

Nomination form International Memory of the World Register

Records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme of the World Health Organization

ID Code [2016-100]

1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

In 1966, the 19th World Health Assembly of the World Health Organization (WHO) requested that the Director-General of WHO launch a global programme to eradicate smallpox, a disease that had afflicted humanity for millenia. In 1980 the 33rd World Health Assembly confirmed the conclusions of the Global Commission for the Certification of the Eradication of Smallpox, stating that smallpox had been eradicated throughout the world and that a return of the virus was improbable.

The success of the Smallpox Eradication programme remains one of the great global achievements in the history of public health. In terms of eradication of a disease afflicting humanity, it is a unique achievement. The records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme provide an extraordinarily significant documentary record of the decisions and actions taken in the effort to eradicate this disease, and as such are of both historical and current value, in light of ongoing efforts to eradicate other diseases.

Both the preservation and the promotion of the records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme of the World Health Organization are crucially important, and inclusion in the Memory of the World register would further both these aims.

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

Records and Archives (RAS) unit at World Health Organization HQ

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

The World Health Organization is the owner of the records, which are managed by the Records and Archives unit at WHO headquarters, with oversight provided by the Smallpox Secretariat in the Control of Epidemic Diseases unit.

2.3 Contact person(s) (to provide information on nomination)

Donna Kynaston, Head Records and Archives

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2.4 Contact details

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3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated.

If inscribed, the exact title and institution(s) to appear on the certificate should be given.

The exact title of the records and the institution are as follows:

Records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme of the World Health Organization

This is a unique body of original records produced in the course of the work of the World Health Organization's Smallpox Eradication Programme, itself a unique body. The records document the extraordinary efforts made by the Smallpox Eradication Programme team to eradicate a brutal, widespread disease. This was a successful attempt to achieve something never before accomplished, the deliberate, systematic, global eradication of a disease. These records provide a unique source of information about the decisions and activities that led to the programme's ultimate success.

This is a finite, closed fonds dating from 1948 to 1987, with the majority of the records dating from 1965 to 1980. The extent of the records is 122 linear meters in 724 boxes. The records include 2490 physical files containing approximately 732,000 paper documents, 15,000 images, 500 maps and miscellaneous records in other formats.

3.4 History/provenance

These records were created by the World Health Organization and have been in the continuous custody of the World Health Organization since their creation.

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

World Health Organization
20 Avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland

4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

Records and Archives Unit
World Health Organization
HQ/GMG/OSS/LSS/RAS
20 Avenue Appia, 1211 Geneva 27, Switzerland
archives@who.int

4.3 Legal status

These records are legally owned by the World Health Organization, a specialized agency of the United Nations. Administratively, the records are the responsibility of the Records and Archives unit at WHO headquarters, with oversight provided by the Smallpox Secretariat in the Control of Epidemic Diseases unit.

4.4 Accessibility

WHO records are accessible to researchers (unless the records are explicitly confidential) once the records are 20 years old. All of these records fall outside this period. There is a detailed inventory to these records, created shortly after the elimination of smallpox was certified and the Smallpox Eradication Programme closed. In addition, the textual records have been digitized in their entirety. The contents of 724 boxes have been digitized in both tiff and pdf formats, resulting in 2490 pdf files of up to 500 pages each. These digitized records are fully searchable via OCR. Researchers may consult the inventory online and then request specific records, which are sent to them electronically. Researchers may also consult the electronic files in the WHO reference room. In order to preserve the paper originals, users no longer consult the paper files directly. The records are fully accessible to researchers except where the records include patient names or other explicitly confidential information, which is blocked before the records are released for consultation by researchers.

4.5 Copyright status

The Smallpox Eradication Programme records were created in the course of the work of the World Health Organization, which holds copyright to them.

5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

5.1 Authenticity

The authenticity and provenance of this documentary heritage are well established. The records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme were created by the World Health Organization as part of its core activities and have been in the continuous custody of the World Health Organization since their creation. Throughout the life of the programme, Smallpox Eradication Programme correspondence and related records were registered, indexed and filed by the WHO Registry, thus capturing key metadata immediately after creation of the records.

5.2 World significance

The documentary heritage contained in the records of WHO's Smallpox Eradication Programme is unique and irreplaceable. There is no other example of an attempt to systematically achieve global eradication of a major disease affecting humans, let alone such a widespread and destructive disease, and there is therefore no comparable body of records. These records are of high value in themselves as evidence of the success of this attempt, and are also of high value as a model with regard to lessons learned, in the context of significant efforts currently underway to eradicate other major diseases such as polio and dracunculiasis. They are also a beacon of hope in this regard. Smallpox affected the entire world, and the work of the Smallpox Eradication Programme benefited the entire world in a

highly significant manner.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

1 Time

These records date from a 30-year post-World War II period of great social and political change which was also a time of relative prosperity and peace and of widespread optimism about the future. These records and the success of the programme they document demonstrate the major strides it was possible to make in these circumstances toward dramatically improving world health, and they document a significant “first”, the deliberate eradication of a major disease.

2 Place

Smallpox was not a regional or localized disease. It affected people from all parts of the world. Even after vaccination became available, it did not reach significant numbers of people in large parts of the world. These locations needed to be systematically identified, and a coordinated, intensive and documented effort to vaccinate populations where smallpox remained a major threat was required. The Smallpox Eradication Programme records contain information about the various localities in the world where smallpox existed between the late 1940s and the end of the 1970s, and documents the efforts and achievements regarding eradicating the disease in these locations.

4 Subject and theme

The subject matter of these records provides significant, in-depth information about efforts in the late twentieth century to improve and safeguard human health. The records document the scale and ambition of the undertaking and provide extensive details about the different kinds of international cooperation that were required and achieved in order to ensure the success of the programme.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1 Rarity

As no other major disease affecting humanity has yet been eliminated, there is no comparable body of records in existence. These records provide insight into the decisions and activities of the Smallpox Eradication Programme specifically, as well as potential guidance for similar efforts regarding other diseases. This information in its original context cannot be found elsewhere.

6.2 Integrity

The comprehensive, detailed records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme have been in the custody of their creator, the World Health Organization, since their creation, and have been maintained in their original order. The initial inventory of these records was created shortly after the close of the programme, and has been retained for reference. In addition, subsequent descriptions of the records have remained faithful to the structure and content of the original inventory.
