

GIM International Interviews FIG President Holger Magel

Well-Grounded Specialised Generalists

Two months before his term of office ends in December, FIG president Holger Magel will arrive at its highlight: FIG XXIII Congress, 'Shaping the Change', to be held in his hometown of Munich, Germany in October 2006. A previous interview headlined 'An obligation to say what we think' (GIM International August 2003) mentioned Professor Magel's many public pronouncements and international visits to professional and political organisations including the United Nations. It revealed a man very active in creating opportunities to share his ideas with others. We asked him to update us as to achievements so far and how he felt about things at this significant moment.

By Christiaan Lemmen, contributing editor, GIM International

You told the international geodetic student meeting 2006 in Krakow, Poland that "FIG is the mother of all surveying, surveyors and surveyor students". Is it then the real and only international representative of the surveyor community?

Absolutely! For a century now FIG has represented the community with a high degree of

engagement on the part of functionaries and members; all branches are represented, including business. FIG has a

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high reputation, is attractive, and has a presence in over a hundred countries. We provide standards that improve the efficiency of surveying services and embedding output data in spatial-data infrastructures. We provide guidelines for quality of education and professional ethics. Ethically based commitment is so important! We bridge fields to get win-win situations; an important example is integration between GIS, surveying and land management, and between cadastre and land registration as a basis for spatial-data infrastructures. We influence political decisions on national aspects of surveying and development of land registry. We are represented as a Non-Governmental Organisation at UN meetings, as recently at the World Urban Forum in Vancouver, Canada.

You said in our earlier interview that

we should not rest on our laurels...

I have said many times that surveyors and geodesists should play a more active role in areas where spatial planning and development decisions and where land-related conflict situations arise and have to be solved. These are all issues that deserve further attention and action. In many countries where there are overlapping claims on substantial areas of land, surveyors can provide a major contribution in conflict resolution. Politicians have to be aware of this: we have made great efforts in this area and the potential role of our profession is more and more recognised worldwide. Another issue is the weak financial position of some of our members. But there

is patronage of rich members for poor member applicants. I would say that FIG is able to meet the demands of international or national communities, state agencies and universities. FIG experts are frequently consulted by UN agencies and by national institutions.

You mention the United Nations, the World Urban Forum in Vancouver held in June of this year. How can and does the profession contribute to good governance and poverty alleviation?

It has been recognised worldwide that the land issue is essential for sustainable development. We have a strong commitment, especially to Africa, in this respect. Secure land tenure and land administration, using modern technology, is of vital importance and a real challenge for our profession worldwide. This

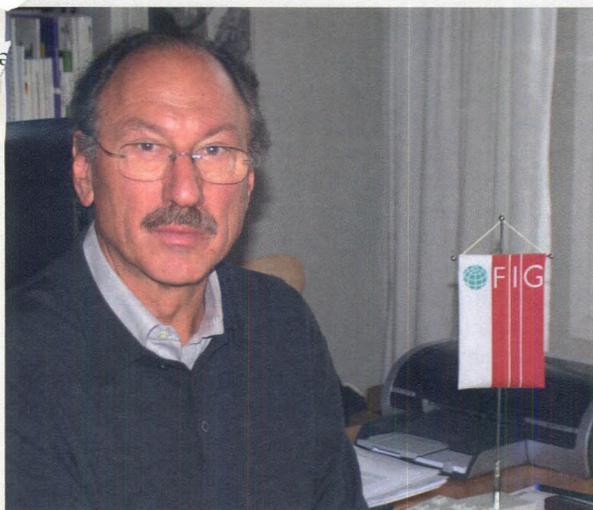


FIG president Holger Magel serves the surveying profession with endless energy, cheerfulness and openness to all. Always to the point, and driven by his conviction of the urgent need to build a more just, peaceful and sustainable world, he has motivated and fired students and professionals alike into providing their maximum support and contribution for his cause.



Prof. Magel, accompanied by his wife, Mrs Ansi Magel, at the gala dinner in Accra during the FIG Regional Conference 2006. The work of the president would not have been possible without her support.

was the focus of attention at our regional conference in Accra, Ghana, this year: the theme was 'promoting land administration and good governance'. We help local organisations to build capacity. We advise politics, politicians and the public at global and national level. Indigenous approaches with respect to customary rights are relevant; this is a view now shared by the surveying profession. Good governance is based on good land administration. This needs both civil society and committed professionals attentive to pro-poor approaches and to gendering land tools. We are happy to be a partner in the UN-HABITAT 'Global Land Tool Network'. FIG has the obligation to contribute to more effective, efficient and equitable land-governance models based on gendered and pro-poor land tools. Further, I want to stress that FIG is strongly committed to the Millennium Development Goals. FIG has become one of the main civil-society partners of UN-HABITAT as a leading umbrella organisation of all experts in land, land survey, land management, security of tenure issues, valuation and spatial planning. FIG is a member of the UN Habitat Professionals Forum, the umbrella organisation for all planners. I am even currently chair of this global and, as I once again experienced at WUF 3 in

Vancouver, well respected association. FIG also has strong links with FAO, UNEP, UNECA, to the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs and to the World Bank. One aspect of the utmost importance in terms of this co-operation is to encourage more extensive professional-surveyor support for disaster management.

The association of surveyors in The Netherlands is joined with other disciplines. Co-operation with other disciplines is surely essential, given the challenges posed by land management, disaster management and land development?

Yes. That's why FIG played such an important role in the establishment of the Joint Board of Geospatial Information Societies (JB GIS), which I have the honour to have been chairing since last year. JBGIS is a coalition of leading international geospatial societies that can speak on behalf of the geospatial profession at international level, especially to the United Nations and other global stakeholders. This board co-ordinates activities within the geospatial society and organisations (ed. The Joint Board of Geospatial Information Societies currently includes among its members the IAG, ICA, FIG, IHO, IMTA, ISCGM and ISPRS). It is very common now for representatives of these bodies to give keynote presentations at our international events. During the Munich Congress there will be close co-operation between FIG and the International Association of Geodesy (IAG) Symposium on Geodetic Reference Frames. Strong relationships with all geo-related disciplines have been developed and will be further developed. We hope that we can initiate some politically orientated actions, such as letters to PM Tony Blair or Germany's President Prof. Köhler in relation to support for capacity building in Africa.

And the development of our own profession?

The FIG definition of 'surveyor' has been renewed and widened in line with the vision that surveyors cover responsibility from

"the single parcel up to the plan of Mars" and FIG General Assembly in 2004 adopted this. That's relevant in relation to the identity of the surveyor. I'm happy with such a broad definition. The number of academic members is rapidly growing: today eighty academic organisations from about fifty countries are members. The FIG surveying-education database provides a comprehensive overview on education. FIG is a member of the International Council for Science. Our Standards Network provides contributions to the development of standards not only for surveying instruments but also on issues such as valuation, geographic information, professional certification and cadastre. These developments are of crucial importance for the future; we can see the benefits of standardisation in many areas. Principles, guidelines, declarations as published in FIG publications are used and adopted worldwide.

Do politicians recognise the importance of the role of the surveyor in contributing to solving many world problems?

In general I observe during my visits much better recognition of the profession today. But we have to remain engaged, especially in order to increase the awareness of politicians and the public! One essential question is whether we need pure specialists in niches, or, as I repeat again and again, "well-grounded specialised generalists". I'm deeply convinced that only specialised generalists - and not specialised experts - can reach the new fields we have discussed: active contributions to planning and development decisions, conflict resolution, and pro-poor land management, including disaster and environmental-risk management. FIG has the responsibility to forward these topics on to the academic agenda: in fact that's what we will be doing at our Congress in Munich in October. Last but not least: our congresses, working weeks, regional conferences, and activities developed by our ten commissions provide a comprehensive set of documentation relevant to the development of

the profession in all its aspects.

What about students? I have noticed how you personally engage with participating students during FIG events.

That's part of my life. As for professionals: FIG contributes by networking for students. This is one of the most relevant issues for FIG; it is about capacity building and the future of the profession in a rapidly changing world. Education should be focused not only on modern surveying but also on the whole environment of neighbouring disciplines. This will be the development in relation to globalisation; I expect many of our students of today to be working internationally tomorrow. We have a special 'students offer' for our Congress in Munich. International experi-

environmental problems. We need open-minded leaders, especially directors of survey authorities and decision-makers. We need a strong education system, with inspired and optimally educated students. We need excellent teachers who themselves should be well-grounded, specialised generalists and even 'wise men'. We need strong links with the UN, the World Bank and other international organisations so as to be able to serve society in contributing to solutions. We need to create a win-win situation by respecting our diverse disciplines. Within the land sector, we need to develop from the present situation of separate organisations towards single land-sector agencies with committed employees and transparent procedures. We need balance between the pri-

We have to attract students and young professionals to FIG

ence is of vital importance for the next generation of surveyors. We have to do even more to attract students and young professionals to FIG. It is a survival strategy for us!

What do you see as the biggest success of your term of office?

We have so much important work to do if we look at urban and rural development, megacities with informal settlements, urban-rural interrelationships, increasing poverty and scarce food and water resources; natural resources in general, and en-

vate and the public sector. We need courageous entrepreneurs in survey companies. I look back over four years ago during which the profession has booked enormous progress: Earth observation, geodetic reference frameworks, GIS and GNSS are making dramatic advances, so relevant in contributing to solutions. An outstanding feature of the last four years has been the dramatic increase in land-management policy and politics around the world. This represents a huge chance for our profession! I'm happy and feel privileged that my excellent team (council, of-

Achievements of Holger Magel's FIG Presidency

- ◆ Increased membership of associations, with about twenty new organisations aside from an increase in academics; FIG now represented in over a hundred countries.
- ◆ Stabilisation in FIG's financial situation and perspectives.
- ◆ Remarkable improvement in internal communication; for example, by regular president's letters, FIG newsletters and monthly article in international journal (GIM International).
- ◆ Professionalisation of FIG conferences; for example, by introducing president's opening and summary closing speeches.
- ◆ Tremendous improvement in FIG PR work; for example, by publication of regular interviews, articles and reports.
- ◆ Wonderful coming together with our geodetic family members, especially IAG, ISPRS and ICA.
- ◆ Successful restructuring of FIG office and FIG director's role as a basis for coping with the role of the organisation as it has evolved over the past decade from having the character of an association of amateurs to a highly professionally driven and operated global business - and the speed of change is even increasing!

fice and commissions) and myself have been able to contribute with FIG to the development of civil society and to a better recognition of the profession. I am proud that our 'German Council' could fulfil its visions and missions according to our motto "shaping the change". One re-

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markable step forward has been the increase in member associations. We now have about twenty new organisations aside from the aforementioned increase in academics. FIG is now represented in over a hundred countries. Explaining FIG to politicians I sometimes joke, "FIG is the UN's little brother"!

Now I look forward to a major event in my hometown of Munich. I hope many new friendships will be made and I hope many will be motivated and will take responsibility for building a better and more peaceful world. Or, as the survey students of Ghana expressed their commitment in their GESA anthem, to making the world 'a happy place to stay'.

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President Magel with Chiefs from Ghana at the FIG regional conference in Accra in March 2006.