

The International Council on Archives: a door open to participation.

In August 2004, the 15th session of the General Meeting of the International Council on Archives (ICA), which met in Vienna at the International Congress on Archives, approved the organisation's new constitution. This change was originally a response to a need to adapt the constitution to legislation in France, the country where the ICA is based. However, the modification went further and included a clear intention to encourage the participation of the professionals in the organisation's sections and working groups. The constitution is necessarily a mechanism to streamline the way in which the ICA operates. It is, as stated in a headline of the Flash gazette from December 2004, "a dynamic reinvention of the ICA".

Structurally, the top decision-taking body is the Annual General Meeting (AGM). The governing body in the period between meetings is the Executive Board (EB), which includes the presidents of all the regional delegations and some section presidents in order to ensure maximum international and professional representation.

The Executive Board has the support of by two commissions, the Management Commission (MCOM), responsible for preparing the meetings of the Executive Board and following up the decisions taken, and the Programme Commission (PCOM), responsible for implementing the professional programme.

The CITRA Bureau (International Conference of the Round Table on Archives), the Audit Commission (ACOM), responsible for monitoring the development of ICA programmes and internal and external communications, and the sections, committees and working groups complete the ICA's range of governing bodies.

Another example of the change being experienced by the ICA is the holding of elections for many of these governing bodies. These elections are scheduled for 2005.

Undoubtedly, however, one of the fundamental changes is the transition from a committee-based structure to a project-based approach. These changes should make the ICA an organisation that responds more closely to the needs and interests of archivists world-wide. Hence, the ICA is committed to encouraging the participation of professionals, which is vital to bring about the changes it wishes to make.

For the 2004-2008 period, the ICA has established four priority areas of action:

1 – Advocacy and promotion of archives

With this area the ICA wishes to achieve three objectives. The first is for the whole international archival community to send a coherent message that reconciles the sometimes contrary interests of different types of archives. The second is to identify the target audience for promoting and defending the

profession. The third and last objective is to develop communication strategies that are adapted to the economic and socio-political contexts of each country.

The many aims in this priority area include improving the image of archives before the general public and before decision-making authorities, encouraging access to collections, issuing declarations or recommendations in controversial cases, working on archive statistics or declaring an international archives day.

2 – Electronic archives and automation

This is the newest and fastest-changing of the priority areas of action. The challenge for the ICA lies in devising projects to share knowledge, experiences and techniques among archivists world-wide and making the most of the potential provided by new technology in order to reach a broader public. This should be done practically, accessibly and also quickly.

This area may include Internet networks and the integration of description tools, the potential of digital imaging, the creation and publication of virtual archives, and guides to the management of electronic records, etc.

3 – Conservation and protection in emergency situations

One of the main challenges for archivists is the conservation of documentation. To preserve collections, problems such as the lack of a suitable building or of minimum environmental or security conditions need to be solved. Archives also need to deal with external threats such as natural disasters and armed conflicts.

This priority area is intended to provide collaboration with the archives of countries with few means or those that have to deal with difficult situations. It therefore intends to promote the writing of guidelines for prevention or for action in the event of disaster, the development of low-cost conservation methods that can be easily carried out in countries or zones with scant resources and the production of the minimum criteria that should be met by archive buildings.

4 – Initial and ongoing training

Performance of archive work requires well-trained staff who are able to deal with the professional challenges that arise each day. Co-operation among training centres, archivists and managers of companies and institutions is therefore essential. In addition to the members of the Section for Archival Education (ICA/SAE), the ICA also encourages the participation of the members from the archive community, especially those from places where centres for archival training do not exist.

Each priority area is headed by a leader, who is assisted by a group of experts. Their work is to assess projects that are put forward and to recommend adoption of the project by the ICA. The Executive Board approves economic backing when the project so requires.

These priority areas have been established within the four cross-disciplinary strategic core areas that the ICA has defined:

- Development of countries' potential and co-operation among them
- Improvement in services to ICA members
- Contact among archive professionals
- Standards and improvements in professional practices

The Programme Commission (PCOM) has been established to carry out this task. This commission must co-ordinate the professional programme to ensure communication among the four priority areas. It must also provide a joint view of ICA activities, enhance communication and contacts in all fields, provide a link among projects that are carried out by the different ICA structures and develop co-operation both within the organisation and outside it.

In accordance with the ICA constitution, the Programme Commission is responsible for giving advice on the aid that is provided from the Fund for International Archival Development (FIDA).

The Programme Commission comprises a president, a secretary, the four priority area leaders and four members from the ICA secretariat who are responsible for the cross-disciplinary strategic core areas.

Henceforth, the essential aspect of work will be on projects proposed by regional delegations, by sections and by members or groups of members. The ICA encourages regional delegations to carry on working along normal lines (regional conferences, resource guides, and co-operation activities among countries in the same region, etc.) but, within the framework of the delegations, it also wishes to encourage the presentation of projects in line with the priority areas of action that have been set out by the ICA.

The ICA also urges individual members or groups of members to seek the backing of the Programme Commission in order to start and develop the projects they consider to be of interest. After the call made by the ICA, over 80 projects had been presented up to 1 November.

To facilitate matters, the ICA has prepared a form that is available at www.ica.org in English and French, the two working languages.

The AAC is aware of the importance of participation in international bodies and wishes to encourage Catalan archivists to make proposals for archival projects, either for Catalonia or with an international scope. The AAC is willing to co-operate, as far as possible, by providing contacts, giving support in communications or backing the projects so that the ideas of Catalan archivists may adapt to one of the priority areas of action.

In addition to helping in realising projects, participation in the ICA will undoubtedly bring Catalan archives greater prestige than they currently enjoy. This is the responsibility of everyone.