

COMMONS FORUM *Commentary*

Our Association Is ...

Erling Berge

**Past President, IASCP; Professor, Department of Sociology and Political Science,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology**

Sanjeev Prakash

Senior Researcher, University of Bergen, Norway

IASC is a remarkable association in many ways. Pioneering a new area of cross-disciplinary research, it has deliberated over and realigned its mandate better to serve its core interests and goals. It continues to organise some memorable international and regional conferences. It has consistently broadened and diversified its membership base. And, in the process, it has probably helped to nurture a new breed of young professionals. Speaking on a personal level, few other associational gatherings of between 500-1,000 participants so effectively reproduce the informal intimacy of small groups — which can be both refreshing and conducive to discussion and sharing between persons of diverse backgrounds, cultures and interests — as do the biannual meetings of the IASC.

Yet (as we know), as an association broadens its scope and size, it also expands its heterogeneity — the diversity of stakeholder interests, perspectives, and professional backgrounds that seek representation in its forums and executive bodies. Our Association continues to witness an expansion from the original, research oriented membership to include an increasing number of practitioners, organisational representatives and policymakers. While this expanding diversity may be advantageous in furthering the Association's influence and purposes, how the transformation of membership will affect our collective priorities, internal democracy, organisational character and, not least, power structure, are matters that should concern us all. The International Association for the Study of Commons started primarily as a network of various social science researchers (including economists) with an interest in natural resources. But also a few natural scientists with an interest in people were part of the network from the start. The work of its members and that of others ultimately transformed the field of commons studies into a broad, coherent platform for theoretical and applied research as well as policy analysis and prescription. As Past-President Narpat Jodha puts it in the first issue of *The Commons Digest*, through its conceptual and empirical work IASC helped replace the dominant “tragedy of the commons” scenario with an “opportunity of the commons” paradigm. Now the Association has broadened its substantive field from the study of environmental resources managed as common property to include all commons, tangible and intangible. Simultaneously, some members have engaged with emerging research fields relating to the global ‘commons’ (though this has generated at least some, probably healthy, controversy).

As our substantive horizons broaden we have simultaneously welcomed new kinds of members — policymakers, donor representatives, and others whose primary fields are in practice and policy. This expansion will bring into the Association more diversity, varied experience and

differentiated perspectives (though being very diverse and international right from the early 1990s, we were not lacking here!). But the same trend also raises many issues about the roles of researchers and practitioners that, we feel, need to be reflected on and discussed in relation to the Association's core aims.

One key issue concerns continuity and marginalization of parts of the membership. General meetings of the Association are structured around its conferences, which are primarily about presenting research papers and results and so are dominated by researchers. Practitioners and policy people may hop across sessions and even participate in some, but they are not at centre stage. Indeed, some might argue that practitioners are thus being marginalized at the conferences. Beneath the surface, however, there is a different dynamic at play. Many foundations and donor organizations support large policy and practice-based projects, mostly in developing countries, which are relevant to IASC's goals. Researchers employed by such projects usually find support to attend 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.

Another group of "floating" members consists of young researchers and junior faculty members from North America and Europe. With limited travel funding, they must choose the conferences they attend carefully. Most people in this group attend an IASC conference only when they are working on a related project and believe they will derive substantial benefit from travelling the long distances that are often involved. For many of this group also, the first IASC experience may well be the last. So, while many former members who return to IASC's conferences after a longish gap are accused of "free riding" (flippantly, we hope!), maintaining a consistent, unbroken membership in the Association can be an acute problem for many. Clearly, some of the issues of sporadic, lapsed or just plain lack of membership, so often mentioned at conferences, are related to this problem. If this is the case for junior faculty and research project staff, what about the senior researchers? It is true that quite a few of them have managed to return to the Association's conferences over the years, probably by learning to juggle with complex itineraries. However, funding for basic, long-term research on the commons, which some of them have successfully led over recent years, remains scarce and uncertain. Most such research exists in a handful of places, mainly in the USA and Canada. And senior researchers, inevitably, get older; many of ours may soon retire. So it would seem from the demographics of our Association that the research core is waning. Will practitioners and applied research project staff be able to fill this gap? Or do we require structures and incentives to retain and nurture our best researchers, especially the promising young ones?

Meanwhile, many of the young, innovative researchers who most often provide the fresh ideas and perspectives that the Association should value may begin to find it more beneficial to take their work to other conferences. As our interdisciplinary approach and theoretical paradigms have gained acceptance mainstream associations have taken up topics close to our interests (for example, The European Association of Agricultural Economists), new specialised associations have taken parts of our topics and develop in new directions (International Society for New Institutional Economics (ISNIE)), and innovative workshops and specialised conferences abound: such as the workshops "Reinventing trust, collaboration and compliance in social

systems” (April 2006) and “Various Approaches to Assessing the Evolution and Impact of Alternative Institutional Structures” (March 2007).

As the field of commons research broadens in all its diverse manifestations, will IASC perhaps be seen by such new networks as no longer a pivotal or novel enterprise, but just another group of researchers aging along with their association? We hope not. Our perspective may seem an unduly pessimistic scenario to some readers. Perhaps the trends we have mentioned will change soon, or at least not peak in the same phase. For an association that values the engagement of its membership, not merely once every two years or so, but throughout its life and days, there is enough here to seriously consider and reflect upon. This contribution is intended as a small first step in that direction.

Erling.Berge@svt.ntnu.no

Sanjeev.Prakash@sfu.uib.no