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**Bogdan Florin POPOVICI\***

## **ISAD(G): A CASE FOR IMPROVEMENT**

**Abstract:**

*The paper tries to reveal some of the problematic issues with ISAD(G). Several questions about the consistency of the standard, of some of its principles, and the terminology are raised.*

**Key words:**

*archival description, ISAD(G)*

**Izveček:**

**ISAD(G): Predlogi izboljšav**

*Prispevek poskuša izpostaviti nekaj težavnih primerov, ki jih povzroča standard ISAD(G). Postavlja tudi nekaj vprašanj glede konsistentnosti stadarda, glede njegovih principov in terminologije, ki jo uporablja.*

**Ključne besede:**

*arhivsko popisovanje, ISAD(G)*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

International Standard for Archival Description (General) was adopted in two editions, 1996 and 2000, the latter being remarkably adopted worldwide<sup>1</sup>. It was definitely a step forward for the profession, at the »political« level (comparing the libraries, which had such a standard two decades before) and at a professional scale, in attempt to lay down a common ground for archival description, across local traditions. Not the least, it was a boost for creating an automated system for archival description, as long as such a product would not anymore serve just one client, but all the Archives whose requirements were compliant with the standard.

Despite such a wide adoption, critical voices on the process of adoption and on the content of the standard were also present<sup>2</sup>. Even the ICA itself considered there is a need for improvement<sup>3</sup>.

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\* Bogdan Florin Popovici, Ph. D., director, Romanian National Archives, Brasov department, Str. Gh. Baritiu nr. 34, 500025 Brasov, Romania, contact: [bogdanpopovici@gmail.com](mailto:bogdanpopovici@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> Yeo had a more reserved evaluation, but he admits US and Canada (?) tend to converge to ISAD(G) (see Yeo 2010, 96).

<sup>2</sup> One of the most vocal came from Australia - Chris Hurley; see for instance Hurley, 2012. He even built his own descriptive standard (Hurley 2009)! A broader presentation of pros and cons can be found in Yeo, 2010, 99-100.

<sup>3</sup> ICA 2012

The present paper aims to reflect my own opinions and remarks about a possible revision of ISAD(G). These came out not only by reading other's views, but also out of my own experiences, national and abroad. This paper therefore reflects my own opinion and does not involve, in any way, the ICA Experts Group on Archival Description, whose member I am.

## 2. THE CASE

The first aspect relays on the **scope of the standard**. In the Introductory notes, it is stated that the standard guides the archival description and *»[s]pecific elements of information about archival materials are recorded at every phase of their management... Archival description in the widest sense of the term covers every element of information no matter at what stage of management it is identified or established«*.<sup>4</sup> One may conclude that ISAD(G) is fitted for all archives - in the European meaning - for all the records and its aggregations, disregarding the moment of the records life. In 2008 in France I visited the archives of *La Poste* enterprise, having there an application of this view: ISAD(G) implementation for describing a semi-current archives. And I am quite sure there are other examples too.

My opinion is that ISAD is not fitted for describing archives other than historical. Of course it can be used, but it is not the right tool. ISAD(G) is designed with the purpose of contextualizing, making information about historical records explicit. This is why it contains descriptive elements (for instance, *Extent and medium of the unit of description, Archival history, Existence and location of originals, Existence and location of copies, Related units of description, Publication note* etc.) which are fitted mainly for historical archives. As it was stated many times, the records manager and the creating organisation have different needs for information than the users of historical archives<sup>5</sup>. Active organisations do not search for context<sup>6</sup>, do not need broad descriptions of contents for records or series, but they do need many specific-operational metadata. A comparison between ISO 23081-1 and ISAD(G), for instance, shows some significant differences. The same result was revealed when comparing ISO 15489 and ISAD(G)<sup>7</sup>. When developing MoReq2, in early stages, ISAD(G) was taken into account as a relevant standard, but in the final version it was removed, as it was irrelevant for electronic records management<sup>8</sup>.

Therefore, in my opinion, a revision of ISAD(G) should choose either to go to a higher level of generality, as to encompass the whole of a record/records aggregation life or to clearly specify a more restraint fields of application., i.e. historical archives.

Another aspect I would like to address are relationships in arrangement and description. The standard is not very clear about the order of processing, but acknowledges implicitly that description is based on arrangement<sup>9</sup>: firstly, one

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<sup>4</sup> ISAD(G), 2000, para I.3.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Duranti, Macneil, 1996, 59 or Yeo, 2010, 94.

<sup>6</sup> *»In the paper world, context did not need to be articulated until the record passed over the archival boundary. Prior to that, it was derived intuitively from its physical »place« while still with the creator«* (Hurley, 2005, 7).

<sup>7</sup> Shepherd, West 2003.

<sup>8</sup> I witnessed this avatar in 2007 that might also have been recorded in DLM Forum records.

<sup>9</sup> See the definition for level of description or statement I.8: *»There are levels of description, with differing degrees of detail, appropriate to each level of arrangement«*.

identifies the aggregations and then starts to describe them. On the other hand, it specifies that one of the multi-level descriptions is the result of the application of the archival principle of the *respect de fonds*. In my opinion, this is too much in debt to paper archives and, even more, ignores even the issues from the paper world...

If one enters an archival repository, (s)he will see: shelves, boxes, and in boxes—folders. Where are the series? Where are the subfonds and, most of all, where are the fonds? Where is the hierarchy in lineated rows of shelves? Hard to find for anybody, because they do not exist... The top level for a physical archive is the folder; all the rest are theoretical constructs, relationships created by the archivists based (in most cases...) on some real facts (provenance, for example). Consequently, the only physical arrangement possible is to range up folders. But the *respect de fonds* principle states not to intermingle documents from different origins. The origin, in itself, is not tangible; it is descriptive information about physical records. This means, as a first step, that description is the one who delivered information for arrangement<sup>10</sup>. And, as a second step, if we consider the fond is a virtual entity, then physical arrangement is not quite relevant, but the intellectual arrangement does matter - and it is possible? using descriptions.

The problem here is that the standard defines arrangement as »*the intellectual AND physical processes and results of analysing and organizing documents in accordance with archival principles*« (my emphasis). Regarding the issue in this way, the standard remains deeply anchored in the paper-fixed world, avoiding a flexible approach that should not at all be valid only in a computerised world (I don't get it... avoiding a flexible approach that should (not?) be valid only in a computerized world). If we agree that physical arrangement is just a matter of archival management, not one of archival arrangement, then the only issue of the standard would be the lack of sufficient elements describing management aspects and not an alleged issue of arrangement, with impacts on the quality of description.

The sentences above immediately raise two other aspects. The former is about the nature of archival fonds. The latter is about the management of archival units and the way they are represented in the standard.

The archival fonds is a very well acknowledged concept, but by no means very clear. Challenged by the archival group, records group and mostly by the Australian series, it was resuscitated in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a fresh interpretation and adjustment to modern archival realities. In a famous study, Terry Cook (2002, p. 73-74) concluded: »*The fonds... should be viewed primarily as an intellectual construct... The fonds is not so much a physical entity in archives as it is the conceptual summary of descriptions of physical entities at the series level or lower... It is at the heart of this process or relationship linking the creator and the records that the essence of provenance or respect des fonds is found... The fonds is thus a concept expressing a dynamic interconnection between the abstract description of the records creator (s) and of the concrete description of the actual records...*« In this regard, as Peter Horseman (1992) already noticed, it is a paradox why ISAD(G) keeps the physical approach: »*Where Cook basically defined the fonds as a kind of virtual reality, both RAD and ISAD still see it as a physical gathering of*

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<sup>10</sup> Horseman, 2002, 16: »*Archival description is selecting essential relationships and describing them. Analysis of these relationships, rather than arrangement, precedes description. Indeed, the description becomes the (virtual) arrangement*«.

*records, following Duchein's notion rather than Cook's thinking*«. (Horseman, 1992, p. 16, note 44).

In a potential revision of the standard, this aspect should be taken into account and the number of descriptive elements pertaining to the management of records. The standard, as it is, fits perfectly for closed fonds or for open fonds with perfect cut-offs for accessions. For example, as it misses completely any field identifying the upper link, it is assumed that this is revealed only by the syntax of the reference code. But for similar units from different accessions, as long as accessions are (or should be...) *management* units and not fonds *intellectual* divisions, a unit of description should be also identified by its reference code within the accession (»the physical code«) and the »intellectual« code—indicating the position within the fonds hierarchy.

Therefore, we are reaching the latter issue mentioned above: the management elements. Archival description, as defined in the standard, is a »*representation of a unit of description... by capturing, analysing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate...*«. In my opinion, the elements describing the management of the unit of description are insufficient. One accession could comprise series from different fonds and a series to be split over many accessions - these are elements that should be recorded somewhere, as long as they are relevant for a certain unit of description. There are no references or elements to accommodate rigorously (that is, not to put everything in the Note area) the actions of the archivists on the fonds: re-arrange, re-describe, re-appraise. On the other hand, there is no rigorous form of identifying the changes operated on a description record - it is only who made a change and when it occurred.

One important issue about the standard, connected with the aspect of »physicality« of fonds, is the one about provenance. There are many issues involved here and, in my opinion, all of them start from a too close bound to classical paper close fonds?

Provenance as a principle was announced at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century (Posner, 1967, p. 37) and, even if it was contested on the very home continent in the midst of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Yeo, 2010, p. 91), it is a central pillar to the profession (A Mule, 1996, 247; Horseman, 1992, p. 2). Provenance was considered important as long as it provided the necessary context for understanding records. It was not like a library item, self-sufficient for understanding. As any archivist knows, records are created in a certain environment and the inner relationships are mandatory for understanding the content of records. »*Records [should] be described in the first instance by reference to their origins and context, not their subject matter*« (Yeo, 2010, p. 90-91). However, in the latest years, provenance has also been reinterpreted. It was noticed that, in practice, the reconstruction of provenance/respect de fonds/original order might be sometimes a dictate of the archivist, altering in this way the intent of the principle itself: »*Not only is the fonds, as something to respect as an existing physical thing, an entity that rarely existed as an original whole, but also all too often such a reconstruction (by archivists) of a whole actually distorts the original recordkeeping reality, thereby weakening provenance. In fact, the archival construct of respecting a fonds suggests (indeed, presents to users) a whole that very often never originally existed as such, in the sense of being felt, perceived, used, or managed by any one person in one place (an organization) and one time*«. (Horseman, 1992, p. 16)

Another reason for a new look over provenance is contained in the definition of the archival description itself, in the standard: *»...representation of a unit of description...by capturing, analysing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archival materials and the context... and records systems which produced it.«* But what if there are many contexts? What if one organisation creates, another manages, another holds the archival material? How many creators are involved in the creation of the file - the author, the responsible for legal matters, the unit of the organisation, the organisation itself, as the fonds creator? What about the organisation 2 that merged with organisation 1 and reopened files to add some records? What about multi-organisational pools of data, shared databases - who is the records creator? The provider of the service? But, who owns the data in this case? Such questions, many of them posed due to new technologies, but envisaged even in the paper world, emphasize the fact that provenance is multifaceted, and there is (or there should not be) a one-to-one relationship between creation/creator and its product (fonds, subfonds, series etc. ). The network of relationships is huge and Peter Horseman (1992, p. 16) put it explicitly: *»Conceptually, a fonds can be expressed almost as a mathematical formula: A fonds (F) is a any set of relationships (r1, r2, r3, etc.), where a record (a1, a2, a3, etc.) is an element in any of the identified (and non-identified) relationships. Evidently, a record can be part of two or more relationships, and two or more fonds. Some relationships bind records mutually, into what Luciana Duranti has termed the archival bond. Most relationships, however, link records with their context of creation and contemporary use, with the number of relationships being virtually unlimited.«* Also, this new approach raises new (postmodern) questions about what kind of relationships the archivists should privilege in their description (Yeo, 2010, p. 101) and if the archivists should let the user deepen the description by revealing new connections (Yeo, 2010, p. 100).

Putting aside these quite philosophical aspects, the issue with the standard is that the relationship side is not its strongest point. The standard, as it is now, only accepts hierarchical relationships between archival materials (and even these are not explicit, missing a clear element indicating the link). The relationships with creators or functions can only be deduced by linking such descriptions with appropriate fields, but no characterization of the relationship is explicit<sup>11</sup>. Or, as Peter Horseman (2010, p. 23) or Chris Hurley (Hurley, 2005, Hurley, 2012 passim) demonstrates (in too many words...), the plethora of relationships is not necessarily hierarchical within archival material range<sup>12</sup>, but of many kinds, and the relationships within *»provenance«* (whatever that would mean) can have many avatars and multiple facets. And even more, it seems this is a future direction expected by users (Yeo,2010, p. 104).

At the end of this section, I would conclude that ISAD(G) should be refined in a way that allows a higher degree of interrelating. It should be more flexible in allowing archivists to identify and promote provenance, but also other contextual relationships, such as parallel provenance.

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<sup>11</sup> A *»patch«* in this regard was issued by ICA in 2012, but it looks more like a workaround and not a core improvement of ISAD(G) that would rest on principle and mind-set around it.

<sup>12</sup> See also Yeo, 2010, 105.

Speaking of the parallel provenance, I would like to address some others (minor?) issues in ISAD(G). One of them refers to definitions.

The fonds for instance, has a »classical« definition in the standard: »*The whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions*«. The first remark on this is that fonds cannot have multiple or parallel provenance, as long as the whole of records was the result of activity of a person, family or a corporate body. The actor is one, the fonds is one, therefore the only accepted relationship between fonds and its creator is one-to-one. I would not come again to the questions above; nor do I want to ask whether this is a real case or just a theoretical one. I would only point out that, if there is a succession of holders of a particular fonds before it is being transferred (and »frozen«) to Archives, the provenance and the original order might not be that of creation/accumulation of records, but the one of filing/use, i.e. management of records. And so, it is rather a matter of *collecting* and not of *organic accumulation*, then... there is no fonds anymore... In the same time, »whole« of records - is that a true fact? One might reasonably argue that if the rules for proper control over records and of the controlled disposition are followed, then it is the whole of records and their »stubs«<sup>13</sup>; but the definition does not say that... On the other hand, traditionally (or perhaps to avoid the previous issue) there are traditions where a fonds started when the records are transferred to Archives (in comparison with the approach where the fonds is the whole of records from the moment of the creation; in one case, the fonds are only in Archives, in the other, a creator holds its own fonds). This might be a clarification, but again, the definition does not cover this.

Another definition, which I consider should be a case for improvement, is for the series. The definition in the standard (»*Documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they result from the same accumulation or filing process, or the same activity; have a particular form; or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use*«) accepts as valid the physical criteria (form) as delimiting a series. In my opinion, this is not so often. A series, if organically, should result from the accumulation of records with the same content. A series is the result of classifying records into the same class (Duranti, Macneil, 1996, p. 59). The classification is generally based on the content of records, not by their external form. In the end, it might be a matter of options, but the fact is that, accepting the physical dimension of series, encourages us to open the gate for a »collection« within fonds. Regrouping some records from different organic series into one »new« series (read *collection*) based on different criteria (for instance, pertaining to a certain topic) is a clear expression of the *Pertinenzprinzip*, which is not considered a valid one for archival practice (anymore...). Moreover, lacking the term »organically« from the definition might promote the disputable practices that consider »accessions« are series within a fond.

Another term I would like to discuss is the unit of description itself. The definition (*A document or set of documents in **any physical form**, treated as an entity, and as such, forming the basis of a single description*—my emphasis) supports in the strongest way the physical dimension of the records, as discussed above; it

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<sup>13</sup> Such reality makes G. Yeo emphasize once again that we are dealing with a collection then, and not with a fonds... (Yeo, 2012, 51 sqq.)

eliminates from the definition the electronic records - which hardly seem physical at all. But as a paramount, it excludes fonds as a unit of description, as long as the fonds does not exist as presented above! It would be funny, if it would not be shivering...

One last aspect regards the physical description of records. There is no obvious element to accommodate the description for appearance, form, validation etc... of a document (except for miscellaneous Note Area, of course). Also, I do not know if existent representation (in PREMIS meaning) should be accommodate in *Place and existence of copies* element: it is a certain difference if the »copy« was accessioned by the Archives and preserved as such in its holdings or the copy was done by the Archives, as part of its custodial/management tasks (use or security copy). Such elements should be pondered in their relevancy and, if considered relevant, included.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I sought to raise some of my concerns regarding ISAD(G) as it is in this moment. In some aspects, there are flaws and I dare suggest some improvements. I am pretty sure the archival fellows who work with ISAD(G) noticed all these and may have seen even more. I would not want to make a point of too much audacity to contradict the great minds that worked to the elaboration of ISAD(G). But, for citing again Chris Hurley, »when I point out the logical absurdities and implementation nightmares of trying to apply these underlying principles in ISAD and ISAAR, I frequently get the reaction that although these standards are subscribed to they are not actually implemented as written. <Oh, yes>, people say to me <we follow the standards, but we don't do what they say—we actually do it your way!><(Hurley, 2005, p. 9, note 22) It also occurred to me many times, and the problem is, as we archivists know, that if it is not recorded, it does not exist... Starting to set down our points might file for a case of improvement.

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## POVZETEK

Bogdan Florin POPOVICI\*

### ISAD(G): PREDLOGI IZBOLJŠAV

V pričujočem prispevku sem želel prikazati nekaj svojih pogledov na ISAD(G) kot je v tem trenutku. V nekaterih pogledih opažam pomanjkljivosti in predlagam nekaj izboljšav. Prepričan sem, da so arhivski kolegi, ki delajo s standardom mnoge med njimi in še kakšne že opazili. Ne bi želel biti preveč predrzen in nasprotovati velikim umom, ki so razvijali ISAD(G). Vendar, če citiral Chrisa Hurleya, »ko pokažem na logične nesmisle in nočne more pri uporabi principov standardov ISAD in ISAAR, velikokrat ugotavljam, da, čeprav sta standarda predpisana, nista v resnici uporabljena. <Da>, mi rečejo ljudje, <sledimo standardom, vendar ne delamo tako kot pravica - delamo po svoje!>« (Hurley, 2005, str. 5, opomba 22). Velikokrat sem že pomislil na to, in težava je, kot arhivisti vemo, če ni zapisano, ne obstaja... Če začnemo razmišljanja zapisovati, bomo morda dosegli izboljšave.

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\* Dr. Bogdan Florin Popovici, direktor, Državni arhiv Romunije, Oddelek v Brasovu, Str. Gh. Baritiu nr. 34, 500025 Brasov, Romunija, kontakt: [bogdanpopovici@gmail.com](mailto:bogdanpopovici@gmail.com).