

International Conference of the Memory of the World Programme, incorporating the 4th Global Policy Forum

Documentary Heritage: A Knowledge Asset for International Understanding and Cooperation

28-29 October 2024

UNESCO HQ, Paris, France

(Room II)

Background

UNESCO, through its Unit for Documentary Heritage, which manages the Memory of the World (MoW) Programme, strives to safeguard humanity's collective memory and cultural diversity for future generations. The programme seeks to ensure that the world's documentary heritage is preserved, digitized, and made accessible to people worldwide. This includes a wide range of materials such as manuscripts, audio-visual materials, and library and archive holdings.

In its two previous inter-regional conferences, the programme highlighted a key objective: fostering North-South and South-South cooperation on preserving and accessing documentary heritage, in alignment with the 2015 [Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form](#) and the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

Building upon these past inter-regional conferences, the MoW Programme will now organize an international conference with a focus on **the possible utilization of documentary heritage as a knowledge asset for international understanding and cooperation**.

The international conference is scheduled to take place from 28-29 October 2024, with the second day dedicated to the 4th Global Policy Forum. The dates coincide with the World Day for Audiovisual Heritage that is celebrated on 27 October each year.

This conference will bring together key partners and experts from the existing national and regional committees of MoW as well as key international organizations working in the field of documentary heritage. Where these do not exist, national experts will be selected by National Commissions for UNESCO and/or regional committees of MoW (MOWCAP for Asia Pacific Region, MOWLAC for the Latin America and Caribbean Region and ARCMOW for the Africa Region). UNESCO Field Offices will also be involved in

the selection of experts. At the same time, this international conference will incorporate the 4th edition of the Global Policy Forum, whose focus will be on showcasing the inter-regional mechanism and implementation of activities on disaster risk management by communities of practice (e.g. memory institutions, educational institutions, etc.) which highlight the centrality of documentary heritage as a shared resource for promoting international understanding, tolerance, cooperation, etc.

The conference will highlight the preservation and promotion of documentary heritage as potent tools for fostering international understanding and cooperation and nurturing lasting peace. Global health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as armed conflicts, highlight the importance of international understanding and cooperation.

Wars and armed conflicts have caused forced displacement. According to Amnesty International, 85% of the refugees are hosted in low- or middle-income countries, which puts a strain on host communities and resources.¹ Regardless of the economic and social conditions of the host countries, however, the world is witnessing a growing anti-refugee sentiment, discrimination, and violence in both developing and developed nations, where these forcibly displaced persons struggle to counter negative narratives and social distrust in host communities. UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, highlighted the critical situation faced by over 100 million people who have been forced to flee their homes due to conflicts, violence, persecution, and human rights violations. He stated that "the international community must come together to take action to address this human tragedy, resolve conflicts and find lasting solutions."²

Documentary heritage can be used to enable solidarity by providing a knowledge basis for international understanding and cooperation and social cohesion at all levels—local, national, regional, and international. Through engaging with historical documents, literature, and multimedia archives, individuals gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human existence and the myriad factors that shape cultural perspectives. By fostering empathy, documentary heritage lays the foundation for constructive dialogue and collaboration, transcending stereotypes and prejudices that fuel international tensions.

To this end, [the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation Concerning the Preservation of, and Access to, Documentary Heritage Including in Digital Form](#) emphasizes “the importance of documentary heritage to promote the sharing of knowledge for greater understanding and dialogue, in order to promote peace and respect for freedom, democracy, human rights and dignity”.

Memory institutions, such as archives, libraries and museums, along with other educational and research bodies, are custodians of quality and reliable information that has an important role to play in an environment of ignorance by disseminating fact-based information, supporting humanitarian and educational efforts, or raising public awareness.

¹ Lack of mental health services for refugees is a global scandal: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/10/lack-of-mental-health-services-refugees-global-scandal-2/>

² More than 100 million now forcibly displaced: UNHCR report: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1120542>

Sir David Khalili, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, argues: “... Conflict almost always derives from misunderstanding, ignorance and prejudice. So we must tell each other our stories – not just in our classrooms, but through our libraries and museums and galleries.”³

However, many memory institutions across Asia, Africa, the Arab Region and the Pacific among other regions still lack resources to effectively engage the public and establish local, regional and international partnerships. Documentary heritage plays a crucial role in these efforts by providing a foundation for connecting diverse cultures and histories. The shared history of many nations offer fertile ground for addressing common challenges and capitalizing on their rich cultural heritage to effectively foster pluralism and diversity in the time of public emergencies. As these regions attempt to join forces, they can learn from other regions while at the same time providing an opportunity for these regions to learn from them. Therefore, documentary heritage serves as a catalyst for cross-cultural collaboration and innovation, transcending national boundaries and fostering a sense of global citizenship. Hence, the theme for this international conference.

Furthermore, the international conference will benefit from the outcomes of a series of capacity building workshops for memory institutions and a conference on “Innovating preservation of documentary heritage in the Arab region,” which will be organized between July and October in Saudi Arabia as part of the MoW Programme’s project in ALUla. Regional insights and knowledge that attest to the tangible value of documentary heritage for international understanding and cooperation will thus feed into the international conference, thereby contributing to a continuum of dialogue at multiple levels.

Objective, issues, outcomes

The two-day conference will revolve around the following question: **How can documentary heritage be used as a knowledge asset for international understanding and cooperation in times of crises both within and among countries?**⁴

Among other issues, the conference will focus on:

- Exploring the knowledge basis of documentary heritage as an embodiment of international understanding and cooperation among Member States and their memory institutions.
- Demonstrating empirical links between documentary heritage, international understanding and cooperation, and the possible resolution of crises (e.g., outbreaks of war, emergencies, pandemics, etc.)

³ Sir David Khalili (2023). *The art of peace: eight collections, one vision*. London: Ebury Press.

⁴ UNESCO defines international understanding and cooperation as “equitable exchange and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect and the equal dignity of all cultures [that] is the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations.”

Source: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373442>

- Highlighting national, regional and international case studies of documentary heritage in relation to promoting national, regional and international understanding and cooperation across different types of crises.
- Providing comparative perspectives on the role of memory institutions during crises.
- Continued focus on disaster preparedness as a basis for forging international cooperation among memory institutions.
- Examining the limits and possibilities for international cooperation in preparation for and during emergencies.
- Analysing how technological innovation can be leveraged to promote documentary heritage for international understanding and cooperation.
- Investigating how memory institutions in low-income countries can implement best practices in identifying, preserving and accessing documentary heritage that enhances greater understanding of the international significance of such documentary heritage.
- Pinpointing the roles that memory institutions can play in ensuring that women's voices are preserved and heard in historical records, including enhancing the use of documentary heritage by educators to teach about the evolution of gender roles and the fight for gender equality.
- Leveraging policy to focus on documentary heritage as an important tool in advancing international understanding and cooperation among UNESCO Member States.

Structure

In order to enrich the discussions, a **Call for Participation** will be issued in order to invite experts, including those associated with the International Council on Archives (ICA), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), the Co-ordinating Council of Audiovisual Archives Associations (CCAAA), etc., to suggest further entry points into an understanding of documentary heritage for international understanding and cooperation during global crises. The Call for Participation will include an invitation to take part in the panel discussions to be organized around key issues as listed in the draft programme. Each panel discussion will be followed by a Q&A session.

As part of the conference, the Salle des Actes has been secured for a possible **exhibition** at UNESCO HQ to showcase selected inscribed collections on the MoW International Register and from key international partner organizations. More space is being negotiated to accommodate more exhibitors. Provisionally, the exhibitors will include memory institutions with items of documentary heritage inscribed on the Register as well as partner institutions with documentary holdings that demonstrate the theme of the conference, including UNESCO Category 2 Centres, etc. An **explanatory guide** for the planned exhibition will be shared with potential exhibitors. Furthermore, as part of this exhibition, the panel discussions will be interspersed with short audiovisual **clips** of selected documentary heritage.

Participants

As an intergovernmental organization with unique convening power, UNESCO is committed to ensuring the diversity of participants, ensuring gender parity at all levels. The conference aims to be a platform for Regional and National MoW Committees, cultural heritage policymakers, academia, the ICT industry, and UNESCO specialists, among others. Specifically, the conference will bring together:

- Stakeholders from memory institutions in selected countries, identified both by the MoW Programme Secretariat and, where necessary, National Commissions for UNESCO.
- Representatives of ministries of Culture, Information and/or Education.
- Delegates from National MoW Committees.
- Delegates from Regional MoW Committees.
- Speakers from government, academia, the ICT industry and UNESCO Member States, Category 2 Centres, Chairholders, Goodwill Ambassadors.
- Delegates from international non-governmental professional associations (ICA, IFLA, etc.).

For its part, the 4th edition of the Global Policy Forum will highlight what has been achieved on the ground since its first edition's focus on policy issues surrounding the preservation and accessibility of documentary heritage within the SENDAI Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction – a shift from *policy* to *practice*.

Except where specified by letter of invitation, participants will fund their own attendance and upkeep during the event.