

What are archives?

"Archives", derived from the Greek root arché (which means "institution", "origin" or "authority"), are a collection of documents and files (including audio-visual documents such as photographs, films and sound recordings) created by organizations or individuals in the course of their business.

Archives chart an organization's activities and ensure its accountability (according to the original definition of the word, archives are legal documents). They are also a source for historical research.

Files and classification: the basics

Files are sets of documents that are compiled either by the person or organization that created them for the purpose of conducting or handling their business or by the archives service as a logical set (following the principle of provenance) during the classification process.

Files are a key component of archives since they ensure access to reliable and comprehensive information as collected by those generating the archival material.

Files can be organized using a classification system – an intellectual structure that standardizes classification practices from one producer to the next. Files reflect the work of each individual who has produced documents in the course of his or her professional duties.

Audiovisual documents require special handling because of their format and content. Mechanisms and policies for selecting audiovisual documents for the archives are applied upon acquisition. There are other aspects peculiar to audiovisual archives, such as copyright protection.

THE ARCHIVIST

The archivist, or audiovisual archivist, is responsible for overseeing archival integrity and access. Archivists are professionals with skills in archive acquisition, preservation, organization (description) and communication.

S standards and practices

Archives services follow universally recognized archival principles set by international standards: the International Standard on Records Management (ISO 15489) and the General International Standard Archival Description [ISAD(G)].

These principles apply regardless of the emergence of new tools and technologies, and are followed by many archives services, including the Swiss Federal Archives, the National Archives and Records Administration of the United States in Washington, D.C., the National Archives of France, and the archival services of the European Union and the United Nations.

The lifecycle of files

There are generally three stages in the lifecycle of paper archives:

Records

Active or recently closed documents and files that are frequently consulted to conduct current business.

Semi-current records

Sets of documents that are no longer used for current business, but must be kept a while longer (for administrative or legal purposes).

Permanent archives

Documents that, after review, are kept indefinitely (historical archives).

This does not tend to apply in the same way to audiovisual archives, which are selected on the basis of policies and mechanisms and archived from the outset. Audiovisual archives are then kept indefinitely from the time they are deposited in the archival funds.

The ICRC archives

The ICRC has always recognized the importance of safeguarding its institutional memory in the form of paper and audiovisual files, as a means to both preserve knowledge of its past activities and lay the groundwork for its future work.

The ICRC archives chiefly consist of:

- current files (paper and electronic) created since the introduction of the new e-mail system,
- institutional archives (paper),
- audiovisual archives (photographs, films and sound recordings),
- the Central Tracing Agency's archives,
- personal contributions made by staff and Committee members,
- other specific collections, such as decision documents or the original copies of agreements concluded by the ICRC (e.g. headquarters agreements).

The archives also keep the organization's

- administrative,
- bookkeeping,
- financial,
- logistical
- and human-resources

files, initially managed by the relevant services before being submitted to the archives service for sorting and elimination or classification. Many paper files are also kept in the delegations.

Over the decades, the ICRC archives have come to represent a unique heritage, charting its own history and that of international humanitarian law and of humanitarian action in general.

The ICRC archives contain innumerable documents produced and received by the organization in the course of its work since 1863.

They provide a wealth of information on the development of humanitarian activities over the years and constitute an invaluable historical record.

The archives also keep alive the memory of the victims of armed conflicts and other situations of violence where the ICRC has been present throughout its history.

C o m m u n i c a t i o n

Every year, on average, more than: 800 archive searches are performed to help with day-to-day activities; 3,000 requests are processed by the Central Tracing Agency; 2,000 searches are performed by staff in the audiovisual and historical archives; and between 200 and 250 researchers come from all over the world to consult the ICRC's permanent archives.

Internal Communication

Staff access to current and semi-current ICRC archives is governed by Article 5 of the "Rules governing access to the archives of the ICRC", adopted by the Assembly on 17 January 1996 and revised on 29 April 2004.

The archives are subject to the ICRC's rules of discretion.

The ICRC's paper files are consulted in-house mainly in order to:

- Ø report on the implementation of strategies and policies to the ICRC decision-making bodies,
- Ø ensure the "business continuity" of ICRC operational affairs,
- Ø meet legal, administrative and auditing requirements and provide proof if needed.

The ICRC audiovisual archives are consulted mainly to find content for

- public or internal communications,
- productions.

External Communication

In January 1996, the ICRC decided to open its archives covering certain time spans to the public. To date, the ICRC's paper archives covering the period from 1863 to 1965 have been opened to the public. The next time span to be opened, in 2015, will cover the period from 1966 to 1975.

Audiovisual archives are given a status when they are entered into the archival fonds (as public, internal, confidential or strictly confidential); users' access rights determine whether they may consult those archives. Whether a record is classified as internal or needs exceptional handling (confidential or strictly confidential) depends on copyright protection and on content – for example, if the ICRC's work could be jeopardized or an individual's privacy or dignity infringed.

The protective embargo on access to internal documents and general files is 40 years, and 60 years for confidential and strictly confidential documents, including personal data.

External communication of ICRC archives is carried out for

- Ø being transparent. The ICRC encourages critical and independent research into its past. It also responds to queries about its activities;
- Ø fulfilling its duty to victims. Granting access to personal data on victims is in their long-term interests. For example, the ICRC issues individual certificates to help victims of conflict and armed violence to obtain moral and financial reparations;
- Ø supplementing external sources. Many researchers and historians consult the ICRC archives when writing academic works or producing audiovisual material;
- Ø raising the profile of the ICRC archives through communication activities to coincide with specific events or themes (exhibitions, colloquiums, publications and audiovisual productions);
- Ø showing off the wealth of material in the ICRC's archival fonds (including the archives of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency, part of which were added to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2007).

The mandate of the ICRC with regard to archives

The ICRC's unique mandate extends to the management of its archives. More than 180 States party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols have entrusted the ICRC with ensuring that these are implemented worldwide.

The organization has a responsibility towards the victims it serves, as well as towards donors. As such, it must ensure adequate documentation of its activities by guaranteeing the integrity and good management of its archival fonds, in accordance with internationally recognized standards.

The ICRC strives to make its archives open and readily accessible to the public; the archives belong to the international community as a whole. The ICRC archives service must have the means to fulfil its duties with diligence, and in a spirit of openness and sharing.

The content of the ICRC archives is actively promoted, including by:

- providing assistance with searching the archives and other services for the public;
- communicating on particular events and themes, participating in scientific colloquiums, and publishing articles;
- giving online access to the ICRC's historical archive catalogues, which provide the public with ample information on available research options;
- making audiovisual archives (photographs, films and sound recordings) and catalogues available online (in the near future).

The future will see a shift from physical to online digital content. The ICRC Archives and Information Management Division monitors developments in new technologies and explores new ways to acquire, organize and present the files entrusted to it.