

The ISEE Policy & Planning Working Group, from a personal perspective

In the ISEE membership directory of 1996, there were 24 areas of research interest listed, including "Policy & Planning" with a total of 22 members attached to this. Looking at the 330 contributions in the program of the 8th ISEE Conference in Edmonton (Alberta) 1996, 30 seemed to me to relate to policy and planning. I wrote a note: "ISEE activities even now cover *Policy and planning* to a considerable degree. I suggest to form a 'special interest group' in ISEE in order to explore the topic *Policy and planning* more comprehensively."

The idea was taken to the ISEE Ethics Committee; the committee minutes of 18 August, 1996 say: "It was resolved that the question of Policy and Planning was indeed relevant to the mandate of ISEE. ... Soskolne would bring this need to the attention of the Counsellors and recommend that consideration be given to the establishment of such a committee. The Committee recommends to the Counsellors that more sessions on policy be encouraged at ISEE '97 than was evident at ISEE '96. Mechanisms for influencing politicians and packaging environmental epidemiology information into a politically consumable format was seen as being of great importance. Issues of this type would be discussed by such a committee. ..."

The first meeting of the Policy & Planning Working Group, on 20 August, 1996 was attended by 11 participants, including John Goldsmith, from about 10 countries.. A lively discussion started; also reservations were expressed. According to my notes: "In summary, it was found worth-while to try and form this group because 'professional organizations can make a lot of difference' ..." One person remarked: "There may be problems down the road," alluding to reluctance to new ways of looking at environmental epidemiology.

On 9 October, the first circular letter for the newly created group was sent out: "... Perhaps, the interrelationship of environmental epidemiology and policy-making can be summarized into two questions: (i) What impulses can environmental epidemiology receive from policy-makers? (ii) What can environmental epidemiology give to policy-making, and how can such input be given efficiently?"

Under the umbrella of "policy and planning," work assignments in my home institute included impact assessment, and reflections on the relative merits of "integrated programs" vs. more specialized, single-issue programs. At the Edmonton ISEE conference, the former topic was reflected in the poster on "Environmental Impact Assessment: New 10-step model applied to waste disposal and highway planning," the latter in "Regional Agenda 21 as framework for setting priorities of Environmental Health promotion."

At the 9th ISEE Conference in Taipei (Taiwan) in 1997, the Policy & Planning Working Group held the second meeting. Co-chair Shilu Tong chaired the session and reported: "The following issues were discussed: 1. How can the Working Group ... contribute to both the ISEE and the field of environmental epidemiology? ... 2. Closer co-operation between organisations is needed... it is desirable that the ISEE strengthens its linkage with other organisations, such as IEA, ISEA, WHO, World Bank & UN..."

The 1998 report on the group's activities stated: "Initially, the group experienced some difficulty in defining the topics of common interest and agreeing on ways how to proceed. It was apparent that expectations of individuals varied to a high degree. For some participants, the worldwide process of implementing Agenda 21 provides a highly relevant framework of current Environmental Health policy development, posing a challenge also to environmental epidemiologists. Others hesitate to acknowledge the relevance of such an 'abstract' procedure and prefer to debate along more specific lines."

As requested by ISEE, the group developed a mission statement. The version of August 1997 reads as follows: "In addition to the advancement of international collaboration on research on environment and health, the International Society of Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE) is concerned with the scientific aspects of policy development and evaluation. ... members of ISEE are involved in the assessment of environmental effects on human health, communication of risks, development of policy options to control and prevent environmental hazards, and the assurance of infrastructure and services. From this background, the "Policy and planning" working group of ISEE intends to:

- assist the organisation and its leaders in recognition of policy-related problems and solutions by, for example, dedicated forums, discussion groups operating by e-mail ...;
- contribute to a fuller understanding of the relationship between research and policy-making, and involve in teaching and training activities;
- contribute to the strategic planning for the Organisation through undertaking evaluations of trends in attention and accomplishments in environmental epidemiology and suggesting for the ISEE leadership salient topics and potential activities for future development; and
- endeavour to assess environmental health problems and epidemiological data for governments and international agencies, and consolidate ISEE's role in the world-wide discussion on sustainable development."

The group was involved in the preparation of the 3rd European Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in London, June 1999, especially in a WHO project which was part of the preparation of the "Transport, Environment and Health" section. Carlos Dora, the responsible WHO Rome officer, agreed to present on this project at the meeting of the group at the 10th Conference of ISEE in Boston in August 1998: "Ongoing problems of transport impact on health, as raised in the preparation of the 3rd European Conference on Environment and Health, London 1999."

This was seen as an emergent case study of policy-making in an "everyday" setting, complemented by a "long-range" case study, "Perspectives on sustainability and health: implications for policy and action in the 21st century" (Yasmin von Schirnding), and a case study referring to an "acute emergency" situation: "Mitigation of immediate environmental health threats in situations of civil unrest" (Warren Winkelstein, Carlos Santos-Burgoa). All three emergent case studies offered the opportunity for intensive involvement of group members. The session in Boston was attended by 30 participants from 10 different countries as well as WHO (Geneva, Rome, Kobe) and World Bank representatives. In

summary, the three case studies, differing so widely with respect to temporal and spatial scope, met with strong interest.

In November 1998, the group's circular letter #10 noticed: "The overall theme of the ISEE meeting in 1999 is closely related to policy-making. Obviously, the issue went 'mainstream' faster than expected." For the 11th ISEE Conference in September 1999 in Athens the Policy & Planning Working Group sponsored three symposia. One was on "Environmental Health policy development: The pros and cons of single-issue vs. integrated approaches," discussing topics such as air pollution, vehicle crashes, sustainable transport, and civil unrest from a policy perspective. One voice suggested "The 'Healthy cities' discussion does not belong here; epidemiology is about investigating the causes of diseases," but this view did not resonate strongly with other participants. The second symposium was devoted to "Humanitarian emergencies, Public and Environmental Health: Lessons from Yugoslavia and other emergencies".

For the third Policy & Planning symposium in Athens, the group arranged with the conference organizers to have access to the set of accepted abstracts, and to analyze these with respect to "policy and planning." Results were presented in the symposium "Evaluation of scientific abstracts with respect to policy development and decision making."

Soon after, for personal reasons, I had to step down as chair. Yasmin von Schirnding agreed to take over, maintaining the lines of interest that had evolved. The circular letter of April 2001, among other topics, informed about two events of potential interest. One was the International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) meeting in Cartagena, Colombia, in May 2001, where WHO was holding a session on Health Impact Assessment as well as an informal consultative working session on the theme "The role of HIA in Development Policy and Planning." The other event was a meeting in London, also in May, on "Health and Sustainable Development Planning: Strengthening the basis of cross-sectoral collaboration."

The 13th ISEE Conference took place in September 2001 in Garmisch, Germany, within the "Conference Week on Environmental and Genetic Influences on Human Health," a joint endeavor of five professional societies. The Policy & Planning Working Group sponsored two symposia on "Health Impact Assessment (HIA) from [an] epidemiological perspective." The first symposium introduced HIA and discussed guidelines for transport impact assessment; health impacts of "moped" usage as well as of drinking water privatization; and environmental health monitoring. In our second symposium, topics included the use of routine health data for, and the inclusion of social impacts in, HIA, as well as risk assessment being used for policy-making. Explicitly referring to dark sides of the place's history (Hitler had opened the 1936 Winter Olympics here), Elihu Richter spoke committedly on "Genocides, genes, environment, and epidemiology: old agenda, new scenarios."

At the 14th ISEE Conference in Vancouver, BC in August 2002, the Policy & Planning Working Group sponsored a session entitled "Health Impact Assessment (HIA) - A

maturing tool of decision-making.” As the session abstract said, “ISEE, and particularly its Policy & Planning ... working group, have established a track record of dealing with these issues, covering impact assessments both within Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and independent from it...” There were seven contributions, including HIA as part of Strategic Environmental Assessment; hierarchical modeling; children’s health toxicity data; tools for assessing urban transport policies; health impact of England’s home energy efficiency scheme; preliminary results of the EPHIA study; and current HIA practice in the Netherlands.

Soon afterwards, I had to retire largely from ISEE activities and to focus on “domestic” business. A later reflection of Policy & Planning activity may be seen in a symposium held at the 21st Annual ISEE Conference in Dublin in August 2009, again organized in cooperation with WHO (Marco Martuzzi): “Epidemiology informs policy-making – in what direction are current projects and processes leading us?” Presentations dealt with the science-policy interface; the contribution of large European research consortia as well as other projects funded by the European Commission; and evidence for the assessment of long-term policies. Once more, this session met with very positive reactions.

In personal retrospect, especially the six years from 1996 onwards were a period characterized by most interesting and instructive debates on policy and planning within ISEE. The workshops sponsored, the circular letters sent out, and email exchanges between enthusiasts as well as critical voices provided a stimulating environment for exchange and discussion.

ISEE members repeatedly acknowledged that the Policy & Planning Working Group contributed to a more complete view of the scope of environmental epidemiology, and to integration across the myriad of specific issues. For numerous participants, the sponsored sessions provided the first exposure to policy-related issues including, e.g., WHO and other UN conferences and activities. If the troubles we took together in the Policy & Planning Working Group did help ISEE to increase awareness of policy issues and to widen its scope of expertise, then it probably was worth the effort. Also, I am amazed to see that many of the “old” issues don’t look very obsolete but rather current.

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