



# ➤ We are all in this together: reimagining international societies

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These are extraordinary times when the world paused in ways that only months ago we would have thought impossible. We witnessed widespread closures of businesses, of schools, of gatherings—and their economic and social consequences. For those of us whose lives are embedded in science, the rhythm of life changed dramatically. We have seen the cancellation of professional conferences and symposia, research meetings and field trips. The comforting rhythm of our academic lives as professors and postgraduate students has been replaced with uncertainty. We have been grounded, isolated and often solitary.

Such fundamental changes have highlighted resources and contexts that privilege some and exclude others from global professional interaction. Digital platforms have become our meeting places. They remind us of the uneven distribution of technical support and of broadband access. The simple task of scheduling a meeting during “working hours” means that people in some time zones consistently draw the 2am slot. Conference cancellations highlight the loss of rich networking opportunities for those who are usually able to attend.

We speak nostalgically of pre-pandemic ways of meeting and sharing ideas and being part of a global professional family. Yet we also understand that going back may be neither possible nor ideal. Enforced changes in our lives are unsettling; they reduce our sense of what is known and predictable and comforting, but in doing so leave us space to think differently. It is time, I believe, to take this unprecedented opportunity to reimagine our international professional societies, taking the best of the past and learning from the present.

I have spent much of my academic and personal life associated with international professional societies. I believe strongly that good science comes from global conversations and collaboration; that the contexts in which we work are important; and that making the world a better place is the ultimate goal. I endorse the mission of the Sustainable Development Goals of *leaving no one behind*, knowing that such aspirational statements

are exceedingly difficult to achieve. I believe though, that we need to give it a try.

My reflections come from longstanding association with ISHS and with the International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics (IAGG). These organizations have features that position them to make a difference. They have a global reach that comes with enormous responsibilities not least of which are reconciling the tensions between global and local. They are concerned with knowledge creation and must somehow accommodate the uneven playing fields in which we conduct our scientific work. Their mission statements reflect values of social justice:

*To nurture and deploy scientific growing knowledge for creating a better world*  
(<https://www.ishs.org/ishs-world-wide-horticultural-network>)

*To promote the highest levels of achievement in gerontological research and training...with a view of enhancing...quality of life and wellbeing of all people*  
(<https://www.iagg.info/mission>)

My comments here have been developed in consultation with colleagues across these organizations. I hope to prompt discussion and debate about what it means to “do global.” I take full responsibility for my arguments and any implied admonitions and I welcome your comments.

As we imagine ourselves going forward, what do we need to be and to do to become global actors who create and share knowledge and make a difference? What can we learn about our future engagement in the world from this period in which a global pandemic has separated us in ways that are quite profound?

## From international to global

The mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was an important period in the development of international societies. Many like ISHS were based in Europe and developed during a period of relative prosperity and stability. They were international clusters of countries in the global north who shared similarities in working

environments and research questions. Their proximity allowed them to create their traditions of coming together to discuss research findings and develop collaborations.

More than half a century later, society membership has grown far beyond the confines of Europe. The contexts in which our members conduct their research and the places in which that knowledge is used to improve wellbeing are immensely diverse. One of our big challenges is to consider how well we have moved beyond our rather comfortable, bounded, international roots to a global remit.

Authors of a recent article on important qualities of leadership during a pandemic said something that resonated with me. It was that good leaders cultivate a sense that “we are all in this together” (<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0884-z>). That seems a good starting point for reimagining what we hold in common and where there are sticky points and how we take leadership to address them.

ISHS members are from more than 120 countries, making it a professional society that is truly global in scope. This global coverage provides tremendous opportunities for network members. A colleague from Latin America noted the importance of being part of an organization that disseminates its expertise in the world. Another who spent a lifetime living and working in many countries, states firmly that societies such as ISHS are very important for global knowledge.

Many believe that science is already global since knowledge is created outside of the messiness of politics and policy and place and thus is universal. Yet *our* science is applied. For it to be relevant and useful in improving the human condition, we must create the evidence in settings that are diverse and where solutions differ while creating a sense that we are working toward a common goal. My completely non-random sample of perspectives on this question suggests that members of our global network don't always believe that their voices are heard. I asked what an organization needs to do to bring in all world regions.

They said:

- enable equitable representation of agendas, perspectives and knowledge from all regions,
- recognize, challenge and overcome barriers to meaningful collaboration with some regions,
- act not as “neo-colonizers” but as those who seek to understand and promote local values.

Strong words. They reflect tensions between global and local. They remind us of historic inequalities arising from colonization and other sources of exclusion. These may have occurred outside of science but their legacies endure. So back to this thorny problem of how we “do global.”

### Accounting for regional resources, priorities and sensitivities

Both the strengths and the difficulties inherent in taking global seriously lie in the fact that we live, work, create and use knowledge in places that are not the same and with people who have different resources and priorities. How do we embrace these differences while at the same time fostering a belief that “we are all in this together”?

My own views are reflected in the mission statement of the global agenda that I direct: *to foster collaboration and critical thinking at the interfaces of regional issues and global trends* (<https://www.iagg.info/gsia>). Like the mission statements of our societies, this one may be difficult to achieve but I believe it worthy of pursuing.

One of our reimagining tasks is to articulate what we mean by collaboration. How do we create the connections that bring new ways of understanding the research issues worth pursuing and the ways in which they are grounded in particular places and lives? A starting premise is that for those who come from positions of privilege, collaboration requires a spirit of seeking connections because you know you have something to learn. For those who are from places with histories of exclusion, it means resisting the inclination to push others away, assuming that they are motivated by self-interest and will take over the agenda. “I never thought of it that way” is a good indicator of openness to the ideas of others that is fundamental to good collaboration.

For leaders of international societies, we must address whether we have articulated our view of collaboration and whether it is reflected in the ways in which we structure our governance and activities. Are there systematic biases in pathways to influence within our organizations and do we have strategies to address them?

Collaboration is rendered more difficult by the unequal distribution of resources. A col-

league described funding in Latin America as a major difficulty since there is little government interest in long-term investment in science and technology. Many programs fail because they cannot be sustained once international cooperation is depleted. Scholars must work outside of academia to afford a decent living. This is but one example of how research resources truncate opportunities to be fully engaged in the processes of knowledge creation and application that our societies promote. How can we be watchful of other sources of inequality and act upon them?

I fear that such inequalities will become even more entrenched in light of the global economic downturns resulting from the pandemic. Two examples may offer some principles for moving forward.

The ISHS Global Horticulture Initiative (GlobalHort) was an example of adapting global goals to local contexts. Launched in 2006, it was a consortium of organizations and agencies working to improve well-being in low-income countries through horticulture. GlobalHort promoted innovation for small scale producers, assisting them to make their businesses more viable, thus increasing health and income of producers and their families. Members of GlobalHort were supporters, promoters and mentors who assisted with grant capture and mentored research projects on the effectiveness of the innovations. Training, education and capacity building were a key part of the program.



› There is joy in the sharing of ideas. Master class on ageism at IAGG European Regional Congress, Gothenburg, Sweden, October 2019. From left to right: back row: Tom Scharf, Charlene Knudsen, Diego Guimaraes de Olivera, Noriko Watanabe, Dorota Matsumotova; middle row: Isabela Thais Machado de Jesus, Mayeso Lazaro, Norah Keating; front row: Kay Shannon, Rebecca Baxter, Mascha Pauelsen, Etienne Duim, Grace Lewis.

The IAGG Latin American Social Issues on Ageing (LSIA) aims to address population ageing through increasing academic expertise in social gerontology. Most academics who do research and teaching in ageing are educated in disciplines such as sociology, demography or economics. The LSIA is a consortium of regional social scientists who will develop and offer symposia, master classes and courses on theoretical, methodological and substantive topics in social aspects of ageing for academics in the region. To assist with the visibility of this initiative, The Pan American Health Organization will sponsor a special issue on ageing in Latin America in its journal (<https://www.paho.org/journal/en>). The journal publishes in Spanish, Portuguese and English.

There are principles in these examples that are part of longstanding practices but need reexamining in light of our changed world.

- The application of research must be grounded in the location where it will be used,
- Resource constraints need to be addressed,
- While global priorities may be shared, solutions are developed within regions,
- Capacity-building takes many forms,
- Language matters.

### Supporting global scholars and scholarship when we are grounded

Much of the pressure to reimagine our professional societies comes from the immediacy of pandemic isolation. Just at a time



› Regional meetings showcase ideas and solutions. Opening reception at IAGG Asia-Oceania Regional Congress, Taipei, Taiwan, October 2019. From left to right: Hueng Bong Cha, Past President IAGG; Norah Keating, Director Global Social Issues on Ageing; Cheng-Chieh Lin, Congress President; Prasert Assantachai, Chair, Asia-Oceania Region, IAGG.

when it seems essential to think and connect globally, the world has pulled away with a pandemic closing doors behind it.

Where and how we will gather are questions that are at the front of our minds. World congresses, regional meetings and topic-specific symposia are among our core activities. They bring considerable benefit to those who attend. They provide the setting for creating our “convoy of professional relationships,” the group of people that we work with, plan with and trust throughout our professional lives. If we are fortunate, it includes people from around the world who will challenge us, support us and remind us that if we think we know the answers, we aren’t trying hard enough. It is here that global scholars are nurtured.

Some of my most satisfying international experiences have come from coordinating master classes for early career scholars (or “young minds” as recently termed in ISHS). These are intensive workshops on topics that are globally relevant but often understood differently across regions. Classes are always structured to include diverse participants who develop skills in collaboration and are mentored by senior scholars. There is joy in the sharing of ideas and in the debates and the closeness that ensues from an intensive experience together. Supporting the next generation of global scholars is one of our most important activities.

Will our future be without world congresses? Many potential losses come to mind if we lose a major platform for our profession: trade shows that connect developers and producers; hearing about the latest scientific advancements from around the world; meeting old friends and adding others to our professional convoy; income to the organization. How much can technology compensate? Digital conferencing platforms help us

manage some of our research activities and governance of our professional societies. The planet is just a little bit healthier because we have reduced our carbon footprint. We must be cognizant, however, of how technology excludes and of the tyranny of the chosen time zone. And we must think of how to replace the serendipity that happens at conferences of meeting someone new and learning about their work and sharing a coffee and discussing ideas.

Regional meetings may address some of the constraints of world congresses. They provide a window into regional challenges and a forum for local scientists to show how their research takes global challenges into regional settings. Local producers can meet with the experts and welcome them on field trips to discuss their operations. With potentially fewer time zones, electronic sessions may more comfortably include those who can’t travel to the meetings. A colleague noted that keeping fees at approachable levels would increase participation and encourage countries from the region to become members.

While we are doing all of this rethinking, I’d like finally to add language. Is it time to review the choice of English as practical, fiscally prudent and thus largely settled for our international organizations? There is power in language. It can exclude individuals, truncate pathways to leadership, reduce publication success and bypass world regions where English is not spoken. If we embrace the idea that we are all in this together, should effort be spent on encouraging scholars to learn English and helping them with tasks such as writing conference abstracts and editing manuscripts? Alternately, should we accommodate language differences through offering regional meetings in the language of the country? What should I say to an author of an

upcoming journal special issue that I am editing who said that he could write in Spanish and it would be more fluent and poetic or in English and it will reach a wider audience?

In a time when our social norms have been radically altered, we need social entrepreneurs. It’s going to be an interesting journey. ●



› Norah Keating

## › About the author

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