



A word with the FIG President, Teo Chee Hai

TEO Chee Hai is a licensed/chartered surveyor in Malaysia as well as being that country's national delegate of the Association of Authorised Land Surveyors Malaysia.

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Divides and disconnects. FIG President Teo Chee Hai talks to **Richard Groom** about the challenges facing the organisation in the 21st century.

In the report you delivered at the FIG Working Week in Marrakech you mentioned a divide between professionals and policy makers and between professionals and people at the grass roots. Would you like to expand on these divides and what action you plan to take?

I do not think I am alone in recognizing these divides. While this may not be an issue in some jurisdictions, in others it is. Leading up to my presidency, I have heard remarks about the inability to present views let alone influence policy, leading to an expressed desire for greater advocacy, if that's the right term to use. In my recent encounters with some grass root organizations, beneath the warm exchanges, I could not but detect both some frustration and also the desire to work with professionals such as us to address issues that are human in nature.

In this regard, one plan is to incorporate into the next Working Week, space for peer-to-peer learning and I certainly hope that presidents and/or heads of delegation of our member associations will take advantage of this to engage one another so that we can begin to address these divides. I am aware of one of our member associations in Africa that has a programme to engage the grass roots in issues, which are close to the surveying profession.

You also mention a 'disconnect' between practitioners and the younger generation of surveyors (including surveying students); academics and practitioners, academic programmes and industry practices; and the profession's estimation of its role and actual reality. Please could you explain these disconnects and how FIG is dealing with them.

I had the opportunity to engage with professional members, academics and

graduates and students at the same time during a recent visit to a member association. If you had been present in that hall, this disconnect would be apparent to you. FIG will continue to put its primary "event energies" into our working weeks and congresses during my term to ensure that these are the primary events where all, from across the breadth and depth of the profession, can participate.

FIG introduced an Academic Members Forum in Marrakech, working towards its first Young Surveyors Conference in Rome next year. These new initiatives are all aimed at bringing together practitioners, industry, academia and the next generation of surveying professionals.

We are also asking our member associations to engage with our commissions, especially with regards to commission activities, in the hope that activities and events at the regional and local level will afford opportunities to address these "disconnects".

It strikes me that the divides and the disconnects are actually similar in the sense that communication is at the core of the problem. A Young Surveyors Conference would seem to me to reinforce 'silos' rather than break them down. On the other hand, at the 2008 FIG Working Week in Stockholm the organizers arranged speed mentoring sessions as a means of facilitating discussion between young surveyors and their more experienced counterparts. Is this the sort of measure that you think is needed to help bridge the divides and get us better connected?

Agreed - better communication and the willingness to engage will begin the process of bridging this divide.

As for the Young Surveyors Conference, we are attaching it to our Working Week for the inaugural event and are working out the programme at the moment. However, going forward the challenge is to integrate that into our working week itself and also provide avenues for interaction with more experienced participants such as those speed mentoring sessions that were organized in Stockholm,

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fee a number of times. How is FIG proposing to resolve this problem? Have you considered allowing direct individual membership to FIG?

I am a member of three professional organisations that are also members of FIG. I also enjoy the rights of membership from these organisations and at the same time having a responsibility to pay subscriptions, a portion going towards the organisation's payment to FIG. FIG will remain a federation and the memberships, in the classes that are presently provided within our statutes, are not open to individuals.

The high cost of attending FIG conferences is prohibitive for those of us who do not have our expenses reimbursed. Indeed, anyone attending Sydney from Europe would have had to find over US\$4000 to make the trip. Overall, there seems to be a disconnect between the modest per capita charge for membership of FIG and the astronomical costs involved in attending FIG events. Does FIG recognise this as a problem and if so, have you considered ways in which events can be made more inclusive, by reducing the costs or using web technology?

I would not disagree with you on the issue of the cost of attending conferences. I understand it is one that is faced not just by FIG alone. Just as it is expensive for one from Europe to attend the Congress in Sydney, it is equally expensive for another to attend the Marrakech Working Week from, say, New Zealand!

Each successive FIG Council has worked on ensuring that FIG's primary events are accessible and affordable. However, the conference fee is only one part of the total cost of attendance. For this term, we continue to review, try and seek some means to maintain our conference fees at an affordable level as well as ensuring that our events are accessible.

Having mentioned the high costs involved in attending conferences, they are actually shorter than they used to be. In Sydney, this meant cramming sessions into the shorter time frame and there were up to ten parallel streams at times. Do you agree that this is overwhelming for delegates and how are you planning to deal with it for the KL conference?

We have to accept that a participant will not be able to attend every single session offered as we continue to operate with parallel sessions. There is also a need to balance between providing opportunities for the many who are qualified to make a presentation and the hurriedness to complete one's presentation at the given session. It is something that we must continue to work on to ensure that participants and presenters do achieve their desired outcome from their attendance.

What plans do you have for FIG to promote itself

to the surveying profession or do you believe that this is the job of the member organisations?

Maybe I can illustrate this challenge! FIG participated in the preparatory meetings for the upcoming inaugural UN Forum on Global Geospatial Information Management. This Forum will lead to a global consultation mechanism amongst member states of the UN to develop effective strategies, formulate policies and strengthen capacities for the management of geospatial information. This global mechanism should raise awareness of the scope and the significance of geospatial or location information and its potential and capacity, when integrated with other information, to address global challenges. FIG welcomes and supports this initiative as it brings to the fore the scope, the significance and the potential of geospatial or location information.

However, the "last mile" in this aspect would have to be put in by member associations where this UN led initiative may afford the local profession at the UN member state level the opportunity to promote the significance and usefulness of surveying and address the divide we discuss earlier.

FIG clearly depends on member organizations to communicate FIG's role and value to their members. To what extent do you see the member organizations as enablers or barriers in this process?

I certainly see member associations as enablers and as you observed earlier, communicators. May I also add engagement, which is crucial. As the saying goes, it takes two hands to clap!

A look at the world map showing the coverage of FIG members reveals the rather disturbing picture that India is not a member, there are virtually no member organisations in the Middle East and few countries in Africa are members. There are also few members in Latin America. Does this reflect a long-standing picture or are there patterns in the way that member organisations are joining and leaving FIG? What is FIG doing to encourage wider membership?

FIG certainly shared your observation. We also understand that in certain jurisdictions, there are no national professional organizations at the present moment. We continue, as it has been with previous Councils, to encourage membership and this Council intends to work with Commissions as well as member associations so that various FIG-related or supported events are better distributed allowing FIG to access some of these under-represented regions. For instance, FIG will only have one Regional Conference during this term of office and the location is Latin America.

Thank you very much for your time and best wishes for your presidency.

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