

# **CPR FORUM** *Europe Regional Report*

## **Building the European Commons: Report of the IASCP Europe Regional Meeting Report**

**Giangiacoimo Bravo and Tine De Moor**  
**IASCP Europe, Regional Meeting Organisers**

The European Branch meeting of the IASCP in Brescia meeting is behind us, and now it's time to sit down and reflect. It may be easier to start with some figures. About 80 people, coming from most of European countries and a number of extra-European ones, joined us in Brescia and, throughout the two days of the meeting opened by Lin Ostrom's keynote speech on "Multiple methods for studying collective action", over 60 papers were presented. That was much more than initially forecasted on the basis of European participation to the IASCP global meetings over the past few years. The success makes us therefore confident about the healthy status of common-pool resource research in Europe, and that is very good news.

The conference theme and sub-themes were set broad enough to capture not only CPR-scholars and practitioners, but also environmental economists, law scholars and, generally speaking, people interested in natural resources management and ecology. Participant culture and competences were consequently rather mixed and often complementary, a situation not infrequent in IASCP-meetings (it actually represents one of the strengths of the association!). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of participants, a significant part of the papers presented during the conference were deeply rooted in some of the "good old topics" of CPR-research: forestry, pastures, and water management.

The subtitle of the conference "From open fields to open spaces" was intended to attract a wide variety of commons- researchers, including historians, as the commons have a long history in Europe and this would allow us to look more closely at the very-long-term developments of commons. A significant number of historical cases and overviews that has been presented at the conference showed that it is possible though not easy to cover such long stretches of time, by means of detailed case-studies or regional overviews. These papers showed several problems which can be expected when digging into the history of the commons. First of all, the source material is usually a lot scarcer than in contemporary commons studies. Secondly, the type of source material does not always allow us to use the same methods of analysis as those that are being used for the contemporary commons.

Thirdly, the integration of theoretical models proves to be difficult, though not impossible. The main reason for this is terminological fuzziness. A term like "the commons" has been used for a variety of forms of resources in different places and periods, and by a large number of scientific disciplines. The term had been used in England for hundreds of years, but what it refers to in that context differs significantly from for example what is usually understood by those researching knowledge as a "commons". One of the most important conclusions of this interdisciplinary meeting therefore is that there is still a need for more terminological clarity among all social scientists working on the commons.

A relevant number of papers dealt with topics related to the conditions of CPRs in developed countries, which was not surprising considering the focus upon Europe. Within this set, a first group investigated a specific European problem: the transition process in post-socialist countries. What emerged is a widespread mistrust between stakeholders and public officials and a difficult process of local management institution building, after the destruction of the traditional ones during the socialist period. However, the picture is more mixed than imagined. Some studies presented indeed interesting cases where the transition created benefits for the local population and a general process of land restitution to peasants and land user (even if sometimes hardly exploited by local politicians and corrupt officials). A second group of papers dealt with the new uses of traditional natural commons, especially in relation with the provision of ecological services. Natural resources and, more specifically, natural commons are today multifunctional: they provide food and raw materials (like fish or timber), tourism and leisure areas, but also grant a number of ecological services that humans and other living beings need for their physical existence (e.g. the capture of solar energy, the regulation of the atmosphere composition, the control of soil erosion, the regulation of the water cycle, etc.). In addition, they are often a source of biodiversity and they sometimes possess a significant aesthetical and cultural value. The multifunctionality of the commons is a source of difficulty for their management, especially due to the number and the heterogeneity of interests of the stakeholders. However, interesting comanagement and multi-level management experiences are on the way, and this topic is certainly a new and exciting one.

A third group of papers converged on the “Knowledge Commons” theme. The interest for knowledge and internet-based commons is rapidly growing and this is turning out to be a crucial issue for researchers (especially the young ones) in developed countries. During the conference two entire sessions plus a couple of other papers discussed the topic. Are knowledge commons public goods or CPRs? It depends on a number of factors, including the specificity of the resource system and of its artificial infrastructure (if present). What is certain is that, however immaterial, knowledge commons need robust and well-developed regulation schemes in order to avoid underprovision, piracy and other harmful behaviors. The interplay between public and private actors is often crucial for the development of those institutions, whose design principles present both similarities and differences with the traditional commons.

Notwithstanding the number of the papers presented and the wide range of the interests they covered, at least two important topics were nearly absent from the conference. The first one is one of the traditional major topics in CPR-research: fisheries. Only two papers dealt with this theme, one studying the changes in Taiwan and one the management of inshore fisheries in a small Southern Italian community. The low interest of European scholars in fisheries is rather surprising given both the importance that the topic has for CPR-research, its role in the EU common policy and the problems this institution is facing to govern its seas and fisheries. Is it actually the bureaucratization and the centralization of the EU fishery policy that discourages researchers to deal with the topic? It may be. Still the small number of papers covering this theme was one of the weaknesses of the meeting.

The second missing theme in the conference was the issue of the global commons: only one single paper dealt with this topic. This was unexpected for at least two reasons. First, global

commons, especially those linked with climate change issues, are at present a “hot” topic in international research in a number of different disciplines.

Why CPRs students are not prone to participate? Second, Europe is supposed to be a chief actor in fostering the development of global institutions for global change mitigation. It has been one of the leading actors in the actualization of the Kyoto-protocol (and it plays, at present, the same role in the bargaining process for the post-2012 phase) and first developed a continental-scale carbon emission permit trade market.

There may be a good reason indeed for this lack of interest in this topic. Despite some remarkable advancements, global commons are hard to confront with the standard CPR approach. The actors are too diverse and heterogeneous, the interests are exceedingly diverse, the conceptual status of the “resources” themselves is hard to define. On the other hand, the IASCP society in general is convinced that global resources are actual commons. The theory, developed mainly on small-scale, traditional resources should be further extended and developed in order to include also ecosystem-scale resources. New research on the global institution building process is not only possible, but may represent a fundamental help for the building itself of both robust and successful institutions. This is a great challenge for CPR students.

Will we be able to confront it?

At a meeting the future of the now established European network was discussed, in the presence of Michelle Curtain. The European branch meeting was attended by 25 people. Several possible initiatives were mentioned, among others the organisation of another European meeting either in 2007 or 2009. One organization showed interest in organising the biennial meeting in 2008 in Europe, which was an explicit request of the IASCP-council. No explicit institutional structure was set-up to organise future activities of the European Branch of the IASCP, but clearly a healthy basis for further intensive cooperation among commons-researchers within Europe, and among those working on European commons has been laid by the conference in Brescia.

For the time being, the conference website <http://iascpeurope.eco.unibs.it/> will continue to act as a virtual meeting point for the European scholars and practitioners of the commons. On a nonregular and informal basis messages are sent to the participants of the conference and others by the former conference organisers. If you feel like making use of this possibility, send us your messages and requests.

[tine.Demoor@let.uu.nl](mailto:tine.Demoor@let.uu.nl)  
[gbravo@eco.unibs.it](mailto:gbravo@eco.unibs.it)