

## A MISSED OPPORTUNITY: ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORMS

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### **Abstract**

*This article takes a critical view of archivists in the region, their conservative interpretation of their mandate, the outdated legislations under which they still operate and their failure to make themselves relevant within the context of the public sector reforms that have been going on for almost two decades. The article tries to demonstrate that most of the archival institutions have sidelined themselves in the reform process and to some extent have become irrelevant in the ongoing reforms. The article reviews the general response of national archival institutions in Eastern and Southern Africa to the opportunity offered by the public service reforms to integrate records management into the reforms and thus lift its profile and relevance to national development. The article recognizes that there are indeed some countries in the region that have been able to raise the profile of their institutions and to become relevant to the development of their nations (notably South Africa), but that such countries are the real exception rather than the rule.*

**Keywords:** Archival Institutions, Public Sector Reforms, Records Management

### **Introduction**

Archives and records management have come a long way in Eastern and Southern Africa in the last two decades. Thanks partly to the technical and professional guidance given by the International

Council on Archives (ICA) and its regional branch, the Eastern and Southern Africa Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA), national archival institutions and the profession in general, have grown and matured.

There are indeed several countries in the region that have recorded considerable progress in the range and quality of records management and archival services offered and delivered (South Africa is a notable example in this regard). However, the same cannot be said about all the national archival institutions and a good number of them have actually retrogressed and are in dire straits.

With ever diminishing resources, some of the archival institutions are suffering badly and have had to curtail the services offered. The signs of stagnation or decay are evident for all to see. The published finding aids and catalogues are from days gone by when times were better (or perhaps the archivists more focused on their core business). You dare not even think of internet access to the collections. There are huge processing and cataloguing backlogs. The retention/disposal schedules were done over 30 years ago and have not been updated. The exhibition cases as well as the exhibited materials have seen better days. The shelves can do with some new paint and even just dusting on a regular basis. It is a sad situation in some of these institutions. Clearly these institutions can do with an allocation of more resources but, against many other competing national priorities and needs, not much priority is being accorded to archival activities. And, unfortunately, the archival institutions have missed the boat and a huge opportunity has not been grabbed and utilized to advantage.

Demand for allocation of national resources will always be large and the competition stiff. Only those who are able to demonstrate their relevance to national development are able to win in the battle for allocation of the resources. In recent years, attempts have been made to show the relevance of records keeping to issues of good governance, transparency and accountability. Well and good and in fact, a significant amount of funding has been leveraged as a result of this.

However, records and archives management have not been able to attract the substantive funding required to take make the difference

partly because the link has not been established between records keeping and national development issues such as poverty reduction, infrastructure development and environmental protection. The link has also not been made between records management and the successful implementation of public sector reforms. The failure to make this linkage represents an opportunity that has been missed - the opportunity to mainstream records management into the public sector reforms and thus raise the profile as well as the resource base for records and archives management.

### **Public service reforms in eastern and southern Africa**

There are many similarities in the public service reforms that have been implemented in Eastern and Southern Africa in the last twenty years. That there should be so much similarity is not surprising because most of these reforms have been led by the World Bank supported by other key international and national organisations and aid agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). The common origins and driving forces for the reforms also mean that there are many similarities in the systems that have been introduced as well as in the experiences that have been endured.

The beginnings of international efforts to reform the public services in Africa can be traced back to the structural adjustment programmes that were initiated with the leadership and support of the World Bank in the mid-1980s. The basic thrust of these early reforms was to introduce a new macroeconomic framework buttressed by a new public administration paradigm. Basically the reforms sought to reduce the role of the state in production, improve service delivery and deregulate public enterprises. The public sector reforms gained a great deal of momentum from the focus that was increasingly being placed on good governance and which emphasised the need for effective financial and human resources management, accountability in public services including effective accounting, auditing and decentralisation, a predictable legal framework with known rules and availability of information and transparency.

The reforms were also driven by the emerging concept of New Public Management (NPM) which emphasised the centrality of the citizen who was the customer and accountability for results. NPM shifted the emphasis from traditional public administration based on the principles of bureaucratic hierarchy, centralised planning and direct control to a market based public service management or enterprise culture. The main emphasis of NPM lay in the reduction of direct public sector costs, introduction of private sector style of management, competition in the private sector, decentralisation, a shift from inputs to outputs and performance measurement.

The pursuit for good governance and accountability also meant strengthening the rule of law and the judiciary, promoting democratisation, depoliticising the public sectors and strengthening anti-corruption measures. The reforms were multi-faceted and promised to change the way Government business was conducted. Large amounts of resources were applied to the reforms in order to achieve the set objectives.

Because the drivers of these reforms were the same in most of the countries, it is not surprising that the concepts and systems that were introduced were similar beginning with the civil service reforms (CSRPs) that were in vogue in the nineties and transitioning to the public service reforms (PSRPs) at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The names given to the reform initiatives in the various countries testify to the uniformity of the systems and concepts that were introduced as well the common origins of the reforms.

Thus in East Africa, in Kenya you have the Civil Service Reform Programme which was introduced in 1992 followed by the Public Service Reform Programme in 2001. Tanzania had similar experiences, also starting with a Civil Service Reform Programme in the early 1990's and transitioning to a Public Service Reform Programme for the period 2001-2011. Uganda began by implementing the Civil Service Reform Programme in the period 1991-1997 and moved on to the Public Service Reform Strategy in 1997. Other countries in Southern Africa were also going through similar experiences with Zimbabwe implementing a Civil Service Reform Programme in the 1990s, Mozambique developing its Public Sector Reform for the

period 2001-2011 and Malawi undertaking a Public Sector Reform Management Programme.

The uniformity of the frameworks used also meant that there were many similarities in the organisational systems introduced. The reforms of the financial management systems were centred around the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) and its emphasis on performance budgeting. Performance management systems were introduced in one form or another and public servants were introduced to results oriented management and performance contracts. There was reform of the judiciary and legal sectors through Legal Sector Reform Programmes while Local Government Reform Programmes gave effect to decentralisation and devolution of power.

### **Opportunities that have been missed**

There are many opportunities that have been missed particularly in linking records management to the public service reforms. There are very few public service reform initiatives that do not require the underpinning support of efficient and effective records management and archiving systems. It is difficult to visualise a pay reform programme without records management support, a human resource information system without records, a financial management information system without properly organised input and verification documents or a programme monitoring and evaluation system without records.

Those who develop the reform initiatives rarely think of records management as an essential component of their plans, until things do not work as well as expected and realise that they should have paid more attention to this aspect. On the other hand, the professionals who should have been there at project formulation to advise them of this need have not been involved for one reason or another.

As outlined earlier, the dominating systems of the public sector reforms have been in such areas as financial management, human resource management, decentralisation, privatisation and outsourcing. Specific sectors that have been targeted include the judiciary and local government. A few examples will be used below to illustrate how some of these have generated an urgent need for better records management, a need that has largely not been satisfied.

### *Development of Integrated Financial Management Information Systems*

Integrated Financial Management Information Systems (IFMIS) have been set up in many countries. A key feature of the IFMIS has been the handling of the payroll as well as public sector expenditure. The ultimate objective of these systems has been to decentralise financial management while at the same time increasing or at least maintaining oversight by the central ministry responsible for finance.

While this has in some cases been achieved, it is important to note that this situation increases rather than diminishes the need for better records management. It goes without saying that financial management is heavily dependent on good records management. For the central ministry to be assured of the authenticity as well as accuracy of the entries made depends on the being able, at some point in time, to verify that the entries made were indeed correct as well as appropriately authorised and vouchered. Most IFMIS have, however, been developed and implemented with scarcely any reference to records management or even the involvement of the records management experts. Imagine what could have been, had this happened and attention paid to better management of the paper records as well as inclusion of a records management functionality in the system.

### *Development of Human Resource Management Information Systems*

The development of Human Resource Management Information Systems has demonstrated sharply the need for good records management as well as for involving the records professionals. However, unfortunately the systems have largely been developed without the involvement of records professionals and those implementing these systems have only found out, too late, that the unreliability of the paper records has undermined the quality, completeness and accuracy of the human resource information systems.

In many cases, it has been found that the personal files on which the basic data should have been extracted to populate the database were so unreliable and incomplete that they have had to re-build this information afresh by getting the public servants to fill in forms with

the essential details. In some countries, it has been found that the records of employees are heavily fragmented with each employee's records scattered over several locations (some employees were found to have as many as ten separate files in different places). There were other problems found in relation to finding and using the personnel records. These included the fact that in many cases, no one knew exactly how many files each employee had and where they were, that the files of one employee were differently numbered at the various locations where they were found, that many essential documents were not on file, that systems of creating confidential and open files resulted in a fragmentation of the information and that some files simply could not be found and retrieved.

In these circumstances, to obtain key employment details at the time of populating the databases, there were many instances when the employees themselves have had to bring from their homes copies of key employment documents such as letters of appointment, confirmation or promotion. The creation of the initial (and usually incomplete) databases has not been the end of the records related problems. The management of the records used to update the personnel and payroll actions each month has created its own set of new problems.

Key lessons from those countries that have implemented HRMIS is that personnel records in the public service have not been as well managed as they should have been. Secondly, the computerised systems that have been created are not as accurate as they should be because the records base was very weak. Thirdly, it has been realised that the ongoing integrity of the systems is heavily dependent on good management of the paper records.

### *Decentralisation*

Decentralisation is another example of how records and information management could have played a pivotal role. Most of the reform programmes include decentralisation and devolution of power and authority particularly in relation to central government functions being devolved to local authorities and governments. Decentralisation and devolution, however, primarily rely on transparency and accountability so that central government is able to account for what is happening in the local governments.

The importance of records in this regard cannot be overemphasised and records managers had a golden opportunity to come in and become central players in this process. That they were, by and large sidelined, is because they did not make themselves involved at the policy formulation level.

With the majority of national archival institutions in the region labouring hard even just to reform the records systems of central government, what hope can there be that they can extend their services to local governments?

### *Management of electronic records*

The reforms have also been about modernising the administrative systems of Government. Whichever country one goes to, computers are now being widely used for administration and other operational purposes and their spread has been heavily supported by the reform programmes.

The management of electronic records presented a golden opportunity for records managers and archivists to come in and impose their authority on the systems. Many people know and (on the surface) accept that electronic records present a monumental challenge in terms of their management. There are many who also accept that electronic records are more fragile than their paper equivalents and that they need to be managed from the point of their creation.

This acknowledgement, however, is as far as it goes. Very few people in IT bother about the management of the electronic records. IT specialists are notorious for one thing: their focus is on getting the system to do what it is designed to do, that is, process the data and information and make this available to the user. What happens to the records is someone else's problem. It is thus not surprising that in most countries, there is very limited management of the electronic records and application of records management software is virtually unheard of. But where have the records management professionals been while all this has been happening? You only need to visit the national archival institutions to get the answer to this. They



themselves are the very beginnings of the application of information technology to records and archives management.

Yes, they have computers, but even on their own computers they are not managing their electronic records, very few have records management software, they do not even use the basic functionality of Microsoft Office and the folder/directory system to establish file classification systems on their computers and, like everyone else, they cannot retrieve documents with ease when they need them.

Let us review the following checklist and see how well the archival institutions are doing:

- a) How many have aligned their paper and electronic filing systems so that records can be retrieved easily?
- b) How many archival institutions have a Local Area Network? Probably all of them. But how many have installed the file classification scheme on the network and are thus sharing administrative information? Or is the network there only for accessing the technical collections?
- c) How many archival institutions have a policy for the management of their own electronic records, including policies for the management of e-mail?

It thus boils down to one thing: how can national archival institutions help others when they cannot help themselves?

The management of electronic records is one area that could have earned the archival institutions the support and the resources they need. They have failed to cash in on the sympathy and understanding which many people have regarding the electronic media.

### **Why have archival institutions failed to take advantage of these opportunities?**

The above reforms have been very heavily funded both from national resources as well as through the support of international development partners. There are several reasons why very little of this windfall has trickled down to records and archives management.

### *Failure to mainstream records management into the reforms*

In the first instance, very few of the countries have recognised records management as being an integral as well indispensable part of the reform process. In Zimbabwe and Zambia for instance, records management was not made a component of the reform programme. Without this recognition, the public sector reforms have largely gone on their own without due consideration to records management needs. The latter has suffered as a result.

On the other hand, there are countries where this recognition has been given and this has benefited records and archives management immensely. Tanzania is a case in point and other countries can learn a lot from what has been happening in that country. In Tanzania, records management was made one of the core components of the Public Service Reform Programme. Through the Management Information Systems component, it was recognised that public service managers needed information that was accurate, reliable and timely in order to be effective decision makers. The strategic objective of the component was to revolutionise Government knowledge and to exploit the opportunities offered by modern Information Communication Technologies (ICT) to avail public service managers with complete, accurate and timely information.

Some of the outcomes expected from this component of the reforms were:

- Public service managers and decision makers who would be able to direct and manage modern information and communication systems to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their operations;
- Reorganised archives and registries with improved record quality, retrieval and access;
- A national records centre to reduce congestion in registries;
- A legal framework for managing traditional and electronic records; and
- Modern information and communication systems to interlink Government ministries and departments to enable them to communicate more easily and cheaply with the outside world.

As a result of the recognition, the Records and Archives Management Division (RAMD) has been able to implement many new initiatives, taking records and archives management to new thresholds.

*Failure to monitor key developmental stages of the reform process*

The pace at which the reforms have been going on in many countries has been frenetic. Keeping up with what is happening is hard enough even for those working in the central ministries. On the other hand, if you are not involved from the very beginning, it becomes difficult, at a later stage, to try and impose your requirements and needs. Generally, archival institutions have failed to keep pace with the reforms or to become involved in key activities taking place. It is not unheard of to find out that an ICT Policy or Freedom of Information legislation was drafted without the consultation of or involvement of the national archival institution.

What is required is for the archival institutions to be proactive in their approach, to keep themselves within the public radar and to ensure that the role of the archives is so publicised and well known that no one can go ahead with certain things without consulting the archival institution. For instance, regularly publishing articles in the media about key records management issues helps to build awareness about the key records management and archives issues and ensures that the institution is consulted when certain programmes are being formulated.

*Failure to provide services which are relevant in the corporate context*

It is difficult, even at the best of times, to get recognition of the importance of records and information management. This is why a records professional once agonised "If records management is such a smart idea, why is it so damn hard to sell?" Talking to registry staff, they will generally confirm that most officers do not worry about the registries until a key document they desperately need cannot be found.

Conference after conference, records managers and archivists have bemoaned the lack of recognition of records management as well as the very little resources allocated for records and archives manage-

ment. The point is, you need a catalyst in order to draw attention to records management. Attention to records management is often generated by the necessity to manage records in order to operationalise other systems. In the early 1990's a lot of records management activity was generated in mining companies because of a requirement that ferro-chrome producers worldwide had to be ISO certified to be able to sell their chrome on the international markets. As these companies implemented ISO systems, they realised that records needed to be organised in order to support accountability for the production processes and to be able to track and verify the point and cause of non-conformity.

Similarly in the public sector, the installation of integrated financial management systems and human resource information management systems has generated the need for records to be managed properly in order to support the system functionality.

#### *Conservative outlook of archivists and records managers*

But, why have records managers and archivists missed these opportunities? Part of the answer lies in the organisational structures and recruitment policies of national archival institutions that have remained transfixed in the past. Traditionally, archivists have been conservative in their approach and outlook, viewing themselves as the conservators of the national documentary heritage. Typically with a grounding in history, they have not been able to shake off that longing for things in the past rather than for shaping things in the future.

This conservative outlook is confirmed by the current recruitment procedures as well as establishments in many of the archival institutions. In many of them, the basic recruitment is still focussed on archival work, with graduates being recruited largely with Bachelors Degrees in History. Even in those cases where the archival institutions have a responsibility for the national reference library, it is often the case that the staff of the library are archivists (with history degrees) who get seconded to run the libraries instead of professional librarians being recruited directly from library schools. It is also mostly the case that it is archivists who manage the IT systems in the institution instead of IT specialists being hired directly for this function.

The mismatch between the staffing complements and skills profiles also extends to records management. Primarily, records managers in archival institutions have looked at records management, not from the front end of that profession but rather from the back end, from the point of view of providing a service for the management of semi-current records as they get retired from public sector institutions and are transferred to records centres. The result is that the current generation of records managers in archival institutions are back end records managers who are totally ill-equipped for the front end of the profession.

#### *Narrow interpretation of legislated mandate*

Most archival legislations in the region now extend the mandate of the national archival institution into the management of records, including current records. While some of the legislations may not specifically empower the institutions in respect of such areas as electronic records, nevertheless they are not barred or inhibited from involving themselves with this media.

That they do not do so is not so much because they lack legalised authority to do so rather because of their own limited capacity or narrow interpretation of their legislated mandate. There is very little expertise in the national archival institutions in front end records management work and procedures resulting in a situation in which they attempt to do what they are not trained to do.

#### *Too much focus on registries*

For those archival institutions involved in front end records management, most are focusing on registries only and forgetting that the proper management of records goes way beyond the registries and that, in fact, by the time records come to the registry or fail to come, everything will have gone wrong.

Records management should be about getting in at the point of creation of the records. This is particularly important with the rapid and unstoppable spread of ICT. A large number of the officers in most organisations are creating records on their computers on a daily basis. They are printing communications that they are sending out or

alternatively, they are sending messages by e-mail. It is not unheard of for staff to be hired or fired over the Internet. In these circumstances, reforming the registries systems only serves little purpose as the damage will already have been done in the office.

Many organisations, including major international funding and aid agencies that one would expect to have sophisticated records management systems are realising that their information resources are hopelessly fragmented as officers do their own thing in the liberated ICT environments.

Records management should be about being intimately involved in the records creation process. One way of imposing this control is to introduce Electronic Records Management Systems (ERMS) or Electronic Document Management Systems. This is easier said than done however. Firstly it is very difficult to convince organisations to make the investment that is necessary to install these systems. And unfortunately records management software does not come cheap. The way forward is really to ensure that as the main systems are being designed, a records management functionality is incorporated. Thus, an enterprise wide system should have a document management module incorporated.

The focus on registries has also been unfortunate in two other respects. Firstly, the central registry is a remnant of the medieval ages whose time is way past. The central registry system used to work well when records creation was controlled by the limited records creation environment typified by the typing pools which typed documents for everyone and made sure copies were made for files in the central registry. In an era of decentralised records creation, as brought about by ICT, it is not possible to hope that you can still centralise the records keeping or hope to maintain a complete and comprehensive central registry. Secondly, whichever country you go to in the region, you will be told that registries are very much looked down upon (dare not say despised) and that staff who work in there are not recognised at all. In fact, you are actually told that in some instances, staff who are failing to perform elsewhere are the ones who get shifted to the registry.

In these circumstances, it is a no win situation for archival institutions to focus their efforts on institutions which have a low profile. Instead, a new alliance must be established and built upon: an alliance with the purveyors of information technology, the IT Departments in the organisations.

### *Inadequate training programmes*

Very few archival and records management schools prepare records managers for the front end of records management. A review of most curricula will show that most of them focus on the management of semi-current records or on that point at which records are being off loaded from the records creating institutions to the records centres of the archival institution.

The National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe offers an undergraduate programme in Records and Archives Management and has recognised registry training as a legitimate area of training for records and archives professionals. Unfortunately, however, the registry component is elective meaning that the undergraduates do not need to take it. Topics include types of registries, the role of registries in the creation, use, maintenance and retirement of files, set up and equipment requirements, security and staffing, filing systems, indexing systems and registry manuals and other documentation in registries.

The lesson that should be learnt from current attempts to dabble in front end records management is that records managers and archivists are trying to the impossible: to improve systems that they know little about and which they do not fully understand or appreciate. To remedy this situation, there is no substitute than hands on experience. If records managers really want to be able to understand how things work at the front end of records management, they have to obtain direct experience of working in the real office environment as well as the registries of the agencies that they will serve. This should be the attachment that training schools should be arranging for their students.

## Conclusion

The opportunities may have been missed but they are not irretrievably lost. The public service reforms are ongoing and it behoves the archival institutions to take note and seek to make themselves relevant to the reform process. However, for this to happen, the archival institutions have to re-configure themselves both in terms of their structures, systems and procedures as well as in their human resources. The current under-funding of archival services results in staff losing focus on archival work as they seek to supplement and augment their incomes. This need not be so if the archival services are recognised and become better funded and resourced.

There is also a need to change the culture of archival institutions so that they can embrace new concepts and new ways of doing things. Without losing sight of the core duty of conserving and preserving the archival heritage, there is a need to come up with a new and vibrant generation of forward thinking records managers and archivists who are more at home thinking about how records management needs can be catered for and integrated into the business re-engineering process rather than how they can receive the records when they become semi-current.

## Further reading

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