

A Strategy for the Commons

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Introduction

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of Garrett Hardin's (1968) article "The Tragedy of the Commons." In some ways the real "tragedy of the commons" was the damage that has been done due to simplistic belief in the Tragedy of the Commons and its inevitability, particularly ill-informed policies of privatization or state take-over of resources. We now know that the "tragedy" is not inevitable. But one of the positive outcomes of that article has been that it has prompted a number of *serious* studies of the commons.

IASC has a lot to be proud of, in terms of both *practical scholarship* and *scholarly practice* that cuts across disciplines, countries, and resources. There is a lot we have learned, and our members have been able to put that knowledge to use in protecting and improving the condition of the commons and those who depend on the commons for their livelihoods.

But this is not the time to rest on our laurels. There are too many remaining challenges to the commons, and new challenges emerging, as we have heard these past few days. With these challenges come new opportunities, as well.

What we need is a "Strategy for the Commons".

Let me first review some of these challenges and opportunities, and then turn to what I think are important elements of a strategic response.

Challenges: Threats and Opportunities

We have abundant reminder this week, both in the conference and in the news, that many local commons are under threat. I realize that this is nothing new—we've had examples of almost 500 years of enclosures of one type or another, in this country alone. But the processes are accelerating as dramatically higher food and fuel prices create increased demand for land to produce both food and agrofuels. The price of rice, for example, has doubled in the last five months, and many other key food prices have been increasing rapidly. While enclosures of the commons may lead to intensification of production of these commodities, we also need to ask at what cost, and to whom? In many cases it is the very poorest people who lose out, and many subsistence, environmental, and even spiritual values that are hard to quantify and price are lost.

It isn't just at the local level: we also have growing evidence of global commons under threat. The IASC has been addressing global commons issues since at least 1996, but it is good that it is a focal point of this conference. The atmospheric commons is one of the most critical examples, going beyond loss of air quality to wholesale climate change. The collapse of ocean fisheries also calls for urgent attention, as does the loss of genetic resources. The loss of biodiversity in terms of wild species of flora and fauna does receive some attention, but loss of agrobiodiversity is also a matter for serious concern, as the local landraces and "orphan crops" like leafy vegetables, roots, tubers, or medicinal plants are lost. This is part of our common human heritage, and can have serious repercussions for the resilience of world food systems.

Let's look for a minute at some of the challenges posed by the "new commons". Our name change and the expansion of our mission to include these other types of commons has opened us to concern with these issues, but also to further opportunities to learn across resources. Again, in both the news and the papers of this conference we have examples of: enclosure (and expansion) of urban parks, gardens, and neighborhood improvements; ICTs (information communications technology)-related commons such as bandwidth for internet and cell phones, or the internet itself; debates over intellectual property rights over music, crafts, books or text on the internet, and even genetic resources.

Information and knowledge open up whole new realms for exploration of the commons. In April this year I attended an international conference on agricultural innovation systems. People at this meeting are dealing with issues like how to foster and spread innovation—whether by farmers, scientists, businesses, or partnerships of these. Increasingly, there are group-based approaches to not only extension information systems, but also participatory plant breeding or other types of knowledge generation and application. I was struck by how relevant the analyses of the commons are for addressing the problems with which they are grappling, and when I mentioned some of what we have found about managing commons, I got a lot of requests to point them to this literature, and grateful responses saying how useful this is.

The list goes on, but let me now turn to what I mean by a Strategy for the Commons.

A Strategy for the Commons

Confronted with these challenges, we can either sit back and bemoan the "tragedy of the commons," or we can bemoan the loss of the commons, whether local or global, "old", or "new", or we can try to do something about it. But what?

Now I am not going to suggest any kinds of panaceas, simple solutions, and I don't mean to imply that any of these apply everywhere. But I do suggest that elements of this strategy for the commons include:

- Continue the learning
- Share our knowledge
- Put it to use

As IASC and as individual members we will each play different roles in this, but let us look at the components of each of these elements, and how they interconnect.

Continue the learning: across disciplines, resources and countries. It is quite appropriate that our new acronym spells out “I ASK.” Study both successes and failures. Look for underlying principles as well as local specificities. Think about what lessons will apply to the next situation, especially to the “new commons.”

I don't see this learning as being in conflict with action. As an applied researcher myself, I firmly believe that sound theory and research methods are critical for getting a better understanding of what is going on as a basis for policies and practice. But I've also found that many of the best theoretical insights (and many methodological innovations) come from engaging with people in the field, which forces us to confront the limitations of our pared-down conceptual models.

That's also often the most fun part. Last year, right at this time, I was back in Sananeri, the irrigation tank in India where I began my study of the commons, 25 years before (which, in turn, was right near my home town where I grew up). It reminded me of how exciting that feeling of discovery was. I had been hearing about the famous farmer managed irrigation systems in Bali and Nepal, but was told they didn't exist in India, and this tank was it was government managed, but I was curious about how the tanks operated, so I did some interviews before starting on what was to be the “real” topic of my masters' thesis. Imagine that feeling of discovering a very active local association managing the tank, and then, as I dug deeper, to find out that what I had been taught about the core of irrigation association activities was incomplete, because it had focused only on the internal activities, and not the efforts the group made to acquire water or liase with (lobby) the state.

But as exciting as that learning can be, it can't end there. We need to:

Share our knowledge. Certainly among our membership, but also more broadly. The Commons Digest and the International Journal of the Commons are good tools for this. I realize that it's ironic that the IASC, with so many scholars of the commons who know all about free rider problems, make our materials available as open access, but the reason is that we believe it is essential to share our knowledge on these issues so that we can build on each other's work and put it to use for addressing the problems and seizing the opportunities that the commons present. *This knowledge is too precious to hoard.*

We also need other ways to share this knowledge outside our Association. I ask each of you to look for opportunities to disseminate an understanding of the commons. Each of you is a member of other communities of practice, and can serve as a bridge, a transmission point, a boundary spanner.

Put our knowledge to use. I know many of us are engaged in direct work with local communities to enhance management of the commons, or providing information, such as about the extent or “value” of the commons (whether in economic, environmental, or other terms), and in many cases also working with communities to advocate for their rights,

We also have a lot to offer to help those working on global commons challenges. And if they don’t seek us out, we shouldn’t be shy about putting forward what we have learned and how it can be used. That requires going out to where they are: beyond our own publications to the things they read or pay attention to, such as: briefs that trade in some of the scholarly language for understandability by a wider audience, and which relate to the global issues they are grappling with; and contact with the media (which may also involve some of those trade-offs). But we also need to address policy at various levels. Let me give some examples.

We have heard this week about efforts in England to advocate for stronger legal rights for the commons, both on behalf of individual local commoners and for the broader public interest. The 2006 Commons Act is a very important accomplishment in this regard. But as we’ve also heard, the law is (almost) nothing without implementation, and that requires a lot of work on the part of national government departments, local government bodies, commons councils, and members of the communities, who will exercise their duties as well as their rights.

For those who wonder whether our association’s name change--dropping the “property” from our name—implies any less commitment to work on property rights, let me assure you that it doesn’t. Owen Lynch’s work in a number of countries provides an approach in working for legal reforms to strengthen community-based property rights. He notes that: “As an initial step, this can be accomplished by creating a legal presumption of local community ownership wherever such evidence exists.” (CIEL 2002: 7) But he also notes that private rights are often stronger than public or “commons” rights, which are easier to expropriate or reallocate without due process and compensation. Rather having individual privatization, collective and community-based rights can be legally recognized as private property rights, which would give the right-holders more leverage with outside interests, including government or rival claimants. Such legal recognition can also strengthen community bargaining power with businesses that might provide capital, knowledge, or market access so that the community gets a higher share of the value of the product, enhancing both their livelihoods and their prestige. These issues

are becoming even more important with the rise of carbon markets, as commons with trees become more valuable, and communities' rights to their carbon and their trees need to be recognized and respected.

But these kinds of legal protection for the commons and commoners often require changes in existing legislation, practice, and even in the mindset of officials, so policy action is necessary. In some cases it will be quite challenging to get governments to be willing to provide such protection, and in other cases they are already willing, and looking for ideas of how this can be done. In either case, I think we can play an important role.

Some of us may work within governments to strengthen protection or enhancement of the commons in national policies or their implementation. Others may advocate for attention to the commons to be included in global treaties, whether in trade agreements, genetic resource policies, climate protocols, or even human rights treaties.

I won't say it is easy to engage with policy, or that we'll always get it right. It's usually easier to criticize than to create, and for many of us, our training stresses critical thinking. It can be scary. But if we don't help shape policy, others will, and they are likely to have less understanding of the commons.

After doing the study of Sananeri tank, I was involved in some of the work that tried to synthesize across cases of farmer managed irrigation, and began to challenge the World Bank and other development agencies for irrigation projects that vested all authority in the state, rather than building in farmer participation and even management of the systems. So it was with a lot of trepidation that I found out that "my tank", Sananeri, had been included in an European Union project for tank rehabilitation, that had required the registration of a tank association in each site, and gave a matching grant to support the association's activities. My visit last year was over a decade after that project, and I was nervous about what that had done to the tank. Having become a bit jaded about the outcome of development projects over the intervening years, imagine my pleasant surprise to find that this (and cell phones) had actually made it much easier for the association to operate. The involvement of a local university and NGO in "organizing farmers" under the project had certainly contributed to the good outcomes. There were, however, some indications that there might be some equity problems resulting, either from this policy or from other changes going on in the area. Some of my Indian collaborators have been investigating, and just this week I got the preliminary results. So the cycle continues... from research, to policy, to research on the outcomes of policy...to better policy?

Being strategic about having a policy impact also means forging appropriate partnerships, which may be with civil society organizations, governments, aid agencies, or even the private sector. For example, shall we accept Bakary Kante's offer to forge a partnership between UNEP and IASC to address some of the combined challenges of sustainability, linking environment to poverty reduction?

Conclusion

These are some of the elements of being strategic to defend and enhance the commons.

The IASC is itself a commons. Whether we achieve anything depends on what we all contribute, but I also think that there is a kind of multiplier effect, when we pool our efforts. So let me end with an invitation, a call to all of you to contact members of the council or secretariat if you have ideas that you would like to take forward.

I may be dreaming, but I would like to see that when we meet again in two years, the widespread connotation of the "commons" is not a tragic relic of the past, but a vibrant hope for our shared future. And furthermore, that as an association and as individuals, we will have contributed to making this happen.

References:

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