

Minister Hackett speech IAIA Conference 2024

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you so much to Eddie and Ainhoa for the invitation to speak at this opening plenary session.

It's really is a privilege to be here addressing such a wonderfully diverse audience, and indeed it's a privilege for Dublin to be hosting this gathering of Impact Assessment practitioners from across the globe.

Céad míle fáilte to you all!

By way of introduction, my name is Pippa Hackett, and I am the Minister for Land Use and Biodiversity in the Irish Government. I am a Senator and I live in County Offaly, in the heart of the Irish Midlands.

Outside of politics, I am an organic beef and sheep farmer with my husband Mark, and we have four children; and long before that, I was an academic at the University of Limerick, in the Department of Physical Education and Sports Sciences, where I enjoyed lecturing and undertaking research. Impact assessments usually related to the impact factors of the journals we were published in!

Inside politics, I am a member of the Irish Green Party and my Land Use and Biodiversity brief covers agriculture and forestry policy.

The theme of this year's conference, "Impact Assessment for a Just Transformation" is timely. As well as being of great interest to me personally in my Ministerial role, it is also of interest to me as someone who lives in a Just Transition territory in the Midlands of Ireland, where I know some of you had the opportunity to visit some special sites earlier this week.

I live close to Mountlucas Windfarm, and not too far from the stunning Clonmacnoise Monastic Site on the banks of the River Shannon, and the very special Abbeyleix Bog, so I hope you enjoyed your visits there.

If we are to be true to the Paris Agreement, made ten years ago next year – can you believe that, and if we are to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future, we will need to bring about a Just Transformation.

And if we are to bring about a true Just Transformation, the role of Impact Assessment will be absolutely vital.

Impact Assessment is defined by the IAIA itself as “the process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action”, something many policy makers have perhaps failed to do in the past.

Only yesterday, I was speaking in the Seanad, the upper house of the Irish parliament, about how agricultural policies for decades, have been encouraging, training and incentivising farmers to chase higher yields and increased production, without much regard for the impact of these policies on the natural world, on water quality, on GHG emissions, nor indeed on the social impacts on farmers and rural communities.

But as you all know, that focus on future consequences is key: it is the future consequences that we want to bring about, the low carbon society with rich and healthy ecosystems, that must inform the actions we take today.

Thankfully, today, we are well equipped to take a more informed view on the future impacts. We have certainly learnt lessons from the past, and with science and technological advancement, as well as greater expertise on ecosystem interactions, we can make better predictions and better model outcomes than ever before.

And of course, it goes without saying that it's important that the impacts to be assessed aren't too narrowly focussed, such as in the past when the focus was largely on the economic impacts. I think we have all seen the very clear consequences of that narrow focus.

So, in looking at the future consequences of today's actions and proposed actions, we need to look at the impacts in the broadest of focus, including environmental, social, economic, cultural, and health implications, and I'm sure there may well be other impacts.

Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and now Chair of the Elders, spoke in 2022 of first coming across the concept of the Just Transformation. Mrs Robinson said at the time:

“I like this expression, because holistic, comprehensive, just transitions will drive societal transformation that will benefit the wellbeing of all people. A truly just transition will not be just a transition – it should tackle the inequalities and injustices caused by and exacerbated by the climate crisis and lead us to a better future.”

So, in the transition to a low carbon society, you as impact assessors will need to assess - and we politicians as policy makers will need to be aware of - much more than just the environmental impacts of our proposed actions: we need to assess and be cognisant too of all of the implications of our actions.

My own sense of one of the key differences between a just transition and a just transformation is the sense of hope, positivity and opportunity that is inherent in the idea of transforming societies for the better.

We have rightly recognised here in Ireland and across the EU, and indeed further afield, the importance of bringing communities with us when we have been talking about the Just Transition.

For me though, living in a just transition territory, the sense of many people on the ground in my community is that inherent idea that a transition, is a transition *away* from something that people know and love, that has been part and parcel of their lives and those generations before them. And with that comes a sense of loss.

And in that Just Transition territory in the Midlands of Ireland, the just transition we are trying to bring about is the transition away from the period of industrial extraction of peat for energy production. This industry was a huge employer for the region, and an enormous sense of pride, with generations of families and communities working in good, decent jobs.

There is a human connection there too, that cultural affinity, that deep sense of meaning.

And so the natural reaction for many, when told that we need to transition away from all of that, is very much that sense of loss.

To give another example, if we say that we need to ensure a just transition for farmers, farmers will rightly ask: to what? Because many are quite content with where they are and what they are doing at the present time, and I know as a farmer myself that our way of life means an awful lot to us.

The concept of a Just Transformation, on the other hand, is something I believe we can really sell. It's metamorphosis of sorts – like a caterpillar into a butterfly – it comes with that sense of progression, of growth, of enhancement, something we can all get behind, and something we all want to see happen.

Unfortunately, we don't yet have a widespread sense of that in the Midlands, but there are some pockets of proactivity, some communities and businesses that get it and are embracing it, and I hope that that positive sense will spread across the whole region in the coming months and years ahead.

And I do genuinely believe that what we are trying to communicate in the Midlands of Ireland, in the transition away from the era of peat extraction for energy, to a clean, green energy revolution, and leading the way in the bioeconomy sector, will transform our region for the better.

But to generate the community buy-in we need to make that transformation a success, we really need to focus on policy that is about more than just the environmental benefits.

We need to be able to work with communities to ensure that the future consequences we are bringing about will not only transform our natural environment for the better, but that they will also lead to better social, economic, cultural, and life outcomes.

I believe it can be done. But again, to design the kind of policy that delivers on those fronts, we need proper impact assessment.

And that is where you, my friends, come in!

We live in uncertain times, but we also live in exciting times, especially for professionals in the field of impact assessment.

Those net zero pledges that so many countries and organisations around the world have made, while hugely significant and politically challenging to agree in many instances, are in reality the easy part.

The real value of proper, thorough, holistic impact assessment is in the design and implementation of the detailed policies that will achieve the low carbon, high nature societies we want to live in, the policies that will *transform* our societies.

So... how do we switch at scale to wind and solar energy, while protecting sensitive marine biodiversity and endangered bird species?

How do we provide more space for walking, cycling, bus and rail without doing excessive damage to habitats, and in a way that preserves mobility for vulnerable people in our societies who can't use public transport or active travel?

Where will we get the feedstocks for the biomethane we will produce to replace fossil gas in our heat intensive industries, and how will this impact on food production and biodiversity in our fields?

These questions are the meat on the bones of those net zero pledges, the nuts and bolts of the just transformation: and we can only answer them with proper impact assessment, so your role as impact assessors is pivotal.

If we are to hit our net zero targets here in Ireland and around the world, then we are going to have to change radically, on so many fronts: the way we generate electricity, the way we consume, the way we get to work, and the way we use our land – be that for food production, fibre production, for climate and biodiversity, or for nature-based solutions to some of the issues that challenge us in a changing world.

Taken together, these changes will indeed amount to quite the transformation of our society. But that in itself can be terrifying for many in our society, because as you know more than anyone, the impact of change in a society or a community can be massive. That's why it's our role as policymakers to utilise impact assessment practitioners to ensure we design and implement the best possible policies in the first place.

So as we go from the big picture pledges at a macro level, to the micro level of the policies to deliver on the transformation inherent in those pledges, a huge amount of policy is being written, and a huge amount of planning underway.

As much as well functioning societies need for example good nurses, doctors, teachers, and other construction workers, we also need good impact assessment professionals. To deliver the just transformation we want to see tomorrow, we need good impact assessment today.

So the work you are all doing, across so many countries around the world, is invaluable, and will make a lasting difference to this generation and the next.

I have read the conference programme, and I have to say the breadth and depth of sessions on offer is genuinely mind blowing.

So, whether it's in the sessions and presentations themselves, or in the exchange of ideas, the friendships made, the field trips, the shared meals, the trips to the pub..

I hope you all have a truly memorable week here in Dublin, and I wish you the very best in your invaluable work, as we work together to bring about a truly just transformation for our planet and for people everywhere.

Thank you.