

**International Association for Impact Assessment**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference, 26 May – 2 June 2001, Cartagena, Colombia**  
**Presidential Address by Elvis Au, President of IAIA 2001 - 2002**

Dear IAIA members and delegates to IAIA01':

Before I start my speech, I would like to deeply thank our Headquarters staff, Rita, Jenni, Bridget and Kelly, the Conference Chair, the Technical Program Director, the conference administrators, and the 17 sponsors for the wonderful jobs they have done for this conference and for IAIA. A big THANK YOU. I personally enjoyed the conference very much.

It is indeed my great pleasure to serve IAIA. Under the leadership of Hobson and Mary Lou, IAIA has been from strength to strength. I am very grateful for the solid foundation works they have established for the organization, and this certainly makes my life a little bit easier. They always inspire me to do more.

I would like to begin my speech with a short personal true story. I almost could not come to this conference. It had nothing to do with the safety issue. It had something to do with my son. When my son knew that I would be away for two full weeks, he was not happy at all and asked where I would go and why. I said I would go to the annual conference of IAIA in Cartagena. He said, "What IAIA? For what purpose?" I got stuck and did not know how to reply. All definitions of IAIA did not work. After a while, I said that we in IAIA are doing something to create a better world for him when he grows up and for his future kids. He smiled and let me go. That small personal encounter inspired me.

I would like to address two key questions in my speech

- ◆ What does the future hold for IAIA ?
- ◆ How should we now position ourselves collectively ?

On the first question, no one knows ! No one can predict! You certainly would not be satisfied with this answer. Also, if you do not think about the future, you cannot have one.

The farther you look to the future, the farther you need to look to the past. So I would like to invite you to join me in a journey to look back, to look around, and to look ahead.

Looking back, IAIA had 20 years of very solid history. The International Association for Impact Assessment was inaugurated with 160 founding members in 1981.

To my great surprise, the formation of IAIA did have some Chinese origin. According to Charlie Wolf, the idea of the setting up of IAIA was formed out of a Chinese dinner in a Chinese restaurant in 1980, after some founding members cracked some Chinese fortune cookies. That is why I feel so honored to have the opportunity to serve IAIA now!

What was the purpose of the creation and existence of IAIA ? The IAIA By-laws says something like this: *“the Association has as its primary purpose the betterment of society through the encouragement of improved policymaking processes concerning the analysis of future consequences of present decisions.”*

Since 1981, IAIA has undergone a process of growth. The number of full members has increased from 160 in 1981 to more than 1000 now. In 2000, the number of professionals/individuals involved in Affiliates is about 1500.

There has also been a process of internationalization. The number of nations represented by our members has increased from 23 in 1983 to about 111 in 2000. This is a very significant development. Our members are around the world; so are our annual conferences. IAIA has held its annual conferences in many different continents around the world in the past 20 years. The physical distances that our members have traveled are enormous, and might well be one of the Guinness Records if there is such a category!

The past 5 to 6 years were very significant in the history of IAIA. Thanks to the leadership of the past Presidents, Maria Partidario, Pierre Senecal, Alex Weaver, Hobson Bryan and Mary Lou Morris. There has been a process of internal consolidation and restructuring going on in IAIA.

Without their efforts, we couldn't have come to where we are now.

So looking back, what have we built up?

We have built up a body of knowledge and practices relating to impact assessment. More than that. We have also built up a global network of members and organizations. This network of relationship and trust did not come easily. Thanks to the efforts by many of our members over a **long** period of time.

While celebrating our previous successes, we cannot afford to be complacent. The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be.

If one looks around the world, one can immediately notice that there are many forces at work. The force of globalization seems to be unstoppable. Environmental and social degradation continues. The global, regional and corporate governance issues are still bothering many of us. Many individuals or governments are still grappling with what the new "knowledge" economies mean and how they should respond to this new trend.

According to the Global Environment Outlook compiled by the United Nations Environment Program in year 2000, there are now two key over-riding trends.

- ◆ firstly, the global human ecosystem is threatened by grave imbalances in productivity and in the distribution of goods and services;
- ◆ secondly, the world is undergoing accelerating change, with internationally-coordinated environmental stewardship lagging behind economic and social development.

The Global Environment Outlook 2000 further identified some key environmental challenges in each region of the world. You can see that it covers a whole range of environmental challenges in different regions – be they air pollution, land and water resource management, energy related

issues, use and conservation of forest, resource use, and greenhouse gas emissions.

There are now major discussions about the environment and development, under the World Trade Organization, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, and the implementation of the Kyoto agreement. You can certainly add more to the list.

To look around further, you might be able to hear the voices from our members, from governments and industries, and from the world community in general. From our members, they ask: “what services or benefits do I get from IAIA?”. From governments, industries or agencies, they raise the question: “how can IAIA help to develop and disseminate best practices on impact assessment and help capacity building? And from the global community in general and from our next generation, they say: “how can IAIA help to shape better decisions and a better world?”. We certainly cannot afford to ignore all these voices.

What does the future or the next 20 years hold for IAIA? Without a doubt, IAIA is at a crossroad, and at a defining moment. Some might see a gloomy picture, in light of many depressing world trends.

I personally find the words from John Denver most encouraging. He once said this:

◆ *“We are the dwelling place of incredible opportunities. They live in us. With consciousness about who we are and what we are, with the awareness of the problems we’re faced with, with a commitment not only to ourselves but to each other, we can make it work. We will make it work.”*

With those encouraging words, perhaps it’s time that we look ahead with great optimism and courage. We could look to the future in three directions: international connection and influence, regional connection and influence, and professionalism on impact assessment. We must aim at the upper right corner – moving along these three directions at the same time, with the same vigor and with determination.

In enhancing IAIA's international connection and influence, we need stronger, more proactive participation at the international forums. We should build synergies with other international agencies or organizations. We must marshal the potential, the talents and the networks of all of our members from over 100 nations, and we must expand the membership base.

To strengthen our regional connection and influence, we need to spearhead the setting up of branches in different regions and nations, as they would function as our mouths and ears at the local levels and as the windows for building cooperation with local agencies. We should build mutually beneficial relationship with our Affiliates and Associated Organizations. We need to reach out to and build synergies with governments and corporations.

To raise IAIA's professional status and professional influence, we need to do more to advance best practices in impact assessment, and to develop a high standard of impact assessment profession. We need to raise the professional standing of our members. It's high time that IAIA should seriously consider initiating a world status report on impact assessment on a biannual or tri-annual basis, in conjunction with other partners. From the feedback I have from many different sources, there is a high demand for this product, and IAIA is well placed to capitalize on this.

There are certainly many different ways or means to move along these three directions. But how do we measure our success in the end? I would say that our success would eventually be measured against:

- ◆ the extent to which we influence decision making in different parts of the world;
- ◆ the extent we empower individuals with knowledge about the future consequences of human actions and the right actions to take;
- ◆ whether we become a truly global professional organization that is respected by the world community;
- ◆ whether we create a strong sense of pride and belonging among our members.

Our focus in these few years must be on making IAIA “*a leading global organization that advances innovation, development and dissemination of best practices in impact assessment*”.

How are we going to influence policymaking processes and hence the world?

When one answers this question, one must not forget that IAIA has already come a long way. Many of our members and predecessors have built a solid foundation, accumulated the knowledge and developed some tools and techniques. Over the years, through the innovation or the conscientious application by our members, we have now in our tool kits such tools and techniques as environmental impact assessment, social impact assessment, technology impact assessment, strategic environmental assessment, health impact assessment and, recently, sustainability impact assessment.

The key for all of us is, in fact, to realize the full potential and true benefits of all these tools and techniques towards the very purpose of the existence of IAIA – which is for the betterment of society through improved policymaking processes.

The future looks very promising for IAIA. And all of us are at an exciting moment in the history of IAIA. The next 20 years would likely be more challenging than the past 20 years. Our predecessors and founding members had seized their opportunities 20 years ago. It is now your turn and my turn. I look forward to working with all of you to realize the goals of IAIA. I would like to appeal to all of you to take an active part in this unique global network.

Thank you.

Elvis Au

President of IAIA 2001-2002

1 June 2001, Cartagena, Columbia