The Impact of COVID-19 on Impact Assessment: An Initial Rapid Review

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a dramatic impact on individuals and society, not the least of which is on the field of impact assessment. In May 2020, the International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) launched a survey reaching over 900 respondents globally.

KEY FINDINGS

- The COVID-19 pandemic has directly and personally affected the lives and well-being of people working in impact assessment.
- Impact assessment professionals are taking direct action to reduce the effect of the pandemic on their families and communities.
- Restrictions on leaving home and on travel have dramatically increased the number of impact assessment professionals working from home and dramatically reduced opportunities for public consultations and field work.
- Reduced public consultations and field work are likely to affect the detail and comprehensiveness of impact assessments, given the key roles consultations and field work play in defining and validating assessment results.
- Relaxing travel and stay-at-home restrictions will lead to an increase in field work. But there will likely be fewer public consultations, with an increased use of remote work, to deal with the continued health threats posed by COVID-19.
- There have been negative financial impacts of the pandemic on professionals, but also adjustments in agreements to allow impact assessment work to continue.
INTRODUCTION

This initial Rapid Review provides a snapshot of how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the lives and work of impact assessment professionals. The broader 56-question IAIA global survey covers the

• Immediate impacts of the pandemic
• New ways of working as a result of the pandemic
• Future of impact assessment

The survey took place from 4-14 May 2020. Of the 927 respondents, 74% were involved in environmental impact assessment, 67% were under 54 years of age, and 42% were female. Additional demographics can be found at the end of this report.

IAIA will issue subsequent reports on the breadth of information collected through the survey. The full report on the survey should be available in August 2020. Follow-up surveys and outreach support to the impact assessment community is also planned. Please contact Bridget John (bridget@iaia.org) for more information.

IAIA defines impact assessment as identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action. It is a practical tool to help meet today’s needs without compromising the opportunities of future generations. Assessment of the environmental, social, economic, cultural, and health implications for proposals is a critical contribution to sound decision making processes, and to equitable and sustainable development.
WHAT HAS BEEN THE PERSONAL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC?\textsuperscript{1}

The top 5 responses were

- Felt uncertain about the future ...................................
- Experienced social isolation ...................................
- Had a sense of professional isolation ............................
- Were juggling work and family ...................................
- Had less time for exercise ........................................

WHAT HAS BEEN THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC?\textsuperscript{1}

The top 5 responses were

- More time with family ............................................. 56\%
- Spending less money .............................................. 52\%
- Improved environmental conditions .......................... 42\%
- Reduced commute time .......................................... 41\%
- Less noise outside .................................................. 41\%

\textsuperscript{1} Because multiple responses were allowed, percentages will not total 100%.
WHAT HAS BEEN THE RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC?²

- Provided support to relatives or to others: 74%
- Organized professional meetings online: 29%
- Organized social meetings online: 26%
- Contributed personal time to support the response to the pandemic: 15%
- Provided direct support to efforts to address the pandemic: 11%
- Donated supplies to efforts to address the pandemic: 7%

HOW WELL HAS YOUR COMMUNITY MANAGED THE PANDEMIC?

Respondents rated their community’s ability to deal with the pandemic on a scale of 1 (almost non-existent) to 10 (excellent). It seems there is a positive tendency in the assessment of how well the pandemic could be managed at the community level, with 51% of respondents rating their community’s ability to deal with the pandemic as a 6 or better.

² Because multiple responses were allowed, percentages will not total 100%.
HOW HAVE IMPACT ASSESSMENT PROFESSIONALS BEEN AFFECTED BY EFFORTS TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19?

At the time of the survey:

- 81% were practicing social distancing outside the home.
- 16% were practicing social distancing outside and inside the home.
- 2% were not at all affected.

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED IMPACT ASSESSMENT WORK?

At the time of the survey:

- 38% of the respondents had begun working from home.
- 27% reported the pandemic had affected their travel and in-person meeting plans.
- 12% had to redesign their work.
- 9% had their work suspended.
- 7% had closed their business, been let go, or had received a stop work order.
- 73% had left field work sites, to the lowest degree in Australia/Oceania (62%) and to the highest degree in West Asia (86%); in 58% of all cases, it was due to government orders limiting field work.
WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS ON IMPACT ASSESSMENT WORK?

- Difficult to continue work: 30%
- Now work from home: 36%
- Less work: 19%
- No effect: 7%
- Stopped work: 5%
- Other: 3%

WHAT IS EXPECTED TO BE THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON WORK OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS?

An analysis of the open-ended responses showed that:

- Limitations to public participation, physical meetings, and field work: 20%
- Continued restrictions on travel: 14%
- A reduction or absence of work: 12%
- An increase in remote work and new ways of working: 12%
- Negative impacts on finances: 10%
- Difficult or a backlog of work: 10%
- Conditions remain the same or quickly return to normal: 6%
Are you currently a member of IAIA?

- Yes (360) - 53%
- No (207) - 31%
- Not sure (111) - 16%

In what region do you live?

- Africa - 210 (18%)
- North America - 120 (10%)
- Europe - 118 (9%)
- Asia - 106 (8%)
- South America - 54 (4%)
- Australia and Oceania - 45 (3%)
- Middle East - 15 (1%)
- Central America and the Caribbean - 11 (1%)

What is your self-identified gender?

- Male - 379 (56%)
- Female - 286 (42%)
- Prefer not to say - 10 (1%)

What is your age group?

- 34 or younger - 79 (10%)
- 35-44 - 184 (27%)
- 45-54 - 189 (28%)
- 55-64 - 159 (23%)
- 65 or older - 66 (12%)

927 respondents. Survey date: 4-14 May 2020