

Foreword to the first issue of 2017

Dear readers,

Welcome to the first issue of 2017, a special and larger than usual issue on ‘displacement, resettlement and livelihood’, co- edited by Frank Vanclay and Deana Kemp. Their editorial follows this foreword.

From an impact assessment point of view, 2016 has been a very challenging year, marked by a number of political campaigns that were fuelled by a rapidly growing post-factual sentiment. Two notable examples in this context were the UK BREXIT vote (see my editorial here from September; Fischer, 2016) and the American elections. It is important to add, though, that these types of post-factual and populist campaigns aren’t solely confined to Western democracies, but are a global phenomenon. Whilst different interpretations have been attempted, importantly for the readership of this journal, the way referenda and elections are now at times being won signifies an attack on the core values and principles of impact assessment. These values and principles are closely associated with informed and evidence-based (i.e. ‘factual’) approaches and a desire for more balanced, truthful, transparent and inclusive decision making which aims at taking account of (all) people, the wider biophysical environment and cultural as well as other aspects, that in the absence of IA would often be ignored. What we are increasingly witnessing are campaigns that are – at least in parts – built on false claims (exacerbated by social media ‘trolls’), aiming to manipulate the electorate and putting blame for problems away from actual causes on others. These are usually related to minorities, in particular migrants, racial, religious or other minorities. In this context, unsubstantiated claims are routinely made and contempt is shown for environmental and social issues and evidence. We have, for example, seen climate change being dismissed as ‘just weather’. Also, and of particular significance for this special issue, we’ve heard a Prime Minister and a designated President of two key Western democracies ‘casually’ talk about the possibility of mass deportations.

As an immediate effect of those campaigns’ outcomes, apart from an increased verbal and physical abuse of minorities, which now also appear to include ‘experts’ (Fischer, 2016), we are seeing climate change deniers being instated as heads to environmental and other departments and agencies and an associated undisguised desire to drive down environmental and social standards. All of this is incompatible with IA’s normative remit and what we are witnessing shouldn’t leave any IA advocate indifferent. A first step to defend IA (its underlying values / principles) and the benefits associated with its usage is an acknowledgement of challenges, and to develop an understanding for the strategies applied by those driving populist and post-factual campaigns. A second step is to review our own IA strategies, approaches and practices and to adapt them to a changing environment, so that we are able to meet new challenges. In this context, I believe that some of the academic debates surrounding IA instruments in recent years have at times been unhelpful, adding fuel to post-factual, post-truth tendencies. This includes in particular the various attempts made to deconstruct IA instruments, suggesting they are ineffective (usually with only selective evidence being provided), without making alternative suggestions for how a better consideration of those issues that tend to be subordinated to economic considerations should be supported. Also, I believe there is clearly a need to refocus our efforts to substantive outcomes of IA (see e.g. Fischer, 2003).

I am looking forward to another year of excellent papers, with some of them hopefully dealing with those challenges head on.

With best wishes

Thomas Fischer, Editor, IAPA
Liverpool, 10 December 2016

References

Fischer, T.B. 2016. Lessons for Impact Assessment from the UK Referendum on BREXIT, *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 34(3): 183-185.

Fischer, T.B. 2003. Strategic environmental assessment in post-modern times, *EIA review*, 23(2): 155-170.