



PAM Pokrajinski
arhiv
Maribor

Moderna
arhivistika

Časopis arhivske teorije in prakse
Journal of Archival Theory and Practice

Letnik 5 (2022), št. 1 / Year 5 (2022), No. 1

Maribor, 2022

Prejeto / Received: 04. 07. 2022

1.03 Kratki znanstveni članek

1.03 Short scientific article

<https://doi.org/10.54356/MA/2022/YVUX1183>

“RECORDS IN CONTEXTS”. A WAY TO USE IT

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Abstract:

Records in Contexts is a product of ICA, aiming to replace the four standards of archival description. Since, at its core, it is a conceptual model, it is quite abstract and differs from the familiar guideline style of ISADG, for example. The presentation will focus on aspects of practical implementation of RiC: articulation of descriptions (attributes, relations), results, and the benefits of using RiC in comparison with previous standards.

Key words:

archival description, archival finding aids, archival standards, Records in Contexts

Izvleček:

Zapisi v kontekstih (RiC): kako ga uporabljati

Zapisi v kontekstih (RiC) je izdelek Mednarodnega arhivskega sveta, napravljen s ciljem nadomestiti štiri obstoječe standarde arhivskega popisovanja. Ker je v svojem bistvu pojmoven model, je precej abstrakten in se razlikuje od znanega stila smernic ISADg. Predstavitev se bo osredotočila na vidike praktične implementacije RiC: sestava popisa (atributi, relacije), rezultati in prednosti uporabe RiC v primerjavi s prejšnjimi standardi.

Ključne besede:

arhivsko popisovanje, arhivski iskalni pripomočki, arhivski standardi, Zapisi v kontekstih

*Records in Contexts (RiC) is a conceptual model produced by the Expert Group of Archival Description of the International Council on Archives (ICA-EGAD), aiming to replace the four standards of archival description. Since, at its core, it is a conceptual model, it is quite abstract and differs from the familiar guideline style of ISAD(G), for example. The ICA-EGAD intends to also release a guideline on the implementation of the model, and until then many archivists are reluctant to implement *Records in Contexts* because of its apparent complexity and distance from the traditional archival description approach.*

The present paper will focus on aspects of practical implementation of *Records in Contexts*. Using an example, the presentation will focus on how the description itself can be articulated and structured. The interest behind this is whether *Records in Contexts*-like descriptions of various archival entities (like records or records aggregations, creators or holders, but also chronological indexes) can be produced and how much of a traditional finding aids system can be built using *Records in Contexts*. Of course, *RiC* was clearly designed for an automated system, which allows for a multidimensional perspective over records and related entities. In the lack of such a system, the presentation will try to see if it can be created using “pen and paper”, in order to make clear the interconnections between descriptions produced and the appearance of the finding aids. This would help, in the author’s view, to a better understanding of the conceptual model, because, essentially, it is the archivists who must understand the usability and possibilities of representation of the archival entities and the benefits of using *RiC* in comparison with previous standards. If this prerequisite will be fulfilled, then the technological implementations may vary according to the needs and imagination of the software producers.

1 The nature of a finding aid

Let us start with two definitions. According to ISAD(G), a finding aid is the “*broadest term to cover any description or means of reference made or received by an archives service in the course of establishing administrative or intellectual control over archival material*” (International Council on Archives, 1999, p. 10). In another definition, “*a finding aid is a collection of information about an archival resource*” (Pearce-Moses, 2005).

This information about other information is, in fact, the metadata. Any “archival material” or “archival resource” (and we shall come back later to these terms) has some characteristics which are expressed through its metadata. Date, form, size—all are elements helping to describe and identify. Some elements are general and shared by various types of archival material (as, already mentioned, date), others are specific to certain types (like, for instance, the scale of a map, colour of a picture). And a finding aid is listing them, acting like a simplified and standardized representation of the original archival material, and facilitating a quicker retrieval.

The metadata describes “archival material” or “archival resource”. Though not immediately apparent, there is an important difference between the two. *Archival material* is the archives themselves: the fonds, series, folders, and documents. *Archival resources* may be much more. A list of all creators with their changing names across centuries is an archival resource. An index of towns and their historical names is an archival resource. Historical calendars for mapping various chronological styles and various calendars across time may be an archival resource. Therefore, while ISAD(G) definition only focuses on archival material as a primary point of interest, the second definition emphasizes that a finding aid may be more than the metadata for records, but it can be any *collection of metadata characterizing entities* relevant for archives, archivists and users of the archives.

A finding aid is a collection of metadata about a particular entity, but it is further individualized by the set of metadata specific to the object characterized by those metadata. For instance, an inventory of series of personal files comprises those metadata elements which characterize that specific archival material, i.e., the personal files. An inventory of a photo collection will have a different set of metadata elements. A finding aid is then a *collection of selected metadata about an archival entity*.

If one reads the ISAD(G) definition, it is visible the standard does not exclude from the finding aid set those used for the administrative control, but on the other hand, the way description was envisaged, it focused mainly on the description of archival material, that is, its intellectual dimension. That implies, furthermore, that using ISAD(G) did not impede, but also did not guide in any way the creation of alternative finding aids used in archival institutions, like, for instance, accessions registers, chronological indexes, or historical places indexes. In addition, while this is a weakness of the definition, we must agree that such tools are, in fact, finding aids, because they contain metadata describing archival resources. A finding aid is, therefore, *a collection of selected metadata about a specific archival entity, created for a certain purpose: administrative control, intellectual control, general information etc.*

In an abstract model, if entities and instantiations of entities are fully described by the metadata at the individual level, it would be possible to generate a (theoretical...) unlimited number of collections (read visualizations), by the mere selection of the relevant criteria. In the analogue world, this model would be impossible, since there are physical limitations, so finding aids are further divided to have the descriptive information manageable. For instance, the accessions register is separated from the inventory of a fonds, and, sometimes, even the inventory may have multiple volumes (in some practices, all being called “inventories” of that fonds). However, in digital systems, this abstract model may be implemented in full, since such limitations may not exist (or they are larger than in analogue realm). The descriptive system would be the metadata repository, and various queries may generate different finding aids. This will decentralize/democratize the creation of finding aids, because the purpose setter for the finding aid and the selector of the criteria of creating the finding aid will not be only the archivist any longer, for all possible outputs; the user—whoever s/he may be—will be able to generate their own customized finding aid, based on customized needs. This is what David Weinberger identified as The Third Order (Weinberger, 2007).

2 Finding aids in the four ICA standards

ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF), ISDF and ISDIAH—the four ICA archival descriptive standards—guide a way compliant finding aids should look like. In each case, several fixed zones are recommended with clearly indicated elements of description. For each standard, minimum mandatory fields are stated.

Table 1 Standards, zones and mandatory fields

Standard	Entity	Zones	No. of descriptive elements	Mandatory fields
ISAD(G)	Records resources	Identity statement area	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reference code ▪ Title ▪ Creator ▪ Date(s); ▪ Extent of the unit of description; ▪ Level of description.
		Context area	4	
		Content and structure area	4	
		Conditions of access and use area	5	
		Allied materials area	4	
		Notes area	1	
		Description control area	1	
ISAAR(CPF)	Agents — creators	Identity area	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Type of entity ▪ Authorized form(s) of name ▪ Dates of existence
		Description area	8	
		Relationships area	4	
		Control area	9	

		Relating to archival materials and other resources	4	▪ Authority record identifier
ISDF	Functions	Identity area	5	▪ Type ▪ Authorised form(s) of name ▪ Function description identifier
		Context area	4	
		Relationships area	5	
		Control area	9	
		Relating to corporate bodies, archival materials and other resources	3	
ISDIAH	Agents - holders	Identity area	5	▪ Identifier ▪ Authorised form(s) of name ▪ Location and address(es)
		Contact area	3	
		Description area	8	
		Access area	3	
		Services area	3	
		Control area	9	
		Relating descriptions of institutions with archival holdings to archival materials	4	

The standards are in fact what were considered relevant entities for archival description: archival material, creators, functions and holders. The elements of description, reflect, basically, the attributes of these entities, and, by the last area (“relating descriptions...”), the descriptions are related with other descriptions:

Description of...	...are related to
archival material	N/A
creators	archival material and other resources
functions	creators and other resources
holders	archival material, creators

3 Finding Aids in “Records in Contexts”

As stated in the introduction, RiC is a conceptual model, and this is one main difference from the previous standards. It is not designed to be implemented as such, but rather it gives the general framework for the archival description. In the model, there are defined more entities than before, and by individualizing them, it opens the way to a more flexible archival description. In this regard, a greater accent is placed on relations, which contribute also to flexibilization and to a higher contextualization of archival resources.

Entity	Number of attributes
Thing	3
Records resource	7
Record et	19
Record	17
Record Part	17
Instantiation	16
Agent	6
Person	8
Group	7
Family	7
Corporate Body	7
Position	6
Mechanism	7
Event	6

Activity	7
Rule	4
Mandate	4
Date	8
Single Date	8
Date Range	8
Date Set	8
Place	7

There are many relations defined, but they can be grouped as follows:

Whole-part relations = The relation that holds between a whole and its parts, for example, the relation between a *record* and its constituent *record part(s)*.

Sequential relations = Any relation that describes a logical sequence between two entities, for example, the relation between an *agent* and its antecedent *agent*.

Subject relations = Any relation that holds between a *record resource* and a subject or topic, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and the main subject(s) which that *record resource* describes or is about.

Record Resource to Record Resource relations = Any relation that holds between a *record resource* and another *record resource*, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and a draft or copy of that *record resource*.

Record Resource to Instantiation relations = Any relation that holds between a *record resource* and an *instantiation* of that *record resource*, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and a digitized version of that *record resource*.

Provenance relations = Any relation that describes the provenance or origin of a *record resource* or *instantiation*, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and the *agent* which created it or the *activity* from which it resulted.

Instantiation to Instantiation relations = Any relation that holds between an *instantiation* and another *instantiation*, for example, the relation between a digital *instantiation* and a migrated version of that *instantiation*.

Management relations = Any relation that describes the authority of an *agent* over another entity, for example, the relation between a *person* and that person's subordinates in an organization.

Agent to Agent relations = Any relation that holds between an *agent* and another *agent*.

Event relations = Any relation that holds between an entity and an *event*, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and an *event* that resulted in the creation or modification of that *record resource*.

Rule relations = Any relation that holds between an entity and a *rule*, for example, the relation between an *agent* and the *mandate* authorizing the existence and/or actions of that *agent*.

Date relations = Any relation that holds between an entity and a *date*, for example, the relation between a *record resource* and the *date(s)* at which it was created or modified.

Spatial relations = Any relation that holds between an entity and a *place*, for example, the relation between an *agent* and the *place(s)* in which that *agent* was located or had some jurisdiction." (RIC, p. 72-73)

However, because RiC does not prescribe a “look”, let us examine what a possible implementation of a finding aid based on RiC may look like.

4 RiC-like finding aid(s)

By its way of presentation, with a predefined structure and rules for each element of description, ISAD(G) is far clearer and easier to follow than RiC. It is very good for teaching archival description until... practice may ask some questions where the standard shows its limits. Some examples, of how to deal with...

- Multiple provenances
- Separation of description creators
- Separate various elements for different audiences (administrative aim)
- Versioning of descriptions
- Integration of versions/copies of records
- Treating the item as like aggregations
- Reusing pieces of information from descriptions like dates, places, etc.
- Creators and functions as access points

RiC, on the other hand, focuses on several entities, separating a body of archival descriptions in multiple elements of interest. We may have a fonds, for instance.

- This fonds interacts with more than one Agent: the creator, in the first place, but also with a possible holder, with many other creators of records that were accumulated in the archival fonds.
- In addition, a fonds and its records interact with dates, places.
- Rules may also be relevant for understanding a fonds, from the organizational mandate of a creator, its internal rules for creating, aggregating, and preserving the records until the rules of description that were employed by an archivist.
- Date is also related in many ways: date of the creation of records, dates of the events in the records, date of the transfer of the records to Archives, date of the description etc.
- And instantiation, which “breaks” the record as we know it in its intellectual and physical parts, allowing for revealing connections between various copies of the same resource in their various contexts and facilitating the creation of administrative finding aids. For instance, it is far easier to obtain administrative information like how many records:
 - were described using RiC
 - were described by a certain archivist
 - were digitized in year X

Let us take an example to see how RiC can be used in the production of finding aids, by “pen and paper”, excluding a particular representation of an IT system.

Based on the **legal provisions** in **1996**, the **Regional Archive B** took over, in **2020**, **5 civil status book registers** from **1895-1920**, from a **Civil Status Office** belonging to **Municipality A**.

The book registers represented **Copy 1**, because, according to the **law applicable, issued in 1894**, the book registers were created in **2 copies**, one preserved at **Municipality A**, the other one at **County B**.

The book registers have similar characteristics of **content** (it contains groups of 500 birth records, arranged chronologically) and **carrier** (paper, 250 pages with pre-printed form, 249 filled in by hand, in a good preservation form). They contain civil status records pertaining to the **village X**, which **change its name** in 1925 and it is now part of **town A**.

Because of their particular relevance, the book registers were not arranged as part of the **Municipality A archival fonds**, but as part of the **Collection of Civil Status Book Registers**, in the **series B**.

The book registers were **described** (according to **RIC**) and **digitized** (according to **FADGI**) in the Archives during 2021, resulting 2510 **TIFF files** (300 dpi, LZW compression, 24 bits colour depth) and 5 **PDF files** (PDF/A3, one file per unit)).

4.1 Step 1: identifying entities

A first step in preparing a finding aid according to RiC would be the identification of entities of interest: one archivist can choose all the entities, another one or several. The core idea behind is that this decision—“how much of RiC do I want to adopt” (Adrian Cunningham)—rests with the descriptor agent or their institution because implementing all the entities requires more complexity, which implies more money, more effort, much logistics which should be balanced with the organizational mandates, policies, and desired outcome. RiC, therefore, is not “all or nothing” (B. Stokting), but it needs a conscious process of decision in its implementation.

Based on the text, here would be a listing of the entities in the example above:

Records Resources	Agents	Dates	Places	Instantiations	Rules	Events
Accession	Regional Archive B	1895-1920	Town A	Copy 1	Rules for the creation of birth records	Creation of birth records
Archival fonds Municipality A	Civil Status Office	2020	County B	TIFF files	Transfer to archives	Transfer
Collection of Civil Status Registers – Series B	Municipality A	1996	Village X	PDF files	Rules for description – RIC	Description of records
Birth registers	County B Office	1894			Rules for digitising - FADGI	Digitization of records
Birth records	Archivist	1925				
	Scanner operator	2021				

A first remark is the richness of entities that RiC allows, in contrast with the four ICA standards. The descriptions set about each entity may lead to the creation of discrete finding aids for various purposes. Although the entities are clearly interrelated, their separate existence may lead to a variety of facets of the descriptive information.

Examples:

- From RiC perspective, the birth records are simultaneously connected with many **records set**. They are part of the registers, which are part of the series B from the collection, but they still have relations with the creator's fonds, and they are also part of an accession. Using proper attributes of description, these realities can be codified in different finding aids:
 - The accessions register
 - The inventory of the archival fonds of Municipality A
 - The inventory of the collection of Civil Status Book Registers
 - The list of the records in one book register.
- **Dates** can be present to characterize many events, from the creation of records until the processing of records. If a chronological index of the records of the collection needs to be compiled, then listing the materialization of this entity would allow having a list of all dates for which a fonds or an archive has records associated to, no matter the type of date: creation date, historical events date, date of processing of records etc.
- **Instantiation** allows for precise administrative management of records, allowing physical characterization and statistics about the archival material – again, a different type of finding aid than ISADG allowed.

A second remark is that, unlike ISAD(G), not all information about related entities is included in one description, but they are rather separated and linked, allowing the production of various “reports” over the archival resources, by the mere reorganization of their metadata.

4.2 Step 2 — describing materialisation of entities

According to RiC, each entity has its own “profile” of information, allowing for its description. Letting aside various presentation hierarchies, relevant to the presentation of the conceptual model, the elements of description for each entity can be easily identifiable from the model.

Once identified the entity of interest, a RiC-like description needs some decisions on several points. One point is that the form of presentation of description depends on the type of output we envisage. Paper finding aids differ in fundamental aspects from digital ones, and RiC is clearly intended for using digital tools. In other words, RiC can be used for paper finding aids, but its full potential is in digital world. A good illustration for the descriptions may be Wikipedia: information is presented in digital both as static text and as links. In the paper world, each link is basically a cross-reference to either another finding aid or resource.



Figure 1: Presentation of descriptive information

A second point is what descriptive information should be included for each entity. Again, as stated above, RIC is not “all or nothing”, and allows for a selection of the attributes relevant in the context of the description environment. How such a liberty may look like is visible again by using Wikipedia example:



Figure 2-3: Comparison of the summary description for the same entity in two different languages

One can see there are various attributes chosen to describe the same entity, taken from a broader list of available descriptive elements.

A third point is about the order of the descriptive information. As stated, descriptive information for each RiC entity comes from two sources: attributes and relations. Attributes are “the characteristics of the entities”. Relations describe “the connections between entities as they contribute to the context of record making and keeping and, as a result, express significant characteristics of the history and management of archival records”. How are these information elements listed in the finding aid? Unlike ISAD(G) and the companion standards, RIC does not prescribe a certain order. Hence, it is again up to the descriptor to decide whether the relations are to be presented at the end of the entity described (ISAD(G)-style) or intermingled with attributes and which is the order of the attributes and relation themselves.

Returning to the example above, a presentation of one register with its instantiation may look like this:

<p>Record set Description Identifier: BV-F-00259-3-0025 Name: Birth register from the village X Has beginning date (R): 1895 Has end date (R): 1920 Extent: 249 records Language: Hungarian Has instantiation (R): BV-F-00259-3-0025 Has instantiation (R): from BV-FD-00259-3-0025_000.TIFF to BV-FD-00259-3-0025_502.TIFF Has instantiation (R): BV-FD-00259-3-0025.pdf</p>
<p>Instantiation description Identifier: BV-F-00259-3-0025 Is instantiation of: BV-F-00259-3-0025 (record set) Name: Birth register from the village X Has beginning date (R): 1895 Has end date (R): 1920 Carrier Extent: 35 x 55 cm, 0.5 cm thick Carrier Type: paper Instantiation Extent: 249 leaves Physical Characteristics: a bound of 250 leaves Production Technique: pre-printed forms filled in by hand Representation Type: textual</p>
<p>Instantiation description Identifier: BV-FD-00259-3-0025.pdf Is instantiation of: BV-F-00259-3-0025 (record set) Name: Birth register from the village X Has date (R): 2021 Carrier Type: digital Instantiation Extent: 150 MB Integrity: 9b8ed22a6ed81b89b43e947bf9e30b17 (MD5)</p>

Production Technique: scanned
Quality of Representation:
Resolution: 300 dpi
Compression: LZW
Bit depth: 24 bits
Representation Type: digital visual, digital textual
Scanning performed by: John Doe

5 Some concluding remarks

RiC reconsiders the entities of interest for archivists, broadening the number and the means of their description. Assuming that a finding aid is a collection of metadata describing an entity of interest, RiC allows for a production of more finding aid types, like archival inventories, accession registers, processing registers, processing statistics, chronological indexes etc.

The RiC description information is comprised of both specific elements (attributes)—which characterize the entity, and also by relations—which contextualize. All these can be represented on paper, but their fully potential is obtained by using digital tools.

At the same time, several decisions are let on the descriptors, allowing the liberty to choose and adapt how the description should look like.

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POVZETEK

ZAPISI V KONTEKSTIH (RIC): KAKO GA UPORABLJATI

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Zapisi v kontekstih (RiC) je konceptualni model, ki ga je izdelala Strokovna skupina za arhivsko popisovanje Mednarodnega arhivskega sveta (ICA-EGAD) s ciljem nadomestiti štiri standard arhivskega popisovanja. Ker je v svojem bistvu konceptualni model, je precej abstrakten in se razlikuje od znanega stila standarda ISAD(G). Strokovna skupina namerava izdati tudi smernice za uporabo modela, trenutno pa pri mnogih arhivistih zaradi kompleksnosti modela in oddaljenosti od tradicionalnih pristopov k popisovanju opažamo zadržanost do njegove praktične uporabe.

Prispevek, ki vključuje konkreten primer, se osredotoča na vidike praktične uporabe modela in skuša analizirati, kako lahko popise oblikujemo, ali so popisi različnih arhivskih entitet (kot so zapisi, združeni zapisi, ustvarjalci ali lastniki ter tudi kronološki indeksi) sploh ustvarjeni v skladu z RiC in v kolikšni meri lahko z uporabo modela izdelujemo tradicionalne iskalne pripomočke. RiC je bil seveda ustvarjen za avtomatizirane sisteme, ki dovoljujejo večdimenzionalen pogled na zapise in z njimi povezane entitete. Avtor skuša ugotoviti, ali lahko ta pogled ustvarimo tudi z uporabo »pisala in papirja« ter na tak način izpostavimo medsebojne povezave med ustvarjenimi popisi in iskalnimi pripomočki. Po avtorjevem mnenju bo prispevek pripomogel k boljšemu razumevanju konceptualnega modela, saj so arhivisti tisti, ki morajo razumeti tako njegovo uporabnost in možnosti predstavitve arhivskih entitet kakor tudi prednosti, ki jih prinaša RiC v primerjavi s prejšnjimi standardi.