

# COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

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

## **Common challenges - policy, theory and voice**

**Bruce Currie-Alder**

**Senior Policy Analyst, International Development Research Centre, (IDRC) , Canada**

Berge and Prakash reflect on the role of IASC in light of the inclusion of commons research in other fora and increasing diversity in the IASC membership. Both of these trends are to be rejoiced yet force us to ponder the Association’s future directions. Two decades of IASC have seen the commons transformed from a tragedy into an opportunity, from a rogue line of research into accepted practice. Given this success, one IASC’s conferences as part of these projects. This creates interest, diversity and breadth of participation at conferences, but it also means there is a substantial “floating” membership and turnover in participation from one conference to the next option is to simply disband IASC and allow its members to gravitate to other fora. Yet while the idea of the commons has gained currency elsewhere, the Association lies at the intersection of research and practice. To build on this position over the next two decades, IASC must understand how commons research is used, link practice back into theory, and strengthen the voices of Southern members.

First, IASC needs to understand how commons research is used. From the first critiques of Hardin’s thesis, commons research has intended to inform policies that affect positive change in the quality of the commons and the lives of people that depend on them. Common property is a set of socially-evolved institutions to manage resources, thus commons research is inherently an applied field that involves people and policies. Much of attention has focused on understanding how existing institutions manage and maintain commons; yet little attention has been paid to how commons research is used, by whom, and to what purpose. How does IASC connect to the demand-side for research? How do policymakers learn about the commons? How do communities that depend on commons digest and act upon research? Taken seriously, such questions carry implications for how IASC structures and sets the agenda for its conferences. While other professional associations respond to pressures to ‘publish or perish’, IASC should encourage members to put research into use in order to enrich the commons. Good research and theory must lead to good practice.

Second, IASC must plug practice back into theory. The digital library of the commons contains numerous case studies, covering most regions of the world (the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia are under-represented). Yet the rate of growth in case studies has not been matched by efforts to synthesis experience and build upon existing commons theory. The line between researcher and practitioner can and does blur, and the same people exercise these roles at different times in their career. Case studies leap from theory into the study of practice, while many members have themselves become policymakers. Yet the reverse linkage tends to be weaker. Particularly troubling is inability of commons theory to address how to engage settings where enabling conditions are not present, and the mismatch between the slow task of setting up new institutions and the limited timescale of available research funding.

IASC needs to feed practice back into theory, and reinvest in the theoretical foundation of commons research. One starting point is methods for commons research, such as controlled experiments to compare baseline data with changes in the quality of commons over time, as well as changes in the lives of people that depend on such commons. In short, practice must shape theory.

Third, IASC should strive to strengthen the voices of its members in the South. The increasing diversity within the IASC membership includes a growing number of members based in developing countries. These members connect IASC to a diversity of local realities. The insights gathered from such settings help us to learn what works and what does not; to distinguish useful insights from that which is context-dependent. Commons theory can only be enriched through testing under a variety of social, economic and biophysical conditions. Where many parts of Europe and North America have already been enclosed, it is in developing countries where the commons are most under siege and the opportunities to put research into use are greatest.

Research cannot be passive when the lives of poor women and men depend on the quality of, and access to, the commons. IASC should enable practitioners in the South to develop their own conceptual understanding of the commons, and act as a platform for Southern voices to be heard within the global policy debates on the commons.

Berge and Prakash are also concerned about the role of the IASC membership and its future. They call for more active participation beyond regional and global conferences and the CPR digest. This suggests an opportunity for members to engage in an ongoing dialogue through blogging or wikis on the IASC website. Embracing such technologies can capture some of the energy of the networking that occurs spontaneously at the conferences. Other options include facilitated discussions on the challenges mentioned above. IASC could also seek to arrange peer-to-peer mentoring among members with different locations, backgrounds or levels of experience. IASC does face an issue of succession planning. As original members approach retirement, there is a need to identify who and where are our younger members. What they are doing, and how to best engage and support them? Career paths in commons research are seldom linear, and will be less so in the future. There is a role for IASC in brokering mentoring relationships among members at different stages in their career in order to retain and nurture promising young members. An IASC focused on how research is used, linking practice back into theory, generating insights for both researchers and practitioners, which is also strengthening the voices of Southern members is an association I want to be a part of.

### **Additional Reading:**

Julius Court and Simon Maxwell (2006) *Policy entrepreneurship for poverty reduction*. Warwickshire, UK: ODI and Practical Action Publishing.

Fred Carden (2005) Capacities, contexts, conditions: the influence of IDRC - supported research on policy processes. *Evaluation Highlight no. 5* [online] [www.idrc.ca/evaluation](http://www.idrc.ca/evaluation)

Jeffrey Sayer and Bruce Campbell (2003) *The Science of sustainable development*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Stephen Tyler (2006) *Comanagement of natural resources: local learning for poverty reduction*. Ottawa, Canada: IDRC [online] [http://www.idrc.ca/in\\_focus\\_comanagement/](http://www.idrc.ca/in_focus_comanagement/)

[bcurrie-alder@idrc.ca](mailto:bcurrie-alder@idrc.ca)