Dear friends,

I hope that all of you had a pleasant entry into 2011. As per our usual practice, this communication should have been sent out on 31st December 2010, but I deferred on account of the HTAi Board Meeting held on 30th January 2011, to include inputs from there as well. As always, I am grateful for your cooperation and collaboration and would like to bring the following points for your attention. Please do respond with your comments/suggestions at the earliest.

With warm regards,

Joseph L. Mathew

Chair, HTAi DC ISG

31 January 2011

1. Annual Meeting 2011

As you are aware, the 2011 Annual Meeting is being held at Rio de Janeiro during June 27-29, 2011. The deadline for submission of abstracts has just passed. I am confident that this year too, several important themes relevant to developing countries will be discussed (during Plenary presentations, panel sessions as well as abstract presentations). As a run-up to the Meeting, I request you to kindly share details of any parallel sessions that you are organizing, that could be of relevance to our ISG. Likewise, when the abstract selection process is completed, please share details of papers you are presenting. This would be helpful for all those interested in DC issues to plan their programme.

2. Materials for the website

At the present moment, we are probably under-utilizing the web-space available to the ISG through the www.htai.org webpage. You may recall that I have raised this issue previously as well, but could not make much headway. Since one of the major roles of ISGs is to foster collaboration through discussion and sharing, I request your inputs on how we could make our web-space more useful including (but not restricted to) some possible options given below:

- Posting published papers, powerpoint slides, videos etc that we have authored/presented/prepared.
- Posting links to webpages that are relevant to the broader concerns of developing countries.
- Developing a mechanism to ensure that there are no copyright issues with the above.

- Liaising with publishers of scientific journals (especially IJTAHC) to provide pdf copies/links to papers, free of charge.
- Posting short biosketches (100-200 words with informal photos) of ISG members, to enable existing members, potential members and other interested people to be a bit more familiar with personal and professional profiles. If you like this idea, I will prepare a short basic format that we could use.

If you are happy to share stuff that is useful, please send them to me by email preferably as pdf files.

3. (Lack of) progress with the initiative for Africa.

I am disappointed to mention that the potential developments in Africa (Malawi, Zambia, Cameroon, Sudan and South Africa) have not made any headway since out last communication. I am not sure of the precise reasons for this standstill; and also how to proceed from here. All suggestions are welcome.

4. Interaction with the HTAi Board

Responding to the need for objectivity and transparency in the way ISGs function, the HTAi Board has established a "ISG Steering Committee" chaired by the Vice-President of HTAi. This Committee will collaborate with individual ISGs as well as across ISGs; and the HTAi Board. Two issues being addressed by the Steering Committee at the present moment include developing (i) a uniform reporting format of ISGs structure and activities; and (ii) a mechanism for allocation of financial resources for ISG activities in an objective and transparent fashion.

With respect to the first issue, I am pleased to mention that our ISG reports to the Board over the past two and half years, have always been objective and includ details of the current membership, actions accomplished vis-à-vis our Action Plan framed in September 2008, and plans for the forthcoming 6-12 months. I am further pleased to note that the HTAi Reporting form developed by the ISG Steering Committee follows our format.

The second issue has been a slightly ticklish one, stemming from the twin facts that our ISG generally failed to secure funding (small or large) for proposals that we considered relevant to developing countries; and also could not work-out how funding to different ISGs was awarded. Therefore I am pleased to note that the ISG Steering Committee will consider requests for funding from different ISGs, evaluate proposals and put them up for the Board's consideration. I would be grateful for your suggestions on how we could tap this potentially useful resource.

At the last communication to the HTAi Board for the November 15, 2010 Board tele-conference, I submitted two proposals on behalf of our ISG viz (i) A research proposal to map health-care decision-making processes across developing countries, and (ii) A development proposal to prepare and deliver an online sensitization/ awareness building learning course for stakeholders in developing countries. A protocol for the first proposal has been submitted to the ISG Steering Committee for consideration.

5. DC ISG Communication format

We have been communicating with each other over email using the present email id (htai.dc.isg@gmail.com). At the inception of the ISG, we tried the option of using listserv as a mechanism to keep abreast of all discussions within our group as well as with the HTAi Secretariat. However, this was not favoured by ISG members on account of receiving multiple emails each day and losing the thread of discussions; hence we reverted to the present email id. The HTAi Secretariat has recently advised that other ISGs use the list-serv system very successfully, and the new list-serv is much more user friendly. It has therefore been suggested that we switch back to using the listserv. As I have limited experience with using such systems, I would be grateful for your feedback on whether this switch would be beneficial to individuals as well as the group.

6. Future of the DC ISG

Our ISG has been in existence for a little over two years, and been fairly active in terms of trying to further the goals of HTAi. At this moment, I'd like us to consider some of the following issues that could affect our overall role and contribution.

(A) DC ISG Workplan:

Our ISG's workplan was developed and finalized in consultation with the ISG members after the 2008 HTAi Annual Meeting; and subsequently posted on the ISG webspace. We need to take a re-look at the workplan to study whether it needs modifications/ refinements/ additions/ deletions etc. to be both useful as well as practically feasible. I request you to please take a look and share your feedback on it.

(B) DC ISG Structure:

At the present moment, our ISG focuses broadly on issues relevant to developing countries. As a mechanism to sensitize HTAi leadership and membership about the issues and challenges involved, I would think that we have been quite successful as evidenced by (i) inclusion of content in HTAi Annual Meetings in Plenary presentations, panel sessions and selection of

papers, (ii) Special Sessions during the Annual Meetings, (iii) discussions on DC issues at HTAi Board meetings, (iv) publication of content relevant to DCs in IJTAHC, (v) enhanced participation of DC citizens at Annual Meetings and enhanced funding for Travel Grants, (vi) development of Regional HTA meetings to focus on issues specific to developing country needs in specific geographic regions, (vii) memorandum of Understanding between HTAi and WHO, (viii) greater dialogue between developing and developed country members, and (ix) preliminary discussion with stakeholders in various African countries.

Given that we have made significant progress towards putting a spot-light on developing country needs/issues, I am wondering whether we now ought to take this to the next level. One of the challenges is that while developing countries share many common issues, it is inappropriate to club all countries together. One way out could be to focus on specific geographic regions (e.g South American countries, Eastern Europe countries, Asian countries, African countries etc) separately, to better understand the specific needs and challenges. Another way out could be to work across continents, but categorizing countries as 'never heard of HTA', interested in HTA, developing HTA, etc. The latter approach would help us to define needs that could be common across geographic regions. I would value your feedback on whether it would be useful for the DC ISG to work at two levels viz broadly across developing countries, and narrowly in terms described above. If this concept appears useful, we would need to work out how best to achieve it.

(C) How to measure success (or lack of it)?

Given that all DC ISG members are busy people with multiple professional commitments and still do their best to carry on with ISG work to further HTAi goals, we need to evolve a mechanism/system to evaluate whether our work is useful (or otherwise). In other words, what short term and long term outcomes should we use, to decide whether we are on track (or not) to achieve whatever we decide to do as per our workplan. A related issue would be to decide how/when to abandon a particular line of action in favour of another.

(D) ISG Leadership

When our ISG was established in July 2008, we did not undergo a formal process of electing a Chair. I am guessing that this is the case with all other ISGs, although I am not sure. However, unlike some other ISGs, I think it is important to rotate ISG leadership. You may recall that I tried to organize an election for the DC ISG Chair during our face-to-face meeting at the 2009 Annual Meeting at Singapore. This failed because time was too limited and we had not discussed it through beforehand. Therefore, during the run-up to the 2010 Annual Meeting at Dublin, I requested for inputs on how this could be best achieved, but this failed again because

of lack of feedback and limited attendance at the ISG meeting. Therefore, I suggest that we undertake the following steps during the five months until the 2011 Annual Meeting: (i) decide how we would like to elect/select the ISG Chair, (ii) decide whether we would like to also have a co-Chair, (iii) develop a mechanism to elect/select the Chair (and co-Chair if we decide on it), (iv) decide the duration of the leadership tenure, and (v) work out a mechanism on how the process can be achieved without having to be physically present at the ISG face-to-face meeting. As has been the case for several other initiatives/systems that our ISG has initiated, I am guessing that our lead will be followed by the HTAi Board to be applied across all ISGs, hence we may need to think a little beyond our own ISG. I believe that we should be able to evolve a process that is pleasant, friendly, relatively simple, yet fairly formal. Please share your thoughts on this.