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A Stronger Post-COVID IIAS

Philippe Peycam



With this note, I would like to share with our readers how IIAS, as a team, is emerging from the COVID 'congelation' period to turn into a stronger and more capable organization than it was even before the pandemic struck.

In an earlier note, I stressed how the time of the strict confinements in the Netherlands was a period when all our colleagues were scattered in their respective homes, with no convivial space possible for them to meet or interact except for virtual online gatherings. During that trying time, we began to set about a new model of internal communication and discussions around thematic working groups. The system consisted in dispatching members of the team around a number of "services" dispensed by IIAS. This led us to further refine the list of operational "functions" of the Institute as follows: Communication & Dissemination, Research (facilitation), Education (facilitation), Network & Community Development, Capacity Building, and Civic Engagements.

From our respective homes, we began to hold meetings around these themes. As we got used to these new formats of exchange, we realized that what was at first a rather artificial mode of interaction became a new mode of inclusive participation in our internal decision-making processes. To this end, we sought to mobilize everyone to become a key part in this new mode of engagement.

With the slow physical reopening of the Institute, we are continuing with that model, now strengthened by regular staff meetings. Within our team, there is now a common recognition of the critical importance of each of these broad functions of IIAS. We also recognize a natural need to address them collectively, especially because of their close interconnection with each other. This function-based participatory model is now taking hold and is leading to a new way to envision IIAS' future plans and operations.

One thing that transpired from our discussions is, indeed, the recognition that, as members of the team, we could not just operate in isolation and that some of IIAS' most known initiatives could serve as catalysts for other associated projects to follow. In fact,

each of the Institute's programmatic services or functions corresponds to one or two of what I would call "flagship project(s)." These include the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), the Newsletter, the IIAS International Fellowship Programme, the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) initiative, and many more.

The emergent working configuration is, therefore, built around autonomous yet overlapping programmatic and operational clusters with colleagues capable of functioning at their own tempo whilst exchanging with each other. All of this is done with the shared knowledge that each cluster is closely dependent on the others. For an institute seeking to operate as an open clearing house for academic endeavors "on, in and with Asia in the world," this dynamic means that many of IIAS' traditional projects can consolidate whilst acquiring a broader spectrum of action.

ICAS 12 played an important role in this evolution. The all-online event which ran for five days between August 23-28 and welcomed 1500 participants online served as the dynamizing occasion that helped IIAS and its team lift themselves out of COVID. Of course, we all missed the chance to gather in the exceptional environment of Kyoto with our partners at Kyoto Seika University and the usual cohorts of ICAS contributors from the five continents. The energy and vibrancy found in every previous ICAS was nonetheless there, tangible. Not only was the event a success, proving that, even virtually, a remarkable number of colleagues and partners sought to take part in the unique ICAS experience. The event had another positive impact as well, this time for the IIAS team. For one full week, all the Institute's members were mobilized. They were inspired by the ICAS core team, who often sat at their desks from very early in the morning until very late at night. As a collective brought back to in-person group life, we felt the need to physically re-populate the office building, to work, and to be together.

On this occasion, the other IIAS initiatives that had been virtually consolidating before the ICAS 12 event also came to light, showing how IIAS was once again ready to embrace a new context, even when inter-regional travel remains very difficult. The Newsletter previous issue

(#89), which appeared right during ICAS, under the editorship of Paramita Paul and Benjamin Linder, is one example of IIAS' resilience.

Following ICAS 12, an inspiring team-scale exchange over the role of the Newsletter and its multiple ancillary communication and dissemination activities was held. Paramita and Ben presented a number of new activities and communication formats that will be gradually introduced. A follow-up meeting, focusing this time on books – book prizes, book talks, book reviews, book series – is to be planned shortly. Likewise, we recently initiated a cross-section discussion on ways to revamp the IIAS fellowship programme to better respond to the changing academic scene. This development will also be gradual, but it will eventually be presented to all the IIAS followers. In a similar vein, the experience of successfully running an ICAS convention online has become an occasion to collectively reflect on the model of these big academic events going forward. Last but not least, the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) and Southeast Asia Neighborhood Network (SEANNET) programmes, hampered for a long time by the impossibility for people to meet "on site," benefited tremendously from the ICAS platform for advancing their agenda. In both cases, new steps have been or are being taken to further institutionalize their pedagogical model across their respective consortiums.

All of these internal IIAS developments are very much works in progress. The collective self-assessment process they require will take the time that is needed to come to full fruition. Moreover, new layouts and consolidations not only call for discussions among IIAS members but also with our partners in Asia, Europe, and beyond. Indeed, so much depends on our capacity to re-imagine "Asian Studies" together in an always more collaborative, locally situated, globally connected, multi-centered fashion.

In the end, I am confident that IIAS will come out stronger from the COVID crisis, with its mission clearer and the instruments of its engagement more effective to reach always more people and partners. I will report again on these changes in due course.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS