

***Evidence-based Governance in the Electronic Age:  
A Summary of Key Policy Issues***



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## Introduction

Citizens in all countries want better *governance*:

- more effective programs and services and better living conditions;
- just laws and respect for human rights;
- honest, open and accountable government;
- meaningful participation and a voice in government decisions.

These goals have been out of reach in many countries. Illiteracy, poverty, corruption, poor communication infrastructures and other challenges have made “good governance” more a hope than a reality to a large proportion of citizens.

The records which governments create and maintain are a vital resource that must be carefully managed in order to achieve good governance. In some countries, the lack of reliable records forms a major barrier to institutional, legal and regulatory reform; anti-corruption strategies; poverty reduction; and economic development.

*Evidence-based Governance in the Electronic Age* – a project of the World Bank and the International Records Management Trust – aims to help countries improve governance through better recordkeeping, by

- raising awareness of the critical importance of records for public sector reform;
- developing tools to assess the quality of records management within countries;
- undertaking initiatives to improve records management capacity;
- providing opportunities to share experiences and develop solutions.

This paper examines the key arguments that national archivists, senior records personnel, educators and others need to communicate to senior government officials:

1. Good recordkeeping is essential for good governance.
2. Electronic information systems create new opportunities and special challenges.
3. Good recordkeeping supports effective, transparent and accountable government.
4. Public access to information and the protection of sensitive information are fundamental to good governance.

### **Governance** means:

how government functions and works together with others to make decisions and take action to deal with the needs of its citizens.

“Good governance is epitomized by predictable, open and enlightened policy-making, a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos acting in furtherance of the public good, the rule of law, transparent processes, and a strong civil society participating in public affairs. Poor governance (on the other hand) is characterized by arbitrary policy making, unaccountable bureaucracies, unenforced or unjust legal systems, the abuse of executive power, a civil society unengaged in public life, and widespread corruption.”

-- The World Bank

### **Good governance reflects, serves and protects fundamental democratic values**, including:

- respect for human rights and the rule of law;
- transparency and openness of government policies, processes and decisions;
- individual and organizational accountability;
- ethical conduct of politicians and public servants;
- citizen involvement and participation;
- protection of personal privacy and security.

## 1. *Good recordkeeping is essential for good governance.*

Good records provide the vital information and essential evidence to

- enable the government to **identify and understand problems** and issues, **make decisions and take action**;
- support **programs, policies and services**;
- document, protect legal **rights, entitlements and obligations**;
- achieve **openness, accountability**, earn **public trust** and **involve citizens**;
- enable the successful use of **information technology**; and
- **preserve and use** important information about the **past**.

Good recordkeeping means:

- **determining** information needs; **creating** and **acquiring** information;
- **distributing** and **sharing** records and information;
- **evaluating** and **using** information to identify and solve problems;
- **documenting** activities and decisions;
- **maintaining** records for as long as they have value;
- **determining responsibility** for managing and protecting records;
- **identifying, organizing, storing** and **disposing** of records;
- **protecting** confidential and personal information contained in records;
- **providing sufficient staff, training** and **other resources**; and
- **evaluating** records management performance and improving where needed.

Archival records:

- have long-term **operational, legal, historical** or other value;
- enable governments, citizens and others to learn **how issues were addressed in the past** or, perhaps, to discover **why they were not addressed**
- enable **local** and **national heritage** preservation and development
- allow societies to maintain their **documentary memory** and foster their sense of **identity** and **culture**.

**Good records are needed for:**

- confirming citizen's rights, such as pension, voting and other entitlements;
- documenting and protecting freedom of speech, assembly, etc.;
- developing and maintaining effective health care programs;
- registering births and deaths;
- protecting public security;
- enabling tax collection and census taking;
- prosecuting and defending court cases;
- supporting job creation programs;
- managing the government's finances, the civil service and other resources;
- documenting the nation's history and development.

"Whenever there is a problem, instead of finding out what has happened before, what we did in the past, and why it didn't succeed (or what successes we had), we simply start afresh...we go on re-inventing the wheel all the time."

K.B. Asante, Former Secretary of State for Education, Ghana

Consider this example. Without quality record keeping processes, water sewage systems may be installed but the records needed to maintain them may not be protected. Eventually, a city may risk water contamination or worse if it cannot document the systems in place and the actions taken.

## 2. *The electronic information environment creates new opportunities and special challenges.*

As computers are introduced, records are increasingly created, stored, transmitted and used in electronic form – often without basic records management systems in place. Managing electronic records is a challenging task for the following reasons.

- Computer systems are **complex, quickly changing, fragile** and often **incompatible**;
- The **volume** and **types** of electronic and paper records have **vastly increased** where computers have been introduced;
- Electronic records are easy to **duplicate, alter** and **delete**;
- Important records are often stored on individual computers and are **not available** to other workers who need them;
- Protecting the **security** of records during storage and transmission is difficult;
- Effective electronic **filing systems** have not been developed or are not used – files are **difficult to locate**;
- Related paper and electronic files may not be **linked** together for a complete record;
- Electronic records are **difficult to preserve** because of rapid changes in computer hardware and software;
- Records management requirements such as retention periods and records disposal are **not built into computer systems**;
- Responsibilities for managing computer systems, records and data are often **unclear** and **fragmented** among program, records management and technology staff;
- Staff may have **little or no training** in using computers and managing electronic records and they **don't know where to go for help**.

### Computers can help to:

- improve access to information, programs, entitlements (Internet sites, electronic application forms);
- improve legal compliance (permits, licenses);
- simplify office work (eliminate unnecessary steps or excess paper);
- combine, analyze data to provide new information (such as data about a disease);
- help staff to share information and work together (such as by exchanging e-mail to solve problems).

Computers, the Internet and related technologies are not useful, however, if the information is not accessible, authentic or reliable. Like paper records, electronic records need to be managed and protected for as long as they are of value.

### The Digital Divide

“Technological and scientific research is oriented to respond to the needs and aspirations of the powerful.”  
- Percival Patterson, Prime Minister, Jamaica

While many countries have a strong communications and technology infrastructure, others lack basic communications capabilities such as reliable telephone service. More than 96% of computers connected to the Internet are located in the wealthiest nations, representing only 15% of the world's population. In the Information Age, more than 1 billion adults worldwide are unable to read and write, 98% of them in developing countries.

**Consider this example. If electronic records are not well managed, a government department may find** that important legal records it created by computer several years ago are no longer readable with new software. As a result, critical evidence is lost. Effective electronic record keeping aims to protect such essential evidence.

### 3. *Good recordkeeping supports effective, transparent and accountable government.*

Accessible and reliable records show

- what **decisions** were made;
- what **actions** were taken;
- what **people** were involved;
- what **rights** and **responsibilities** exist.

Good records enable citizens, government itself and others to determine if

- its programs and services are **accessible** and **effective**;
- it is **transparent** in the way it functions; and
- it is **accountable** for what it says and does.

In many countries, recordkeeping systems have not been given the priority they need; consequently, recordkeeping is often weak. The main reasons include:

- **little awareness** by government officials and citizens of the value of information and records;
- **weak leadership** for records programs; archives and records management groups not well positioned to influence government;
- **unclear** or **inconsistent** recordkeeping responsibilities and accountability;
- records-related work is **low-priority, poorly paid**; not enough records staff;
- **weak** or **non-existent** records laws, policies, standards, and practices;
- **limited budgets**, equipment, materials and space;
- **poor skills** and **limited training** for managing paper, electronic records;
- **little cooperation** among departments, professions; fragmented programs;
- frequent government **reorganization** which confuses records responsibilities;
- **increased volume** and **complexity** of records – “information overload”;
- **limited computerization** to help manage, share and use information.

**Effectiveness** means:

- government policies and programs achieve the results intended, such as jobs created, better education, cleaner water and air, less corruption, etc.

**Transparency** means:

- government policies, decisions and actions should not be more complicated than necessary;
- information about them should be accessible and easily understood.

**Accountability** means:

- government officials are expected to act responsibly and within their authority;
- acknowledge their actions and decisions and admit responsibility for them;
- accept the consequences of their behavior.

“Poor recordkeeping is eating away at the foundation of accountability in the federal government.”

-- Auditor General of Canada, 2001

**Studies** dealing with recordkeeping and governance in sub-Saharan Africa concluded that governments were unable to implement effective public sector reforms, in part, because of

- not *having* information to develop and support reform policies and processes;
- not *knowing* what information was needed to undertake various government functions;
- not *being able to rely* on available information;
- not *using* available information in decision-making or analysis – decisions are based on pre-formed judgments, not evidence.

The **risks** and **consequences** of poor recordkeeping can be serious for governments, individuals and society. These risks include:

- **poor decisions, policies, programs and services**
- **reduced access to rights and entitlements; unfair treatment of citizens**
- **reduced transparency, accountability and trust in government**
- **cynical and uninvolved citizens and groups**
- **duplicated and wasted effort**
- **lost opportunity, increased costs and huge backlogs of old and valueless records**
- **inability to measure program and service effectiveness**
- **wasted investment in technology**

There are many risks to poor record keeping:

A government cannot develop a strategy to deal with HIV/AIDS because records about the nature and extent of the epidemic have not been kept.

A woman who has worked many years as a teacher is retiring and has applied for a pension. She is told that some of her employment records cannot be found and there will be a major reduction in her pension credits.

A corrupt politician orders that documents be destroyed that would show he is involved in an illegal sale of government assets. Without record keeping systems his actions may not be stopped.

A patient becomes ill but cannot be treated efficiently and effectively because her hospital file, showing her medical history and past treatments, cannot be found.

An office worker spends weeks searching for an important file that has been misfiled. It cannot be found and key information cannot be reconstructed.

A department rents space for records storage, but insects and dampness make most of the records useless within a few years.

A records inspector investigates an expensive storage facility only to find that many of the records stored there are forms that should have been destroyed years ago. In the meantime, valuable records are at risk.

A government's efforts to automate its personnel records fail when it is found that many of the existing paper files are missing, out-of-date, incomplete or inaccurate.

Governments need a strong records management **framework** or **infrastructure** consisting of:

- **wide awareness** of the value of records and information by political leaders, civil servants and citizens;
- effective **laws** and **policies** such as access and privacy laws, “public records” acts, archival legislation, government-wide and department recordkeeping policies;
- **governance and accountability arrangements** that identify records management responsibilities, assign leadership, monitor and evaluate performance, and coordinate records management with program management and information technology management;
- **standards and practices** for the life-cycle records management such as practices for creating, identifying, organizing, classifying, accessing, storing, protecting, retaining and disposing of records;
- skilled **staff** including all civil servants and records managers, along with effective **training programs**;
- **budget, space, equipment and supplies** including computer hardware and programs, filing cabinets and adequate storage space.

A records management **framework** comprises the building blocks of an effective records and information management program. If well designed, implemented and supported, it provides the *direction, authority* and *capacity* for governments to manage their records and information in support of good governance.

#### **4. Public access to information and the protection of sensitive information are fundamental to good governance.**

Citizens, the media, funding agencies and human rights groups want full and accurate information about what government is doing to fight poverty, protect citizens' rights and entitlements, prevent and prosecute fraud, protect the environment and deal with other problems. Governments also want to create and maintain accurate information to show that they are trying to deal with these issues.

In many countries, the **right of access** to government records is protected by "freedom of information" laws. These rights help citizens to:

- view, understand and evaluate government decisions and conduct;
- use the information to challenge government policies, actions and to seek changes;
- appeal decisions if access to information is denied to them.

There need to be some reasonable **restrictions** on access to protect the privacy of citizens and government, such as

- personal information such as information about a citizen's finances and political opinions;
- sensitive information such as information about military activities;
- confidential views of public servants in order to encourage impartial advice;
- confidential business information that could be used by competitors.

Information access and confidentiality need to be **balanced**. For example, governments should collect information to identify and deal with security threats without seriously jeopardizing reasonable rights of free speech and public assembly.

**Access and privacy protection requires good records management** to ensure that records are available, accessible, complete, accurate, relevant and secure. Recordkeeping systems should identify information that requires special protection and ensure that it is available only to those who have a right to access it.

#### **Access to government records and the danger of corruption**

When records management systems are developed and incorporated into a government's operations, there is an opportunity for citizens and government employees to achieve better and more accountable government, based on the accurate and reliable evidence found in well-managed records.

"The whole scheme of the *Access to Information Act* depends on records being created, properly indexed and filed, appropriately archived and carefully assessed before destruction to ensure that valuable information is not lost."

-- Information Commissioner of Canada, 2000

Government's efforts to improve their operations can also be frustrated if they have not created and protected the evidence *that shows they are working hard to deal with problems*.

**Privacy laws** require government to:

- use personal information only for authorized purposes such as tax collection;
- not distribute or sell personal information to businesses, etc. without authorization;
- keep information only for as long as needed;
- protect information from unauthorized access;
- allow citizens to review their personal information and correct it if it is inaccurate.

***Consider again the example of the water system. If citizens are concerned about the quality of their water, they should be able to approach government for evidence of water treatment processes. Without effective record keeping, government officials may not be able to find important studies and make that information publicly available.***



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