INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES
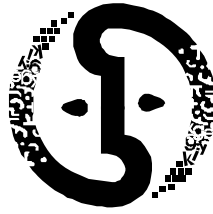# CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES ARCHIVES

Committee on Best Practices and Standards / Sub-committee on archival description
Comité des normes et des bonnes pratiques / Sous-comité des normes de description

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The Archives of France hosted the 2010 meeting of the CBPS sub-committee on archival description, May, 25th-27th, with ICA support.

The main priority of the sub-committee remains the development of the compendium of ICA standards, which will be presented at the Brisbane International Congress on Archives, in 2012. After the official release of the compendium, the development of a future archival conceptual model is envisaged for the 2012-2016 term. To this end, a work plan assigning tasks to the different members of the sub-committee was established, in order to produce a first draft of the compendium by the beginning of November.

The meeting also gave the participants the opportunity to discuss the latest features developed by Artefactual Systems for the ICA-AtoM software, a free open source tool for creating and publishing on-line descriptions compliant with ICA standards.

1. Compendium of ICA standards

At the Marburg meeting, May 25-27, 2009, the sub-committee decided to develop a compendium of descriptive standards, including additions (for example a common area for the control of archival descriptions) and a focused description of the relationships between the different types of entities.

The development of this document remains the priority of the sub-committee for the current mandate 2008-2012, and its release is planned for the next International Congress, at Brisbane (Australia), 2012. Its main purpose is to promote consistent use of the standards. It also seeks to explain to the community how the four ICA standards relate to one another as a unique set of standards that together will produce archival descriptions that will make records accessible. Substantial changes of standards will also occur in the 2012-2014 term, and a conceptual model for archival description will be developed. Finally, this document may be useful for the SAA Working group which is charged with the revision of EAD by 2015.

The draft plan was slightly modified. For instance, originally it was planned to develop crosswalks with other standards such as EAD, EAC-CPF, ISO standards on records management, etc. However, it was deemed premature, because some of these standards are being revised, and the compendium won't include a bibliography, but rather an updated list of related standards.

The sub-committee split then off into two working groups.

The first one started to think about a detailed outline of the part of the compendium explaining the purpose of archival description and archival information systems, which will include 5 sections:
- Nature of archival materials
- Purposes of archival description
- Nature of archival description
- Benefits of archival description
- Nature of archival descriptive systems

The second working group drew a diagram illustrating the relationships between the different archival entities, mentioning the concerned standards.

In this diagram, entities (i.e. records, actors and functions) are interrelated through an action. For instance: an actor performs the act of mandating a function to another actor; records are evidence of actors (corporate body, person, family); an archival holder as a subdivision of an actor has a mandate to hold records / performs the action of holding records; records are evidence of actions performed by actors; records may be about actors; records may be about other records, etc.

A call for comments should be organized by the end of the year and during the 2011 meeting, the sub-committee will complete, discuss, amend and expand the draft of compendium.

During the Paris meeting, CBPS members discussed the process for developing an archival conceptual model which will begin in 2012.

A model is not a format, rather it explains past formats. A model explains the legacy data, it can transform them into any form, it can causally relate all data, it can make the formats more comprehensive. So, before generalization and integration, it is necessary to understand how current concepts reflect functionality and processes. Terminology can be an obstacle to understanding (for instance, are mandates top functional level?). One should differentiate between the nature and the designation of things (for example, the Identity area of ISAAR(CPF) includes both elements specifying the type of the entity described as well as others containing alternative names of the entity).

Therefore, the purpose is to create and share a common understanding of the structure, content and intended uses of standards and formats. It aims to enable archivists to understand their own areas of knowledge better, it enables others to understand related fields of knowledge, it makes underlying assumptions explicit. Note that the world of data archivists use in their descriptions is much larger than the world represented in standards: it includes not only typical archival topics such as archival materials, corporate bodies, persons, families, functions, mandates, but it also refers to places and topics.

The sub-committee agreed in principle with the general objectives of an archival conceptual model and of archive museum/libraries integration. These were defined during a workshop organized by the FRBR-CRM Harmonization Group at Helsinki, January 2010 (see:

http://www.cidoc-crm.org/workshops.html). The methodology suggested for developing such a conceptual model after the 2012 International Congress on Archives is the following:
- determine scope and domain
- consider use of existing archival conceptual models as input in the knowledge engineering process
- draft classes and properties by analyzing domain concepts, formats, prescriptions, documentation rules and data structures
- representation in graphical form
- draft scope notes (definitions), correct inconsistencies
- write (then revise) a complete document with introduction, explanations, graphics, etc.

2. Demonstration of ICA-AtoM software and discussion

a. Background and main features

ICA-AtoM is an international cooperative project which aims to develop a free and open-source tool enabling archivists to edit archival descriptions and to upload archival finding aids (see: http://ica-atom.org/). The software is intended to be multilingual, web-based and compliant with ICA descriptive standards. The software is developed by a Canadian company, Artefactual Systems, and the project is managed by a Steering Committee. Steering Committee members are representatives of Library and Archives Canada, The National Archives of Scotland, Archives of France, Unesco and the Netherlands Archives School. The Steering Committee controls whether the software is compliant with ICA descriptive standards.

At its current stage of development, ICA-AtoM is made up of 3 subsets:
- a menu "Add/edit" allows for the creation or for the edition of 4 types of descriptive records by clicking on 4 tabs (archival description, authority records, archival institutions, functions). In addition, a "Terms" tab provides an access to all the terms available in the drop-down menus used for describing archival materials, creators, functions of creators and archival institutions, and a Recent updates Tab enables us to view lists of archival descriptions, authority records, descriptions of functions, description of archival institutions and terms recently added to ICA-AtoM;
- a menu "Admin" allows users to choose your settings; users can refine user permissions in the groups and permissions information area (for instance, in the case of a collaborative platform, an archival institution may not be allowed to change the descriptions of another archival institution);
- ICA-AtoM includes an XML import function that serves to import EAD descriptions along with related authority records and archival institutions.

The implementation of features for the import/export of authority records using the EAC-CPF XML schema was planned for the end of 2009. However, the XML schema was not finally released until March 2010. Another feature concerns the import/export of thesauri partly because the company, which is seriously interested in carrying out the technical audit (see below), stressed that the audit result would be much less meaningful if the software cannot be tested on a thesaurus. And of course, many users want to be able to import a thesaurus instead of creating one manually.

The Steering Committee will review EAC-CPF and import/export of thesauri using the SKOS XML schema in June. Artefactual Systems will move the 1.0.9. release to a 1.1-stable release after the summer break.

b. Technical audit

Several members of the Steering Committee stressed the importance of a technical audit when the SG met in Paris in November 2008. Last autumn, SG members accepted in principle the need for a technical audit to take place, before the public launch of V1.1. This would provide users with a reinforced guarantee that they would be getting a tried and tested product, as well as protect the project's credibility (and that of ICA as a whole).

The Archives of France have contacted a company, Atol CD, with the appropriate skills and experience, and invited them to submit a proposal. ICA general secretary, David Leitch, met Yannick Louvet, the possible project director, for an exploratory conversation in December 2009. He demonstrated a broad understanding of ICA's requirements and this was further developed by continuing dialogue between Atol CD and the Archives of France in January-February.

The audit includes an acquisition phase, a dynamic and a static audit, and several options for an installation/security audit:
- acquisition phase: getting acquainted with technique and function;
- static audit: this kind of audit allows the checking of the coherence of the source codes, data models and architecture. It allows for the management of the different divisions of the software. This audit is performed by studying the code and checking that it follows the functional constraints, by studying the architecture (meaning the implemented communication model, the access database, ...);
- dynamic audit: study of the application's behaviour under "extreme" situations (voluminous master data (thesauri, reference index...), numerous simultaneous connexions, numerous connexions to the database), installing the software on an other system than Linux (Windows 2003 Server).

In terms of timing, the audit is likely to take six weeks from early October 2010. Although some of the findings can be fed through to the developer during the audit process, Artefactual will need some additional time to resolve issues generated by the audit. So V1.1 would not be ready for its public launch before the end of the calendar year.

c. Educational role

The purpose of the ICA-AtoM Project is to provide free and open-source software that enables institutions to make their archival holdings available online, especially those who would otherwise be unable to do so. Furthermore, the project can act as a catalyst for further collaboration around professional best practices in archival description and the management of archives technology.

The software can serve as a tool for promoting descriptive standards. Workshops on ICA-AtoM were organized for the Warbica (West African branch of ICA) Conference, last October, in Dakar (Senegal), or for the "Stage technique international" held in France over the last months. We gave an introduction to these standards and a feedback-experience on how to use standards in a specific working environment. Then, the attendees were able to test some features of the application with some exercises: how to publish a description of their archival institution, which is also ISDIAH-compliant; how to produce descriptions of archival fonds; how to link these descriptions to the archival institution and to the creators, etc.