



External Access to WHO Archives

Purpose and Definitions

This policy concerns external access to the archival records of the World Health Organization.¹ The WHO Archives exists in order to collect, organize, preserve and make available WHO records of enduring value. As such it has an integral role in serving the administrative and legal needs of WHO. In addition, as the custodian of WHO's institutional memory and documentary heritage, the WHO Archives also provides access to external researchers.²

- Archival records are records in any format, created or received by WHO in the course of carrying out its mandate, which document significant activities, decisions, policies, programmes and projects, and are therefore considered to have enduring value. The values of WHO records are established in approved records retention schedules.
- The WHO Archives contains the archival records of predecessor organizations, WHO governing bodies, WHO technical units and WHO administration, including the Office of the Legal Counsel and the Director-General's Office, as well as separate operational entities serviced by WHO. These records include historical photographs, oral history tapes and microfilm as well as textual records such as correspondence, reports and financial records.

Records from external sources which are deposited in the WHO Archives because of their relevance to WHO activities, are also subject to this access policy. External sources will be informed at the time of deposit that they must clarify any specific access restrictions that they wish to impose on their records.

In its policy for providing access to its records to external researchers, the WHO Archives is in line with official UN archival access policy. Its goal is to create an atmosphere of transparency and openness, to facilitate the sharing and dissemination of information and to broaden understanding of the work of WHO. At the same time, there is a recognized need to limit access to information which is by nature confidential or has been provided in confidence, or which is so recent that if made public it could hamper WHO work or constitute an invasion of individual privacy.

¹ Access to WHO Archives by WHO staff members, consultants and interns is regulated by Cluster Note 2003/7.

² The term "external researchers" includes academic researchers (both professors and students) and other members of the public.

General Access Rule

In general, records held in the WHO Archives may be consulted by external researchers when the records are at least 20 years old, according to the dates of individual documents consulted or, in the case of a file, the date of the most recent document in the file. In all cases archival records may be consulted only on site; they may not be signed out.

Exemptions to the General Access Rule

The Director-General's Office may grant exemptions to the 20-year general access rule if satisfied that such exemptions are justified by the circumstances, such as the advisability of providing early access in order to facilitate research WHO considers of significant value. The application of exemptions may be subject to specified conditions.

Restrictions on Access

Certain records are subject to access restrictions regardless of the 20 year general access rule. These include but are not limited to:

- Records containing personal information which, if disclosed, might prejudice the reputation, safety or privacy of individuals, remain closed to external access.
- Records containing business, legal or financial information obtained or created under explicit or implicit conditions of confidentiality remain closed to external access.
- However, the above mentioned records may exceptionally be made accessible to external researchers after 40 years only if written permission has been granted by the responsible technical unit, in consultation with the Office of the Legal Counsel and the Director-General's Office.

Access to Published WHO Records

Records which are published and disseminated immediately after their creation may be consulted by external researchers even if the records are under 20 years old. These records contain no information regarded by WHO as confidential. They include the official documents of meetings of the Executive Board, the World Health Assembly and other governing bodies, which are made available immediately through the WHO Library and the Internet. They also include records created for the purpose of disseminating information to the public, including material for the press, publications and Internet website content.

Procedures for Access

- Applications by external researchers to consult the WHO Archives should be made in writing to the Head, Records and Archives. They must then register for access by completing the WHO Archives research request form.
- Requests for exemptions to the 20 year general access rule, as well as for access to confidential records older than 40 years, should be addressed in writing to Head, Records and Archives. They will be reviewed and decided on a case-by-case basis by the responsible technical unit, in consultation with the Office of the Legal Counsel and the Director-General's Office. Permission must be granted in writing, and conditions for access clearly outlined.
- When requests for access to the WHO Archives have been approved, Records and Archives staff identify which records fall in the public domain and can be accessed immediately through the WHO Library, which records are available according to the 20 year access rule, and which records are not available because they are either under 20 years of age or subject to a specific access restriction as provided above.
- Appointments must be made in advance in order to enable Records and Archives staff to provide the most efficient service.
- Access to certain records by external researchers may be delayed to allow for conservation or other archival work necessary to prepare files for consultation.
- External researchers will be held responsible for any damage to records used.
- Any questions regarding access to the WHO Archives should be directed to Head, Records and Archives.

Copying and Reference Service

Transcription, standard photocopying and digital copying of WHO archival records to which external researchers are provided access are allowed, with the following restrictions:

- Complete collections, or entire subdivisions of collections, may not be copied.
- All photocopying is done by Records and Archives staff.
- Copying of fragile materials may be restricted. Digital photography of archival materials may be carried out by researchers under Records and Archives supervision.
- WHO reserves the right to charge a fee per copy for requests totalling more than ten copies.

In most cases, WHO retains copyright to records in the WHO Archives:

- Permission from Head Records and Archives must be obtained before reproducing WHO Archives materials in publications.
- WHO records quoted or reproduced in publications must be cited appropriately.
- External researchers who use WHO records in publications are requested to provide two complimentary copies of the publications to the WHO Archives.
- WHO is unable to release users of the Archives from any obligations that may apply in respect of copyright or other rights belonging to third parties. It is the user's responsibility to obtain clearance from any relevant third party.
- Use of WHO archival records for commercial or promotional purposes is not permitted unless explicitly authorized by WHO in writing. The decision as to whether a given potential commercial or promotional use is legitimate and in WHO's best interests will be made on a case by case basis by the Director-General's Office, in consultation with the Office of the Legal Counsel.