

FROM THE PRESIDENT

IASCP and the Challenge of Managing Global Commons

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This note in a way represents loud thinking on usability of IASCP model (approaches/processes/experiences etc. underlying the CPR focused research, advocacy and decision, effectively used in dealing with local CPRs in many countries) to address the governance or management problems of global commons. For doing so, (i) first we identify the key features of approaches/processes focused on CPRs, facilitated by IASCP directly or indirectly; (ii) next we outline the major constraints to effective governance of global commons; (iii) finally, we try to see the indicative match or mismatch between (i) and (ii). The purpose of this note is not a scholarly message but some pre-mature ideas for sharing, developing or rejecting by CPR researchers.

1. The Uniqueness of IASCP as an International Association

When viewed through: the growth and diversity of its membership, the number of studies and publications on CPRs, number of scholars actively engaged in researching CPR issues, frequency and varied themes of meetings/workshops deliberating on operational and conceptual dimensions of CPRs at different levels, formal and informal exchanges and interactions between policy makers/practitioners and researchers concerned with CPRs, scholarly work on cutting edge issues in the field of CPRs and their links with larger socio-political and environmental contexts, promotion of concerns and action on CPRs including through interdisciplinary work, advisory input by CPR workers at different levels ranging from community based rural development to the mobilization of international opinions for governing global commons etc., IASCP (operating through its members at different levels) has made a remarkable progress in a short period.

The aforementioned achievements could be linked to some unique features of IASCP that distinguishes it from other international professional associations, which are often structured and operated as groups of learned citizens i.e. the fora for distinguished scientists and scholars to discuss the vital problems of mankind with often little links with the relevant and functioning humanity on the ground. The two key attributes of IASCP as mobiliser and promoter of concern and action for CPRs include:

(a) A collective and voluntary facility for building a CPR fraternity comprising diverse stakeholders from different countries and socio-economic groups differing in terms of level of their formal education and articulation capacities, as well as disciplinary backgrounds; primary interests and responsibilities vis-à-vis the dimensions of CPR-work (e.g. field NGOs and activists versus university professors and policy-programme advisors) and finally level and type of planned or actual usage of CPR-learning (e.g. for academic or policy-programme purposes etc.). These structural features and associated functional arrangements promoted by IASCP facilitated regular interactions and exchanges between CPR-scholars and practitioners.

(b) Continuous process of interactions and mutual learning promoted by IASCP between those engaged in research and practices covering different aspects of CPRs in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts through publication, CPR digest, web-site as well as (e.g. biennial conferences and regional

workshops etc.), helped in building and harnessing of synergies between different stakeholders as an important factor in promoting IASCP as a movement. Field application of learning on CPRs emerged as a key outcome of features and processes mentioned above. IASCP induced action on multiple fronts. Context specific policy advocacy and application of work on CPRs also grew side by side. Furthermore, the information, insights and understanding generated by CPR work strengthened the agenda of community organizations, NGOs etc. dealing with these resources at grass roots level. On the other hand this (including through constructive dissents) led to rapid conceptual refinements and work on cutting edge issues involving CPRs. Besides, CPRs found a place in the academic curricula of different universities and also became an important area of interest for several donor agencies engaged in rural development through community mobilization and collective action in the developing countries. Even a quick glance at different issues of CPR-Digest, papers for biennial conferences and regional workshops as well as the peer reviewed publications of IASCP members would support the above assessment.

2. Challenges of Global Commons

In the light of the above background, experience and achievement of IASCP (or CPR workers) an important question relates to usability of the same in developing governance systems for global common pool resource, such as global pollutions sinks, international waters, global biodiversity flows and stocks, systemic environmental changes, internet space etc.

A relatively new field for the bulk of the CPR workers (researchers and practitioners), global common pool resources present a qualitatively different and larger challenge for IASCP and its workers compared to local CPRs. The first and foremost challenge of global commons consists of difficulties in ready applicability of IASCP approach (e.g. mobilisation of diverse stakeholders, their interactions and dialogue at microlevels, functional mix of research and action components and inbuilt focus on basic social values such as equity, fairness etc.) to address the governance problems of global commons.

This in turn happens because of (i) scales and levels of global commons (e.g. global pollution sinks; global biodiversity; international waters etc.), and complexities characterizing them and (ii) differences in stakeholders perceptions and perspectives about them. We elaborate on this by commenting on indicative attributes or rather gaps in the ongoing general approaches to govern the global commons and possible contribution, IASCP (based on their experience in addressing local CPRs) can make in addressing some of these gaps.

(i) A Top down, macro-level approach

The prevailing approaches to identification and structuring of the issues of global commons (e.g. dimensions of global environmental changes, their abatements and adaptations etc.) are characterized by a top-down focus, where governance problems and possible solutions are conceived at global, international or regional levels. In here even if the involved stakeholders (e.g. countries and groups) are correctly identified, they continue to have multiple disconnects unlike in the case of local CPRs. Despite global treaties and agreements as framework tools of governance, the practicable elements for managing global commons, continue to be assessed differently by different stakeholders (e.g. rich and poor countries). This affects both decision system as well as enforcement possibilities focused by different stakeholders. This tends to push the global commons' governance issues towards rather abstract generalities repeatedly recorded and reported by periodical meetings of the "parties to agreements". IASCP's association with such processes at different levels focusing on: needs and ways of mobilizing and linking diverse stakeholders, integrating policy and action aspects of CPR governance, involvement of communities and integrating macro- micro perspectives etc. can offer some lead lines for managing global commons.

(ii) Scale factor and heterogeneities

To reiterate, some of the above mentioned problems are rooted in the scale factor as well as vast heterogeneity of stakeholder perspectives and their underlying political power. The long dragging situation of Kyoto Protocol can illustrate the essence of this point, where diversity of national interests-driven gaps in perspectives and the differences of economic and political powers obstruct the governance systems for global commons. Higher the scale, greater are the heterogeneities and differences with regard to global CPRs as well as the involved stakeholders. IASCP – designed and promoted systems of dialogue and conflict resolution at micro-level (e.g. community forest management in developing countries) tend to become irrelevant or non-functional in such situation. Identifying the ways to promote such relevance in the new context is a challenge for IASCP. One possible approach to address the situation could be promoting space and role for microperspectives in the macro focused discourse on global commons. IASCP can attempt this through its research and advocacy activities.

(iii) Indifference to micro-realities and perspectives:

As already alluded to, another feature of approach and design of discourse on global commons is the general indifference towards micro level processes and practices. Accordingly, even when the global/macro issues are elaborately debated and decided upon at the highest levels, their micro-roots are rarely effectively addressed. Take the cases of global environmental change or biodiversity decline. Through UN systems or other agencies, treaties are formulated to address them; states sign them; but the process hardly address the place-based realities, the treatment of which is key to success of governance structures designed by international treaties. IASCP – through its past work and experiences could play important role to alert and induce the global actors to be sensitive and effective in this regard.

(iv) Resource management minus people Another basic problem of ongoing macro-level discourse and agreements on global environmental commons is that they treat the commons more as components of natural resources with little concern for the people and the basic issues of livelihood, equity, fairness and action-led sustainability, which IASCP has been addressing as a part of its mission from the very beginning. International treaties/agreements on biodiversity conservation, climate change or desertification, etc. which bring top down ideas and funds for the signatory governments of developing countries, rarely bother to consult local communities and incorporate their perspectives in designing “governance norms and mechanisms”. IASCP could make this issue as a part of its informed advocacy and discourse at relevant levels.

(v) Inherent inequalities

Quite related to stakeholder disconnects mentioned earlier, the vast differences in focused time horizons, capacities, costs and perceived gains associated with collective management of global commons, tend to make globally designed approaches highly unequal for the parties to agreements. The historically generated and structured differences between rich and the poor countries (vis-à-vis costs of managing global commons) are hardly compensated by provisions (through GEF etc.) provided under the international treaties. This is more so, when compensations hardly reach the real custodians of environmental resources such as grass roots level communities. IASCP through its work on assessment and valuation of environmental services of CPRs in different contexts can help to highlight and address this problem in appropriate fora.

The above indicative assessment of approaches to governance of global commons is quite sketchy. Yet it is suggestive enough about the emerging situation. In the light of the above it may not be far wrong to say that, if global discourse on global commons continues as it is approaching now i.e. (i) ignoring basic social values (e.g. focus only on resources with indifference to people) involving livelihood, equity, fairness and place based sustainability processes; (ii) dominance of macro approaches ignoring their micro-level roots; (iii) political power and national interest-driven gaps, in the perspectives and practices of stakeholders trying to evolve governance systems for global commons; and (iv) persistence of

inequities in potential costs and gains of managing global commons, a new form of “tragedy of commons” may emerge. This is highly likely with enhanced primacy to market forces and marginalization of state and communities under economic globalization. However, materialization of such potential tragedy of commons will be highly ironical because it would happen despite more information, identified potential options to address the problems and higher level of awareness as well as global administrative structures to address the involved tasks. Unlike the situation of Hardin’s pastoralists, the present situation is both qualitatively and quantitatively different and potentially more conducive to avert the tragedy of commons.

3. Potential Indicative Role and Responses of IASCP

Can IASCP help in inducing change in approach to global commons? Can it transform and use its past experiences with local CPRs to facilitate the change? A positive response at this stage may amount to a loud thinking. Yet it needs presentation to induce others to think, supplement or replace the points raised here. The central thrust of our argument is that IASCP has certain niche attributes in terms operational concepts approaches and actions which it has evolved and applied to address the CPR management issues at local levels. The same attributes with context specific adaptations, could be promoted and tried for addressing the challenges of governance systems for global environmental commons. Some of them were alluded to in the preceding section.

To reiterate, we suggested the indicative possibilities of building bottom up, participatory, micro-level approaches to understand and address the governance problems of macro-level or global commons operationally fragmented in local contexts. The involved approaches should be built upon the IASCP’s experiences in helping management of local environmental commons in diverse situations. Building of local capacities, federating of local stakeholders and enhancing their place and voices in global discourse on governance of global commons would be an essential part of such effort. However, despite their own experiences and deep concerns, IASCP or CPR experts would need to have collaboration with other agencies sharing the concern for environmental and social issues in the changing global contexts. Such agencies may include certain NGOs, international/national action agencies and community federations as well as specialized technical agencies dealing with specific global commons such as IPCC, IHDP, UNEP, IUCN etc. to cite a few.

Finally, what has been stated above addresses the problem from largely the angle of those who would like to alter or amend the new changes affecting global CPRs. However, an equally important part of the strategic approaches should be to focus on the agencies and actors contributing to the changes (global environmental) themselves (e.g. global/local polluters). Changes in the approach, decisions and activities of these agencies – as a set of stakeholders, offers an area, where, IASCP through its insights and understanding, generated by conceptual break-throughs and their potential applications, can prove helpful. This implies aggressive advocacy and participatory advisory input in the discourse and preparations for global treaties and implementing mechanisms directed to governance of global commons.

In the near term context IASCP should engage in developing a conceptual cum operational framework to prioritise the issues and advocate and initiate activities that help integrate knowledge and action on management of global commons.

Note: Some of the documents that helped in shaping the views presented in the paper include the following:

Alcamo, Joseph (et.al.) and Bennett, Elena M. et.al. (Authors), (2003). *Ecosystems and Human Wellbeing: A Framework for Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*. Washington, Coveland, London: Island Press.

Dolsak Nives and Ostrom, Elinor (eds) (2003). *The Commons in the New Millennium: Challenges and Adaptations*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press. IHDP UPDATE (Newsletter of the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change) – (Different Issues).

Jodha, N.S. (2005). Economic Globalisation and its Repercussions for Fragile Mountains and Communities in Himalayas. IN Huber, U.M.; and Reasoner, M.A. (eds.). *Global Change and Mountain Regions: An Overview of Current Knowledge*. London: Springer.

Zerner, C. (ed.) (2000). *People, Plants and Justice: The Politics of Nature Conservation*. New York: Columbia University Press.