



Fostering trust and transparency through information systems

Reliable official recordkeeping systems provide evidence that is crucial to accountable, transparent democracies. How can countries improve such systems?

Effective records management is a cross-cutting issue. Initiatives aimed at enhancing economic performance, increasing government accountability, and strengthening civil society—such as anticorruption efforts, administrative and civil service reform, decentralization, electronic government, legal and judicial reform, public expenditure management, tax policy and administration, and access to information—all rely on access to accurate evidence.

Yet ineffective control of records is common in many countries, and often takes similar forms. Mountains of paper fill offices and corridors, while record storage areas have become the “Siberia” to which difficult staff are sent—creating enormous scope for corruption. The causes are also similar: outdated skills, laws, and institutional arrangements; lack of policies, standards, and practices for creating, organizing, using, and disposing of records as evidence; lack of awareness of the significance of records for governance; and lack of political will to protect evidence.

There is widespread agreement that computerization offers the way forward. But computerization creates new challenges, by creating electronic records that will not remain reliable and authentic unless carefully managed. E-records are subject to loss because of their reliance on changing technologies, their storage on fragile media, and their dependence on documentation that may be inadequate or missing. Globally, there is little capacity to manage e-records as evidence.

E-applications are not the whole solution

In its early stages electronic government focused on developing technology and architecture to support online delivery of government services and information. Increasingly, though, the focus is on the integrity of information created through electronic applications. As government services move online, e-records will be used to confirm pensions and other entitlements, register births and deaths, verify citizenship, certify voting rights, enable the collection of taxes and censuses, support financial management and audits help resolve land claims, support litigation, document inter-governmental agreements, enable economic planning, document development, and support countless other information-intensive activities. Unless there is adequate infrastructure for managing e-records, the intended benefits of e-government will be compromised.

The speed at which information technologies and e-records are being adopted around the world is not being matched by the skills and infrastructure needed to manage them. E-records must remain accessible and usable as long as they are needed for business or legal purposes; some need to be preserved over the long term or permanently. If e-records are to survive and be valid in the future, governments must address issues such as media instability and deterioration, obsolescence and incompatibility of hardware, software, data formats, and storage media, lack of metadata or contextual information (which makes it difficult to

Many development goals depend on trustworthy evidence

Many developing countries lack a systematic approach to managing records

access information or use it meaningfully), and lack of clearly assigned responsibilities and resources for long-term preservation.

The issues were explored in a three-year (2002–04) project on Evidence-Based Governance in the Electronic Age, funded by the World Bank’s Development Grant Facility. Consultations with government officials and records professionals from 38 English-speaking developing countries—including face to face, electronic, and videoconference meetings facilitated by the World Bank Institute—identified weak legal and institutional frameworks, lack of accountability, and inadequate training as common impediments to keeping accurate evidence. Case studies showed little evidence of a systematic approach to managing records.

Better records management is crucial to legal and judicial reform

The growing emphasis on transparency and the need to reduce large backlogs of court cases have led to case management reforms and greatly increased use of court technology and electronic filing—highlighting the need for effective management of case files and other court records. Well-managed court records are essential to efficient, effective legal systems. They are the means by which citizens and organizations are able to enforce their rights, and they support accountability by making the judiciary more transparent. Accurate, readily accessible records of judicial rulings reduce the potential for illicit manipulation resulting from delays, corruption, and inaccuracies.

Dysfunctional records management undermines legal and judicial reform. Decisions are made without full information about cases, and the absence of systematic recordkeeping and controls leaves scope for corruption or collusion between court officials and lawyers. Court time is wasted, delays are created, and the judiciary’s standing is lowered. The large volume of records passing through a typical court system, their sensitivity, and time pressures on courts makes effective records management essential. Three cases illustrate the issues involved:

- One of the greatest challenges facing South Africa is the transformation of its court system. An integrated justice system is being developed, and records management is considered an integral part of the management of court business. The national archives has statutory responsibility for overseeing records management and is seeking to introduce records management controls—though this is difficult, given limited resources. These responsibilities are beginning to be translated into the electronic environment, but infrastructure and systems are needed to ensure that e-records will survive intact and that vital metadata will be preserved.
- In Ecuador poor records management is a key issue undermining court performance, with huge accumulations of poorly managed files contributing to inefficiency and waste. A reform program starting in 1996 introduced guidelines for managing records at every stage of their life cycle, and the creation of electronic networks has facilitated the sharing of information about cases. As a result the case management system and information requests are handled more efficiently. But sustainability may be an issue, because there are no professionally trained records managers in the judiciary, and the national archives does not play a significant role in managing legal records. In addition, the legal admissibility of e-records and long-term requirements for keeping them need to be addressed.
- In 1990 Singapore embarked on reforms that have transformed its legal system into a model of efficiency and effective use of technology. An electronic filing system has made case information and court records more readily available to judges, court personnel, and lawyers. Policies and procedures have been established for creating, maintaining, and disposing of e-records. E-records are accepted as legal evidence, and are sent to the national archives in their original electronic form. There they are transferred to microfilm as low-cost means of preservation, but in the process their interactive functionality is lost.

Well-managed records are vital to financial management reform

Reliable, timely, accessible financial records should provide evidence that resources have been received, committed, or spent so that accountants can prepare financial reports for public scrutiny and external auditors can ensure that the reports are credible. Weak systems result in vast quantities of financial records being kept longer than necessary, while essential records are hard to find. The result can be high levels of unvouched spending, where there are no payment vouchers or other documents to substantiate the authenticity of expenditures—leading to unresolved audit queries and creating opportunities for fraud, corrupt procurement, and money laundering.

Requirements for capturing and preserving e-records need to be integrated with financial management information systems to support system integrity over time. Otherwise, governments, donors, and lenders may face unnecessarily high risks for the significant investments they make in such systems. Again, three cases illustrate the issues involved.

- Vietnam has made good progress in strengthening financial management but has not tackled the issue of managing financial records. The national archives plays no role in records management. The Ministry of Finance has issued guidelines on which records should be kept, for how long, and in what condition, and this has helped ensure that financial records can be readily accessed during audits. But regulations permitting the destruction of financial records are often not applied, and inactive records are beginning to accumulate, causing storage and retrieval problems. Although computerization is widespread in government departments and an integrated financial management information system has been proposed, Vietnam has not developed the capacity to manage e-records.
- Financial reforms have been under way in Tanzania since 1992. The controller and accountant general has stressed the need to drastically reduce unvouched

spending, to demonstrate accountability for public funds. Although much of the country's financial management system is still paper-based, aspects of financial management have been computerized, and an integrated financial management information system has been introduced. However, the link between paper and e-records has not been defined.

- Chile, a pioneer in e-government, has introduced a substantial program to modernize management of public finances, including an integrated financial management and resource allocation system. This will have major implications for financial records management. In preparation for a paperless work environment, legislation has been passed on electronic documents and certification of e-signatures. But questions remain about the legal admissibility of e-records, and the lack of a strategy for managing and preserving them over time presents risks for long-term integrity and access.

Recent advances in records management

Ghana and Tanzania show that improvements in records management are achievable and sustainable. For several decades both countries suffered crippling declines in the management of official records. But with support from the U.K. Department for International Development, they have achieved improvements and laid the foundations for managing records created by electronic applications. New laws, policies, and procedures have been introduced in line with international good practices and local resource constraints. Closed files have been transferred to low-cost storage or destroyed, and filing systems have been restructured to support modern administrative functions. The improvements have been robust, reliable, and sustainable, and have increased the demand for accurate evidence. Ghana and Tanzania are now applying their new records management practices to court, financial, land, and human resource records and introducing e-records management programs.

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Improvements in records management are achievable and sustainable

New technologies and products for managing e-records are emerging, including records management application software, electronic document and records management systems, enterprise content management systems, and information lifecycle management systems. Governments need to adopt standards for evaluating these products. EC Model Requirements for the Management of Electronic Records provide an example of functional requirements for electronic recordkeeping systems.

Although existing technologies provide a foundation on which to build e-records management solutions, none addresses all the requirements for protecting the authenticity of e-records or guards against the inevitable obsolescence of the various layers of technology (data formats, software, hardware, storage media) involved. Thus government agencies need to develop the capacity to implement and maintain flexible technical architectures. This will require support for records management policies and procedures, education for records managers and information technology staff, and training for end users.

Assessing capacity to manage records

Two new tools gauge records management infrastructure and capacity and so help task teams strengthen data integrity. The E-Records Readiness Tool, developed by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the International Records Management Trust, can be used with existing e-government readiness tools at the national and agency levels.

Where problems are identified that require further analysis, Records Management Capacity Assessment System (RMCAS) software, developed by the Trust and the World Bank, enables a more thor-

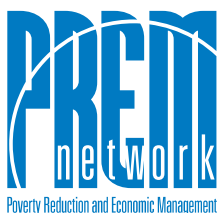
ough evaluation. RMCAS is mapped against the International Organization for Standardization's Records Management Standard (ISO 15489). Based on information from users and creators of records, it diagnoses records management capacity on a scale of 0 to 5 and provides links to appropriate training materials.

As an example involving legal and judicial reform, the tool asks: "Are new cases always registered or captured in a record-keeping system as soon as the first document is received?" Countries (or agencies) score level 2 capacity if every new case is registered or captured as soon as the first related document is received. As an example in financial management, the tool asks: "Are loan agreement data entered into the system immediately after agreements are signed?" Level 2 capacity is achieved if responsibilities are clearly specified for maintaining debt management records and for compliance with debt management recordkeeping requirements.

These tools, developed and tested in cooperation with developing country partners, should support operational work by helping to ensure that records are managed effectively to support transparency and integrity as part of the reform process. They are available free of charge at www.irmt.org. The Website also contains 13 case studies on records management conducted in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

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If you are interested in similar topics, consider joining the Administrative and Civil Service Reform Thematic Group. Contact Ranjana Mukherjee (x34301) or click on Thematic Groups on PREMnet.



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