



STATE OF THE ARCHIVES:

An analysis of South Africa's national archival system,

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and INTRODUCTION

Archival Platform, 25 March 20

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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South Africa's national archival system was conceptualised in the early 1990s, the product of a vibrant transformation discourse emerging alongside the negotiation process which was changing South Africa's political landscape so dramatically. Broad consultative processes convened from 1994 by the new state culminated in the 1996 Constitution and the *National Archives of South Africa Act No 43 of 1996* providing the framework for the establishment of the system. By the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency, most of the system's building blocks had been put in place and it was beginning to take shape around five key objectives:

- Turning archives into an accessible public resource in support of the exercise of rights.
- Using archives in support of post-apartheid programmes of redress and reparation, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, land restitution and special pensions.
- Taking archives to the people through imaginative and participative public programming.
- Actively documenting the voices and the experiences of those either excluded from or marginalised in the colonial and apartheid archives.
- Transforming public archives into auditors of government record-keeping in support of efficient, accountable and transparent administration.

Much good work was done systematically through the 1990s, but the hopes of that period have not been realised. Today the national archival system is in trouble. Good work is being done only in isolated pockets. There is no overarching policy framework for archives beyond that implicit in national and provincial legislation. The vision of the 1990s has evaporated. Chronic underfunding and lack of resources is ubiquitous. The political will required to change things is largely absent. The system, simply put, is not delivering. These conclusions have been reached by the Archival Platform (a joint University of Cape Town-Nelson Mandela Foundation project) on the basis of a detailed analysis undertaken over two years (2012-2014). As a stakeholder in archives, and mindful of the public interest in a dynamic, efficient and transformative national archival system, the Platform's analysis is offered as a contribution to addressing what are fundamental challenges.

The system in 2014 fares poorly when measured against the key objectives of the 1990s:

- As has been noted repeatedly by the Auditor-General (AGSA) and the South African Human Rights Commission in recent years, the state of government record-keeping is embarrassing. Public archives are neither equipped, resourced nor positioned to do the records auditing and records management support they are required to by their mandates. Poor record-keeping undermines service-delivery, cripples accountability, and creates environments in which corruption thrives.

- Generally public archives have been unable to transform themselves into active documenters of society, nor to fulfil their mandated role of co-ordinating and setting standards for the archival sector as envisaged in the 1990s. Oral history projects are common, but are both random and undertaken in modes that are profoundly problematic. The huge potential of digitisation in support of preservation and public access has not been harnessed.
- Apartheid-era patterns of archival use and accessibility have proved resilient. Archives remain the domain of elites. Public archives do very little outreach, and only a fraction of their holdings are accessible online.
- Swathes of documentary memory are being lost, especially in electronic environments. While 21st century record-keeping is primarily electronic, public archives remain geared to paper-based realities. Numerous cases have been reported of records ‘disappearing’. And public archives continue to authorise the destruction of the vast majority (estimated at over 90%) of public records through appraisal processes without independent monitoring in the public interest.
- Ironically public access to archives has become more restricted in the era of a constitutionally protected freedom of information. The 1990s vision of ‘open democracy’, which saw archives opened in ways that had been impossible under apartheid, has been lost. *The Promotion of Access to Information Act* is routinely used by archives for gatekeeping. And the impending *Protection of State Information Act* has already fostered new cultures of secrecy within public archives and revived that old apartheid oppressive tool – the classified record.

The Archival Platform’s analysis reveals a national archival system in trouble. After twenty years of democratisation and transformation the system reminds us of nothing so much as the 1980s State Archives Service and its ‘homelands’ subsidiaries. The recommendation is not that the system needs ‘help’. Rather, we are recommending that it needs to be reviewed fundamentally. The models which informed it – North American and European models in the main – need to be reconsidered. The Minister of Arts and Culture must meet the challenge by acting decisively to avert what could become a national disgrace.

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www.archivalplatform.org

http://www.archivalplatform.org/news/entry/state_of_the_archives/

This analysis is dedicated to Gerald Kraak with deep respect for a lifetime's work as an archival activist and in acknowledgment of his indefatigable support for the difficult work of archives in the cause of building a just and equitable society as head of the South African office of The Atlantic Philanthropies.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In 2007 the National Archives, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Constitution of Public Intellectual Life Research Project at the University of the Witwatersrand co-convened an archival conference, ‘National System, Public Interest’, to assess the state of the national archival system and the vitality of the broader archival sector. The conference set itself the task of assessing how the archival landscape had changed in South Africa since 1997, when the *National Archives of South Africa Act No 43 of 1996* came into operation, by asking how well the system was working. Key questions addressed by the conference included how transformation discourse had engaged changing realities and what the key challenges facing both the national system and the broader archival system were.

Archives at the Crossroads 2007, the Open Report to the Minister of Arts and Culture from the conference, sounded a severe warning about an archival system under severe strain, and a wider archive sector urgently in need of support. The Open Report identified three problem areas: the lack of understanding of the political and social role of the archive and archiving in a democracy; the under-resourcing of archival work, because its significance was largely unacknowledged; and inadequate and un-integrated planning, and a low skills base that resulted in the archival system not serving South Africa as it should.

This analysis, prepared by the Archival Platform, the organisation born out of the Conference, considers the state of the national archival system seven years after *Archives at the Crossroads 2007* alerted the Minister to the crisis.

Purpose

At the heart of the Archival Platform’s mission is a commitment to playing a catalytic role in enabling practitioners, theorists and the general public to reimagine the concept of ‘archive’ and to re-think the ways in which archiving is practiced in a changing world.

In this analysis we take a long hard look at the national archival system to determine what is working and what is not. We identify elements that need to be re-imagined or restructured and detail key areas where strategic interventions are required to enable the national archival system to deliver effectively on its mandate.

We do this with the intention of making a positive contribution to the growth and development of a national archival system that reflects the values embodied in our democratic constitution, embraces our diverse pasts, arms us to address the challenges we face in the present, and opens to a more just and equitable future.

Methodology

In considering the question of how and by what criteria to assess the state of the national archival system, the Archival Platform Team pursued three lines of enquiry, asking:

- What shaped the national archival system that was set in place after 1994? What vision drove its conception? What was it imagined to do?
- What is the national archival system mandated to do? Is it delivering on this mandate? How does it interact with non-public organisations and institutions that have to do with archives and records?
- What needs to be done to ensure that the national archival system reflects the values and aspirations embodied in our constitution?

While the conclusions articulated in *Archives at the Crossroads 2007* arose from the conference discussions, this analysis was informed by the Archival Platform's close engagement with the broader archival sector, dialogues with practitioners, professional associations and other interest groups across the country. It was also informed by developments in international and local archival theory, critical thinking about the role of the archive in the production of knowledge and in transitional justice and the changes to archival practice that flow from the growth of electronic information and communication technologies.

Intense conversations with archivists, visits to public archives and a diversity of other institutions and organisations in the broader archival sector provided an opportunity for the Archival Platform Team to get to grips with the challenges and the aspirations of the institutions, governmental bodies and the individuals who work in and with them and who use them. Having engaged with practitioners across the country, we turned to the record – the strategic and annual reports, estimates of expenditure to complement the information gathered through personal engagements and to 'read' the state of the archive as it would be viewed by officialdom and the public. Finally, we looked at the research undertaken by others in the field to see whether our findings were supported or contradicted, or opened up new lines of enquiry.

Key issues raised in our analysis were shared with members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Arts and Culture at a strategic planning workshop in September 2014. A draft of the report, incorporating input from the Archival Platform Steering Committee, was distributed for comment and presented to key stakeholders including: the Department of Arts and Culture, the National Archives Management Team, the National Archives Advisory Council, the National and Provincial Heads of Archives Forum, the Western Cape Archives Advisory Committee, the executive of the South African Society of Archivists and members of the Unisa Department of Information Science in November and December 2014.

Discussions arising from these presentations brought some additional issues and concerns into focus and sharpened the articulation of interventions proposed in the concluding chapter of the analysis. The analysis has been well received by key

stakeholders who have concurred that it is a fair and accurate reflection of the state of the national archival system and that the proposed interventions are necessary. It has been heartening to hear that, even in its draft form, this analysis has been used to inform the development of strategic plans in some of the provinces.

Structure

The analysis is divided into three parts.

Part One responds to the first set of questions that framed the Archival Platform's inquiry: What shaped the national archival system set in place after 1994? What vision drove its conception and what was it imagined to do? Chapter One outlines the regulation of public archives under colonial and apartheid rule. Chapter Two summarises the discourse and processes that informed the conceptualisation of the national archival system in the 1990s. Chapter Three outlines new Constitutional arrangements for archives, describes the process through which the *National Archives of South Africa Act No 43 of 1996* was negotiated and outlines key provisions of the Act. Chapter Four covers three key initiatives that critiqued the national archival system in the first decade after it came into being.

Part Two responds to the second set of questions that framed the Archival Platform's inquiry: What is the national archival system expected to do? Is it delivering on this mandate? What factors impede delivery? Chapter Five provides a broad overview of the national archival system, including its mandate. Chapter Six outlines the mandate of public archives. Chapter Seven considers the mandate to ensure the proper management and care of all public records. Chapter Eight covers the mandate to preserve records of enduring value. Chapter Nine interrogates the mandate to document aspects of South Africa's past previously neglected by repositories. Chapter Ten reflects on the mandate to promote access to and use of records by the public. Chapter Eleven deliberates on the mandate to provide professional guidance and to facilitate collaboration between institutions that have custody of records and archives. Chapter Twelve considers the wealth of archives and records held in the care of individuals, civil society organisations and institutions such as museums, libraries and universities and notes where these may be at risk. It notes the upsurge in memory projects and initiatives and concludes with some concerns about the long-term sustainability of these.

Part Three considers the way forward. Chapter Thirteen proposes that the national archival system needs to be re-imagined to take into account current realities and future expectations. It considers the challenges archives might be called on to address and identifies strategic interventions required to reduce the structural, resource and capacity obstacles that impede their ability to do this effectively and efficiently.

Terminology

This Report refers to ‘archives’, ‘archiving’, ‘the archive’, the ‘national archival system’ and ‘the archival sector’ as defined in *Archives at the Crossroads 2007*.

- We use the term ‘national archival system’ to mean the institutional network of state structures, which is charged with responsibility for ensuring the proper management of public records, promoting the accessibility of South Africa’s archival heritage and overseeing the national system. The system comprises the National Archives, the National Archives Advisory Council, the various provincial archives structures, and a range of related governance structures.
- We use the term ‘archives’ to refer to collections or storehouses of preserved historical resources, whether documentary, oral, visual, material, virtual or physical. In doing so, we deliberately break from an inherited usage of the term ‘archives’ as limited to texts, whether documentary or oral.
- We use the term ‘archiving’ to refer to a range of dynamic processes including those by means of which some items get preserved and others do not, how choices are made about systems used to preserve items, and the ways in which access to records is determined.
- We use the term ‘the archive’ as a conceptual term to refer to the circumscribed body of knowledge of the past that is historically determined as that which is available for drawing on when we think about or reckon with the past.
- We use the term ‘archival sector’ to refer to the broad range of institutions including museums; universities; private, corporate, community and activist archives; and a variety of archival and memory projects; as well as the users, creators and theorists of archives, among them professional historians; family history researchers; artists and other cultural workers; identity theorists; academics; and countless others with an interest in archives.
- We make extensive use of the term ‘public archives’ to refer to national and provincial archives and records management services.

Acknowledgements

The Archival Platform acknowledges and thanks the many stakeholders who have contributed information and generously shared their experience and expertise as this analysis has taken shape. These include: the Director and staff of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, provincial archivists and their colleagues in the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Northern Cape and Western Cape; members of the National Archives Advisory Council and the Western Cape Archives Advisory Committee; colleagues in the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative at the University of Cape Town, University of Fort Hare, University of South Africa, and University of the Witwatersrand, the South African Society of Archivists and archival activists in civil society initiatives.

The Archival Platform

The Archival Platform, established in 2009, operates under the auspices of the University of Cape Town NRF Chair in Archive and Public Culture, Professor Carolyn Hamilton, and the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

The Archival Platform aims to play an advocacy and intervention role in respect of memory, archives and records as dynamic public resources in South Africa in the 21st century and within the context of a fledgling democracy. Its activity is directed broadly at: public education, professional development, research, networking, advocacy and sectoral mobilisation. It draws attention to the political and social role of archives and records in relation to four interrelated areas of concern: access to information and the ‘right to know’; social justice and the ‘right to truth’; good governance: deepening democracy by encouraging the exercise of active citizenship in relation to the role of the record in holding politicians and leaders to account; and the discourse around remaking the past in the present and the work of building social cohesion in a historically fractured society. In addition, the Archival Platform plays a proactive role in addressing the specific concerns of the archival sector: poor communication and limited interaction, the low visibility and status of the profession and the dismal shortage of opportunities for ongoing professional development.

Members of the Archival Platform Steering Committee, Professor Carolyn Hamilton, NRF Chair in Archives and Public Culture, UCT; Professor Njabulo Ndebele, Chairperson of the Board of Trustees, Nelson Mandela Foundation; Sello Hatang, Chief Executive Officer, Nelson Mandela Foundation; Verne Sheldon Harris, Director of Research and Archive, Nelson Mandela Foundation; Dr Noel Solani, Senior Manager: Heritage and Conservation, Nelson Mandela Museum; and Dr Mbongiseni Buthelezi, Senior Researcher, Archives and Public Culture Research Initiative, UCT, bring their deep understanding of the need to transform the archival landscape and a demonstrated track record in this respect to bear on providing guidance and direction. Jo-Anne Duggan directs the day-to-day activities of the Archival Platform.

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