



**The Integrated Assessment Society (TIAS)
Experts Workshop
A Methodological Review of Recent Global Assessments**

Brussels, 6-7 November 2008

**Co-sponsored by
the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency and the European Commission**

Summary Report of Workshop Outcomes

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On November 6-7, 2008 The Integrated Assessment Society held a small Experts Workshop: Methodological Review of Recent Global Assessment. The workshop was hosted by DG-Environment of the European Commission in Brussels and core funds were provided by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency.

The assessments explored at the workshop included UNEP's GEO-4 (published in 2007), the OECD's Environmental Outlook to 2030 (published in 2008), the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) (forthcoming in December 2008), the IPCC's Fourth Assessment (published in 2007), the forthcoming third UN World Water Development Report (planned for 2009), and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (published in 2005).

This workshop was the next step in a process that TIAS initiated with a session at the University of Maryland, May 2007, formulating expectations for the four major environment-related worldwide assessments that were then some months to a year from publication¹.

The participants at the Brussels workshop were involved in one or more of the assessments. Furthermore, others who were unable to attend provided additional contributions beforehand or by teleconference during the workshop. In order to enable a frank discussion not only of successes but also of challenges and difficulties, the workshop adopted the Chatham House rules "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed".

¹ Van Bers, C., D. Petry, and C. Pahl-Wostl. (eds.), 2007. Global Assessments: Bridging Scales and Linking to Policy. Report on the joint TIAS-GWSP workshop held at the University of Maryland University College, Adelphi, USA, 10-11 May 2007. GWSP Issues in Global Water System Research, No.2. GWSP IPO, Bonn



The workshop focused on the usefulness of these assessments to, and uptake by, policy in practice. In particular, it took advantage of the appearance in 2007-2008 of this uniquely rich group of global assessments, spanning a broad assortment of approaches in terms of ownership, governance and rules for the acceptance of content.

Under this general heading of process, the workshop was structured around a series of specific questions:

1. How successful have assessments been?
2. How have assessments tried to deal with the often disjunctive perspectives among those involved – in terms of interests, time horizon, culture, problem perception and so forth?
3. Have assessment processes included efforts to build up or improve the capacity to undertake the assessment – if so, how?
4. How have assessments tried to deal with the inherent uncertainties about the future?
5. How have assessments tried to deal with the multi-scale character of worldwide developments and problems to be addressed?

Each of these questions generated quite a bit of discussion and brought the complementarity of experiences in the assessments to the table. In addition, some of the assessments are periodic, with large intervals, allowing a look back over past editions and forward to possible sequels. Very briefly, and provisionally, here are a few of the key points that came out of these discussions.

From problem definition to action

- A trend can be seen, in assessment practice as well as in the demand articulated by users, to move from defining priority problems to defining and exploring priority actions.
- Such a shift means that future assessments will have to move to even more controversial issues. Therefore, the need to deal with disjunctive perspectives will likely become even bigger than it has been so far. Therefore, process design, rules for acceptance and review of information as well as clearly defined relation with policy users will become even more important.
- As one specific example, there is a need for more training on how to do global environmental assessments. This is not only related to content knowledge, but also on such skills as process facilitation and conflict resolution on the part of convening lead authors, who are pivotal figures in the process and often selected primarily for their seniority in content terms.

A diversity of purpose

- The question whether assessments have been a success unsurprisingly unearths a diversity in strategic purposes. From the point of view of the mandating body, this diversity ranges from awareness raising, to consensus building, to consolidating evidence.
- Generating new knowledge, scientifically, is not the primary role of assessments, but synthesis of existing knowledge and the forward-looking components of the

- assessments will often create a new understanding of existing knowledge. Also, the reports often end up being used extensively as reference documents.
- While it remains difficult to assess the degree to which individual assessments have ‘landed’ in societal discourse, and comparing is not completely fair given their different goals and mandates, those with a clear, pre-defined relation with their audience seem to have done best.
 - The goals and mandate of assessment affects definitions of success and choices of methods, participants, products and target groups. Choices of methods would, for example include decisions on how conservative an assessment should be towards latest insights; rules for author affiliation, review and sign-off; and scenario set-up. The participants felt that at this point in time, the experience with assessments over the past decade can help to highlight the kinds of questions that need to be considered by those mandating future assessments.
 - All the assessment processes contributed to building up or improving the capacity to undertake these studies, although this is more of an explicit goal in some assessments than others. Capacity building cannot be limited to the global level, but also has to get into the sub-global. Obviously, this is a long-term agenda, but it is essential for improving, over time, cross-scale integration and consistency.

Key methodological issues for content

- In the various assessments attempts have been made to relate global and regional findings to the reality on the ground, nationally and locally – and vice versa. In spite of these efforts, broadly accepted concepts and methods for handling multi-scale linkages in the assessments are still largely missing.
- Methods for dealing with uncertainties in a structured way exist, but are not consistently applied. The way uncertainty has been dealt with seems to have created discomfort for some of the assessments. It also may become more important for future assessments, as they move from uncertainty in natural systems ‘only’ to include uncertainty in, and different views on, the behaviour of social systems.
- Real integration is still a weak aspect in assessments (as in science, development strategy and policy formulation and planning, management and implementation, etc). Crossing the interface between physical, social and human systems is still very difficult. For example, see the volumes on Human Choice and Climate Change by Rayner and Mallone². More emphasis could be put on seeking solutions in this direction, for example by more actively trying to get more social scientists on board.

Coordination

- A diversity of views was expressed on the issue of coordination among future assessments related to the global environment.
- On the one hand, the not-so-open question is: how many assessments is enough? Or, from the point of view of the expert: can’t these processes be coordinated in

² Rayner, Steve and Mallone, Elizabeth (editors) (1998) *Human Choice and Climate Change: volume 1-4*. Batelle Press, US.

such a way that key people do not spend all their time, paid as well as unpaid, in preparing and making these reports – for years on end?

- On the other hand, if these assessments are part of a process of integration of environmental considerations in global and regional policy, attempts to streamline them in terms of content and knowledge production will miss the point.
- The size of the assessment processes remains a reason for concern and some are more efficient than others. One difficulty for all big assessments seems to be that there is almost never time for true integration across chapters and volumes within the same study – for example, between retrospective and forward-looking analyses.
- A light form of coordination operated among the various secretariats of a number of the assessments during 2006 and 2007. It served to exchange information on timing of process steps such as review and pre-publication; to identify possible contradictory messages and understand the reasons of the contradiction; to jointly inform the envisaged audiences, explain complementarity and provide a joint timetable for review and publication. This ad-hoc arrangement was found to be valuable and should be kept in mind for the future.

It was clear, based both upon the discussions during the workshop and from the interest shown by those who were not able to attend, that this is a topic of interest for many people involved in these and possible future assessments. Therefore, it was strongly recommended that a follow-on workshop be held, at which there will be broader representation. This is scheduled for 21-22 April 2009.

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Participants and people who provided input before the workshop or by teleconference link

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