Assistant – UNHCR
- Wasmyah Alenezi – Archives Intern – UNHCR
- Giuliano Fleri – Archives Intern – UNHCR.