

# British Academic Wins Global Citizen Award



The Global Spatial Data Infrastructure Association has made a rare award to a leading GI expert whose career in GI and town planning has spanned nearly 60 years.

'This is the greatest moment of my life' said Emeritus Professor Ian Masser upon receiving the news that he was to receive, the GSDI Global Citizen award. The award, which is only made very occasionally, recognizes someone who has provided exemplary thought leadership and substantive worldwide contributions in promoting informed and responsible use of geographic information and geospatial technologies for the benefit of society and who has fostered SDI developments that support sustainable social, economic, and environmental systems integrated from local to global scales. Prof Masser is only the fourth such person to receive the award.

Masser received the award during the Association's conference in Taipei, Taiwan on 2 December 2016. His acceptance speech entitled 'Looking back on SDI developments with an eye to the future' drew upon his experiences in the last thirty years and reconsidered the four "Brave New GIS Worlds" scenarios put forward in 1996 with particular reference to the diffusion of SDIs and the impact of technology and the development of the GIS industry.

His speech touched on the seminal Chorley report of 1987, which provided the impetus in the UK for the development of GIS and encouraged interest from research bodies at the same time as similar initiatives in the US and Australia. He identified President Clinton's significant executive order of 1994 'Coordinating Geographic Data Acquisition and Access: the National Spatial Data Infrastructure' which set out defined time limits for each of the initial stages of the national SDI.

In 1996, Masser in collaboration with Michael Wegener, published the influential paper, 'Brave New GIS Worlds'. It explored contrasting scenarios likely over the next 20 years through perceptions of the impact of GIS on society in different countries. It developed four scenarios of GIS diffusion: Trend – characterised by incremental diffusion of GIS along the lines experienced in the recent past; Market – based on the commodification of information restricting access to the more powerful; Big Brother in which surveillance and control by fully integrated omniscient systems pervade all aspects of life; and Beyond GIS in which public domain information contributes to greater democratisation and grassroots empowerment.

Updated in 2016 by the authors, they correctly anticipated the miniaturisation, memory and computing speed of all kinds of electronic devices possible today and predicted the emergence of transnational media conglomerates integrating telecommunications, cable and computer companies. An aspect which they acknowledge they did not anticipate has been the explosive growth volunteered geographic information (VGI) or the diffusion of GPS enabled mobile phones.

One of the most significant projects that Masser identifies is the EU's INSPIRE initiative to create an SDI for the EC – 'an infrastructure built on those of 28 different countries in 24 languages by a truly democratic process. . . a role model not only in relation to the developments of SDI but more generally to the formulation of public policy at the European level' (Max Craglia 2014). Masser has commented in detail on the progress of this project in *GiSPro* (February 2015 and August 2016).

Looking ahead, he is critical that many national SDI initiatives still abide by the principle, 'one size fits all', and envision a relatively uniform product. His view is that as most database maintenance is carried out at local level, national SDI strategies should drive regional ones, and regional SDI strategies drive local ones. He believes that the small elite of spatially aware professionals in geography, land administration and environmental science, must develop SDIs to provide an enabling platform in a transparent manner to serve the majority of society who are not spatially aware.

## Emeritus Professor Ian Masser

Educated in geography and town planning at Liverpool University, he has held senior positions at the University of Liverpool, the State University of Utrecht, the University of Sheffield and the University of Twente in the Netherlands. Nearly half his time was spent in Sheffield where he was Professor of Town Regional Planning at for nearly 20 years. During a career that spans more than sixty years, Ian has visited more than fifty countries in all five continents. Born in York and, like a true Yorkshireman, he notes with some pleasure that most of the costs of his travels were born by government bodies and universities.

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