

## Values and Theory in Impact Assessment

Presidential Address  
by Richard Fuggle<sup>1</sup>

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I am greatly honoured to be assuming the Presidency of IAIA in its 25<sup>th</sup> year. There can be no doubt about the Association's growth and developing maturity over a quarter of a century, and we will, I hope, all be together to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> birthday at next year's annual meeting. Over the years our Association has grown in membership almost 10 fold in terms of numbers and almost 50 fold in terms of its International representation. The 160 persons who gathered in 1981 were from only two countries, 24 years later over 1500 IAIA members come from 108 countries.<sup>2</sup>

But as we all know maturity is not simply a matter of years and physical growth, important though these are. With maturity the exuberance and determined single-mindedness of youth gives way to tempered judgement, deeper insights, and greater understanding of human nature and the way the world works. With maturity comes recognition that the values that people hold and use to regulate their relationships are more important than material trappings, that understanding why people do certain things is as important as knowing what they do and how they do it. I believe these indicators of maturity are as applicable to organisations as they are to persons. So I would like to suggest that, as an Association, we give some thought during our 25<sup>th</sup> year of existence to the way our Association is maturing: some thought to the values we hold and promote, some thought to the "why" of Impact Assessment rather than to "what it is" and "how we do it". I say this because I have the impression, maybe wrongly, that as an Association and a Profession we have not given the attention that we should to the ethics and theory of Impact Assessment.

Having said this, one indicator of Impact Assessment's developing maturity is the theme *Ethics and Quality Assurance in Impact Assessment* which has been adopted for our Association's 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts next year. A second indicator is the increased extent to which books and papers are being published on environmental ethics and the ethics of Impact Assessment<sup>3</sup>. A further indicator of developing maturity is that papers have started appearing in the literature that probe the "why" of impact assessment, the theoretical and philosophical basis for what we do<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor of Environmental Studies, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7701, South Africa.

<sup>2</sup> IAIA Handbook 2004 and IAIA Annual Report 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the articles in *Encyclopaedia of Applied Ethics*, Vols 1-4, Academic Press, San Diego, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett RV Kurian PA. 1999: The theory of environmental impact assessment: implicit models of policy-making. *Policy and Politics*, 27, 415-34. Cashmore M. 2004: The role of science in environmental impact assessment: process and procedure versus purpose in the development of theory. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 24, 403-426. Dalkmann H Herrera RJ Bongardt D. 2004: Analytical strategic environmental assessment (ANSEA): developing a new approach to SEA, *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 24, 385-402. Hellström T Jacob M 1996: Uncertainty and Values: the case of environmental impact assessment. *Knowledge and Policy*, 9(1), 70-85. Hill RC 2004: Theory for the Practice of Environmental Assessment, PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town. Kornov L Thissen WAH 2000: Rationality in decision- and policy-making: implications for strategic environmental assessment, *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 18(3), 191-200. Lawrence DP 1997: The need for EIA theory-building. *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*, 17, 79-107.

## Ethical considerations

To touch briefly on some ethical considerations. IAIA draws together a group of persons increasingly practising as Professionals, in that we provide a service to society through the exercise of particular knowledge to achieve our income, status and privileges. What we need to explore more deeply is the ethical nature of our profession<sup>5</sup>. Are we a *service* profession? Should we align ourselves with doctors and lawyers and adopt the ethic that a client's needs and welfare are paramount? Or are we an *information* profession? Should we be bound to accept that our primary allegiance is to seeking and disseminating information, rather than to service—thus aligning ourselves ethically more closely with scientists and journalists? In my experience many of the tensions between proponents of proposals and Impact Assessment professionals arise because project proponents see us as being service professionals with a duty to promote their interests, while we see it as our duty to analyse and set out the effects of a proposal fully and truthfully and to hold this value ahead of our client's interests. I believe that as an Association we should be giving our members clear guidance on issues such as these.

For those of us undertaking environmental assessments, what does it mean if we style ourselves *environmental* professionals? Does this mean we must adopt guiding principles from Environmental Ethics?<sup>6</sup> Do we need to espouse ecocentricity rather than anthropocentricity and attribute greater moral worth to life-supporting processes than to human needs? Are we ethically bound to incorporate sustainability, or the precautionary principle, into our professional judgements and advice?

These are deep and serious questions and the answers give rise to far reaching consequences. As a maturing organisation we need to examine and promote the values which we hold to a far greater extent than we have done to date. I believe we need, as an Association, to provide guidance and leadership to our members on ethical matters. We should, at least, be providing training courses in ethics similar to the courses we run on methods and techniques.

## Theoretical considerations

Does IA Work? And if so, how does it work? Does it work in the same way everywhere? Is there a difference in the way the different variants of Impact Assessment (Environmental, Social, Health, Technology, Biodiversity) actually perform their function? And what is that function? Put another way, does Impact Assessment have any theoretical basis?

To develop this theme I will confine myself, for illustrative purposes to Environmental Assessments (EA). The conventional wisdom is that EA influences the way decisions are taken in the formal approval process; that it influences the formulation and planning of proposals; that outcomes are better for society at large if EA is undertaken; and that sustainability is promoted. However, there is also the cynical view that EA has failed to exert significant influence on the nature of proposals; that EA serves merely as a means for justifying decisions already made; and that it removes the rough edges from proposals to make them more acceptable to affected parties. In this view EA does not serve society at large and does not promote sustainability.

My reading of EA literature suggests that to-date most writing on EA effectiveness has been focused on procedural matters, that little rigorous evaluation of how EA actually influences

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<sup>5</sup> Airaksinen T 1998: Professional Ethics, In *Encyclopaedia of Applied Ethics*, Vol 3, Academic Press, San Diego.

<sup>6</sup> Hinman L M 1996: *Contemporary Moral Issues*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, Chapter 10 Environmental Ethics.  
Holmes Rolston III 1993: Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World, In Winkler E and Coombs J (Eds) *Applied Ethics, A Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford.

outcomes has been published, and that little has appeared on the theoretical basis for EA effectiveness. (Though, as indicated earlier, I acknowledge that a change might have occurred in 2004, as several papers which examine the theory of EA have recently been published.<sup>7</sup>)

For the first decade of EIA little, if any, explicit formulation of theory occurred. EIA was implicitly based on a modernist information processing model. It drew upon science and the rational planning paradigm. It held that EIA added environmental and social dimensions to economic and technical decisions; that information from EIA led to improved decisions; that more information led to better decisions; and that EIA made information accessible. These postulates were taken to be self evident and there is little evidence of their being tested or examined critically.

An administrative model for EA effectiveness was proposed in the next decade. EA was seen to be effective because it forced bureaucratic and administrative reforms. EA allowed bureaucrats (and politicians) to be held accountable for their decisions and EA enabled groups outside of government as well as courts of law to intervene in administrative and political decisions.

Since the 1990's a paradigm shift appears to have occurred. Environmental Assessment seems to have espoused a postmodern model of governance based on political pluralist as well as institutionalist paradigms for planning<sup>8</sup>. SEA has become the preferred variant of EA and has come to be seen as a framework for development planning<sup>9</sup>. SEA has become as much a political as a technical device, and is also seen to be important, particularly in development proposals, because it empowers the marginalized and provides a framework through which they are incorporated in the planning process. It is also seen to foster equity in the distribution of benefit and harm resulting from proposals and allow for a process of mutual adjustment between stakeholders in the selection and co-design of proposals.

So, from a theoretical perspective EIA is the variant of Environmental Assessment that has its origins in an information processing understanding of how Impact Assessment works, while SEA is the variant that is based on postmodern theories of governance. Similar theoretical analysis is needed for the other variants of Impact Assessment—Biodiversity, Health, Sustainability—to give better understanding of how these in fact work.

In this address I have touched briefly on some ethical matters and outlined three markedly different notions of how EA operates. I suspect that all the values and mechanisms discussed, exert a greater or lesser influence in different contexts. The questions I pose for your consideration during IAIA's 25<sup>th</sup> year are: What is IAIA's understanding of how Impact Assessment operates? And, what ethical principles should the Association be promoting?

To conclude, I have suggested in this address that as our Association matures it should give greater attention to the ethical values and intellectual theory on which Impact Assessment is based. This is something to which I will devote energy during my term as President, and is a challenge I direct to all IAIA members.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Flyvbjerg B 1998: *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

<sup>9</sup> Hill RC Fuggle RF 2004: The Converging Evolution of Land-use Planning and Environmental Assessment: Theoretical Implications for SEA, IAIA04 Conference Proceedings, Vancouver.