

## Efforts of Japanese Local Governments to Develop Record Management and Public Archives

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### Introduction

As Mr. Shinichi Okamoto explained this morning, in 2011, the Public Records and Archives Management Act (PRAMA) came into effect. It stipulates a uniform rule concerning the management of the government's current and non-current records, and specifies permanent preservation of historically important official documents. In addition, PRAMA imposes obligations on local governments to strive to manage records in adherence with the spirit of this law.

In fact, Japanese local governments started to work on managing such records long before the state government. The first public archive was established by Yamauchi Prefecture in 1959, 12 years earlier than the National Archives of Japan was established in 1971. The first information disclosure ordinance was enacted by the Town of Kaneyama, Yamagata Prefecture in 1981, whereas the Information Disclosure Act in 1999. The first public records and archives management ordinance was also enacted by a local government, the City of Uto in Kumamoto Prefecture in 2001.

Neither the government of Japan nor local governments, however, have developed a system to select, preserve, and use historically important official documents for a long time. In future, local governments must enact ordinances concerning historically important official documents in accordance with PRAMA. Therefore, as I will detail later, we formed the Workshop to Study Local Public Records Management Ordinances in 2010 and published the study results in 2011.

What should Japanese local governments do to develop the records management system and public archives? The aim of this presentation is to introduce these problems and efforts to solve them. First of all, I will summarize the historical background of records management in local regions of modern Japan. Next, I will introduce the management of historically important official documents by local governments, as well as the current status of local public archives, and discuss disincentives to their development. Then, I will introduce the guideline to establish ordinances we suggested to solve the problems. Finally, lessons on the preservation and management of official documents learned from the actual damage sustained in the Great East Japan Earthquake will be covered.

### Historical Background of Public Records Management by Local Governments

There were four historical groundbreaking events in the history of local records management in Modern Japan.

The first was the reform of the local government system in 1889. Until then, for approximately 300 years since the latter half of the 16th century, feudal lords organized

communities of villages and towns into administrative units and appointed community leaders as administrative supervisors. They were called *nanushi* or *shoya*, both of which mean 'village headman.' Leaders' houses became government offices and public records were under their control. The modern government established by the Meiji Restoration initially maintained the conventional system. However, in 1889, the government separated the administrative function from communities, merged many villages and towns into new local governmental bodies, and built independent government offices. At this time, certain types of official records under the control of leaders were passed on to the new local governmental bodies; mainly concerning land and inhabitants. Otherwise, however, the remaining records were virtually destroyed, although leaders and their descendants have been continuing to personally manage them, and many exist even now. Slide pictures show examples of public records in the latter half of the 19th century, which were destroyed.

The second is the abolishment of county offices in 1926. County offices were established as a local government instrument in 1878. When they were abolished, administrative records which were known as county records were compiled, but most public records were destroyed and few remain.

The third is the merger of cities, towns and villages in the late 1950s. At the time, few official documents of pre-merger local governmental bodies were passed on to new local governments except for some documents concerning continuing affairs. Vast amounts of non-current records were left behind in the repositories and offices of the old governments. A decade or more later, they were forgotten and many had been lost somewhere. This slide picture shows a bound book of public records received by a village office for a year in 1945. The picture shows a notice sent to the executive employee of a village office on August 17, immediately after the government of Japan declared its defeat in World War II. This document came close to being destroyed in the 1970s and was preserved immediately before the destruction.

Accordingly, local governmental bodies paid little attention to the historical importance of official documents until the 1960s and most current records were lost in the reforms of the local government system. However, in the 1970s and 80s, the non-current records management and the establishment of archives progressed for two reasons. The first was the citizens' movement to preserve historical records, spearheaded by a group of historians known as the Association of Japanese Local History Researchers. In the process, the focus also switched to old local governmental bodies' official documents. Later, this movement developed into a national campaign seeking to establish local archives, which was led by the Japan Society of Archives Institutions, formed in 1976. The second reason is that more local governments introduced the information disclosure system in the 1980s and people started to recognize official documents as a basis for administrative accountability.

The fourth groundbreaking event was the establishment of the National Archives Act in 1987 as a result of these movements. There were 19 public archives at the time, including the National Archives of Japan. Article 3 of the National Archives Act stipulates that the state and

local governments are responsible for preserving and using historically important official documents, granted public archives in existence legal grounds, and promoted the construction of new ones. The Japanese contemporary history of records management and public archives started in 1987.

### Current Situation and Challenges of Local Governments

From 1987 onward, the number of local governments that preserve historically important official documents is increasing. According to an investigation by the Japan Society of Archives Institutions in 2010, 90% of the prefectures and 40% of the cities, towns and villages select historically important official documents from non-current records. I highly value this fact. Still, 70% or more of the local governments did not disclose the selected public records.

An investigation by Mr. Kenji Tomita shows there are a total of 60 local public archives as of 2012, which means only 3% of the 1789 local governments have public archives. Many local governments without archives have not improved the system for preservation and use of historically important official documents. Many precious public records are left unattended in repositories and continue to be destroyed with citizens unaware. What prevents the system from being improved? I summarized and categorized the factors into the following four:

First of all, due to the historical background I mentioned earlier, local governments do not prioritize records management. Employees do not understand official documents' historical importance. No dedicated employee has been appointed and little progress has been made. Earlier, a local archives employee asked me the following question. "It is required by law to destroy official documents when their retention period expires. Why should we preserve them?" Incidentally, he is not an archivist. In the meanwhile, local governments are prone to establish archives when citizens significantly prioritize local history.

Secondly, appraisal standards, as well as the content of official documents to be selected and preserved, are unclear. In Japan, official documents kept disclosed for a long time and investigative research on appraisal and selection progressed very slowly. This has hampered the development of a systematic archivists training in Japan today.

Thirdly, local governments cannot prepare the budgets, facilities, and staff required for public archives. Half the public archives were established during the economic boom in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since the 2000s, however, small public archives have been gradually established despite the economic recession.

Fourthly, ordinances on the records management have not been developed. It is difficult to directly apply PRAMA to local governments, and there are few preceding ordinances to be referred to. Therefore, local government employees cannot acquire knowledge about appropriate records management for their governments and ordinances to be established.

### Guideline for Ordinance Establishment

Workshop to Study Local Public Records Management Ordinances was formed based on a proposal from the ARMA Tokyo Branch. It consists of 14 members: archives employees, local

governments' records management officials, records management company staff, and academic experts. We aimed to eliminate disincentives to records management ordinances and declared the following two purposes: to propose the enactment of records management ordinances and establishment of local archives from the standpoint of local autonomy; and to develop a guideline, not a draft ordinance, which summarizes issues to be considered in preparing ordinances. A report was published under the title "Toward the Establishment of Public Records and Archives Management Ordinances" in 2011.

Next, I will introduce some issues from the Guideline referring to the actual picture of local governments.

The first point concerns who should be responsible for managing historically important official documents. PRAMA stipulates the National Archives of Japan etc. should be responsible for this. However, it is not feasible for local governments to establish facilities equivalent to national ones. Hence a greater emphasis was put on enhancing the functions of local public archives rather than constructing new ones. Moreover, it was proposed that business of local public archives be decentralized with close cooperation among offices if necessary.

The second point is the facilities required for the management, for which we listed six key factors: a) transfer/collection and temporary storage, b) arrangement and conservation, c) permanent preservation, d) reading and use, e) wider use, and f) management. In addition, we clarified c), d), and f) should be performed in core facilities and accepted that other factors could be performed in a decentralized manner.

The third point is management facilities other than public archives. Because of the historical background, museums and libraries set up by local governments often manage historically important official documents and the number of public archives established in museums and libraries is increasing. Therefore, we proposed important administrative points to manage historically important official documents in such facilities smoothly.

The fourth point concerns how to handle business in existing public archives. The report emphasizes the need to reconfirm and re-select official documents after a certain period and proposes a user-friendlier service method than the one stipulated in PRAMA. In addition, we took into consideration local official documents up to the end of the 19th century, which were destroyed 120 years ago and are still personally managed by the descendants of old community leaders. Finally, we highlighted problems anticipated in the context of records management ordinance when local governments manage these documents, which are not currently handled as official.

#### Lessons from the Great East Japan Earthquake

Finally, we should learn lessons from the damage inflicted on historically important official documents by the Great East Japan Earthquake. In the Town of Minamisanriku, Miyagi Prefecture, a library was just around the shore, and a town office and a prefectural branch office were 250m and a kilometer away from the shore, respectively. On March 11, 2011, a 16m high

tsunami hit the Town. The library disappeared; its books, building, and the site were washed into the sea. In the case of the town office, only the steel beams were left. The tsunami nearly reached the rooftop of the three-story building of the prefectural branch. Although the building remained, its entire interior was gone. Actually, the library was hit by the Chile earthquake tsunami immediately after opening in 1960 and lost its holdings that time. However, the library did not relocate and subsequently started to preserve old official documents, all of which were also lost. If the library and town office had relocated after the Chile earthquake tsunami, historically precious official documents might have survived the tsunami damage.

Many citizens in Fukushima Pref. were forced to evacuate due to explosion accidents in the nuclear power plant as well as the earthquake and tsunami. There are some examples whereby those returning to their houses found precious cultural resources and documents, which had been individually managed, had disappeared. Although a relatively taboo topic, many thieves broke into houses in dangerous areas contaminated by radioactivity after people evacuated. The slide picture shows the status of affected private homes immediately to the south of the off-limits area and that of the area about 12 km north side from the nuclear power plant. People were only allowed to enter this area about half a year ago.

With this disastrous experience in mind, we must review the conditions for the management and preservation of historically important official documents. Where should facilities be built for the permanent preservation of documents? Decentralized storage of documents and data, as well as copying of documents in case of disaster must be considered. In addition, we should strongly promote the establishment of local public archives that meet all requirements.

We will continue striving to hand down the precious archives of mankind to the next generation. I hope archivists worldwide will share these problems and help each other.