

## Capacity Building and Civic Engagement: IIAS as a Global Matchmaker

Adriaan Bedner

When IIAS became operative in 1993, the reason the Dutch government wanted to fund this initiative was that the founder had convinced them of the need for a knowledge-center on Asia. Asia was the continent of the future and the Netherlands needed solid scholarship on the region to be able to engage with it economically and politically. The institute's 'audience' was the Netherlands, and in particular policymakers in the Hague. In short, at first sight capacity building and civic engagement in Asia did not seem high on the Institute's list of priorities.

Nonetheless, from the start, IIAS actively pursued these two objectives that gradually became more important when the Institute moved away from being a Dutch knowledge-center only to become a global academic lynchpin – in particular in the humanities and in Asia, but increasingly in the connection Asia-Africa-Europe as well. It is a remarkable achievement that the Institute has managed to do this without losing its support from the Dutch government.

A brief look at IIAS's website makes clear how prominent capacity building and civic

engagement are. For example, the most prominent item at the time of writing of this piece is "The Birth of the Airlangga Institute of Indian Ocean Crossroads and the role of IIAS," which offers a prime example of IIAS's achievements on this score. When scholars in Surabaya were looking for inspiration to start an area studies institute, IIAS was a natural partner to help develop this plan. Convincing those involved in the initiative that it would be a bad idea to simply copy a similar institute in Singapore, IIAS helped them to think through what they would like to achieve and how they could position themselves to become more than a badly-funded competitor of the Singaporeans. In so doing, IIAS's institutional network has been key and it has proved to be unique capital for such efforts at institution-building in Asia.

This is only one example of the staggering number of projects and networks IIAS is involved in, however. The main reason that IIAS is so successful in engaging in all of them – I think – is that it combines a broad, idealist vision of how scholarly collaboration can lead to a better world with a fairly modest way of operating. This means that IIAS will not

dictate the terms of collaboration and leaves ample room for partners to be in the lead. To play such a role is only possible through the Institute's form: unlike 'normal' scholarly institutes it does not have a large academic staff of its own; it is a 'clever' organization, which uses its resources to maximum effect by stimulating and supporting others to ultimately produce the knowledge IIAS seeks to generate.

Yet, without deep, interdisciplinary area studies knowledge available within IIAS, this would not have been possible. Such knowledge is located in the various programme committees, boards, and in the close collaboration within the various networks. But, members of the core staff also need to have sufficient knowledge themselves about the state of the art in area studies to be able to gauge new scientific possibilities. This is perhaps most apparent in the programme Humanities Across Borders (HAB), which is truly innovative in its efforts to build a new, multi-cultural, and inclusive methodology in the field of humanities. A programme such as Humanities Across Borders would never have been possible without the experience and vision of the present director of IIAS.

This engagement with innovation does not mean that IIAS no longer invests in more traditional forms of capacity building and civic engagement. Examples abound, with various levels of involvement, from the dual master programme in heritage studies to engaging with local communities in the River Cities Network. What should be mentioned here as well is the fellowship programme,

which has run from the start of IIAS, and which has enabled dozens of scholars to spend a year or more in Leiden to work on research and prepare themselves further on a future in academia. For some of them, the fellowship programme has acted as a safety net, preventing them from dropping out just after having finished their PhD.

There seems to be a danger of 'overstretch' if a small institute like IIAS initiates, engages in, and supports so many different programmes and networks. As I mentioned above, the main reasons it has worked so far are vision and an institutional structure to support it, which hitherto has worked well enough. Yet, there is a third factor that has been indispensable for IIAS's success, which is its ability to attract external funding for its efforts. In particular, the long-term commitments like those of the Mellon Foundation and the Luce Foundation have contributed to a stable financial basis for engagement and innovation. Such support, in turn, relies on the ability of IIAS to show that it has the knowledge and networks to use the funding effectively. This is what the Institute has managed very well over the past years, which closes the circle.

Thus, in a way the success of IIAS in capacity-building and civic engagement is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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## Network and Community Development

Tina Harris

I first heard about the IIAS in 1999. This was just a year after I finished university, and well before I even toyed with the possibility of going to graduate school. Frustrated with a secretarial job in New York City where my main task was to pour tea, I joined the Social Science Research Council as a program assistant, where my job was to help set up workshops with academics, policymakers, and NGO representatives in South Asia and Southeast Asia. At every meeting – often held in various parts of Asia – at least one person would mention their involvement in the interesting activities of a mysterious organisation called the International Institute for Asian Studies. I remember a Nepali environmental scientist in Meghalaya, a Dutch historian in Chiang Mai, and a Malaysian sociologist

in Bandung all mentioning the IIAS and its far-reaching work in "area studies" as it was called at the time. In my mind, the IIAS was a massive organisation with hundreds of staff members, churning out new knowledge from its giant headquarters in the Netherlands, with mini-IIAS branches all over the world.

Little did I know that two decades later, I'd be co-chairing IIAS board meetings in a beautiful but compact house in Leiden, with a tiny but tight-knit and extremely dedicated staff team. I marvel at how this idea of IIAS as a huge institution with "hundreds of staff members" still rings true at many of the IIAS global events that are held around the globe, such as the Asia-Africa Conference, the Asian Borderlands Conference, and the International Convention for Asia Scholars (ICAS). Yet, what was clear in 1999, only five or six years after its

establishment, was that the IIAS had already been able to facilitate academic events that brought far-flung (in both the geographical and disciplinary sense) scholars together in fresh new ways. While it shares important features with other academic departments and organisations, IIAS as an institution is unique, as its global reach is remarkably wide.

One example of IIAS network-creating is the Asian Borderlands Research Network, which I have been involved with for over a decade. Setting up a conference like this is a serious amount of work, and part of what IIAS does best (mostly spearheaded by the peerless Martina van den Haak). The process works via careful inquiries, co-hosting, and collaboration with staff and students in local institutions in Asia. Held in a different Asian borderland city every two or three years, the conference also specifically focuses on generating new networks for individuals from Asian borderland regions, particularly those who are early career scholars or practitioners, with travel grants available for low-income scholars and field trip opportunities near the venue location. Perhaps, then, one of IIAS's

biggest community-creating influences is its dedicated long-term timeframes. Many NGOs and academic grants run on (at the most) five-year plans, or on short term projects that often fizzle out. Even though IIAS may have similar funding cycles, it manages to maintain and sustain community networks on the micro level – and keeps these relationships going.

While the scholarly landscape – and therefore IIAS – has changed significantly over the past thirty years; from Global North development studies or "oriental" and area studies perspectives to finally including more Asian and Global South voices (just take a look at the authorship of the first few newsletters compared to now!), there is still more to learn and more to change. As a facilitator of global networks and long-term relationships, however, it is clear the IIAS is remarkably far-reaching, with lasting impact.

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## A Call for Promiscuity

Jeroen de Kloet

Much has changed in the social sciences and humanities since I obtained my PhD in 2001. Too much to grasp in a short essay. Allow me to reflect upon, and juxtapose, only two trends: professionalization and decolonization. Indeed, I am struck by how universities have become more "professional" – I deliberately want to steer away from the (dare I use a Deleuzian term) overcoded word "neoliberal" here, although both terms share, for me, similar negative connotations. On a more positive note, and very much supported by current student cohorts, there has been a call for a decolonization of the universities in recent years. What role did and can the IIAS play in both processes?

First, professionalization. Over the past decades, fields seem to multiply as they become more and more specialized. Journals continue to pop up to cater to these "emerging new fields." Talking about my current field, it is not just media studies I do, but also platform studies, new media studies, television studies,

visual studies, cultural studies, software studies – and at times the rather uninspiring prefix "critical" serves as a further marker of distinction. Just as regional or national markers are used to further differentiate fields. Consequently, knowledge runs the danger of being increasingly siloed, whereas a discourse of multi-disciplinarity has simultaneously emerged, merely seeming to obfuscate these processes of specialization. In addition, processes of professionalization related to research grants, track records in ranked journals, and signified by words like "deliverables" and "impact," encourage rather than discourage specialization and a consistent, if not repetitive, research focus.

It seems to me that the IIAS is, and has always been, resisting these trends. Granted, in its packaging into three research areas, it may act as if it has a clear and strong focus, but actually, if one has to characterize the IIAS, it is in its curiosity, its omnivorous and promiscuous range of topics, its eagerness to connect nearly everything to Asia – I remember the aspiration to even move into outer space. Take Humanities Across Borders, a programme that resists specialization, that works against the call for professionalization, and instead pushes knowledge beyond the confines of the university. In programmes like these, the idea of multidisciplinary as well as the call to work together with alternative sources of knowledge, to forge alliances with artistic knowledge, with vernacular forms

of knowledge, becomes pivotal, not mere window-dressing.

Second, decolonization. Here, I like to suspend my thinking from theoretical debates, for example, regarding the difference between the postcolonial and the decolonial. Instead, I like to observe how students increasingly question our Euro- and Anglocentric curricula, how calls for other voices, from other places, with other histories, are becoming louder and louder. It has been increasingly problematic that a philosophy department would offer only one course allocated to "Non-western philosophies" – till today a quite common practice. At the same time, our students remain predominantly educated by teachers coming from the West, using authors based in the West, and engaging with media objects from the West. I am well aware of the complications of writing about "the West" (or the East, or China, for that matter), as if it were a clear and definable category, but allow me to use this simplification here. The discontent of students with these practices is inspiring, and provides a unique opportunity to change our teaching and research practices, and also a potential trajectory away from the processes of professionalization as discussed earlier.

If we see decolonization more as a practice than as a theory (ironically, U.S.-based publishing houses seem particularly instrumental in the dissemination of decolonial theory), it seems to me that

the IIAS has already gathered ample experience. Its biggest conference, the ICAS, is usually based in Asia, as many of its other seminars and activities are; its partnerships, fellowship schemes, networks, and research programmes are driven by collaborations with, to use another fraught term, the "Global South." The Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA) may well serve as an example here. While these experiences also deserve critical scrutiny (for example, in terms of funding), such experiences of collaboration and exchange may inspire a more practice-based approach towards decolonization.

By multiplying our frames of reference, by moving away from the usual suspects in knowledge production and develop a curiosity to other, often less known authors, alternative traditions; by resisting yet another reification if not celebration of the Oxbridge and Ivy League class, by moving away from rankings that are less global than they seem, by resisting further professionalization, and aligning ourselves with our students in a call for decolonization, research in the humanities and social sciences may well become more open, more unsettling, and more promiscuous. It is this intellectual promiscuity that the IIAS may bring to the humanities at large.

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