

Increasing Transparency at the IAEA Archives

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The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Archives are an invaluable source for the study of nuclear proliferation. Their 5,574 linear meters of historical records—in a variety of media formats—contain key sources on the Agency’s central role in the spread of nuclear energy and other peaceful applications of nuclear technology, as well as on its global position as the key institutional actor charged with verifying the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The archives hold the working documents of the Agency’s Secretariat and its policy-making bodies: the Board of Governors and the General Conference. Yet, researchers presently encounter significant obstacles to access at the IAEA Archives, principally due to (1) comparatively strict withholding policies and (2) an under-developed capacity to accommodate researchers. This Issue Brief offers recommendations for revising IAEA archival access policies—considering both the policies and holdings of similar archives and the best practices developed by the International Council on Archives. These suggestions aim to improve researcher access, while remaining sensitive to the unique challenges faced by the IAEA Archives, due to the work of its parent organization.

CURRENT STATE OF ACCESS

Researchers seeking to consult records at the IAEA Archives currently face significant barriers to access. Archival accessibility is desirable, as the International Council on Archives writes, because of “the vital necessity of archives for supporting business efficiency, accountability and transparency, for protecting citizens’ rights, for establishing individual and collective memory, for understanding the past, and for documenting the present to guide future actions.” The IAEA is an understudied organization when compared to the broader historical context in which the organization has functioned, and it has played key roles in the development of the present global nuclear order. However, examination of the organization’s role

in history has been limited to the purview of a few insiders with necessarily limited perspectives. Increasing transparency is one major way by which the IAEA can maintain and reinforce its legitimacy as an organization. Underlining the legitimacy and transparency of the IAEA is crucial to the success of its mission in the global nuclear order.

This task is especially relevant given that the IAEA presently works under heightened scrutiny in addressing significant future challenges, such as verifying an agreement with Iran, confronting nuclear security, and engaging the global impact of nuclear energy.

Improving access to the IAEA Archives would enable researchers to conduct fresh scholarly inquiry into the important and transformative work of the organization. The International Council on Archives defines access as “the availability of records/archives for consultation as a result both of legal authorization and the existence of finding aids.” Currently, access to records of the IAEA Archives is restricted in the following ways:

1. Lack of Resources

Despite the existing access rule which allows the public to access IAEA “records, semi-current records and archives that are more than 30 years old,” a large amount of these historical records remains inaccessible to researchers, reportedly due to an administrative backlog. Furthermore, classified information is categorically excluded from the 30-year-rule without a systematic review process.

2. Inaction on Derestriction

In 1996, the IAEA Board of Governors decided that its records, with the exception of clearly defined sub-groups, should be derestricted two years after issue. This is in line with archival policies at the WTO, IMF, and NATO. However, this decision has not been implemented. Board of Governors records—even those outside of the 30-year-rule—have yet to be derestricted. Frequently, duplicates of these very same records are freely accessible to researchers at other archives, such as the British National Archives in Kew and the United States National Archives.

3. Lack of Systematic Review

There is no regular, systematic review and declassification procedure in place. Individual requests for declassification or derestriction in the past have shown that there is a lack of transparency on which records remain classified and for what reasons. In other major archives – like the US National Archives, for example – this information is

provided through withdrawal notices that indicate the title, name, and date of the specific records that remain restricted or classified.

4. Deficit of Finding Aids

There are no finding aids available for researchers, either in paper or electronic form. The IAEA website does not provide information on IAEA Archives access regulations, declassification procedures, or collections and holdings.

5. Short Window of Authorized Access

The IAEA Archives currently limits individual researcher visits to five consecutive days per month. This is an unreasonably short period for serious scholarly inquiry. Comparatively, researcher passes at the US National Archives provide access for one year.

Issues 1, 2, and 5 all appear to be the result of insufficient resources within the Archives and Records Management Section for the administrative tasks of derestricting records and accommodating researchers. Issue 4 could also be attributed to a lack of resources from within the organization. Nevertheless, the persistent shortcomings in providing information about the Archives’ holdings and rules of access raise questions about the Agency’s commitment to transparency. Issue 3 presents a serious concern; the uneven application of derestriction measures leads to unequal treatment of members of the public in their attempt to gain access to the archive. This undermines the principle of equal access to the archive’s holdings, which in turn creates profound obstacles to free scholarly inquiry.

The above examples are illustrative of the major impediments to the use of the IAEA Archives for historical research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve access to the IAEA Archives in line with the best practices recommended by the International Council on Archives, which would increase transparency and usability for researchers, the following recommendations are provided:

1. Open Board of Governors records

Following the 1996 directive of the Board of Governors to systematically open its own records to the public after two years of issue, these records should finally be made accessible. As these records have all been digitized for internal use, they could easily be made accessible to the public on the IAEA's website through a dedicated portal with search features.

2. Implement a transparent access policy

The IAEA Archives should define a transparent access policy that clearly describes the types of general and special restrictions placed on parts of the holdings and ensures equal and fair access to the public. (See the International Council on Archives 2014 document "Technical Guidance on Managing Archives with Restrictions").

3. Create a transparent and systematic declassification review process

Records falling outside of the restriction period should be systematically reviewed and opened to the public. All major international organizations such as the WTO, IMF, WHO, and NATO have systematic and documented declassification review processes in place that help to open records to the public.

4. Develop a transparent process for ad hoc declassification review

In addition, researchers should be able to submit requests for ad hoc declassification reviews that can be tracked. An ad hoc review process should follow a systematic procedure with a timeline of expected outcome, as well as provide justification

about possibly withheld records. Once records have been opened for one researcher, they are open to the general public.

5. Identify withdrawn and restricted records in the holdings

In order to make known the existence of records as recommended by principle 2 of the International Council on Archives' "Principles of Access," withdrawn records in the open files should be clearly indicated by withdrawal slips, as is the practice in other archives. Furthermore, the types of restricted files and the policies for withholding should be elucidated, in order for the researcher to gain a better understanding of which records become available after 30 years.

6. Create detailed finding aids of archival holdings

Archival research is immeasurably aided by the existence of detailed finding aids that describe the holdings of the archive. While IAEA archivists are helpful in responding to research inquiries, the IAEA Archives should nevertheless draw up detailed finding aids to describe the Archives' holdings to researchers and improve accessibility.

7. Communicate access policies and finding aids via IAEA website

The IAEA Archives should publish their access policies, holdings descriptions, finding aids, and visitor information on a dedicated part of the IAEA's website that should be easily found by using a search engine. At the time of writing, no IAEA Archives page (or information about the Archives) could be found on the IAEA website.

8. Extend researchers' physical access to archives

The IAEA Archives should allow researchers to apply for security passes that would allow them to access the archives for longer periods of time (during business hours), such as one to three

months. Security passes should be renewable.

9. Adopt a twenty-year-rule

The IAEA should seriously consider moving from a thirty-year to a twenty-year archival restriction policy in line with the archives of WHO, IMF, and UNESCO.

CONCLUSIONS

The IAEA Archives' wealth of historical information should be made accessible to researchers in order to promote free inquiry into the organization's role in the history of the development of nuclear technologies and governance since the early 1950s. The Archives should adopt transparent policies to communicate access procedures and restrictions. They should also assist researchers in making use of the historical material by producing detailed finding aids and regularizing physical access to the reading rooms. Opening access to the IAEA Archives will contribute to preserving individual and institutional memory, enriching understandings of the past and present, and providing ways to guide future actions.

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