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Implementation of the DIRKS Methodology by International Organizations: The Case of the United Nations*

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Abstract

The authors conducted a research on the records management activities in the United Nations (UN) through an investigation of the UN website and a field research at the Archives and Records Management Section (ARMS) at the UN Headquarters in New York in September 2006. This research aimed to identify the issues in records management that serve as communication measures to overcome language and cultural barriers in international organizations.

Among the research results, it is interesting to note that ARMS is implementing the methodology of Designing and Implementing Recordkeeping Systems (DIRKS) based

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on ISO 15489 for the records management of UN projects, operations, and housekeeping activities. In particular, it appears that ARMS places considerable value on business analysis with other UN departments so that it can approve record scheduling and classification periods. In addition, ARMS establishes the “Taxonomy for recordkeeping,” which is applicable to peacekeeping operations as well as mapping the taxonomy with the scheduling. The staff of ARMS emphasizes the importance of the DIRKS methodology in terms of its flexibility as a pragmatic solution for recordkeeping activities in the UN.

This paper discusses the effect of the DIRKS methodology—which originated within the Australian and Oceanic contexts—and its value for international organizations. It also discusses the background of the current records management activities of the UN as well as the challenges in implementing the DIRKS methodology in international contexts.

1. Introduction: Why the Authors Focus on Records Management in International Organizations

Currently, any organization in any part of the world establishes records management and recordkeeping systems¹ in order to conduct day-to-day business; retain “tangible knowledge” in the organization; and maintain evidence of the business, which may be needed to be presented to external authorities and customers. The authors believe that such recordkeeping should be assigned increased importance in international organizations. This is because international organizations need to conduct their businesses by overcoming language and cultural barriers, and such situations will foster more effective records management and recordkeeping systems.

While recordkeeping is given due importance in international organizations, the real situations of recordkeeping in international organizations have seldom been clarified. A number of research reports concerning archives and records management in international organizations were published by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1980s, as part of the RAMP (Records and Archives Management Programme) study series.² The most recent report was issued by Liisa Fagerlund in 1995 at the UN for the International Round Table Conference on Archives (CITRA) in Washington D.C.³ However, it is necessary to keep up with the current situation of recordkeeping under the effects of electronic information.

In order to pursue the abovementioned research interests, the authors conducted research on records management and recordkeeping in international organizations, focusing on the Archives and Records Management Section (ARMS) at the United Nations (UN). The following two research methods were used: (1) investigation of the ARMS website⁴ and (2) field research at the ARMS office and interview with the ARMS staff at the UN Headquarters in New York in September 2006.

This paper presents the results of the authors' research, with a particular focus on recordkeeping practices of ARMS, based on the "DIRKS" (Designing and Implementing Recordkeeping Systems) methodology. This is because the DIRKS methodology is based on the "records continuum" theory, which is now globally considered as the leading theory in recordkeeping, as well as on ISO 15489, the international standard on recordkeeping.

2. The Present Condition of Archives and Records Management in the UN

First and foremost, it is necessary to explain what ARMS is and to clarify its roles in

the UN.

The UN Secretariat constitutes 12 departments, and ARMS is part of the “Department of Management -- Office of Central Support Services -- Facilities and Commercial Services Division.”⁵ A detailed structure of this department is shown in Figure 1. This shows that the roles of ARMS are as important as the internal management issues of the UN. It is worth noting that the functions of the “UN documents” and library are executed in a different department: Department of Public Information (DPI). The organizational chart of the DPI is shown in Figure 2. It should be noted that “UN documents” include three types of “documents” that are open to public access: (1) usual “documents,” including the proceedings of UN organizations, reports from member countries, resolutions, internal rules and policies of the UN (shown later), and many others; (2) “official records,” including proceedings and resolutions of important UN organizations, such as the General Assembly and the Security Council; and (3) “UN publications,” those available in the market including yearbooks, treaties, and magazines for public relations. Such terms as “[UN] documents” and “[official] records” seem unique to the UN and fairly different from the world of records management and archives, where “documents” and “records” imply that the unpublished information is only meant for internal use. Further, “[UN] documents” and “[official] records” in the UN are different from the “documents” and “records” covered by ISO 15489.

(Figure 1 and Figure 2 come around here.)

The fields of ARMS activities are threefold: (1) Maintaining semi-current records of

the UN. This role is practiced in the “records center” in the Queens area in New York, away from the Manhattan East area where the UN Headquarters is situated. (2) Archiving non-current records of the UN, and providing the public as well as the UN staff with access to the records. The archival facilities are located in the UN Headquarters in New York and in Geneva, Switzerland.⁶ (3) Planning, developing, and reviewing policies and procedures of records management for the UN staff. Currently, ARMS deals with almost all records in paper format in the first two fields; however, with regard to the third type of activity, ARMS focuses on both paper and electronic records.

3. Rules and Regulations for Records Management and Archives in the UN

According to the ARMS staff, there are three-level internal regulations in the UN:⁷

- ST/SGB (Secretariat—Secretary General’s Bulletin): This category is the highest regulation and works as a mandate.
- ST/AI (Secretariat—Administrative Instruction): This category is the middle-level regulation and functions as a mandate.
- Information Circular: This category functions as guidance and a guideline, but not as a mandate.

There are several regulations concerning records management and archives:

- ST/SGB/242 (1991): United Nations Archives and Records Management

This is the most basic rule for records management and recordkeeping in the UN, though it consists of only seven articles in two pages. This bulletin describes the basic tasks of ARMS with regard to both current and non-current records, and the procedure of records management and recordkeeping, including the rule that “United Nations

records shall be inviolable and may not be removed from any UN premises or destroyed without specific written authorization from the Chief, Archives and Records Management Section.”

- ST/SGB/2007/5 (2007): Recordkeeping and the Management of UN Archives

This is a revised version of the former “Administrative Instruction,” ST/AI/326 (1984): The United Nations Archives. It implies that the rules of records management in the United Nations are upgraded from the middle-level regulation (Administrative Instruction) to the highest regulation (Secretary General’s Bulletin). This bulletin consists of eight sections: definitions of terms, purpose and scope, responsibilities of staff members, responsibilities of departments and offices, responsibilities of the Archives and Records Management Section, electronic records, access of staff members to noncurrent records and UN archives, and final supplementary provisions, with “Annex: Guidelines concerning the separation of private papers from business records.” It states that, in principle, the records of the UN should be open to the public 20 years after their creation; it succeeds the existing rule defined in the former Administrative Instruction. In addition, the new bulletin defines e-mail messages as business records.

- ST/SGB/2007/6 (2007): Information Sensitivity, Classification and Handling

This new bulletin was issued at the same time as ST/SGB/2007/5 as a set. It defines the procedures for the classification and declassification of sensitive records, including the following: the reasons for classification (safety or security of individuals and/or member states, protection of privacy and/or other human rights, ensuring free and independent decision making of the UN organizations, and so forth), the treatment of classified records (including electronic ones), and the declassification process.

- ST/SGB/2004/15 (2004): Use of Information and Communication Technology

Resources and Data

This bulletin is not a direct rule for records management and recordkeeping; however, it defines the use of communication equipments as a presupposition of records management and recordkeeping. It includes rules restricting the private use of the equipments and procedures for monitoring the use of electronic equipments.

While the “Secretary General’s Bulletin” functions as the set of rules for records management and recordkeeping in the UN, the practice of records management and recordkeeping can be a problem for each individual staff member, office, and department in the UN. Therefore, in order to address this problem, ARMS attempts to implement the DIRKS methodology that is discussed in the following sections.

4. The DIRKS Methodology and Its Application to the UN

4.1 What Is DIRKS?

Before discussing the activities of ARMS based on this methodology, it is necessary to explain what exactly the DIRKS methodology is and how it is important for the community of records and archives.⁸

DIRKS is the acronym for Designing and Implementing Recordkeeping Systems. It originated in the cooperative activities between the Archives Authority (currently, the State Records Authority) of New South Wales and the National Archives of Australia, based on Australian Standard AS 4390–1996, Records Management (presently superseded by the Australian Standard for Records Management, AS ISO 15489–2002), in order to establish methodologies for designing and implementing recordkeeping systems for government organizations. The activities of these two organizations resulted

in *The DIRKS Manual* that was issued in 2001 and revised in 2003.⁹

DIRKS consists of the following eight steps:

Step A – Preliminary investigation

Step B – Analysis of business activity

Step C – Identification of recordkeeping requirements

Step D – Assessment of existing systems

Step E – Strategies for recordkeeping

Step F – Design of a recordkeeping system

Step G – Implementation of a recordkeeping system

Step H – Post-implementation review

The characteristics of DIRKS can be summarized as follows: it takes working environments and organizational structures into consideration for establishing effective recordkeeping systems, and enables any organization—not limited to the government organizations—to establish flexible recordkeeping systems that are suited to the organizations, based on the “best practice” model shown in AS 4390 – 1996.

In fact, the eight steps mentioned above in the DIRKS manual are reflected in ISO 15489-2 in 2001; “3 Strategies, design and implementation” have the same steps as those in the DIRKS manual. In addition, “Electronic Records: A Workbook for Archivists” by the International Council on Archives (ICA), which functions as a set of international guidelines for electronic recordkeeping, includes the same steps as those in the DIRKS manual; these steps are mentioned in section “4.4 Steps to be taken” of “Chapter 4: Implementing recordkeeping requirements” of the manual.¹⁰

In addition to the DIRKS manual, the National Archives of Australia issues a number of tools that supplement the manual and help people and organizations understand and

implement DIRKS.¹¹ The tools include the following:

- Recordkeeping Metadata Standard: A tool for the description, control, and retrieval of records.
- Policy and guidelines on capturing web-based records
- Keyword AAA: A thesaurus for recordkeeping terminology.

Based on the manual and the abovementioned tools, government organizations in Australia have practiced DIRKS for effective recordkeeping. At present, the UN ARMS is trying to undertake such activities in Australia for the practices of DIRKS.

4.2 DIRKS in the UN ARMS

Information about the present activities of the ARMS and its future activities with regard to DIRKS is available on the ARMS website. The main page of this website contains a link to the “UN records” section page (Figure 3), which in turn contains several subsections. Among these, the “Recordkeeping Policies & Standards” subsection (Figure 4) contains the link to the “Manual for Design and Implementation of Recordkeeping Systems (DIRKS).” In fact, this link provides a package of MS word files, compressed in ZIP format; these files contain detailed information describing DIRKS as well as related documents, including the “Guide to interviews” for “Step A – Preliminary investigation,” “Sample recordkeeping requirement documentation” for “Step C – Business case for an improved records management program,” and other documents concerning DIRKS. The latest version of these files was developed in June 2004, and their contents largely depend on the DIRKS documents issued by the State of New South Wales, Australia.¹²

(Figure 3 and Figure 4 come around here.)

One ARMS staff explained to the authors that ARMS had introduced DIRKS as part of its recordkeeping practices based on ISO 15489, adding that a former ARMS staff from Australia contributed to this. According to the above documents and interviews with the ARMS staff, the basic practices of DIRKS in the UN are as follows: ARMS and each business unit in the UN conduct “business analysis,” corresponding to “Step B – Analysis of business activity” in the DIRKS manual. Through this business analysis, ARMS identifies the business processes and the degree of importance of each business step, and then identifies the value of records produced in the business processes. Based on the results of the business processes, each business unit in the UN develops retention schedules for records as well as classification procedures in order to maintain the confidentiality of sensitive records for a definitive period. Finally, ARMS approves these retention schedules and classification procedures.

4.3 DIRKS in Peacekeeping Operations

One of the unique features concerning the implementation of DIRKS by ARMS is the peacekeeping operation (PKO). In fact, PKO holds a special position with regard to recordkeeping in the UN. For example, while there exists a retention schedule for “Records Common to Most United Nations Offices (RCUN),”¹³ recordkeeping in PKO is an exception for the schedule. Instead, the “Peacekeeping Operations Retention Schedule (PORS) User Handbook”¹⁴ and the “Recordkeeping Toolkit for Peacekeeping Operations”¹⁵ are prepared by ARMS.

The DIRKS-featured activity of recordkeeping in PKO constitutes the development of

the “Taxonomy for Recordkeeping in Field Missions of UN Peacekeeping Operations.” The first draft of the taxonomy was issued in June 2006 in order to clarify business processes and the value of accompanying records in PKO.¹⁶ This taxonomy categorizes the functions of PKO in three large areas, and then further categorizes them into more detailed levels:

- Field operations: Including “Civil Society Support,” “Disarmament, Demobilization & Reintegration Support,” “Election Support,” and so forth.
- Field mission management: Including “Crisis Management,” “Mission Planning,” “Mission Reporting,” and so forth.
- Field mission support: “Legal Support,” “Logistics Support,” “Claim Handling,” and so forth.

In addition to the taxonomy, ARMS issues a “mapping” of the taxonomy to the retention schedule.¹⁷

The merit of this taxonomy appears to be that it combines the classification of business processes and that of records and establishes the basis for developing a recordkeeping system correspondent to the business process. However, at present, the first draft of the Terminology has just been issued, and the ARMS staff held that the influence of this Terminology on the PKO business was yet to be seen.

4.4 Glossary

A glossary on recordkeeping holds tremendous value for exercising recordkeeping, in that it clarifies each element of recordkeeping and facilitates the staff in an organization to share his/her knowledge about recordkeeping. As discussed above, the National Archives of Australia issues “Keyword AAA” for this purpose.

The ARMS website provides a “Glossary of Recordkeeping Terms.”¹⁸ While a large number of terms in this glossary are based on “international sources” such as ISO 15489 and General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)), a number of terms seem original in the UN. For example:

- Substantive records: Records related to the core activities of an organization i.e., those activities that are distinctive to the organization.
- Interim Archives: The HQ Records Centre where ARMS maintains those records that will not be preserved permanently as part of the UN Archives. Such records will eventually be destroyed.

5. Importance of and Challenges in Implementing DIRKS in the UN

According to the staff of ARMS, the value of DIRKS is that it facilitates conducting recordkeeping as a generic, flexible project based on best practices and the good practices in each department and office in the UN. In other words, the merit and importance of DIRKS in the UN can be summarized as follows: While rules for recordkeeping such as ST/SGBs function as “mandate” legislations for the UN staff, they might be inflexible and misfit for the actual business in each UN department and office. On the other hand, documents based on DIRKS, including the DIRKS manual and the taxonomy for PKO, are expected to function as guides to recordkeeping based on the actual business at each department and office, and as a “bridge” between the abovementioned rules and the actual business. In addition, DIRKS contributes to clarifying the characteristics of records as “[business] process-bound information,” a concept suggested by Theo Thomassen,¹⁹ and brings the recordkeeping system closer to ongoing business processes in the UN as an organization. The hierarchical relationships

among the abovementioned SGBs and DIRKS documents are shown in Figure 5.

(Figure 5 comes around here.)

On the other hand, the ARMS staff recognized it as a major problem for the UN staff to comply with the rules and guidelines of recordkeeping described in ST/SGBs and documents concerning DIRKS. The ARMS staffs admit that they find it difficult to enforce such rules and guidelines because ARMS is merely a small bureau in the UN (see Figure 1 above). Recently, the ARMS staffs attempted the proactive promotion of their tasks to the UN departments and staff. In July 2006, ARMS implemented a massive overhaul of its website and expanded the information disseminated from the website. The ARMS staff informed the authors that, for the UN staff, the website itself was a measure of education and training with regard to recordkeeping. In addition, the ARMS staffs visit the UN departments by request for training and advising on recordkeeping activities.

6. Conclusion

While there are other prominent programs in ARMS such as “Guideline on Digital Imaging and Recordkeeping,”²⁰ this paper deals with DIRKS as an important component of recordkeeping activities. One of the shortcomings of this paper is that it is based solely on the activities of ARMS and comments from the ARMS staff; therefore, it is necessary to investigate how recordkeeping and DIRKS methodologies actually work in business units outside ARMS. In addition, the authors are planning to visit other international organizations, such as UNESCO, ILO, WHO, and UN High Commissioner

for Refugees (UNHCR) to investigate their records management systems, in order to further understand the records management in international organizations as a means of communication beyond language and cultural barriers.

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Department of Management

Treasury

Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts

Office of Human Resources Management

Office of Central Support Services

- Information Technology Services Division
- Integrated Management Information System Project
- **Facilities and Commercial Services Division**
 - Procurement Service
 - United Nations Postal Administration
- **Archives and Records Management Section**
 - Travel and Transportation Section
 - Capital Master Plan Project

Figure 1: Organization chart concerning the ARMS (shows only divisions and subdivisions related to the ARMS)

Department of Public Information (DPI)

News and Media Division

- News Centre
- UN Radio

Strategic Communications Division

- Palestine and Decolonization Section
- Information Centre Services

Outreach Division

- Dag Hammarskjöld Library (DHL)
- CyberschoolBus
- NGO Section
- Publications Service
- Sales and Marketing Section

Figure 2: Organization chart concerning “UN documents”



Figure 3: Main page of the UN ARMS Website

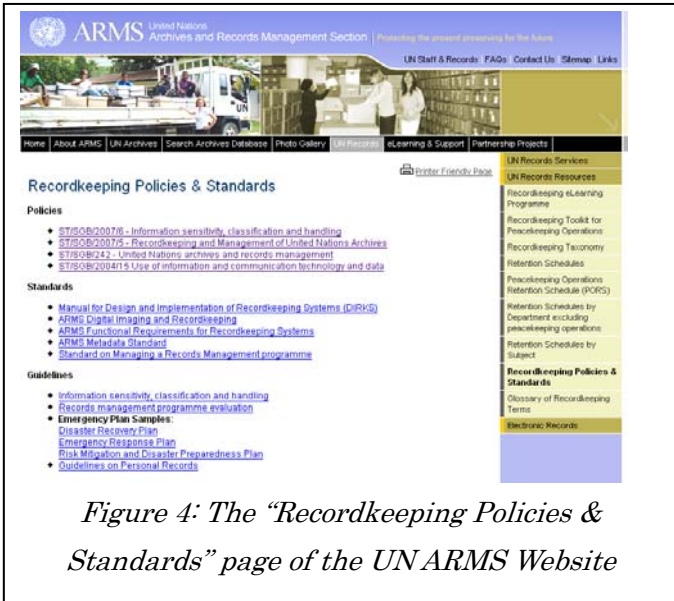
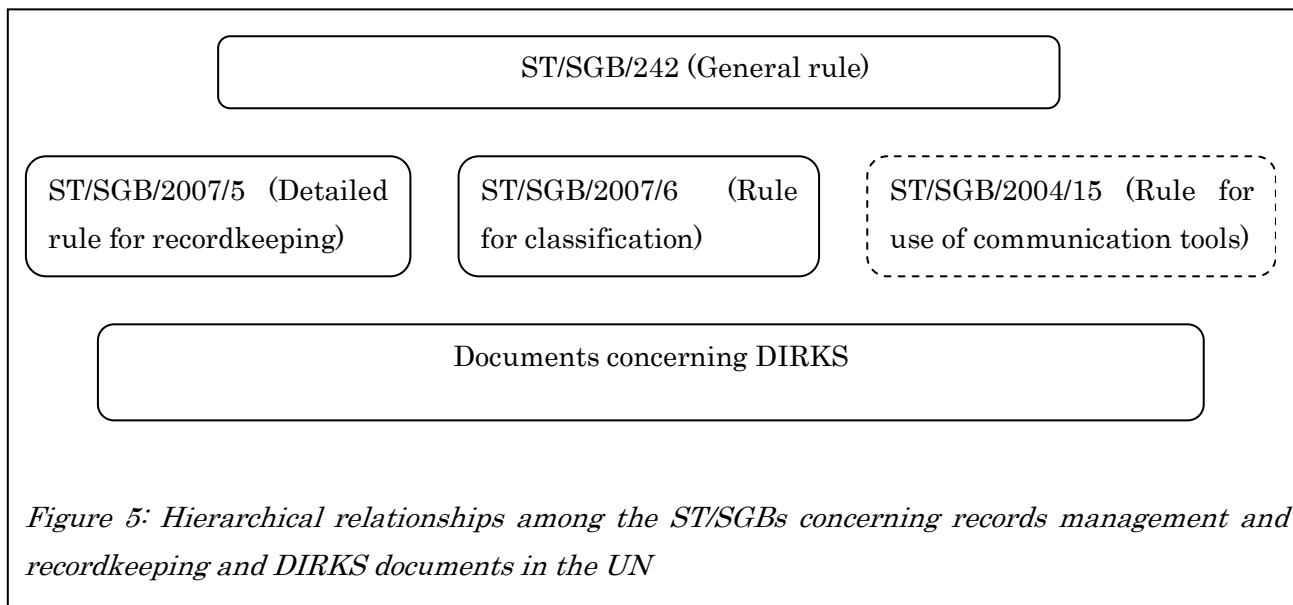


Figure 4: The “Recordkeeping Policies & Standards” page of the UN ARMS Website



Notes and References

1. In this article, the definition of “recordkeeping” follows that in the glossary of the Society of American Archivists: “The systematic creation, use, maintenance, and disposition of records to meet administrative, programmatic, legal, and financial needs and responsibilities.” *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, ed. Richard Pearce-Moses (Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 2005). Also available online at <http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp> (accessed 2007-06-10).
2. See for example: Stark, Marie Charlotte. *Development of Records Management and Archives Services within United Nations Agencies: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983); Segura, Bodil Ulate. *Access to the Archives of United Nations Agencies: A RAMP Study with Guidelines* (Paris: UNESCO, 1987). The reports are also available online from the list of “RAMP Resources” on UNESCO’s website at http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=21989&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed 2007-06-10).
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5. See: United Nations, “Departments of the UN Secretariat.” <http://www.un.org/Depts/index.html> (accessed 2007-06-10).
6. In Geneva, the archival facility is merged with the library. See The United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) Library, <http://www.unog.ch/library/> (accessed 2007-06-10).
7. In the UN, acronyms such as “ST/SGB” and “ST/AT” are known as “document symbols,” applied to all “UN documents.” The rules for applying acronyms and numerical numbers to the UN documents differ according to the types of UN documents. While the former “ST/SGBs” use continuous numerical numbers, the recent ones use the year. For more detailed explanation about document symbols, see: United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld Library, “Document Symbols: United

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- Nations Documentation.” <http://www.un.org/Depts/dhl/resguide/symbol.htm> (accessed 2007-06-10).
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