

Dealing with Backlog Accumulations of Archival Materials in Eastern and Southern Africa

Where there are few trained archivists, an effective way of dealing with backlog accumulations of archives is the adoption of a series of cooperative workshops.

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INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on backlog accumulations must begin with a clear understanding of what the term actually means. Cook defines backlog accumulations as "groups of papers which have been allowed to rest forgotten or unused in closed storage (or in extreme cases are discovered where they were not known to be) until they were entirely dead from the point of view of current administration."¹ He suggests that backlog accumulations, which may include the mass of uncatalogued material, much of which has come to the repository in a large consignment, or the mass of material which has been processed and described inadequately or to obsolete standards in the past, are a problem endemic to all archival work. He further states that "there are rarely sufficient resources to deal with backlog even if there were no systems of introducing new systems." Cook concludes by stating that "there is no satisfactory solution to this problem."

Archival institutions in eastern and southern Africa are faced with a major challenge of unprocessed records. Indeed, the overwhelming problem facing many archival institutions is how to deal with backlog accumulation of records extending as far back as a hundred years. Many of these records are still lying within the records creating institutions (ministries and departments) in deplorable conditions while others are in archival repositories awaiting archivists. A recent study conducted by a master's student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal revealed that "Archival institutions within ESARBICA were currently facing a huge backlog of unappraised records." The study suggested that "the reason lay primarily in the lack of expertise to conduct the exercise and was also due to lack of cooperation by departments with records

whose disposal authority has been applied for, but not affirmed."²

WHY BACKLOG ACCUMULATIONS?

The first question which needs to be addressed relates to the reasons for the existence of backlog accumulation. A UNESCO study conducted by Moncef Fakhfakh in 1995 identified several factors for the breakdown of archival services in Tunisia, namely:

- lack of laws governing archives management
- absence of structures and services competent in the management of records and archives in the majority of government departments
- non-existence of appraisal, filing and transfer of archives to the national archives
- lack of a corps of archivists and archive specialists
- no more room in archives administration premises³

The above factors are not unique to Tunisia alone. They equally apply to eastern and southern Africa. Backlog accumulations in this region are a result of the lack of strong archival institutions in the region during the colonial period and soon after independence. As Musembi rightly observed, "Before the 1950's the colonial government in Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika and Zanzibar, did not show any serious attempt to set up proper archives service. In all these countries, colonialism was satisfied with sending the most vital records to Britain for preservation, destroying others or letting them just rot."⁴ Tanzania, for instance, had no archives service until after independence. Faced with this situation, many of the newly independent nations began to establish viable archival services after independence. In their quest to collect as much documentary material as they could gather, many archivists brought into their newly established archives offices huge masses of records, some of which were ephemeral in nature or of no value at all. All records belonging to the colonial period were considered to be of archival value. As it turned out later, many of these records ended up being poorly

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processed or have remained unprocessed up to date. Archival institutions such as those of Lesotho and Uganda still lack adequate archival repositories and are therefore unable to access any large quantities of records into their custody.

Secondly, backlog accumulations have remained a major challenge to archivists due to staff shortages. Many archival institutions in the region remain understaffed. For instance, in Kenya the Department of Kenya National Archives and Documentation Services last recruited graduates in 1996. Elsewhere in the region it has been very difficult to recruit and retain graduates into the archives services. This situation was best summed up by the Director of Namibia Library and Archives service when she said, "The National Archives of Namibia (NAN) is currently recovering from a very difficult period in its history. Following the tragic death of Chief Archivist Brigitte Lau in 1996 and the exodus of almost all professional staff between the years 1994–1998, Chief Archivist Joachen Kutzner had been left as the only professional to run the archives during the extremely demanding move to the Archives new purpose built premises in 2000."⁵ Archival institutions are not only faced with problems of inability to attract young graduates into the profession, but even when they have recruited them they are unable to retain them. Peter Mazikana, the former editor of *ESARBICA Journal*, observed in 1999 that "there is an increasing attrition rate on trained professionals and technocrats who are leaving for what is perceived to be greener pastures. As we enter the new millennium we are therefore doing so with a diminishing pool of skills and expertise."⁶ The Director of the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Services noted in his 2005 report to an ESARBICA Board meeting that "the Department continues to experience staff shortages due to resignations and natural attrition . . . Currently the staff strength stands at 96 against an authorised establishment of 240."⁷

Shortage of staff results not only in the archives' inability to appraise records in their custody, but also in their inability to offer advice on better record keeping practices at the point of records creation. Many institutions have no trained professional records managers and as such records are not filed systematically. This becomes a major problem when records are due for transfer to archival institutions, as each file will have to be appraised individually to determine its value. This process is costly and slow, resulting in huge accumulations at the departmental and ministry level.

Due to shortage of staff, archival institutions have been unable to appraise closed records in ministries and departments, resulting in huge accumulations of closed records in these institutions. In the 2005 ESARBICA conference held at Gaborone, Botswana, a Namibian delegate reported that "the main problem with government archives is that no appraisal is taking place, for lack of qualified staff, and therefore the existing space is getting exhausted."⁸

Inadequate funding has also been a contributing factor in the accumulation of vast quantities of records in the region. Without adequate funding, it has been impossible for many archival institutions, the majority of which are located in capital cities, to visit outlying stations to inspect, appraise and advice on effective records keeping requirements.

Thirdly, delays and cumbersome procedures for the disposal of valueless or records of an ephemeral nature often lead to backlog accumulation in archival offices. It cannot be overstated that the disposal of public records is governed by law and that public records cannot be disposed of without proper authorization, even if they are of little or no value. The delay in authorizing the disposal of records may lead to the accumulation of records in archival institutions. For instance, in its 1999 annual report, the Kenya National Archives and Documentation Services reported that

valueless public records from the following records creating agencies which are located in the repositories are waiting disposal authority:

1. Ministry of Local Government.
2. Ministry of Cooperative.
3. Ministry of Agriculture.
4. Ministry of Commerce and Industry.
5. Ministry of Community Development.
6. Ministry of Natural Resources.
7. Attorney General's Chambers
8. Statehouse.
9. District Agriculture Office, Kisumu.
10. Finance and Development.
11. Exchequer and Audit.
12. Tourism and Wildlife.
13. Municipal Council of Mombasa.
14. Nakuru Municipal Council.
15. East Africa Land Forces Organization (EALFO).
16. Trade and Supply.
17. Ministry of Education.

Approval to destroy the records from the above

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creating agencies has been pending for a very long time. Most of these valueless records are kept haphazardly on the floors of the repositories thereby making them (repositories) untidy. Arrangement should be made to ensure that the necessary approval to destroy these records is granted so as to ensure that the repositories are neat and tidy.⁹ Finally, inadequate storage facilities or lack of space in national archives has been a major constraint in the collection of archives in the region. Many archival buildings have not experienced any expansion since their opening, while others have remained in temporary accommodation. For example, the national archives of Uganda and Lesotho are yet to be housed properly, while the national archives of Kenya and Mozambique occupy buildings which were not designed for the storage of archives. Although in some countries such as Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, South Africa and Tanzania records centres have been opened to alleviate storage problems at the national archives, the number of these regional records centres remain small and their impact is yet to be realized fully in the management of public records. Moreover, many of these records centres were not designed as archival repositories and their holding capacity is still very low in comparison to the numbers of records waiting to be processed and transferred there.

CONSEQUENCES OF MAINTAINING BACKLOG ACCUMULATIONS

More often than not, the consequences of maintaining backlog accumulations go unnoticed. Failure to deal with backlog accumulations has many consequences for records creating institutions, national archives and the general public at large. The consequences of unmanaged records were perhaps best summed up by J. H. Simes, an Assistant Records Keeper with the Scottish Records Office, when he said: "In the main, there are congestions, frustrations and expense. Congestion when record rooms become cluttered up, frustration when things cannot be found quickly, and expense when staff time is squandered needlessly searching for information which should be readily at hand."¹⁰ As can be seen from the above statement, the first consequence of maintaining backlog accumulations is that available archives space or some other office space is utilized for the storage of records of an ephemeral nature or whose value is yet to be determined. Secondly, as many backlog accumulations basically consist of records that have not been arranged

and listed, their retrieval is problematic, leading to wastage of staff time seeking for information that ought to be readily available. Thirdly, the existence of backlog accumulations leads to the denial of access for researchers to materials, some of which have reached mandatory statutory periods for their opening. In many of the eastern and southern African countries, records are opened for public inspection at the expiry of 20 or 30 years. It can therefore be argued that any archival institution holding backlog accumulations containing records that are more than 20 or 30 years old is denying its citizens their inalienable right of access to part of their archival heritage.

DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS TO BACKLOG ACCUMULATIONS

Faced with these problems the question which must be asked is whether approaches to managing records developed in Europe, the Americas and Canada will provide solutions in situations where systems have broken down. The traditional methods, which involve records surveys, compilation of retention schedules, sorting, appraisal, arrangement and listing, might not work effectively. One wonders how these processes can be undertaken with limited resources and within a reasonable time frame. How long would it take a records manager working alone or with a small staff of inexperienced clerks to gain control over records accumulated over such long periods? This article argues that if meaningful results are to be achieved, that is, if the backlog accumulation is to be processed and registries decongested, new approaches to managing backlog accumulations need to be developed. This is a view shared by Garaba, who argues that although the existing models may be used in the appraisal of records "they are not always suitable to African conditions where there is a different tradition of documentation. In that light there is need to develop models that are suitable to local conditions".¹¹

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Normally, the starting point for a records management programme is the records survey and records disposal. This is an approach which Frank Evans supports and recommends. He argues that "a realistic approach to the development of an effective records management programme requires that the programme concentrate initially upon the area of records disposal. Only after

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a disposal programme has been implemented should emphasis be directed to the area of records maintenance and use and records creation."¹² Records surveys aim at collecting data relating to record series, rate of accumulation, preservation needs, and the preparation of retention schedules. According to Derek Charman, a private consultant in records management in the UK, the objectives of records surveys are to assist in the development of retention schedules.¹³ The advantages of records surveys were summed up by Peter Emmerson, records manager with Barclays Bank in the UK, when he said:

the survey work brings other immediate benefits. Records which are already time expired are eliminated, duplication is brought under control, in some cases record copies of documents can be designated though this may lead to changes in the structure of records to ensure complete information . . . and it brings to light those records that are still being created but whose purpose has since been forgotten. Birth control is always better than abortion. Investigation and analysis of this kind will also bring to light poor filing systems which can then be drawn to the attention of the operating department with suggestions as to the ways in which they could be improved, irrespective of where the direct responsibility for systems design lie. The large accumulations of records which are no longer in current use, the great problem of backlog can also be attacked during the survey at least on the plane of identification, even if the physical movement and arrangement of the records has to be postponed to a time in the future.¹⁴

This approach presupposes that records must have been created and maintained in some reasonable order. But the prevailing situation in many institutions in eastern and southern Africa renders this approach unworkable. Firstly, it would be very difficult to carry out a meaningful survey as Charman and Emmerson recommend. In many instances records series are not easily identifiable while the records stores are full to capacity, with very little working space available to spread out the records for identification. Secondly, as the records are dumped without order, any attempt to bring them out for identification would be time consuming and not cost effective. It is for this reason that initially the survey should be limited to identifying the location of record stores. The nature and content of the records can only be determined when archivists

are ready to embark on processing the records and moving them to records centres or national archival institutions. Thirdly, traditional approaches to dealing with backlog accumulations suggest that records retention and disposal schedules should be developed before any appraisal work can commence. This article argues that processing backlog accumulations cannot wait until retention schedules have been compiled. The disordered state of the records would make it impossible to construct meaningful schedules. The compilation of retention schedules should only commence after backlog accumulations have been dealt with and new filing systems are developed.

Based on the above discussion, this article suggests the adoption of the following measures in order to deal with backlog accumulations in eastern and southern Africa.

THE WORKSHOP APPROACH

One solution recommended is the adoption of a series of workshops for processing backlog accumulation. This approach is very appropriate in those areas where there is a scarcity of trained archivists, as the work of attempting to deal with backlogs alone can prove to be a daunting and discouraging task, even for trained archivists. Each workshop should consist of a team of professionally trained archivists or records managers and a group of clerical officers drawn from the national archives and from the Ministry or Department whose records are to be processed.

The aim of the workshop should be to sort, arrange, appraise and describe records held in the stores or deposited at the national archives. More specifically, the workshop should aim at:

- identifying records of long term value
- identifying records which, although not required for day-to-day administrative purposes, must still be retained to meet legal requirements
- identifying records of an ephemeral nature which can be disposed of immediately
- compiling finding aids and other retrieval tools for records to be transferred to a records centre or the national archives
- identifying various publications held and arrange for their future management in a library
- processing and accessioning archival records into the repository.

In the past the workshop approach has been used with considerable success in East and West Africa as well as

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in Guyana and in Belize. Similarly in Zanzibar, Tanzania, The Gambia, Sierra Leone and Ghana, records management projects conducted by the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers with the support of the International Records Management Trust have been successful.¹⁵ For example, the 1991 Sierra Leone workshop, which lasted for three weeks, had the following achievements:

- 35,000 files of an ephemeral nature were identified for disposal
- 5,500 files of intermediary or long-term value were accessioned to a new National Records Centre
- 1,100 files of permanent value were accessioned to the National Archives
- space was created in offices and several filing cabinets were cleared as were many wooden cupboards and shelves.¹⁶

In Malaysia, a similar programme was developed by the National Archives based on the West African model. In the early 1990s the National Archives organized special records management workshops known as URUS within ministries and departments. During the workshops the staff from the National Archives and the ministry concerned worked together to process vast quantities of records.

A similar approach has been developed by the National Air and Space Museum in America, which used volunteers to deal with records management related problems. During the workshops, the National Air and Space Museum was able to:

- review, check, caption and re-jacket nearly 4,200 colour negatives
- prepare a master inventory for 3,300 videocassettes
- relabel 750 videocassettes
- reorganize and rehouse the entire film collection
- sort and refolder seven-drawer lateral file cabinets containing space history files
- accession, describe, assess physical condition, rehouse, label, shelve and enter description data for 160 scrapbooks.¹⁷

The volunteer programme was so successful that “the archives staff truly believes in the potential of such a programme and after each session have supported the scheduling of a programme for the following year.”¹⁸ The advantages of the volunteer programme were summed up by Susan Ewing, a supervisor with Aircraft Publishers in Brisbane, California, when she wrote:

The programme provided the archives with additional volunteer staffing for intensive work on selected projects and offered an opportunity for interested persons to contribute to the historic preservation of national treasures while experiencing a behind-the-scenes look at world famous museum. Everyone who has participated in the NASM programme has benefited and has been enthusiastic about the programme and its results. The staff of the NASM archives recommends that other archival agencies consider such a programme for assistance with the never-ending work of managing the nation’s documentary heritage.¹⁹

The success of such workshops depends on proper planning and organization. Whoever is organizing the records workshop should ensure that adequate arrangements have been made, including identification of suitable accommodation where records can be processed. The area identified should be large enough to allow for the records to be spread out for identification. The location must also be large enough to allow for a team of about 10 people to work at the same time.

The second step will involve selecting a team of registry clerks, archivists from the national archival institution and any volunteers from the participating ministry or department, if the backlog accumulation is still with the creator or his immediate successor. Once the programme has been prepared, the training of participants should commence. The training should cover all information necessary to perform the tasks involved in processing of the records. It should emphasize the importance of protecting the materials and preserving their original order.

Top management support is a pre-requisite to the success of the workshop. Unless the management can demonstrate that it values its records, it should not expect its junior staff to cooperate in the programme. Specifically, top management support from the participating ministries and departments will be required in the following areas: the official opening of the programme should be conducted by a senior official from the creating office; the director of the national archives should be in attendance. There are several other ways that the management can show its commitment. To ensure that the participants feel that their work is valued, they should be provided with light refreshments and lunches during the entire period of the workshop.

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Arrangements for the disposal of ephemeral material need to be worked out in advance without describing it at item level, which would require an unrealistic period of time. Summary lists should suffice for this purpose. All records that have been closed for at least 20 years and which warrant permanent retention should be listed in a specially designed format and transferred to the national archives.

To avoid the disposal of records which might still be needed for administrative, legal or other reasons, it is suggested that those records which are less than 20 years old but which must be retained should be listed and transferred to a records centre. Care should be taken to ensure that a date for disposal action is included in the transmittal list for these records.

Library materials such as annual reports, laws and other publications identified during the workshops should be sent to the archives special library or documentation centre, where these exist. The processing of these materials should be left to a professionally qualified librarian.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A RECORDS CENTRE

As indicated above one of the problems leading to backlog accumulations is the lack of storage facilities in national archival institutions. Except for Zambia, Namibia, and lately Botswana, which is currently extending its facilities, very few archival institutions in eastern and southern Africa have increased their storage capacity through the construction of new buildings or extensions to the existing building. As a way of increasing storage facilities, national archival institutions should strive for the creation of additional space through the opening of new records centres in their respective countries. William Benedon has defined a records centre as a "low cost centralised storage area for housing and servicing inactive and semi-active records whose reference rate does not warrant their retention in office space and equipment".²⁰

When seeking to open new records centres the following factors need to be taken into account:

- the distance from the records creating institutions
- the size of the building required to accommodate records created
- the number of staff required to run the centres effectively

- the quality of service required in terms of retrieval time, confidentiality, etc.
- the amount of money available for setting up and equipping the centre
- the type of transport available for transferring records to and from the centre.²¹

The records centres should provide adequate physical facilities to enable staff do their work properly and users to make effective use of the records and the services provided. This requires the provision of a certain minimum of furniture and equipment, which, together with the records housed and the administration officials and researchers who consult them, must be physically accommodated in suitable premises.

The records centres should have ample space to accommodate the records for the foreseeable future, taking account of the records likely to be accessioned each year. Similarly, consideration should be given to records centre activities such as cleaning and processing of records. In this respect, a comparison might be made with a records management programme for a university archives, in which Dwight Wilson argues that "improperly filed material is only one of the reasons why the archivist must demand adequate working space. The whole business of processing the records, examining, cleaning, sorting and re-arranging requires room enough for the records to be spread out in an orderly fashion so that they are reassembled as organic bodies."²² The processing area should have sufficient tables and other equipment to efficiently arrange and describe the records. This area should be separated from the rest of the records storage area so that records contaminated with mould or insects will not damage other records already accessioned into the storage areas.

Additionally, the records centres should provide a secure place for the storage of records awaiting processing. This is desirable bearing in mind that the archivists might be called upon to collect records from offices at very short notice to create office space or to rescue records that might be in immediate danger.

RECORDS TRANSFERS

To be effective, the management of semi-current and non-current records requires a coordinated approach. Lack of coordination will lead to departments continuing their old practice of utilizing storage areas on a random and uncontrolled basis and retaining

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semi-current records in their registries and offices. Moreover, records will continue to be transferred to the record stores without adequate listings or appropriate form of listing.

Records must be transferred to the record centre in a regular and systematic manner. At the end of each year, departments must examine their storage area with a view to identifying those files which have not been acted upon for the last 5 years. Such files should be closed immediately. Under no circumstances should files remain current for more than 5 years. This should be done irrespective of whether the files have reached the prescribed maximum thickness. Moreover, once a file has been closed, no papers should be added into it. Records of an ephemeral nature which are likely to be destroyed within twelve months should not be transferred to the records centre, but disposed of by the department as part of good housekeeping.

Records to be transferred to the records centres must be listed in records transmittal lists in a format prescribed by the records centre or national archives.²³ Transmittal lists should incorporate the box and file numbers, a description of the records, a disposal date and a shelf location number. Three copies of the list must accompany the records. When the records arrive in the centre they will be checked to ensure that the contents tally with the descriptions in the list. Each box will then be allocated a unique location on the shelves which it will retain for as long as it is kept. One copy of the transmittal list will be signed and returned to the department as receipt of records held in the centre. The second copy should be retained in an action order file for review purposes, while the third copy should be kept in departmental order by the records centre as a master list.

No records should be accepted into the records centre or archival institution unless they have been given an action date to indicate when they should either be destroyed, reviewed or placed in the archives. These will serve as a guarantee that the records centre is not used as a dumping place for valueless records. The action dates should conform to the disposal schedule.²⁴

RECORDS DISPOSITION

The compilation of records disposal schedules is essential to the smooth operation of the records centres and to ensuring that records of permanent value reach the archives. As noted earlier, schedules

can only be developed when the backlog accumulation has been cleared and well-structured records series have been introduced. Schedules should be drawn up systematically for every series created in the public sector, starting with schedules covering housekeeping records common to all ministries. In the case of subject correspondence files, the review date, rather than the retention date, should be indicated. Studies conducted by the Public Record Office in Victoria, Australia, indicate that compilation of retention schedules for subject correspondence files is not ideal. They argue that most "information systems are not set up and maintained with the precision and consistency which would make this approach viable."²⁵ They go on to argue that registry classification systems and filing procedures are not usually applied so consistently that detailed analysis for disposal can be relied upon.²⁶ Certainly this will be the case in many of the countries in eastern and southern Africa.

Records transferred to the records centres should be reviewed regularly to ensure that those of enduring value are transferred to the national archives and that the others are destroyed after the agreed retention periods have lapsed. The disposal of confidential waste should receive maximum attention. Ian Dunn, Information Officer and Archivist at the Cheshire Record Office, advises that "confidential waste should clearly be differentiated and appropriate arrangements for disposal made internally or agreed with commercial suppliers of waste services. It may well be advisable for a member of staff to accompany known confidential waste to the incinerator or shredding plant and this should certainly be a stipulation with any high sensitive material."²⁷

TRAINING OF RECORDS MANAGERS AND ARCHIVISTS

Training of archivists and records managers needs to be given priority by national archival institutions. It is disheartening to note that some archival institutions in the region are operating with less than five trainee archivists. One wonders how these colleagues find time to deal with administrative issues of their archives and at the same time find time to process records in the archives and those still outside their custody. Not only should the archivists be trained, but they should also be offered some incentives to attract and retain them. No wonder Francis Garaba recommends that "to ensure that this problem is addressed there is need

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for Government to ensure that qualified personnel are given incentive driven packages to retain their service. By so doing it will be much easier for knowledge sharing in the appraisal field to be transferable to junior archivists and thus promote that continuity trend to avoid this backlog of unappraised records.²⁸ Schemes of service should be reviewed regularly, and if possible efforts should be made to classify the archival profession as an area belonging to scarcity of skills category – and hence be able to upgrade the positions of archivists in the civil service.

SEMINARS AND SHORT COURSES

Finally, it has been observed that lack of skilled manpower in records creating offices is one of the causes for the existence of backlog accumulations. Short courses and seminars should be held regularly with records creating institutions to sensitize them and train them in basic procedures for processing semi-current records. During such seminars and short courses, practical sessions on appraisal and arrangement should be held with clerical officers from the participating departments. The frequency and duration of such programmes may be determined by the national archives, subject to the availability of resources.

CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed procedures for dealing with backlog accumulations. It has pointed out that the starting point for dealing with this problem must begin with clearing backlog accumulations, and the workshop programme developed in West Africa is recommended as being suitable for this purpose. The creation of a records centre with two separate storage areas – an intermediate records centre and an archive repository – is crucial to the success of the records management programme. Their successful operation will depend on the adherence to and effective use of clearly stated procedures derived from professional procedures.

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Abstract

Discusses the problems associated with managing semi-current and non-current in many archival institutions in eastern and southern Africa. The article seeks to answer some basic questions such as: Why do archival institutions in the region have backlog accumulations? What is the level of awareness of the problems associated with backlog accumulations? What is the capacity of archives to handle records created by governments? What mechanisms need to be put in place to avoid backlog accumulations ever becoming a problem again in the region? Finally the article proposes a strategy for dealing with backlog accumulations.

Keywords: East Africa; Southern Africa; archival backlogs; archival accumulations; managing archives

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