

Centre for History and Economics: Meeting on United Nations Archives.

Trinity College, Cambridge, December 6, 2002

State of UN Archives: Current issues

The first aim of the meeting was to try to form a clear picture of the current state of the UN's archives. The archival system, like the UN itself, is extremely diverse. Jens Boel emphasised that this was often a result of the very different functions played by various UN agencies. Each agency has its own archival policy, retention schedule, and rules on access and disclosure. The list of archives of intergovernmental organizations that appears on UNESCO's excellent archival website - <http://www.unesco.org/archives/> - reveals that there are at least 24 UN-related organizations (including the World Bank, and regional development banks) with accessible archives. There are clearly many more that have yet to respond to the website, which is the result of a joint project between UNESCO and the International Council on Archives/Section of Archivists of International Organizations, which Mr. Boel chairs until 2004. Mr. Boel told the meeting that the group meets once a year, and that much is being done in terms of developing shared standards of 'best practice'. The Section of International Organizations is, at the same time, helping to create professional archives within large international non-governmental organizations.

The question of co-ordination is more sensitive. Past initiatives to bring together the archives of various UN agencies have ended in failure, due to suspicion of efforts to erode the autonomy of individual agencies. Mr. Boel stressed the importance, instead, of more informal co-ordination. Efforts are underway: a Common Reference Centre is being initiated by Merilla Guptil, head of archives at the UN in New York, although it will be confined to the UN itself, and not the specialized agencies. There are informal contact groups in both New York and Geneva to which users of UN archives experiencing difficulties can refer, but Mr. Boel emphasised the reluctance of many UN archivists to encroach upon the prerogatives of other agencies in what they do. It was suggested, by Bernhard Fulda, that a more official ombudsman position might be created to deal with the problems of researchers. David Reynolds made a comparison with the system of

consultation currently used by the Public Record Office in the United Kingdom, where there is a consultative committee of ‘users’ (made up of academics and other public figures), as well as a committee on which the departments that ‘generate’ the archives are represented.

Unsurprisingly, it emerged that a shortage of resources was a major obstacle to the establishment of shared databases, finding aids, etc., particularly on-line. It was widely agreed that it would be very useful to have a single search engine where researchers could locate archival documents anywhere within the UN system – realistically this seems a distant prospect.

The problem of conservation is pressing, particularly in the case of the UN’s operations in sub-Saharan Africa. There is little co-ordination *within* most UN agencies with regard to the documentation held in regional offices. UNESCO’s archives website acknowledges that there is little information available on the holdings of UNESCO’s regional offices; Sunil Amrith had a similar experience with the regional archives of the WHO. Richard Jolly pointed out that the files of the Economic Commission for Africa in Addis Ababa, for example, have largely been destroyed. The frequent moving of regional offices, out of areas of conflict, has inevitably made archives a low priority. Resources for the location and conservation of assorted regional archival material would be invaluable.

It became clear, over the course of the meeting, that current issues pertaining to UN archives cannot be dissociated from the more current policy issue of ‘knowledge management.’ Here, too, different agencies have diverse policies. The question of how the UN system manages and uses information has become a pressing issue in recent years, particularly with the efflorescence of electronic communication. As Thant Myint-U and Elizabeth Sellwood argue in a paper on ‘Knowledge and Multilateral interventions’, it is important to ask: ‘how did the UN “know” what it believed it “knew” about the countries in which it intervened, and how did this matter?’¹ There seems to be a

¹ Thant Myint-U and Elizabeth Sellwood, *Knowledge and Multilateral Interventions: The UN’s experiences in Cambodia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* [Centre for History and Economics/RIIA, 1999].

consensus that more and more people in the UN are asking this question. Informal communications from Merilla Guptil and Thant Myint-U emphasised the importance of convincing senior management within the UN of the importance of their own records, to the UN's own operations and risk management, as well as to the work of historians. The need for the UN to benefit from its own unique field experiences, particularly in the field of peacekeeping, requires a more systematic approach to record keeping and an emphasis on the importance of institutional memory.

David Reynolds suggested that the relationship of archives with the question of effective records management in the present day (the archive of the future,) might be a point of convergence between the concerns of archivists and historians, and of senior management in the UN agencies. Jens Boel concurred with this view, arguing that in order to obtain support and funding for the archives, an argument would need to be made to senior management highlighting the relationship between institutional memory and institutional efficiency. He felt that the question of archives ought to be linked to issues of transparency and accountability, so prominent in recent debates on UN reform. It was suggested that highlighting the links between archives and 'knowledge management' might encourage the support of UN leadership, and member governments for an initiative on archives. However, it will be important not to allow the question of archives to become embroiled in the more controversial aspects of information and knowledge management in the UN, particularly those related to intelligence capacities.

Current research initiatives

The two large, current research projects on the history of the UN are the United Nations Intellectual History Project, and the Centre for United Nations Studies at Yale University. Yale also hosts the Academic Council on United Nations Studies (ACUNS).

The importance of UN archives to these initiatives has recently been addressed by the co-ordinators of the United Nations Intellectual History project, who suggest that:

From the viewpoint of UN history, international archives are of the greatest importance in the modern world. Over the last 100 years, but especially over the last 55, we have been building structures of global governance--economic, social, even cultural, as well as political structures. We need to learn from this experience, from failures as well as successes, from first feeble efforts, as well as from mature systems. Archives are key to this. Thus, we urge the leadership of every UN agency to make archival preservation a priority, and we encourage researchers worldwide to make greater use of available archival material.²

Richard Jolly stated that, in a recent meeting with various UN archivists, the co-ordinators of the IHP had emphasised the importance of UN agencies writing their own histories (in the way that the IMF and the World Bank have already done) – the UNDP has embarked on such a project.

A major undertaking of the IHP has been the collection of oral histories from 75 leading figures in the history of the United Nations, focusing mainly on those who have made intellectual contributions to the economic and social side of the UN's activities. These interviews will eventually be deposited in the UN archives in New York – although there are issues to be resolved regarding copyright; the availability of audio tapes as opposed to transcripts, etc. – and will be of significant value to future researchers, beyond their vital contribution to the volumes to be published under the aegis of the IHP. Reference was also made to the UN oral history project at Yale University, undertaken between 1989 and 1991, which form an important contribution to the UN archive, and to the Columbia oral history archives.

Richard Jolly pointed out that the collection of interviews had been a very costly procedure, but it was also thought, given advances in digital recording technology, that the collection of oral histories on a smaller scale need not be prohibitively expensive. The collection of oral histories is, of course, an urgent task - it was suggested that this ought to be an ongoing process. Jens Boel pointed to the importance of going beyond senior policymakers in this enterprise – there have been some efforts at UNESCO to interview lower-level project officers about their field experiences.

² <http://www.unhistory.org/>

Universities and UN archives

It was our impression, before the meeting, that academics and students have not used UN archives widely. Jens Boel, however, suggested that this was a misleading assumption. Mr. Boel pointed out that UNESCO alone receives hundreds of researchers (and even members of the public) a year, working on a very wide variety of topics. The problem would seem, then, to be one of visibility: there is a perception that UN archives are under-used. The lack of awareness of how, and how much, UN archives are being used might be a consequence of the diversity, and geographical dispersion, of the archives themselves.

Participants at the meeting were struck by the diversity of projects for which UN archives can be (and, Mr. Boel pointed out, are being) used. Indeed, we felt it was important to recognise the fact that UN archives can be used to support many kinds of historical research, including areas for which UN archives may not be an immediately apparent source. Tim Harper pointed out, for example, that in places like Malaysia and Singapore, while national archives are well funded and well resourced, few files relating to the period after 1945 are open to the public. The archives of international organizations are an important way of filling that gap in archive-based historical knowledge. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, many countries have seen their national archives destroyed or lost – in such cases, the archives of the UN are likely to be crucial to historians of the recent past.³ At the same time, the study of UN history itself needs to go beyond using UN archives alone. Richard Jolly pointed out the importance of examining national archives around the world for national perspectives on the work of the UN; equally, there are sources relating to the history of the UN to be found in national archives, university libraries, and private collections around the world.

There would seem, therefore, to be a significant role for the exchange of information between students and researchers working with UN archives. We suggested the

³ Stephen Ellis, 'Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History*, 43 (2002), pp.1-26.

establishment of a website to facilitate this exchange between researchers from all over the world; this was welcomed.

The question of financial aid through scholarships is essential to this process of academic co-operation in using UN archives. It was widely felt that UN archives have, thus far, been used to a great extent by researchers based at Northern universities. The study of the history and nature of the United Nations organization, and the contribution of the UN's archives to the writing of international history, would be greatly enriched by enabling researchers from developing countries to use the archives to support their own research projects. Tim Harper mentioned a scholarship scheme run by the Dutch National archives to allow Indonesian researchers to consult the files of the Netherlands East India Company; the Rockefeller Archive Center runs a similar scheme for researchers from around the world. It was thought that the funding for a similar enterprise relating to the UN archives would have to come from better-off universities or private foundations. It was also felt that it might be useful to examine the question of how the history (and, indeed, the current activities) of the UN is taught in universities around the world; shared information on this question might eventually be available through the proposed website. This led to discussion of the United Nations Fund for International Partnership's proposed initiative, still in its early stages, for systematic links between the UN and universities in the Global South.

It is very much our intention that this process of exchange and co-operation will be of as much value to the UN, and the UN's various archives as to academics around the world. One immediate way in which the academic community could fruitfully assist the UN's archives is by bringing together information on sources in university (and other private) libraries around the world that relate to the United Nations and its activities. The private papers of many key individuals who have shaped the UN are to be found elsewhere than the UN's own archives. Indeed, it is one of the stated aims of the UNESCO/ICA initiative on the archives of international organizations to gather this information:

Later on, UNESCO and ICA/SIO hope to be able to extend the Guide to include information on other archival holdings relating to the history and activities of international organizations, such as those to be found in university, national and other public archives, private foundations, archives of non-governmental organizations, etc.⁴

This would appear to be an initiative in which universities themselves could be helpful. It was pointed out, for example, that the Bodleian library in Oxford holds extensive material relating to British former UN staff members. Merilla Guptil pointed out in her brief note that such an inventory might be of as much value to the UN itself as to scholars working on UN history.

Recommendations/Proposals

A number of suggestions emerged from the meeting, which can usefully be divided into high-level, and ‘grassroots’ academic, initiatives.

High Level

- A declaration from the highest level of UN leadership expressing support for an initiative to tackle questions related to archives and information.
- The establishment of a standing consultative committee on UN archives, complementing initiatives already underway under the auspices of the Section of Archivists of International Organizations at the International Council on Archives. This committee should include senior academics and public figures and some representation of the senior management of the UN agencies ‘generating’ the archival material. It is essential that organizations like the World Bank and the IMF be involved. It was felt that UNESCO would be the obvious clearing-house for this initiative.
- A consultative committee of senior academics outside the UN system could be established to mobilise the university community in support.

⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/archives/>

Academic

- A website should be established for researchers working with, or planning to use, UN archives. This would be a way of exchanging information, and would have the eventual aim of compiling a database of the whole variety of historical research that is being carried out on UN history, and on other historical topics using UN archives. A preliminary exercise will be the compilation of a comprehensive list of all the UN archives around the world. The Centre for History and Economics will initiate work on the website.
- Efforts need to be made to compile a list of sources on UN history (personal papers, etc.) that are available in university libraries, private archives, and national archives. Work will start on this, in the first instance, within the UK.
- In the longer term, a survey might be conducted of how and where the history of the UN is taught at universities around the world. This might also be of value to the project on the UN and universities in the Global South.
- It would be useful to hold one or two further meetings by way of follow-up: one in Cambridge and one in North America. These meetings might be slightly more formal and include commissioned papers.

This preliminary meeting was chaired by Emma Rothschild (Cambridge/Harvard), and attended by: Sunil Amrith (Cambridge); Jens Boel (UNESCO); Bernhard Fulda (Cambridge); Tim Harper (Cambridge); Sir Richard Jolly (UNIHP); Paul Kennedy (Yale); David Reynolds (Cambridge).

Sunil Amrith
December 7, 2002