

SUSTAINABILITY ASSESSMENT OF AN IAIA EDUCATIONAL & NETWORKING FORUM

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Abstract

The International Association for Impact Assessment's (IAIA) mission is 'to provide an international forum for advancing innovation and communication of best practice in all forms of impact assessment to further the development of local, regional and global capacity in impact assessment' (IAIA, 2008).

Based on a literature review, I have undertaken a sustainability assessment (SA) to determine the most sustainable way IAIA can achieve this mission. This involved comparison of conference, electronic conference and hybrid forum alternatives, with the aim of maximising participation, educational benefit and networking opportunity, while being carbon neutral. I identified a hybrid forum consisting of a global conference complemented by a non-interactive electronic conference, as the most sustainable alternative.

Therefore, I recommend IAIA implement this alternative in future, incorporating mitigation strategies to further enhance the forum's sustainability.

Introduction

This paper accompanies my poster that was displayed at IAIA08, and presents the key issues and outcomes of my sustainability assessment (SA) of the International Association for Impact Assessment's (IAIA) objective of providing an educational and networking forum to promote best practice in impact assessment (IA).

I discuss important sustainability concepts before implementing a seven step process to ultimately determine the most sustainable way of meeting IAIA's objective.

Sustainability concepts

I consider sustainability a highly integrated concept, whereby environmental, social and economic factors are decidedly inter-related. Therefore, fundamental to this assessment is Newman's (2005) definition of sustainability - 'meeting the needs of current and future generations through an integration of environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity'.

A relatively new practice, focussing on sustainability rather than environmental impacts only, SA identifies the most sustainable solution by applying a suitable process. The seven step process presented in this paper is based on Pope's (2007, p337) five step process for undertaking SA.

To complement the integrated definition of sustainability, an integrated assessment approach was necessary. I adopted Morrison-Saunders and Therivel's (2006) 'maximise objectives' approach, whereby all decision-making factors in Step 3 should be maximised.

The 7-Step Process

Step 1 – Identify the goal

IAIA aims to hold an annual forum that offers educational and networking opportunities to promote global best practice in IA.

Step 2 – Identify the question to be addressed

To sustainably achieve the above goal, the critical question to be answered through this SA is:

What is the most sustainable way for IAIA to hold an educational and networking forum to promote global best practice in IA?

Step 3 – Develop a sustainability decision-making protocol

Pope (2007, p237) recommends a sustainability decision-making protocol, including relevant sustainability factors, with associated aspirational objectives, specific targets and acceptability criteria (minimum acceptable levels), is necessary to guide decision making in the SA process. Accordingly, I developed the following sustainability protocol for this SA:

Factor	Objective	Acceptability criteria	Target
Participation	Provide a forum that promotes participation	More than 400 members participate	More than 600 members participate
Networking opportunity	Provide a forum that provides opportunities to significantly strengthen networks		Hold social 'meet & greet' events Provide informal opportunities for discussion
Educational benefit	Provide a forum that significantly improves participant's level of education in IA and related topics		Maximise knowledge gained Maximise application of new knowledge leading to improvements in IA
Carbon footprint	Provide a forum that is carbon neutral	Minimise carbon emissions	Zero carbon emissions

Step 4 – Identify alternatives to achieve the desired outcome

Therivel (2004) explains that alternatives are entirely new ways to achieve an outcome, while options are slightly different ways to achieve an alternative. Based on reviews of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and associated documents for IAIA's 2002 and 2004 annual conferences (Bowes *et al.*, 2004; Heijbroek *et al.* and IAIA, 2002), I identified six alternatives/options:

Alternative	Options	Description
Do nothing		No annual forum but continue undertaking current practices of maintaining a website, journals, newsletters and publications
Conference	Single location	International participants physically meet in a designated location, and undertaking scheduled activities such as presentations, discussions, forums, workshops, technical visits and social functions
	Multiple regional locations	Participants physically meet in the most suitable (typically closest) of three designated locations, and undertaking scheduled activities
Electronic-conference (e-conference)	Interactive	Use sophisticated audio and visual technology to upload scheduled activities to the internet in real-time, thereby allowing live, global, two-way communication
	Non-interactive	Use audio and visual technology to upload activities into an electronic, internet repository, allowing delayed viewing of one-way communication
Hybrid forum		Combination of preferred conference and e-conference alternatives

Step 5 – Assess the sustainability impacts of each alternative

I have assessed alternatives/options against the decision making protocol, and supported by the following perspectives:

- Botstein (2008) identifies active participation with instructors and fellow students, through questions and discussions is critical for effective learning, and 'despite the advances being made in distance learning, e-tools will never replace the real-time, real-world interaction needed for meaningful learning'.
- Clark and Holliday (2006) acknowledge collaborative dialogue as critical in linking knowledge with action in sustainable development.

- Britz and Koohang (2006) identify convenience, flexibility, reduced seat time and decreased costs as major advantages of hybrid learning.
- Carbon offsetting is a 'financial instrument representing a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions' and offsets are typically generated from emissions-reducing projects such as financial support for renewable energy (Wikipedia, 2008). I support carbon offsetting as it effectively neutralises emissions, raises the profile of climate change and related issues, and supports projects that may lead to better energy solutions faster. Although offsetting (i.e. countering negative impacts with positive action) is preferably avoided, it is acceptable if net gains are delivered (Gibson *et al*, 2005). I consider the significant increase in educational benefits from attending a conference, that lead to improved IA, and therefore positive contributions to the environment, deliver such gains.

Alternative/ option	Assessment comments
Do nothing	Although available to all members and resulting in no increase in carbon footprint, educational benefits cannot be maximised as communication is typically one-way and non-interactive. Alternative fails to provide networking opportunities, and is therefore infeasible (i.e. unable to meet IAIA's objective).
Single location conference	Previous IAIA conference attendance data (Bentzen <i>et al</i> , 2004) supports the participation target as realistic and achievable, despite costs associated with attending an international forum. Networking opportunities are maximised through adequate scheduling, and educational benefits are maximised due to effectiveness of face-to-face interaction. Carbon footprint is most significant with this option and target can only be achieved by offsetting emissions.
Multiple regional conferences	Although costs and carbon footprint reduce somewhat with proximity (Heijbroek <i>et al</i> , 2002), resource efficiency, and networking opportunities and educational benefit cannot be maximised due to segregation. I believe these negatives outweigh the positives, making this option less sustainable than a single location conference.
Interactive e-conference	Although very cost effective and only producing a small carbon footprint, global time zones make this option logistically unrealistic across many regions. Lack of appeal to people unattracted to on-line environments, competing unrelated demands, and technology glitches associated with such sophisticated software degrade capacity to maximise participation, networking opportunities and educational benefits (Anderson <i>et al</i> , 2008).
Non-interactive e-conference	Viewing flexibility and less sophisticated technology demands of this option, compared to the above option, promotes participation across time zones. I believe these benefits outweigh increased educational benefit from interactive communication afforded to the limited audience in suitable time zones and with suitable technology.
Hybrid forum	Based on above assessments, a hybrid forum would involve a non-interactive conference complementing a single location conference. Minimal additional resources are required to provide an additional opportunity that reduces carbon footprint, and increases participation due to greater flexibility and reduce cost.

Step 6 – Select preferred alternative

A hybrid forum maximises participation, educational benefit and networking opportunity targets. Although significant carbon emissions result from the conference component, carbon offsetting can effectively achieve zero emissions. Therefore, this is the most sustainable, and hence preferred, alternative.

Step 7 – Enhance sustainability of selected alternative

Mitigation can enhance sustainability of the hybrid forum as follows:

- Make carbon offsetting compulsory for attendance at conferences (minimal additional cost incurred (IAIA, 2008))
- Hold conferences in locations near areas of high membership (e.g. Ontario, London, Seoul, (IAIA, 2007)) to reduce cost, increase participation & reduce carbon footprint
- Promote media coverage to lift the forum's profile and public awareness of IA
- Encourage feedback from participants via survey on potential for improvement & sustainability initiatives (i.e. monitor, review and revise)
- Maximise use of public transport, local produce and local resources

- Incorporate 'avoid, reduce, reuse, recycle' principles wherever possible
- Continue to incorporate mitigation measures already identified to help 'green the conference' (IAIA, 2008)
- Incorporate applicable initiatives of IAIA's Policy Note # 14 (IAIA, n.d.)

Conclusion

I undertook this SA to determine the most sustainable way IAIA can provide an annual forum that offers educational and networking opportunities to promote global best practice in IA. Application of the seven step SA process identified a hybrid forum, consisting of a conference in a single location and a non-interactive conference, as the most sustainable option.

Therefore, I recommend IAIA implement this alternative in future, incorporating the mitigation suggestions from Step 7 to further enhance sustainability.

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