

# Disaster Prevention as a Common Task

## Recommendations of the EU-Report on Archives

by Hartmut Weber

In recent years flood disasters have occurred in Europe with ever increasing frequency, unpredictability, rapidity and growing destructive impact. Floods do not stop in view of borderlines and the ravage inflicted by them has long ceased to be a purely national matter. The last massive flood disaster, that occurred in summer of 2002, hence caused enormous damage to holdings of archives and libraries in Poland, the Czech Republic and in the federal state of Saxonia in Germany. Increasingly public attention has also focused on cultural heritage including the valuable written and audio-visual records of the European cultural heritage. The fire at Weimar's Duchess Anna Amalia Library in September 2004 with its destructive results intensified the public sensibility to endangered libraries but also archives material again.

Disasters worldwide such as tsunamis or hurricanes with their severe consequences like the overflow of New Orleans caused in summer 2005 by the hurricane Katrina are in the present not only possible, they are probably driven by global changes of climate. The new kind of disasters are unpredictable, rapid and therefore with high destructive effect. Disasters can be classified as either natural or man made. Disasters caused by natural phenomena are for example high water, floods, earthquakes, landslides, hurricanes or hailstorms. Fire can be the result of a clap of thunder or other natural reasons but also due to man-made disasters like explosions. Man made disasters may also be considered as terrorist actions or war and armed conflicts. On the whole the consequences of man made or natural catastrophes are the same: damages by water directly or as a result of the work of the fire department, in many cases, especially in connection with floods, a more or less thick layer of mud on the envelopes, files or documents. The mud is indeed a very new experience of the last disasters.

The best way to avoid loss and damages caused by overflowing rivers and other disasters is to store archives in archive purpose built buildings based at suitable places where the danger of flooding and other catastrophes can be prevented as much as possible. But there is also an ongoing necessity for archives to pass on their expertise for disaster control in an advisory role to assist record producing authorities with endangered active records in the case of disasters.

The Council of the European Union took this situation into account and stressed in its resolution from 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2003 on Archives in the Member States the necessity for closer cooperation especially in the field of disaster prevention. It urged its members to encourage appropriate measures to prevent damage to archives due to catastrophes like flooding. Therefore the “Report on Archives in the enlarged European Union” which had been elaborated by an expert group on archives of the member states and EU-institutions at the request of the Council of the European Union in 2003/04 stresses recommendations on the subject of disaster prevention and giving it high priority. The statements of facts and problems of endangered archives and the recommendations were elaborated on the basis of a summary report combined by the Federal Archives of Germany. This report summarizes all the experiences and the knowledge of all the reports of the archives administrations of Poland, the Czech Republic and the German State Saxony concerning the floods of summer 2002. It also outlines the recovery measures including the restoration of damaged archival materials.

The Report on Archives in the Enlarged European Union adopted by the Council Recommendation of 14<sup>th</sup> of November 2005 stresses the urgency of closer and boarder-crossing cooperation in Europe in the field of disaster prevention. In detail the report recommends the development of a catalogue of measures and best practices for disaster prevention and recovery, the installation of a European network for disaster preparedness and disaster management, furthermore a feasibility study for the establishment of about four competence-centres in Europe for borderless disaster aid and finally the setting up of quick crisis emergency teams acting across borders in case of disaster in order to limit damages and to prepare effective and economic restoration of damaged objects.

The mentioned catalogue of measures and best practices for disaster prevention and recovery should be prepared interdisciplinary by experts and should cover architectural prevention measures in order to design an archives purpose built building. Furthermore there is a need to work out organisational prevention measures like instructions for the behaviour in storage rooms. Moreover it is crucial to think about logistical precautions like the availability of emergency storehouses in case of the necessity to remove the holdings from a damaged building. An essential element of a catalogue of measures is the development of concepts for the treatment of damaged archival materials like the

preconditions in connection with the acknowledged freeze-drying method of water-damaged paper objects. Furthermore there is a need to work out plans and checklists for initial measures in case of disaster as for example plans with the addresses and phone numbers of all people, who are to be informed in the case of emergency or the localization of the meeting place in the case of the evacuation of an archives building. Finally there is a need to train both, the professionals and the supporting staff in order to be prepared for an emergency.

In this framework there is a need for closer cooperation of experts and a requirement for the establishment of a European network for disaster preparedness and disaster management for archives linked with the catastrophe-management-systems of the civil protection forces. The development and implementation of a European Network for Disaster Preparedness and Disaster Management is the central point and focus of this European initiative. This network should be an Internet application, partly free for public use, partly for restricted use by archives but also by the civil protection forces. On the homepage of this network you should find all necessary information about appropriate measures and best practices in case of disaster including checklists that can be adopted to local conditions. In the framework of this application on the Internet there should be available a useful list of experts for emergency cases with their contact information like phone-numbers or e-mail-addresses. Furthermore it would be useful, to find in this network a list of disposable equipment and devices which might be directed to the place of disaster in the case of emergency. Finally a list of information about available useful devices in the closest proximity of the affected archive institution like cold stores, vacuum drying, fumigating chambers or lyophilizing cabinets should be available in this network application.

The long-term goal, which needs to be pointed out is connected with a large amount of EU-money, is the establishment of at least four special competence-centres in Europe with quick crisis emergency teams. The first step is to examine the possibilities for the development and financial endowment of these at least four regional border-crossing competence centres in European regions, which are usually threatened by floods. These competence centres should be connected with existing efficient laboratories for restoration and conservation of archival materials. The centres should be equipped with specially trained staff and special devices for effective rescue measures, methods for instant treatment like deep freezing or vacuum-drying and measures to restore damaged

objects. One of these competence centres should also have the function of the leading the operations for all the four centres as a co-ordination centre in the framework of the European Union.

Along with the competence centres for disaster preparedness, rescue and treatment of affected material there should be experts and specialised personnel with suitable equipment who can rapidly access border crossing operations in the case of emergencies. In order to guarantee a quick and effective operation the organisation of these teams and the legal and financial framework of the operation of these teams have to be pre-planned as well as all questions in connection with the activation of the crisis emergency teams.

The required financial endowment of the start-up phase of about four years of such an European Disaster Protection and Rescue Program for Archives will amount to 2.8 million EUR. This sum includes the development of concepts and the feasibility study, the development and implementation of an internet based European Network of Disaster Preparedness and Rescue Management, furthermore the establishment and equipment of both the competence and co-ordination centres, the employment of one specialist for each of the competence centres and finally the costs for the training of the staff.

Fortunately a European Disaster Protection and Rescue Program for Archives had to take in account that there is no need to start from scratch. New research in this field is not required. International and national Standards already exist. Literature, reports, handbooks and checklists are also available but they have to be read. Special websites on the internet inform about measures and best practices concerning current disaster prevention, rescue operations and restoration methods of affected objects in detail.

In all member states of the European Union more or less preparatory work for national, regional or institutional disaster prevention programs or at least elements of such programs are in the pipeline. In many cases especially archives situated in regions, which are usually threatened by floods have the required knowledge to avoid damage and often have also useful equipment and helpful material for rescue and treatment. The experiences with the last disasters showed that archives and archivists have a lot of knowledge about suitable measures, if they are asked. But in some cases they were not contacted with negative consequences. These experiences also stress the necessity for archives to pass on their expertise for disaster control, as I mentioned before, in an

advisory role to assist record producing authorities. Precautionary procedures have to be in force not only in archives, but also in the registries of ministries, courts of law and agencies of public administration in order to avoid the damage of active records, which have the potential to be appraised archival records.

It is evident that I am very familiar with the situation in Germany in this field. Let me outline finally some German initiatives that are on the way to a national disaster prevention program. By reason of the German federalism this is not a very easy path to take! In some German federal states (Länder) wide-ranging disaster prevention and rescue programs for state archives or linked activities for archives and state libraries already exist. In the Berlin area the federal archives co-operate with state archives, city archives and other archives in the field of disaster rescue and instant treatment of affected material by sharing their resources. For better co-operation and co-ordination the biannual conference of the heads of federal and state archives administration, the federal archives and the archives directorates of the 16 federal states, entrusted their experts for preservation and restoration to work out a recommendation for disaster preparedness, rescue and treatment of affected archives. Last but not least the Federal Archives implemented a kind of Network for disaster management:

In Germany the disaster management teams and the emergency forces like policemen, fire brigade and the Federal Agency for Technical Relief are supported by a special geographic IT-information system including a database with all information essential for quick and effective help. This disaster management system is maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and in the past contained information about endangered buildings like railway stations, hospitals and so on. In order to optimize the situation of the German archives in the case of disasters, especially in the case of flood disasters or other large-scale endangerment the Federal Archives has succeeded in offering the opportunity to add information about archives in Germany to this information system. For this purpose a database called NORA (Notfall Register Archive) was created by the Federal Archives. NORA means Emergency Register of Archives. This register contains the names of the archives with the linked essential information about the local situation, the buildings, the holdings, the addresses and phone numbers of responsible staff and in the case of disasters useful equipment and helpful materials. The coverage of all this information is carried out by the archives themselves with the help of an internet application running on the Federal Archives website. A periodical data interchange between the database of the Federal Archives and the highly protected

catastrophes management database of the Federal Emergency Management Agency guarantees that the emergency management forces are constantly provided with complete and up-to-date information about affected or endangered archives. Thus civil protection can act rapidly and effectively to avoid damages or loss if archives are faced or endangered by disasters.

This German Emergency Register for Archives NORA could be a pilot study and the first concrete step on the way to the mentioned European Network on Disaster Preparedness and Disaster Management. Perhaps these European initiatives will also support the urgent world-wide closer co-operation in the field of disaster prevention and rescue like the Blue Shield Initiative of UNESCO, supported by and in partnership with the expertise of the ICA.