

# COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

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

## “OUR ASSOCIATION... Should Focus Its Goals”

**Steven Donda, PhD.**  
**Department of Fisheries, Malawi**

Erling and Sanjeev’s article on the current trends of performance and activities triggers one’s mind to seriously think and reflect on the future on IASC. Certainly, the future of IASC does not look healthy at all. If IASC was a person, one would be tempted to say that IASC looks pale and needs serious diagnosis and medical prescriptions.

As stated by Erling and Sanjeev, the IASC started primarily as a network of various social science researchers (including economists) with an interest in natural resources, and few natural scientists that had an interest in people. Indeed, over the years the Association has seen its membership grow and become more diverse due to varying stakeholder interest and backgrounds. Of late it has been observed that the IASC membership has greatly shifted from being research oriented to practitioners, organisational representatives and policy-makers. On one hand, this diversity of membership and participation of such members at the biannual conferences provides a perfect platform for the researchers to bounce off their research findings and get feed back from the practitioners, while at the same time providing valuable information to the policy makers. After all the whole purpose of research is to create knowledge and provide information to the practitioners. While on the other hand, regardless of this diversity, IASC should still remain focused and concentrate on its original objectives, whereby, research comes first.

The future of IASC looks bleak as the analysis of attendance to the last few conferences indicate the presence of a substantial “floating” membership and an increasing number of young researchers, junior faculty members and “free riding” old members. The situation is exacerbated by the appearance on the international scene of new streamlined associations that have taken up interests and topics that are similar to those of IASC and have the potential to absorb the young and upcoming researchers as they build up their career paths. It is the sprouting up of these new networks (such as Association for Evolutionary Economics; Association of Environmental and Resource Economists, etc) that will in the long-run erode the pivotal role that IASC plays in the study of the commons if nothing is done to protect IASC.

The analysis of attendance to the conferences also reveals the existence of a window of opportunity that could be utilised to promote or enhance capacity building among researchers in the study of commons. This is the appearance of foundations and donor organizations that support large policy and practice-based projects, especially in developing countries, which are relevant to IASC’s goals. These organisations could be used to facilitate the nurturing of the young and innovative researchers to remain in their fields of research that will contribute to the IASC’s goals. It is tempting at this stage to relate what is happening with IASC to what happens

with an “open-access” commons. IASC has practically displayed the concept of open-access commons and its consequences, considering the fact that its membership has been open to all.

However, this does not mean that IASC will go down the drain the Hardin way. There is a lesson that can be learnt from an article Feeny, Berkes, McCay and Acheson wrote in 1990 titled “The Tragedy of the Commons: Twenty-Two Years Later”. In the article, they disagreed with Hardin and said the “tragedy” may start, but the outcomes will not always be the same. They further criticised Hardin by saying that his theory overlooked cultural factors, which would influence these resource users to come together after several years of declining resources, to seek ways on how to control the decline, and agree upon a set of rules of conduct, that would effectively limit exploitation. This is indeed the case with IASC now, the tragedy may have started, but the people like Erling and Sanjeev have noticed it and are flagging the problem to alert other members of the potential tragedy.

In my view, I feel this is the right time to seriously start thinking on what needs to be done to avoid the tragedy. As Erling and Sanjeev put it, it may be an unduly pessimistic scenario to some readers, but I find this to be one of the diagnostic features of the IASC sickness that calls for attention from all members. This response essay is meant to echo the concerns raised in the main article, and emphasize the need for IASC to focus on its original goals of research while at the same time providing a forum for the dissemination of research findings to various stakeholders.

sdonda@sdpn.org.mw