

# Recent Memory Archives: Practices and Challenges

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## Executive summary

The InMAP study analysed the situation of recent memory archives developed in Portugal over recent decades, focusing on entities that document Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and oral memory. The research adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a nationwide questionnaire survey with semi-structured interviews conducted with professionals from representative organisations in the sector. The findings show that, despite the dynamism and institutional diversity of the field, the entities involved — namely municipalities, museums, universities and research centres, as well as associations (among others) — face significant structural constraints in the areas of documentation, digital preservation and digital access to this heritage. These weaknesses jeopardise the long-term safeguarding of collections and limit their potential as a strategic resource for knowledge production, cultural participation and social cohesion. The study concludes that these challenges require a clear and urgent policy response. Sustained investment in qualified human resources, continuous training and capacity-building, standardisation and technical guidelines, adequate funding mechanisms, institutional strengthening and cross-sectoral coordination is essential to ensure the preservation and transmission of ICH and collective memory to future generations.

## Recommendations

- National strategy for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and the preservation of memory;
- Strengthening of human resources;
- Training and capacity-building plan;
- Standardisation and technical guidelines;
- Sustainable funding programme;
- Institutional strengthening and sectoral coordination.

## Target audience of the policy brief

Património Cultural, I.P., Museus e Monumentos de Portugal (MMP), Direção-Geral do Livro, dos Arquivos e das Bibliotecas (DGLAB) and Arquivo Nacional do Som

## Introduction and Problem Statement

Over recent decades, Portugal has witnessed a growing number of recent memory archives created by museums, archives, libraries, universities, associations and municipalities.

The term “recent memory archives” refers here to archives and repositories that document

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and preserve oral memory. In this context, oral memory preservation is understood as the collection and valorisation of narratives — lived or transmitted — shared by individuals about their social or cultural practices, knowledge and know-how,

places and events. ICH is understood in accordance with the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), as traditional cultural practices, i.e., living heritage.

Despite the proliferation of initiatives, there is a lack of structured information capable of informing the characterisation, development and societal impact of these archives. The InMAP study therefore sought to address two central questions: what is the current situation

and evolution of these archives? What are the main challenges regarding documentation, digital preservation and digital access?

Documentation, digital preservation and digital access were considered core areas of analysis due to their relevance for the transmission of knowledge about ICH and oral memory.

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## Analysis / Key Findings

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The InMAP study analysed the situation of recent memory archives created in Portugal over recent decades, focusing on entities that document Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and oral memory.

The research combined two complementary data collection instruments: a nationwide questionnaire survey, which obtained 195 valid responses (of which 123 entities are actively engaged in this field), and 11 semi-structured interviews with 19 professionals from representative organisations in the sector (museums, archives, libraries, associations and universities).

### A diverse and territorially uneven sector

The surveyed universe reveals significant institutional diversity, with municipalities predominating (35%), followed by museums (19.5%), universities/research centres (14.6%) and associations (10.6%) (Graph 1).

The public sector represents 75.6% of the sample, confirming its central role in promoting and sustaining projects dedicated to documenting ICH and oral memory. This centrality underscores the importance of public policies for the sustainable development of the field.

Geographically, there is a higher concentration of entities in Greater Lisbon (25.2%), the North (17.1%) and the Centre (16.3%), revealing an uneven territorial distribution that reflects established dynamics of cultural and institutional investment.

For most entities, activities are permanent in nature (65%), indicating a trend towards continuity and institutionalisation, which constitutes a positive aspect of the landscape analysed. However, 18.7% of entities carry out activities of a more episodic nature, signalling the coexistence of initiatives limited to specific timeframes and objectives.

### Documentation: fragmented and weakly standardised practices

Documentation constitutes a critical area marked by multiple structural weaknesses (inventorying, standardisation, technologies). Data analysis reveals a landscape of poorly systematised practices, characterised by the absence of standardised procedures and the limited use of information management tools.

### Absence of digital preservation strategies

Digital preservation is one of the most fragile areas identified. Despite being widely recognised as important, only 8.1% of entities have a formalised digital preservation strategy.

### Limited digital access

Digital access presents a heterogeneous and generally unsatisfactory picture. Half of the entities (50.7%) have a website to make their resources available, while 31% do not. Among those with a website, the proportion of heritage made available online is very limited: only 5.7% provide full online access to their collections.

### Structural challenges identified

**Shortage of human resources as a cross-cutting constraint:** identified as the main gap

across all dimensions analysed (inventorying 17.3%; digital preservation 11.3%; digital access 18.6% in the questionnaire; most frequently mentioned issue in interviews).

**Insufficient capacity-building:** gaps in specific competencies (43.1%) and digital skills (37.4%) identified in the questionnaire and reinforced through interviews.

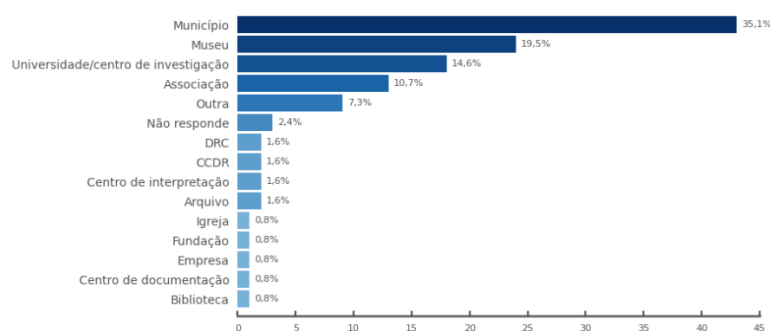
**Fragile technological infrastructures:** absence or inadequacy of information management systems (40.7% do not use any), storage limitations and lack of equipment.

**Lack of standardisation and formalised procedures:** absence of technical standards (40.7% have no written guidelines), controlled vocabularies (52% do not use them) and written procedures.

**Systemic financial constraints:** insufficient funding (only 19.5% consider it adequate) affects all other dimensions.

**Institutional coordination deficit:** interviews highlight the need for stronger articulation between national authorities and local entities.

Graph I – Typology of institutions with activity in the field of intangible cultural heritage or oral memory (%)



Fonte: InMap  
Base: 123

Source: InMAP

## Policy Options and Recommendations

Considering the diagnosis presented, which reveals multiple and interdependent structural weaknesses, integrated and coordinated public policy measures are proposed, organised around six priority axes.

### National strategy for the safeguarding of ICH and the preservation of memory

**Action:** Develop an integrated national strategy articulating the different authorities (museums, heritage, libraries and archives) and providing an overarching framework for the sector.

The absence of a national strategy and current institutional fragmentation hinder a coordinated approach. An integrated strategy would

facilitate priority-setting, resource allocation and convergence of competencies.

### Strengthening human resources

**Action:** Ensure public funding for the recruitment of specialised staff with stable contracts, appropriately sizing teams to project requirements. This includes:

- Support for the recruitment of specialised profiles to address existing gaps;
- Incentives for the consolidation of multidisciplinary teams capable of addressing documentation, preservation and access in an integrated manner.

The shortage of human resources is the main structural constraint affecting the sustainability and societal impact of work on ICH and oral memory.

### **Training and capacity-building plan**

**Action:** Implement a structured national programme of continuous training for professionals working in municipalities, museums, archives, libraries and related entities.

Short training courses should be offered at different levels, ranging from awareness-raising for technicians and decision-makers to specialised training aimed at strengthening technical and digital skills. The training model developed by the Portuguese Museum Network may serve as a reference.

### **Standardisation and technical guidelines**

**Action:** Develop and disseminate technical guidelines to harmonise practices and raise quality standards, including:

- Technical standards, controlled vocabularies, and guidelines for digital preservation and digital access.

The lack of shared guidelines leads to heterogeneous practices and undermines the

quality and sustainability of documentation, preservation and access processes.

### **Sustainable funding programmes**

**Action:** Create dedicated funding lines for the documentation of ICH and oral memory, providing regular and structured support, comparable to funding schemes in other heritage areas (e.g. ProMuseus).

The absence of funding seriously constrains the development of initiatives in this field.

### **Institutional strengthening and sectoral coordination**

**Action:** Establish effective coordination mechanisms between:

- National authorities (Património Cultural, I.P.; MMP; DGLAB) and local entities (museums, archives, libraries, municipalities);
- Different sectors (museums, archives, libraries, heritage).

The current distance between national and local levels generates operational difficulties and lack of support on the ground. Cross-sectoral collaboration is essential for effective policy implementation.

## **Conclusion**

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Recent memory archives constitute a strategic resource for safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and oral memory, and for strengthening community valorisation. The InMAP study demonstrates that, despite the sector's dynamism, entities working in this field face critical challenges in documentation, digital preservation and digital access, compromising long-term safeguarding and limiting their potential as a societal knowledge resource.

These structural weaknesses require an urgent policy response. The adoption of integrated public policies is essential to ensure continuity, quality and access to this heritage. Investment in human resources, training and capacity-building, standardisation and technical guidance, funding, institutional strengthening and cross-sectoral coordination is a prerequisite for ensuring the transmission of heritage and collective memory to future generations.

## **References**

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UNESCO. 2003. *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO

## Technical Note

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