

COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: “Our Association Is ...,” by Erling Berge and Sanjeev Prakash

A Fundamental Re-thinking of Our Association is needed...

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The IASC is indeed a remarkable association; and it has been quite successful. Established with the modest goals of encouraging exchange of knowledge and experience among disciplines, between scholarship and practice, and promoting appropriate institutional design, it ended up contributing to the establishment of a new field of study on the commons. An unmistakable mark of the Association’s success is the mainstreaming of its flagship themes and topics in professional conferences and disciplinary associations, including economics.

In the process, the Association has also managed to retain so much of the openness, collegiality and vitality that have characterized its meetings and events from its earlier years. Pre-biennial meeting workshops focusing on selected topics and analytical techniques have been among the major attractions for the Association’s growing and increasingly diverse membership. In addition to the substantive content and analytical tools they provide, these workshops have also been important forums for face-to-face networking, mentoring and mutual learning for young researchers and new comers to the field. Along with the meetings, these serve as mechanisms for developing new cohorts of commons scholars and practitioners, in effect seeding emergent “wiki” communities interested in commons issues. The Association’s electronic publications and discussion forums provide ready access to substantive content and facilitate continuing exchanges within sub-groups on topics of common interest within sub-groups.

But success comes with inherent tensions and challenges. Goals and milestones reached are also occasions for pause and reflection — to scan the horizon for the next milestone, revisit old goals, or test new ways of getting there. For the Association, this is a moment of such reflection. Berge and Prakash describe some of the challenges now facing the Association. They point to factors, especially donor funding, which drive the changing composition and dynamics within the Association’s membership. They raise concerns about the waning ranks of core academic researchers, the shifting balance towards practitioners and applied research project staff, and wonder if the latter group can fill the gap created by the former. They also worry about the potential migration of innovative young researchers to other associations and conferences, and contemplate the prospect of being seen as, and indeed of becoming, an aging Association among fresh networks in the expanding field of commons research.

The challenges to the Association are real, but the scenario Berge and Prakash paint is perhaps too gloomy if not tinged with a hint of nostalgia. Their scenario glides past some bright spots that cradle the seeds of the Association’s future vigour and reinvention. Their scenario also does not consider how connectivity, new modes of collaboration and information sharing are rapidly changing the context within which IASC and other associations operate, and the vastly expanded

scope for crafting arrangements in which vital research expertise and talent for innovation can be shared to mutual advantage. Within this evolving context, and as commons research becomes increasingly mainstream, the Association needs to reposition and reinvent itself. The Association would have to anticipate next generation issues pertaining to the commons and carve out a new niche at the leading edge.

The enterprise of theory and knowledge generation is increasingly being organized through mass collaboration, open sharing, non-hierarchical peer exchanges and collective action involving scholars and practitioners, certified experts and novices alike. The basic elements of these configurations already exist within the Association. These include current members, cohorts of workshop alumni, “free riders”, one-time meeting participants and supporters. These “floating” elements can be harnessed to form a stronger base for a rejuvenated, reinvigorated Association of the future.

In this scenario, the Association’s diverse membership and extended network and the rich pool of perspectives and knowledge they represent are likely to be even more important future sources of strength and competitive advantage. A welcoming and nurturing environment will be key to recruiting, engaging and drawing back time and again members to lend their creative energies and capacities to the Association. Professional, discipline based associations are less able to provide both the interesting blend of perspectives and environment that have been strong selling points of the Association. Broader trends in the way knowledge is generated, shared and validated are also blurring dividing lines between academic researchers as generators of theory and knowledge on one hand, and practitioners as users and field implementers on the other. Recruitment of academic researchers and investment in the development of talented young researchers will be necessary to fill gaps created by retiring core researchers and to maintain a critical mass of their expertise within the Association.

Part of the gap could also be filled by reaching out to established researchers in other networks and associations with complementary strengths and interests. Collaboration with such associations and networks could mobilize needed theoretical expertise on topics of common interest or pioneer work to address jointly defined novel research agendas. However, this mode of operation would likely require broadening the Association’s focus and framing of commons-related questions in ways that could attract fugitive research expertise and motivate other associations to collaborate. Collaborative activities could include, for example, co-organizing workshops and conferences, joint publications or shared awards for research on jointly defined seminal topics. The substantive outcomes and the issues surfaced through such activities could create new niches and provide fodder for the IASC’s future lines of work.

Funding will continue to be an issue, but this will not be unique to the Association. The difficulty of raising funds especially for secretariat operations is a perennial problem and for which there are no easy solutions. Creative and more vigorous fund-raising would be more fruitful if the Association offers new knowledge products, fresh research on cutting edge issues, or novel twists to longstanding topics of critical importance. Collaboration with energetic new associations could lighten the burden of resource mobilization. Repackaging and adding value to pre-meeting workshops might pay dividends. Incremental innovations to the IASC meeting design, such as more open space formats, could make for more stimulating, less forgettable

sessions. However, prior to the repackaging and fund-raising pitch, a more fundamental rethinking needs to happen. The Association needs to rearticulate its goals and redefine its niche in an increasingly populated field of commons research. The Association now pauses to ponder the possibilities as it scans the horizon and gathers new energy for the exciting times ahead.

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