The Future of the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme – Discussion Paper

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ABSTRACT

To mark the 30th anniversary of the Memory of the World Programme in 2022, the Brandenberg University of Technology, in cooperation with the Institute Heritage Studies, convened an international Think Tank of MoW experts to evaluate the achievements and future prospects of the Programme.

They judged that in developing a global structure to facilitate preservation of, access to and awareness of documentary heritage, MoW has been remarkably successful, as evidenced by the development of registers, standards, capacity building, and expert networks. Yet while it remains underfunded, understaffed and still struggling for brand recognition, its success has paradoxically attracted an increasing politicisation. This has overshadowed its expert-led character and made its operation more complex.

The meeting considered that MoW's future depends on dealing with these and several other concerns. These include realising the potential for documentary heritage to enrich education, multiculturalism, sustainable development and post-conflict reconciliation. Raising awareness of the threat to documentary heritage from political and economic conflicts and population displacement has become more urgent. Dialogue and cooperation with experts in other disciplines and with other UNESCO programmes such as World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage is needed. The Think Tank concluded that, while MoW has amply demonstrated the need for its existence, it has yet to reach its full potential.

1. Introduction

1.1. The UNESCO Memory of the World (MoW) Programme is focused on documentary heritage. It complements other UNESCO heritage programmes, notably the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage conventions. Established in 1992, it has a three-tier structure of international, regional and national committees. Its objectives are:

- To facilitate preservation, by the most appropriate techniques, of the world's past, present and future documentary heritage;
- To assist universal access to documentary heritage;
- To increase awareness worldwide of the existence and significance of documentary heritage.

1.2 Over three decades, MoW has elevated the importance of documentary heritage worldwide, including the establishment of registers of significant heritage. It has sustained itself and grown, even under stressful and challenging conditions. The 30th anniversary of MoW in 2022 was therefore a time to celebrate its achievements.

1.3 Accordingly, the Chair of Technoscience Studies at the Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg, in cooperation with the Institute Heritage Studies organized a Think Tank to review the validity of MoW's philosophical foundations, consider MoW's current situation

and reflect on its challenges and potential. The eighteen participants, drawn from all UNESCO regions and all levels of the MoW Programme, brought their many decades of practical and intellectual involvement with the Programme, and with UNESCO, to the task. As the discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule, neither the participants nor their affiliations are identified. This discussion paper summarises the informational content of the Think Tank. The aim is to spark initial thinking around some of the complex issues now surrounding MoW, and to suggest some responses.

2. Thirty Years of MoW: A Story of Achievements and Challenges

2.1 Achievements

2.1.1 Over three decades, MoW has mobilised the professional community around the globe, embracing a variety of stakeholders, volunteer experts, decision makers and players in the political sphere. So far, 94 National Committees, 3 Regional Committees (MOWCAP for Asia and the Pacific, MOWLAC for Latin America and the Caribbean, and ARCMOW for Africa), 8 MoW Knowledge Centres and the International Centre for Documentary Heritage (ICDH) have been established. MoW has impacted memory institutions and governments. It has helped institutions acquire funding, improve their practices and skills, develop their holdings, establish standards, inspire new initiatives. It has offered a framework for cooperation.

2.1.2 Surveys in different countries have revealed where memory institutions are in need. Collections have been lost, libraries closed; institutions lack resources, knowledge and facilities, and need governmental support. Capacity building workshops in preservation, disaster preparedness and access skills have been held, as well as training to assist those preparing register nominations. Meetings and conferences have helped develop a global community underpinned with publications, educational materials and normative guidelines. The Jikji Prize for innovative approaches to documentary preservation and accessibility has been awarded biennially since 2005. The "Recommendation concerning the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage including in digital form", adopted unanimously by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2015, was a MoW initiative.

2.1.3 Recognition by governments and decision makers that in any digitisation programme, the analogue originals should also be retained and not destroyed is a change in awareness and practice, partly due to MoW. Similarly, the perception that documentary heritage belongs to the whole world means that a small collection in a small country, facing preservation problems, is still part of the heritage of all humankind. The concept of documentary heritage, too, has expanded beyond traditional print and written sources.

2.1.4 All of this is an indication of the developing dynamism and potential of MoW to generate new perspectives, knowledge and initiatives. Yet, brand recognition is still a work in progress. MoW is much more than its registers, and the Programme struggles for recognition in comparison to World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage. Over its entire existence,

MoW has been severely underfunded and understaffed. Its success has depended heavily on volunteer commitment and achievement. And, as recent developments have shown, it has become a victim of its own success.

2.2 The downside of success

2.2.1 For most of its history, MoW has worked harmoniously as a collegial, expert-driven programme, but in recent years, it became a political football when Member States realised the impact of inscriptions on the International MoW Register. This became obvious between 2015 and 2017, when objections were raised against certain nominations submitted to the Register. Member States could see how UNESCO's soft power could be used to gain symbolic territory in antagonistic escalations. One Member State threatened to withdraw its UNESCO funding unless the General Guidelines, approved by the IAC in 2017, were changed to allow veto power against other countries' nominations. A "comprehensive review" ensued from 2018 to 2021, during which the International MoW Register was closed to new nominations for more than four years. The review appears to have ended when the UNESCO Executive Board (EXB) set in place controls to ensure that new inscriptions would not raise questions about the ideology and identity or past practice of Member States. This has created an atmosphere encouraging self-censorship, and it has damaged the morale of the community that sustains MoW. The impact may well be long lasting if not permanent.

2.2.2 The "comprehensive review" resulted in a new iteration of the General Guidelines. The Guidelines, which were deliberately designed to articulate MoW's philosophy as well as tabulate procedures, first appeared in 1995, three years after the Programme's foundation. A subsequent revision in 2002 by an expert group reflected the Programme's growth and experience to date. By 2015, it was necessary to begin a further revision, in part to address the realities of digitisation and to make the Guidelines compatible with the new Recommendation on documentary heritage. A Working Group consulted widely with the MoW community and beyond for two years, and in December 2017 the MoW International Advisory Committee (IAC) approved a new text of the General Guidelines.

2.2.3 Yet, a few months later, the EXB suspended new nominations for the International MoW Register and established a Member States-based Open Ended Working Group (OEWG) to conduct a "comprehensive review" of MoW. Dissatisfied with its inability to deliver an outcome, the EXB replaced it by a Limited Participant Working Group (LPWG), and the current 2021 text of the General Guidelines was the result. Huge parts of the approved 2017 text were slashed, removing most of the Programme's rationale and philosophy. MoW's essential rationale is still outlined in the Preamble to the 2015 Recommendation, but this will not necessarily be apparent to readers of the Guidelines.

2.3 General Guidelines changes

2.3.1 Up until 2017, MoW was explicitly developed as an expert-led programme; reliance on

expert guidance was seen to be the best way to manage specified and shared documentary heritage. Under the 2021 General Guidelines, this character of MoW has been lost and the role of experts is circumscribed and now subordinated to a raft of defined roles for Member States and their National Commissions for UNESCO, the MoW Secretariat, the EXB and the Director General.

2.3.2 Other more significant changes between the 2017 and 2021 texts include in particular the deletion of the following:

- The history of the General Guidelines so MoW has been distanced from its corporate memory.
- Provisions for "lost and missing heritage" and "heritage under threat";
- The statement that "UNESCO does not enter into disputes concerning interpretation of historical events".
- The Code of Ethics

2.3.3 In a completely new departure, an added clause reads, "Any documents that promote issues and ideas in opposition to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and of the UNESCO Constitution and/ or promote any form of denial of human rights, foster hate speech or promote racist or discriminatory rhetoric are inadmissible" (8.2.2). Determining admissibility was devolved to the Register Subcommittee (RSC) whose members, chosen for their relevant professional documentary heritage expertise, are now additionally required to render political judgment. This provision has no antecedent in MoW, and it may conflict with the UNESCO Constitution, which calls for the "unrestricted pursuit of objective truth". Hate speech, racist and discriminatory rhetoric may be uncomfortable, inconvenient and unpleasant, but are part of all recorded history. The 2017 text devoted considerable attention to explaining that inscription on a MoW Register recognised the significance of a document (either positive or negative) and it was explicitly stated that it did not bestow or indicate any approval of its content by MoW or UNESCO.

2.3.4 The process for nominating to the MoW registers is now more complex, time consuming and inequitable. Nominations can now only come from or through UNESCO member states, IGOs or NGOs maintaining official relations with UNESCO.

2.3.5 The 2017 text of the General Guidelines introduced a mechanism for *comments* on nominations, as an enhancement to further improve the quality of nominations. This included a process for handling objections, related solely to the eligibility of documentary heritage measured against the selection criteria. The resolution of such objections would be by time-limited dialogue. The details of this process were put in an appendix because objections were expected to be few. However, in the 2021 text of the General Guidelines the concept of *objections* has moved to centre stage and has morphed into the combative concept of *contestations* (either technical or undefined "other") determining how they are to be addressed in a strangely and obscurely-named "incidental process". Objections/contestations are now seen as normative, not exceptional, and are unrelated to the selection criteria. This idea, and the aggressive

terminology that underpins it, are entirely new to MoW, and the consequences are yet to be worked through.

2.3.6 Finally, approval of nominations to the International Register is now subject to the politics of the EXB, as also is the power to approve revisions to the General Guidelines (previously in the hands of the International Advisory Committee).

3. The Current Framework Conditions

3.1 The current framework conditions for the implementation of MoW are defined by the status of UNESCO as an intergovernmental organization and they are set out in the MoW General Guidelines, approved by the Executive Board in 2021 at its 211th session.

3.2 As a UNESCO programme, MoW has always belonged to an intergovernmental organization, in which authority rests with the Director General, and just like other programmes administered by such bodies, MoW is likely to be influenced by the dynamics of international relations and by geo-political changes influencing UNESCO as a whole.

3.3 This is evident in the politicisation occurring within programmes focused on culture and heritage, especially those involving listing systems, which appears to be an increasing trend across UNESCO. Assigning heritage significance is inherently a political act because it is based on selection, which is open to interpretation, cultural biases and political interests. Member States do use successful programmes as a political arena. In MoW, this is exacerbated by the fact that documents are witnesses and testimonies to past events and thus likely to be entangled with political discourses. All these set limits to how MoW is implemented today, and are reflected mainly in the distribution of roles and responsibilities as well as in the nomination process.

3.4 The role of independent intellectuals in the functioning of UNESCO has decreased over time. MoW, too, has been impacted by these changes and its intergovernmental character is now even further elevated over its expert-led status. While the technical role of experts is still recognised, the political sphere now assumes a much more important role within UNESCO and on a national level.

3.5 The executive role of the Director General in appointing IAC members continues to be respected, but the candidates must now be presented to the EXB, so that it takes note of them. The IAC continues to be the body that recommends register inscriptions, but these now need to be endorsed by the EXB. The IAC Register Subcommittee continues to decide on the application of the selection criteria for the International MoW Register, but the political sphere effectively decides what gets to be nominated and consequently evaluated, and it can also interfere in the evaluation process.

3.6 In theory, nominations can still be submitted by anyone, but now only through the National Commissions for UNESCO or alternative government bodies. An exception is made for some international organizations, which may submit nominations directly to the MoW Secretariat. Consequently, the nomination procedure is now more complex, intimidating and undemocratic,

being dependent on the existence and capability of supporting political structures, which can exercise control or even prevent documentary heritage from being submitted, assessed or inscribed. The process is furthermore dependent on the competence of intermediary bodies, regardless of whether they are capable of fulfilling the responsibility they have been assigned or of taking decisions of a kind they were not accustomed to in the past.

3.7 The provisions which now exist for objecting to nominations under evaluation has normalized contestation and can be misused in the absence of a clearer definition and interpretation. It can be turned on its head and used by a potential objector to examine nominated documents with the express purpose of hunting for grounds for a contestation. Furthermore, contestation can be made on any grounds, whether related to the criteria or not, and there is no time limit for resolution. Anyone can block any nomination permanently if so minded, whether in good or bad faith. There are no provisions for how to respond when this occurs, as in the case of other UNESCO programmes, such as the World Heritage system, where a more formalized and time-limited approach has recently been adopted following extensive discussion by the Open Ended Working Group on Sites of Memory Associated with Recent Conflict.

3.8 All these changes introduce limits to how the objectives of MoW can be achieved.

4. Perspectives on the Way Forward

4.1 This discussion paper proposes for further consideration a list of reflections sensitive to the potential trajectories MoW could take, and which can guide its development over the coming years.

4.2 How to bring the comprehensive nature of MoW to light? MoW is known primarily for its International Register, an impression which obscures the role of its Regional and National Registers and the fact that the three levels are independent and do not operate as a hierarchy. While the registers are an important means for achieving the goals of the Programme they are just a means to an end, not the core of MoW, which is much broader in scope. The inclusive nature of MoW, resulting from its three tiers of operation and the activities taking place at all levels, including workshops, conferences, publications, awards, exhibitions and the regional and national registers, are not well known to the international community. They are also not visible on the MoW website (especially in its most recent refashioning), which is the main platform for the Programme. Ways have to be found to create reference points, which show the whole nature of MoW and present the full range of activities that have been taking place on all levels over 30 years.

4.3 How to enforce and expand the three-tier structure of MoW? The activities taking place on a regional and national level have been fundamental in creating MoW's profile, and these should be strengthened through capacity-building activities, awareness raising measures, infrastructural development and resource acquisition, tailored to the needs and conditions existing in different parts of the world. The potential of MoW's three-tier structure should be fully

explored. The three existing Regional Committees are based on geopolitical affiliation, and so far no attempt has been made to build lasting committees based on cultural or linguistic sub-regions, or to develop forms of cross-regional cooperation, let alone committees based on non-geographical affiliations or interests. Some such groups were set up strictly to propose heritage for inscription (Baltic countries, Indentured labourers, etc.) but then dissolved after submission of the nomination file. Furthermore, the potential of National MoW Registers and other MoW activities need to be validated and widely advertised locally, as these illustrate the importance of documentary heritage and help attract support by offering nominators leverage for gaining sponsorship and support for preservation and access.

4.4 How to make the funding of MoW sustainable? So far, the Programme has been largely reliant on the work of dedicated volunteers. Funding has been a perennial challenge. MoW has always been underfunded by UNESCO (obviously in comparison to the other two flagship heritage programmes based on conventions), and the support by Member States, given differing levels of national development, has been variable and uncertain. While MoW has demonstrated the capacity to attract support and resources outside UNESCO's programme and budget, these have been largely confined to bilateral and multilateral networks still within the scope of UNESCO's organisational framework. There is a need to move beyond UNESCO's typical funding and governance structure and to seek mutually acceptable partnerships, which allow new resources to be brought in and enable a more systematic and dedicated programme to be developed. Both the Programme and the documentary heritage safeguards and highlights need to become self-sustaining in the future.

4.5 How can MoW develop its potential to address contemporary concerns? Documentary heritage is a resource that can be used to enrich education, to celebrate multilingualism and to promote cultural diversity and it can support sustainable development, post-conflict reconciliation and resilience building, to name but a few areas. The potential of MoW in relation to these topical issues, however, is not readily apparent. While preservation and access remain key objectives of MoW, there is a need to go beyond technical processes to considering the contribution of documentary heritage to societal values. Furthermore, MoW should help develop partnerships and action plans to protect inscribed heritage now endangered by civil unrest, national insecurity, political and economic conflicts, natural disasters, looting, destruction and people's displacement, and raise awareness of the threat to historical memory in the areas affected.

4.6 How can MoW expand its fields of cooperation? MoW is best known and acknowledged by people working in memory institutions, and it has been mainly inspired by the methodologies and experiences of libraries and archives. However, its subject matter is of relevance in many fields, beyond those dealing strictly with documents and information, and beyond the activities carried out within the UNESCO Communication and Information Sector. There is need to expand cooperation with experts in other disciplines like History, Cultural Studies, Political

Science, Museum and Heritage Studies. Above all, closer collaboration should be developed with World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage programmes, which have resonances with MoW through their common contributions to understanding aspects of human history. Stronger bridges with the Blue Shield should be built, and documentary heritage explicitly included in elements protected during armed conflicts. In general, there is a need for everyone, whether public or private, government or industry, to join forces and communicate with each other to harness the potential of documentary heritage.

4.7 How can MoW develop mechanisms for dialogue? All UNESCO's programmes, including MoW, should be carried out in the spirit of international cooperation, with a view to creating more peace and stability in the world. Despite this aim, they cannot become fully resilient to geopolitical tensions and antagonisms affecting their operation, but it is possible to seek intellectual solutions against the negative effects of power by making appeal to rationality. While in other UNESCO programmes there has been a more nuanced, constructive discussion about conflicting issues, *in MoW an effective mechanism for dialogue does not exist* and the outcome of the "comprehensive review" has set in place a permanent veto regime that does not plague the other two heritage programmes. Potentially critical or sensitive documents should be handled in MoW in a way that keeps them protected from political antagonisms between Member States, clearly differentiating attribution of significance from endorsement of their contents. It is therefore necessary to open up an intellectual debate about conflicting nominations and to find ways for moderating how people engage in useful discussion and facilitation between the nominator and somebody objecting. This is necessary on all levels, considering that many different competing interests exist in various countries, which need to look somewhere for guidance. *MoW must recover its expert driven character and sustain itself as a technical programme*.

4.8 How can MoW become proactive in developing latent areas of expertise? There are unexplored areas in MoW, the development of which can be fundamental to its goals. Lost and missing documentary heritage is one such area. Surviving documentary heritage that has been preserved needs to be contextualised by understanding what is lost or is missing. MoW can play a key role in acknowledging the disappearance of heritage and pointing out gaps, which might be filled by drawing on ancillary documents. The concept of "shared heritage" is another area to be enhanced. While there are notable examples of joint nominations, some have been or are related to the colonial past, laden with potential problems of dichotomous interpretation and power relations by coloniser and colonised. MoW needs to systematically consider what is truly shared heritage and explore this concept proactively. Its capacity to recognise heritage that does not necessarily reside in the particular Member State or the particular location of the nominator needs to be retained and enhanced. A further area is the emergence of new archival holdings on contemporary events, such as the impacts of tsunamis or human rights breaches, which are created by putting together fragmentary pieces of information collected from a variety

of sources dispersed around the world. MoW can and must assume a higher responsibility in creating the documentary heritage of our time.

4.9 How can MoW respond to the challenges of a digital world? Digitisation is praised for its potential but the technology relies on energy sources, which create greenhouse gases and contribute to the negative effects of climate change. This is intensified by the tension between keeping digital materials safe for the future and the constant need for updated technology in a race against obsolescence. With climate change being the major issue affecting all humanity, the paradox of mitigating negative environmental effects through sustainable digital preservation should become a focus of attention in MoW. Among UNESCO's heritage programmes, MoW is uniquely positioned to engage in a debate about the uses and effects of artificial intelligence in relation to questions of preservation and access, as well as about progressive copyright reform adapted to the digital age. Furthermore, MoW needs to provide guidance on interpreting digital heritage, and, in a world overloaded with digital information, help discern that which is valuable.

4.10 The MoW Programme has amply demonstrated the necessity of its existence. As a living Programme, it will continue to be a work in progress. If it is to reach its full potential, the issues raised in this paper need to be addressed with integrity either by existing mechanisms, or by means yet to be created.

Suggested Readings

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