



Advocacy for Preservation

A Briefing on the 2015 UNESCO Recommendation on Safeguarding Documentary Cultural Heritage

KEY POINTS

- 1) *The Memory of the World Programme is an initiative under UNESCO. It aims to support the preservation and protection of the world's documentary heritage and make it accessible to all.*
- 2) *UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the preservation of and access to documentary heritage in the digital era was agreed in 2015. It is the first to embrace the field in its entirety and it gives extra momentum to UNESCO's Memory of the World programme*
- 3) *The Recommendation is also a valuable advocacy tool for libraries, given that it implies a commitment by governments to promoting preservation and access, and supporting libraries in doing their jobs.*

The UNESCO [Memory of the World](#) (MoW) Programme was established in 1992 in the light of the growing awareness of the importance of the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage. Around the world collections were suffering a variety of fates: illegal trading, destruction, natural disasters and loss of interest, leaving many at risk of being lost.

Much has happened since the establishment of MoW, but our documentary cultural heritage is still in danger. In 2015 the *Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form* was adopted by UNESCO, giving new momentum to the programme.

The History of the Recommendation

Following the creation of the Memory of the World Programme, an International Advisory Committee (IAC) first met in Poland in 1993. Here, they developed an action plan which affirmed UNESCO's role with governments, international organisation and foundations for the implementation of the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme.

This included the [General Guidelines for the MoW Programme, initiated by IFLA and the International Council on Archives \(ICA\)](#). Since then, IAC meetings

The Recommendation's provisions on Identification:

1.1: 'Member States are encouraged to support their memory institutions in establishing selection, collection and preservation policies'.

1.3: 'Member States are encouraged to identify specific documentary heritage the survival of which is at potential or imminent risk [...]. They should support and strengthen their relevant memory institutions'.

The Recommendation’s provisions on Preservation:

2.4: ‘Member States are encouraged to develop awareness-raising and capacity-building measures and policies as a key component of preservation, including promoting research as well as training for documentary heritage professionals and providing facilities for such’.

2.5: ‘The existence of possibly legitimate access restrictions on any part of the documentary heritage should not inhibit or limit the ability of memory institutions to take preservation action’.

2.8 ‘Member States are encouraged to support memory institutions’ participation in the development of international standards for preservation’.

have been held every two years and many [National Memory of the World National Committees](#) have been established around the world.

In 2012 at its 190th session the [Executive Board](#) of UNESCO [requested that the Director-General](#) make greater efforts to strengthen policies and capacities for libraries, archives, museums, and other institutions that house cultural heritage.

This led to the drafting of the [Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form](#). The Recommendation was adopted at the UNESCO General Conference in 2015. It was formulated through a sequence of expert and Member State meetings, to which IFLA also contributed, advocating for the inclusion of libraries. Importantly, the Recommendation

takes into account the rapid evolution of technology and the challenges of establishing models and processes for preserving digital heritage materials.

“ *Documentary heritage records the unfolding of human thought and events, the evolution of languages, cultures, peoples and their understanding of the world.* ”

The General Conference of UNESCO 2015

What the Recommendation Says

In the Recommendation a document is defined as: ‘An object comprising analogue or digital informational content and the carrier on which it resides. It is preservable and usually moveable. The content may comprise signs or codes (such as text), images (still or moving) and sounds, which can be copied or migrated. The carrier may have important aesthetic, cultural or technical qualities’.

The Recommendation’s Provisions on Access:

3.1: ‘Member States are encouraged to provide appropriate legislative frameworks for memory institutions and ensure their necessary independence in preserving and providing access to documentary heritage’.

3.2: ‘Member States are urged to promote and facilitate maximum inclusive access to, and use of, documentary heritage by empowering memory institutions to provide accurate and up-to-date catalogues and finding aids’.

3.8: ‘Member States should support and promote public domain access, and wherever possible, encourage the use of public licensing and open access solutions.’

The Recommendation's provisions on Policy Measures:

4.1: 'Member States are urged to consider their documentary heritage as an invaluable asset and to apply this perspective in national legislation, development policies and agendas. They are further encouraged to recognize the long-term need for new investment in the preservation of different types of originals in analogue format, in digital infrastructure and skills, and to adequately endow memory institutions'.

4.6: 'Member States are encouraged to periodically review copyright codes and legal deposit regimes to ensure they are fully effective, with limitations and exceptions, for preserving and accessing documentary heritage in all its forms'.

Documentary heritage, in turn, is defined as documents 'of significant and enduring value to a community, a culture, a country or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment'. It notes that the importance of a document may not be clear at first, but that, in due course, this heritage 'provides the means for understanding social, political, collective as well as personal history. It can help to underpin good governance and sustainable development'.

The 2015 Recommendation represents a commitment by Member States. At national level, they agree to identify documentary heritage and take policy measures to ensure preservation of and access to it. On the international level, they promise to launch bilateral and multilateral research projects and publish guidelines, policies and best practice models.

The Recommendation is also an instrument to help build partnerships for identifying appropriate solutions to threats such as the decay, natural disasters, human behaviour, technological obsolescence, as well as to mobilise resources so that valuable collections and records may never be lost. Examples of useful provisions for libraries can be found in the inset boxes.

IFLA has, since its publication, been working to promote the 2015 Recommendation as well as contributed to the implementation and the emphasis on libraries within it.

Engaging with UNESCO and Memory of the World

The 2015 Recommendation also serves as an important tool for advocating for the work of libraries by recognising their role and the need to provide them with the laws and resources necessary to do their jobs. It can be used as an instrument for putting pressure on Member States to initiate appropriate steps in order to comply with its instructions, and to facilitate

The Recommendation's provisions on National and International Cooperation:

5.1: 'Member States should support the exchange of research data, publications, and information; the training and exchange of specialist personnel and equipment'.

5.2: 'Member States should encourage cooperation with international and regional professional associations, institutions and organizations concerned with documentary heritage preservation and access, with a view to implementing bilateral or multilateral research projects and publishing guidelines, policies and best practice models'.

5.3: 'Member States are invited to facilitate the exchange between countries of copies of documentary heritage that relate to their own culture, shared history or heritage, and of other identified documentary heritage'.

its implementation. Action in the coming

months is particularly important, as all UNESCO Member States have been asked to reply to a survey on the actions they have taken to give effect to the Recommendation.

Crucially, when the Recommendation was passed, Member States agreed to carry out a review of implementation within four years. This review is currently underway, with Member States, through their UNESCO National Commissions, asked to fill in a survey concerning the actions they have taken. This is a key opportunity for libraries to ensure that useful information is being gathered, best practices can be identified, and pressure can be put on governments which aren't doing enough to support their libraries and fulfil their commitments.

What can you do?

- Read the [Recommendation](#) (available in all United Nations languages) for yourself. If helpful, translate it into your own language so that others can read it too.
- Raise awareness of the Recommendation among colleagues in the library field through a blog or article in your library association newsletter.
- Hold a discussion at your library or library conference about the Recommendation and what needs to be done to achieve it.
- Get in contact with your national UNESCO Commission ([UNESCO has a directory](#)), and find out what they are doing to respond to the survey launched by UNESCO. Offer to help with evidence about what libraries are doing, and what more support they need.
- Learn about the Memory of the World programme [here](#). If libraries are not already represented, find out how your library association can get involved.
- Need help how to contact you National Committee or write a letter to your Government? Get in touch with [IFLA](#).

You can read more about MoW and how to use the 2015 Recommended [here](#).