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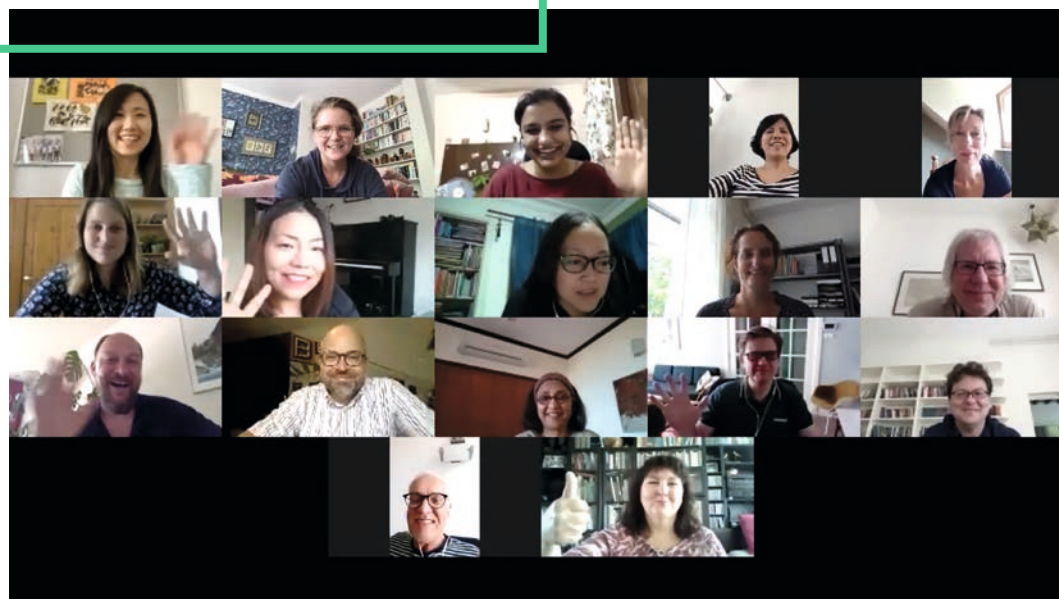
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# Nurturing community during COVID-19

Philippe Peycam



Below: IIAS staff keeping in touch through online meetings.

Amidst the anxieties and grief brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, IIAS – a mediating space for dialogue and generation of knowledge on, in and with Asia – is witnessing the disruption of many of its activities and plans. Many programmed events have been either cancelled or postponed indefinitely. Our sense of purpose and way of functioning as a global-local platform of engaged scholarship is being put to the test. Yet, with the little hindsight we already have, I can say that the confinement period, if at first unsettling, is somehow turning into a meaningful experience for us. We, like so many other organisations all around the world, have had no choice but to brace ourselves and to reflect upon our mission and methods. To what extent can IIAS's mode of functioning withstand the challenges of navigating the present crisis and its future unfolding?

To ensure that the IIAS team would not turn into an assortment of scattered colleagues, left to work on their separate tasks in isolation, our first decision was to organise everyone into virtual 'working groups', with the aim to synchronise our actions and shape them into broader collective efforts. One of the underlying issues we sought to address was the extent to which our actions would respond to the emerging needs and aspirations of not only the staff, but also the resident and incoming fellows, project partners and colleagues at large, that might result from the COVID crisis.

National borders were closed and international travel was brought to a near-complete standstill. Yet, this new exploration of the local, at the expense of what had perhaps become an addictive dependence on the global, may paradoxically not necessarily mean the end to universally framed concerns and interests. On the contrary, thanks mainly to social and digital media, people and communities have become even more receptive, more dependent on each other, a realisation reinforced by the fact that each and every region of the world has experienced the crisis almost simultaneously. An urge to return to a simpler approach to the basic elements of life has been coupled with an enhanced desire to transcend cultures and geographies around shared values and aspirations. The recent demonstrations across the world – from Tokyo to Santiago, from Delhi to London – against systemic racism, following the tragic killing of George Floyd in the United States, is an example of the emergence of this new collective consciousness.

I see this as pertinent to a shared desire for basic solidarity – between generations, between societies and segments of society – a sentiment born out of the threat of a socially blind virus. In terms of a human life, the idea is emerging of a common shared space that cannot be infringed upon for narrow economic or power gains, a basic realm that

concentrates on the value of a dignified life in its multiple expressions. This idea is certainly compounded by the sentiment that COVID is just one of nature's responses to human hubris, and that it is yet another warning against a global ecological crisis that is ahead of us. Economic and social disparities may appear less acceptable now, especially when the effects of the virus tend to reinforce them, with large swaths of society, in both the global North and South, left without jobs, education or healthcare. Observing the fact that service providers hitherto deemed subalterns – nurses, cleaners, carers, farmers, postal workers, and so forth – enabled us to continue to live our lives under lockdown, is the kind of collective realisation that is bound to drastically alter our perceptions of the world, of the role of youth, of the falsity of artificial structures, and the space of action and reflection that is needed to recalibrate social relations at large.

Against these needs and aspirations arising from a new urgency impinging upon both global and local actors, IIAS stands as a model of engaged scholarship. The institute has long taken steps that in the present context have become even more relevant: initiate and assist programmes that instil inclusive local grounding while supporting meaningful interactions at the global level; and make a commitment to a sense of commonality in which differences are respected while mutual understanding through reasoned thinking is sought after. IIAS's 'touch' is its capacity to reach out to human experiences, wherever they are, without the mediation of artificial boundaries or hierarchies imposed by disciplinary, institutional or national structures.

What now appears even more essential is IIAS's combined sets of approaches: at the same time a research facilitator, a network builder, a pedagogical enabler, a cross-sector knowledge disseminator and a promoter of dialogue between cultures and communities. For instance, when put together, the IIAS fellowships, *in situ* graduate schools, and publication and dissemination instruments, define IIAS's role as a facilitator of research. Likewise, the institute's border-transcending initiatives link academic endeavours with other practices of knowledge in such a way that they enrich each other's texture; initiatives such as the pioneering pedagogical model developed by the programme 'Humanities across Borders' (HaB), or the direct civic interventions enacted by the institute-coordinated Southeast Asia Neighborhoods Network (SEANNET).

Within the organisation, a number of post-COVID resolutions are what will help IIAS to further its mission and unique methodology. I see them growing around already existing strengths of the institute:

- **From collaboration to mutualisation:** allowing other partners and projects to (reciprocally) use the platforms and

networks we have created so as to deepen each other's experience and mission.

- **Systematically anchoring activities in contexts,** at regional, national, and local levels, based on respect for the diversity of conditions and an equal belief in trans-local trans-cultural understanding.
- **Moving beyond the narrowly individualistic, fragmented model of scholarship** through processes of collective deliberation around themes that have the potential to produce transformative shared outcomes.
- **Innovation through creative disruption** by bringing into contact peoples, ideas and approaches otherwise unlikely to interrelate; to support 'experiential' meeting formats that can instil new debates, and encourage new consciousness or solutions.
- **Consciously choreograph** these multiple innovations-disruptions to create conducive situations for new conviviality, new meanings, new understandings.

One word can sum up IIAS's post-COVID method of action and resolve, rarely used for an academic institution: *community*, or the art of *community formation* and *community nurturing*. Concretely this means that we at IIAS believe that people will still want to meet in person, to discover, exchange and learn to 'unlock' themselves. They will still travel, but for better reasons than to conform to a narrow academic habitus. To this communal desire must be added a shared aspiration for situated knowledge, hence the need for organically shaped multi-purpose events or activities for which online instruments are used to the extent that they *include* and *facilitate*, not become an end in themselves.

Take the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS). During confinement, with no clear outlook as to when preparation work for ICAS 12 in Kyoto could resume, we, together with our partners at Kyoto Seika University, decided to stick to our original plan to hold the ICAS biennial conference on 24-27 August 2021. In the midst of the lockdown, we took the stand that people will want to meet again and that ICAS's unique ecology of knowledge exchange, built on multiple collaborations, and modified to foster a combination of physical and digital connectivity, will continue to thrive. We have no doubt that people will still want to enrich themselves by partaking in more than one exchange format because knowledge and its clarification occurs through dialogue and in conversation with each other, in moments when one least expects.

Thanks to these deeply ingrained convictions, helped by a few additional innovations and resolutions, I believe IIAS and its team will not only weather the COVID crisis and its consequences, but will come out of it stronger.

Philippe Peycam, Director IIAS