



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

THE CENTRE FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION RESEARCH



CeCAR
The Centre for Collective Action Research

CECAR IDENTIFIES THE MECHANISMS BEHIND, AND SOLUTIONS TO, LARGE-SCALE COLLECTIVE ACTION.

Produced by the Centre for Collective Action Research

Editor: Tina Johansen Lilja

Layout: Tina Johansen Lilja/Maria Lewander

Graphics: Maria Lewander

Cover photo: Orbon Alija/iStock

Design: Dolling Tahko

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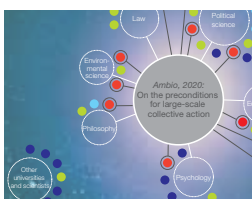


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WORDS FROM THE DIRECTOR

SINCE THE FOUNDING OF CECAR IN 2016, its progress has been beyond our initial expectations. Our research activities have resulted in a large number of research articles, typically published in some of the most prominent and policy-relevant journals. We have had great success in winning numerous research grants in competition, and the research budget of the centre has expanded. More and more of the CeCAR researchers have been appointed as experts in high-level commissions at the UN, EU, and national levels, as well as in the private sector. A conceptual framework¹, which was one of the major goals when the centre was established and upon which CeCAR's activities rest, is gradually gaining more international attraction.

ALTHOUGH ALL THESE EXAMPLES of success are positive and signal that we are addressing important and highly relevant issues, our ambition is to take CeCAR to the next level by developing more applied social science, a platform for dialogue with decision-makers, and deepened cooperation between scientists and stakeholders in both the public and the private sphere.

This report presents CeCAR and our vision for the future.

Prof. Sverker C. Jagers
Director of CeCAR



WHAT IS A COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM?



A COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEM is commonly described as a situation in which actors are motivated to take a course of action that is more beneficial than costly to them individually, but is simultaneously more costly than beneficial to society as a whole. This generates a substantial risk that important collective benefit will not be produced at all. In the social science literature, a collective action problem is typically understood as a social dilemma. Building on Dawes's classical definition², such a dilemma is present when both of the following premises are true:

1. *The payoff for each individual actor to act in self-interest (called defecting) is higher than the payoff for acting in the interest of the collective (called cooperating), regardless of what others do.*
2. *All individual actors receive a lower payoff if all defect than if all cooperate.*

USING SOCIAL DILEMMA LOGIC is a powerful way of explaining the origin of many societal challenges – not the least environmental problems – and to analyse how they can be overcome. A classic example is Hardin's elaboration of the idea of the "tragedy of the commons".³ This describes a situation in a shared resource system in which individual users, acting

independently according to their own short-term self-interest, behave contrarily to the common good of all users by depleting or spoiling the shared resource through their collective action. According to Hardin, this tragedy can be overcome only by either privatizing the joint resources or letting the state take over the management of the resources.

HOWEVER, NOT ALL COLLECTIVE ACTION PROBLEMS, especially not larger-scale collective action problems, are proper social dilemmas. They also include other coordination problems, such as situations that do not necessarily affect an individual actor, but rather affect other parties, such as patients, children, clients, or future generations. In addition so-called "race-to-the-bottom" situations, where even a small number of defecting actors can start a negative feedback loop, make cooperation among the general collective less likely. Yet all types of collective action problems share a feature of proper social dilemmas: they cannot be overcome, or managed, unless at least some actors act against their own short-term self-interest or against the interest of their principals (i.e., cooperate rather than defect). A complete analytical framework of collective action should cover all these types of collective action problems. To develop and gradually improve such a framework is one of the key objectives of CeCAR.

¹ Jagers, S.C., Harring, N., Löfgren, Å., Sjöstedt, M., Alpizar, F., Brülde, B., Langlet, D., Nilsson, A., Carney Almroth, B., Dupont, S. & Steffen, W. (2020). On the preconditions for large-scale collective action. *Ambio* 49, 1282–1296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-019-01284-w>

² Dawes, R.M. 1980. Social dilemmas. *Annual Review of Psychology* 31: 169–193.

³ Hardin, G. 1968. The tragedy of the commons. *Science* 162: 1243–1248.

THIS IS CECAR

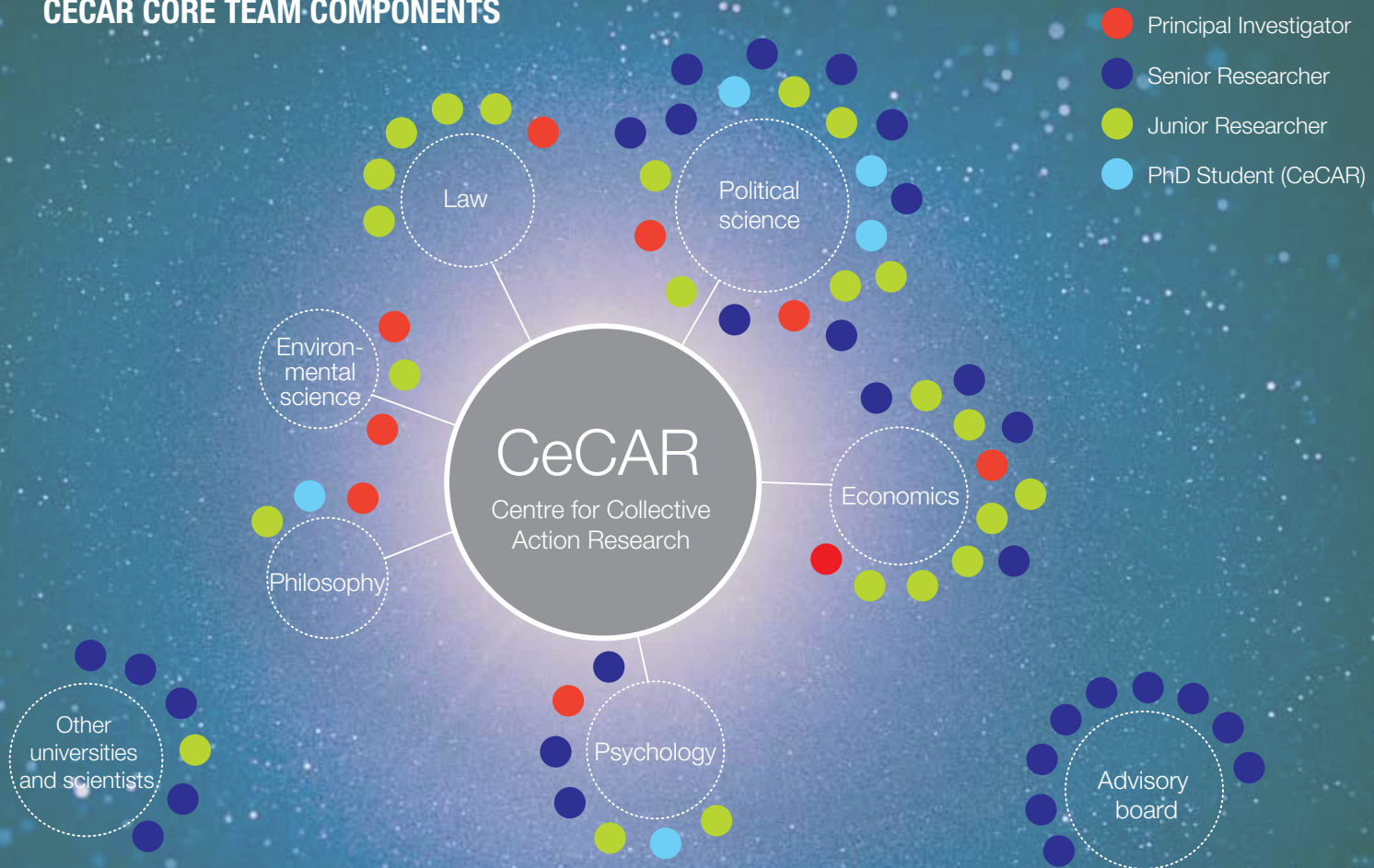
AS AN ORGANIZATION, CECAR exists to facilitate and support research contributing to solutions of today's most pressing large-scale collective action problems. Successful research within this area hinges upon bringing creative researchers together from different disciplines, promoting communication, and encouraging big idea discussions. To meet this organizational challenge, CeCAR is structured around activities where ideas and results can be effectively shared.

THE CECAR ORGANIZATION has a core team with a director and researchers from a wide range of disciplines primary including Economics, Environmental science, Law, Philosophy, Political science and Psychology. The research team includes PhD students, post-docs, and junior and senior researchers directly

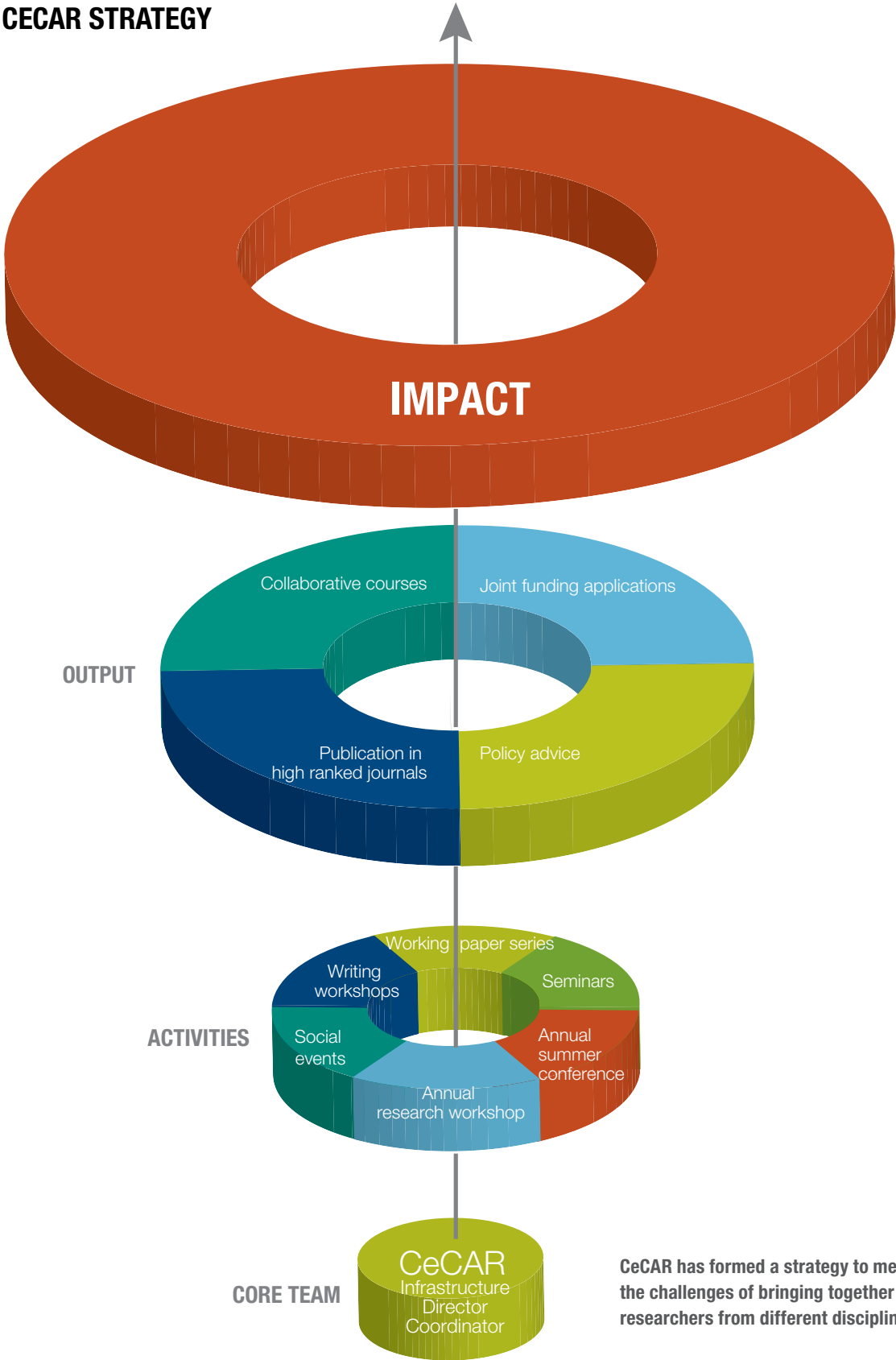
funded by the centre, as well as an extensive network of national and international researchers, including our international advisory board. Coordination and communication form the basis for the activities.

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACTIVITIES such as workshops, seminars, and working paper series is shared between the core team and appointed researchers from different disciplines. This creates a critical sense of ownership of the centre's activities among the researchers, who are not otherwise bound together by a discipline or a common office building. The activities have successfully contributed to society through high-quality interdisciplinary research, new collaborative applications, courses, expert commissions, and policy outreach.

CECAR CORE TEAM COMPONENTS



CECAR STRATEGY



CeCAR has formed a strategy to meet the challenges of bringing together researchers from different disciplines.

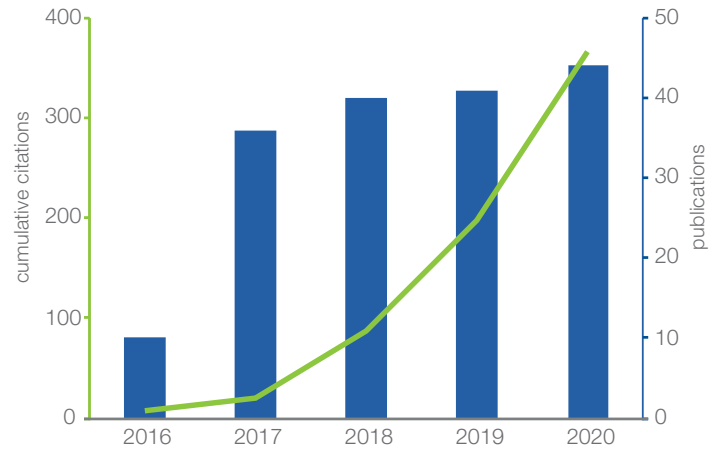
OUTPUT AND IMPACT

CECAR CONSTITUTES A VIBRANT research environment, with researchers jointly engaged in understanding and tackling large-scale collective action problems – one of the most challenging types of problems facing society. Currently, our research is concerned with a large number of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as climate change, overfishing, plastics, corruption, and antibiotic resistance, just to mention a few. However, our scholarly community is well equipped to take on additional types of collective action problems in the future.

AS OF THIS TODAY, CECAR has initiated more than 50 research projects and published over 170 articles and other academic writings in peer review, and our research is increasingly cited among scholars from a broad range of disciplines – a development matching our interdisciplinary ambitions and visions.

OUR RESEARCH TARGETING the most fundamental characteristics of large-scale collective action is conducted by both internal and invited world-leading researchers. It is stringent and systematic, and the results have already been recognized and published in high-profile research conferences and scientific journals.

PUBLICATIONS AND CITATIONS 2016–2020

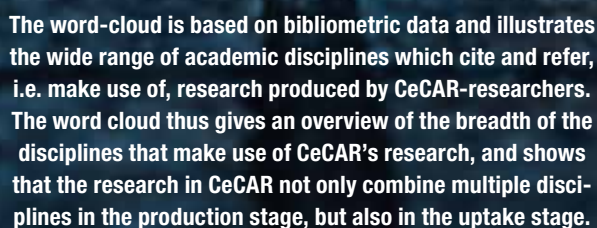


Publications per year (blue) and cumulative citations (green).

ANOTHER IMPORTANT ELEMENT of the CeCAR research agenda is concerned with how to overcome collective actions problems, either more spontaneously and voluntarily or via the design and implementation of policy instruments and policy mixes. This strongly solution-oriented research is unique, with its high level of applicability and policy relevance. In these endeavors, we systematically evaluate and test out a large number of factors involved in voluntary collective action, such as actors' values, beliefs, trust in the impact of social norms, and various forms of nudging, as well as how policy instruments and policy packages should be designed for the highest possible effectiveness, cost efficiency, and public acceptance.



CeCAR's research is concerned with a large number of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

A core cause of CeCAR's success in bringing researchers together is that the team, despite coming from different discipline, is unified in a common theoretical framework explaining large-scale collective action problems.

CeCAR is built around activities where ideas and results can be shared among researchers from different disciplines. Four of the most important activities are a December workshop, summer conference, big-idea writing workshops, weekly seminars and working paper series.

DECEMBER WORKSHOP

The focus group of this two-day workshop is the network of CeCAR researchers, as illustrated in page 6. The workshop provides an intimate setting with no more than 20–25 participants, who take part in all presentations and discussions. After CeCAR researchers present their papers, two researchers representing disciplines other than the authors' comment on each paper. There is also room for some social interaction.

SUMMER CONFERENCE

The yearly summer conference has a broader reach than the December workshop, involving a large part of the CeCAR community and also researchers and students outside the immediate network, including the CeCAR advisory board and steering committee. The conference always includes two or three external or internal keynote speakers of interest to a broader audience, in addition to a series of five-minute presentations in which CeCAR researchers discuss their ongoing research. These "egg-timer" presentations effectively showcase the research within CeCAR.

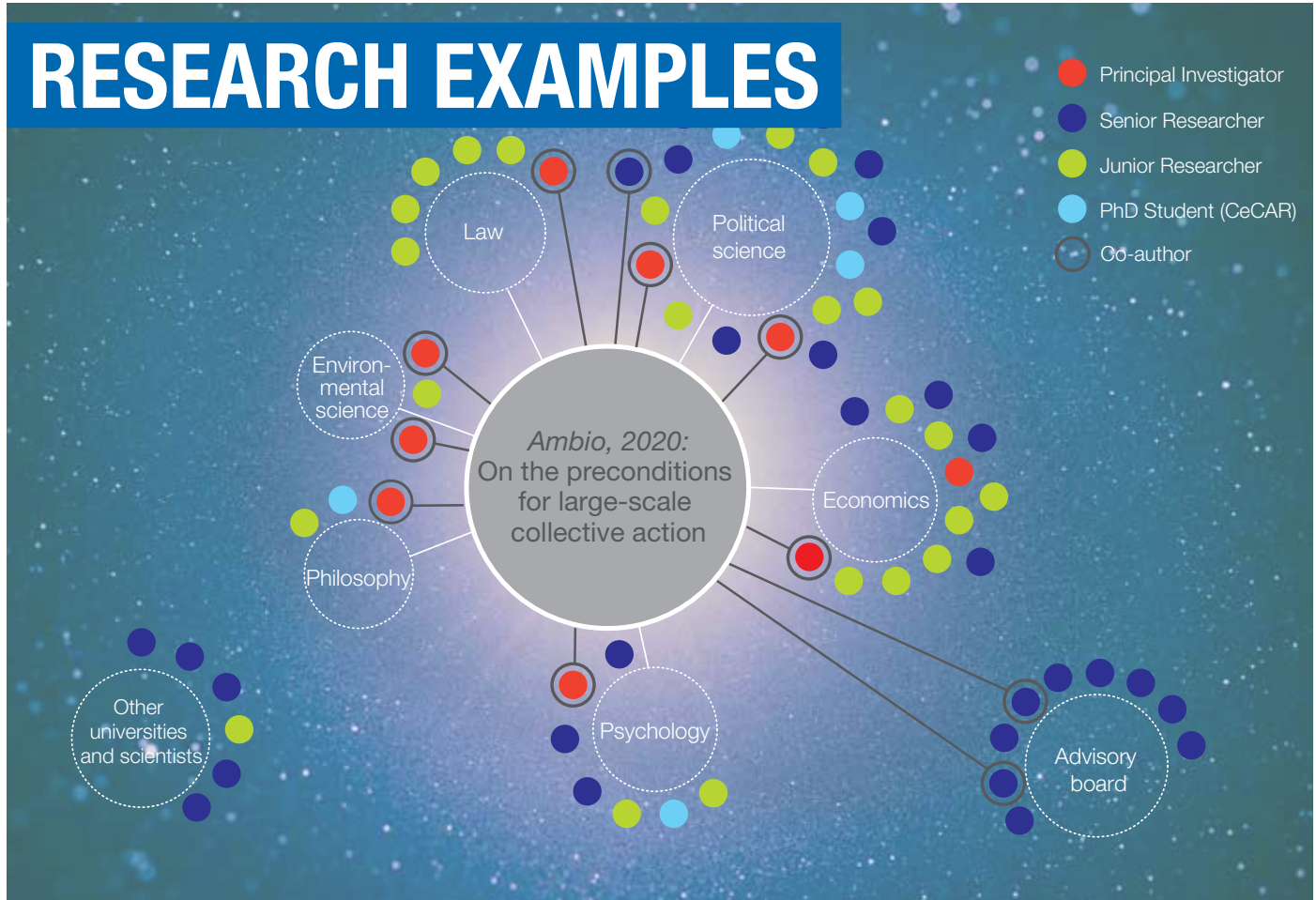
BIG-IDEA WRITING WORKSHOPS

In these workshops, CeCAR researchers from different disciplines meet in a smaller setting to develop an outline for a future joint paper. The starting point is the application of the Large Scale Collective Action framework to a concrete problem, such as the deforestation of the Amazon. Various experts are then invited, depending on the topic, and a core writing team finalizes the manuscript. The result is a merging of different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives and practical knowledge. These workshops have developed to become a CeCAR signature activity.

WEEKLY SEMINARS AND WORKING PAPER SERIES

The weekly seminar bring the CeCAR researchers together to listen to a presentation of ongoing or recently finished research. The presenters are often but not always external and give 30-minute presentations, followed by comments and suggestions from the CeCAR group. The seminars are a great way to keep the CeCAR researchers up-to-date on new research and also provide an opportunity for them to share their own insights and expertise with others.

The working paper series gives CeCAR researchers the opportunity to quickly publish valuable research results without having to wait for the longer process of submission to peer-reviewed journals.



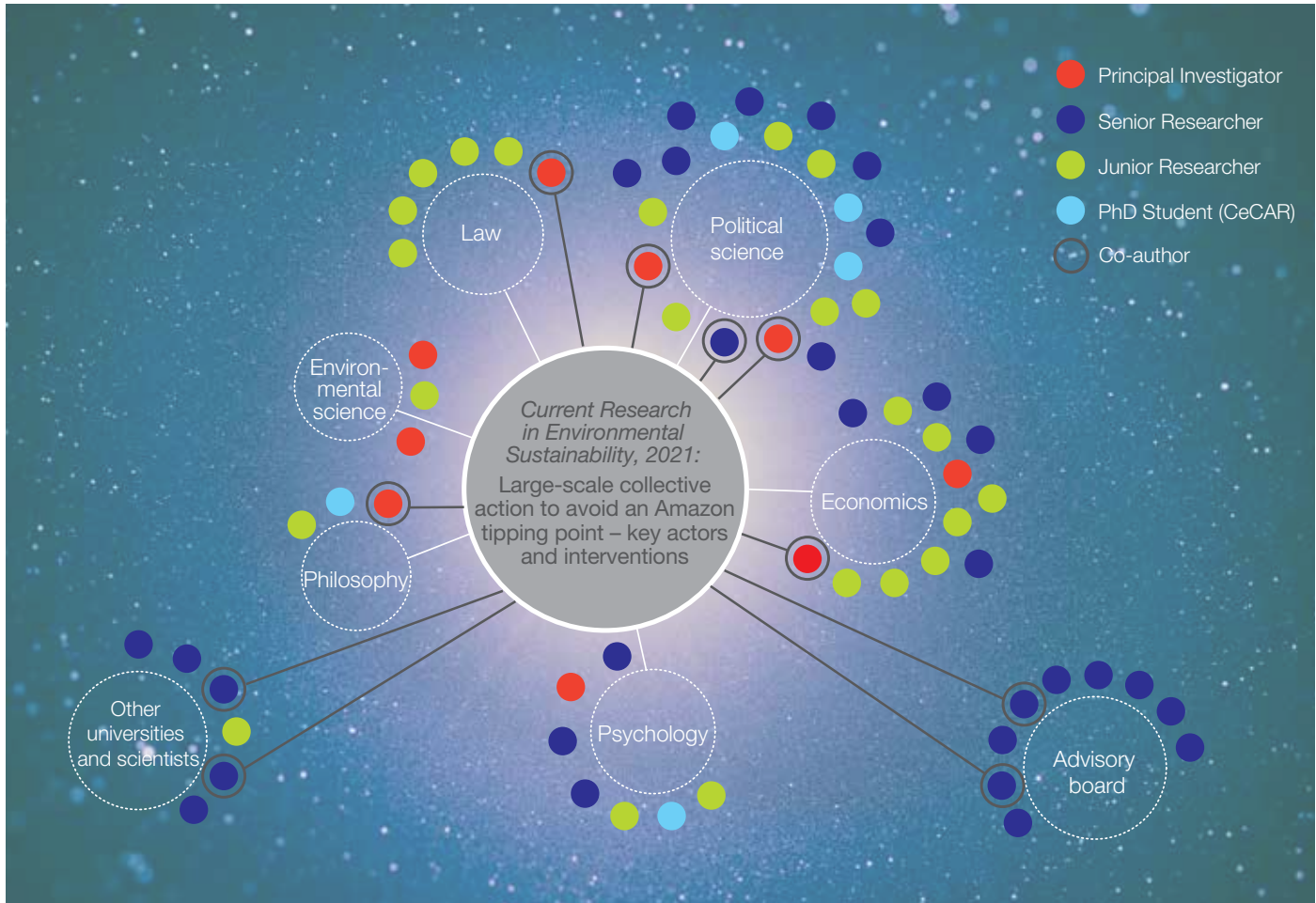
ON THE PRECONDITIONS FOR LARGE-SCALE COLLECTIVE ACTION

Sverker C. Jagers, Niklas Haring, Åsa Löfgren, Martin Sjöstedt, Francisco Alpizar, Bengt Brülde, David Langlet, Andreas Nilsson, Bethanie Carney Almroth, Sam Dupont & Will Steffen

Published in Ambio, Volume 49, 2020.

Abstract: The phenomenon of collective action and the origin of collective action problems have been extensively and systematically studied in the social sciences. Yet, while we have substantial knowledge about the factors promoting collective action at the local level, we know far less about how these insights travel to large-scale collective action problems. Such problems, however, are at the heart of humanity's most pressing challenges, including climate change, large-scale natural resource depletion, biodiversity loss, nuclear proliferation, antibiotic resistance due

to overconsumption of antibiotics, and pollution. In this paper, we suggest an analytical framework that captures the theoretical understanding of preconditions for large-scale collective action. This analytical framework aims at supporting future empirical analyses of how to cope with and overcome larger-scale collective action problems. More specifically, we (i) define and describe the main characteristics of a large-scale collective action problem and (ii) explain why voluntary and, in particular, spontaneous large-scale collective action among individual actors becomes more improbable as the collective action problem becomes larger, thus demanding interventions by an external authority (a third party) for such action to be generated. Based on this, we (iii) outline an analytical framework that illustrates the connection between third-party interventions and large-scale collective action. We conclude by suggesting avenues for future research.



KEY ACTORS AND INTERVENTIONS IN A LARGE-SCALE COLLECTIVE ACTION TO AVOID AN AMAZON TIPPING POINT

Mairon G. Bastos Lima, Niklas Haring, Sverker C. Jagers, Åsa Löfgren, Martin Persson, Martin Sjöstedt, Bengt Brölde, David Langlet, Will Steffen & Francisco Alpizarh

Published in Current Research in Environmental Sustainability, Volume 3, 2021.

Abstract: The destruction of the Amazon is a major global environmental issue, not only because of greenhouse gas emissions or direct impacts on biodiversity and livelihoods, but also due to the forest's role as a tipping element in the Earth System. With nearly a fifth of the Amazon already lost, there are already signs of an imminent forest dieback process that risks transforming much of the rainforest into a drier ecosystem, with climatic implications across the globe. There is a large body of literature on the underlying drivers of Amazon deforestation. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the behavioral and institutional micro-foundations of change. Fundamental issues concerning

cooperation, as well as the mechanisms facilitating or hampering such actions, can play a much more central role in attempts to unravel and address Amazon deforestation. We thus present the issue of preventing the Amazon biome from crossing a biophysical tipping point as a large-scale collective action problem. Drawing from collective action theory, we apply a novel analytical framework on Amazon conservation, identifying six variables that synthesize relevant collective action stressors and facilitators: information, accountability, harmony of interests, horizontal trust, knowledge about consequences, and sense of responsibility. Drawing upon literature and data, we assess Amazon deforestation and conservation through our heuristic lens, showing that while growing transparency has made information availability a collective action facilitator, lack of accountability, distrust among actors, and little sense of responsibility for halting deforestation remain key stressors. We finalize by discussing interventions that can help break the gridlock.

THE VALUE OF SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND OUTREACH



BETHANIE CARNEY ALMROTH,
plastic pollution expert

“As a member of CeCAR, I’ve been able to move some of my research into a more interdisciplinary realm. I have built upon my understanding of the source, fate, and effects of plastic pollution and placed that natural science knowledge in a societal context. This has helped me become a more effective public speaker, communicating science results to a wide range of audiences with more nuanced discussions about not only ecotoxicology, but also solutions. The plastics research we are conducting now is sought after and readily applicable in science-to-policy mechanisms.”



FREDRIK CARLSSON,
dissemination of research
on nudging as a way to
address environmental
problems

“It has been extremely rewarding to present our research on the use of nudging as a way to reduce the environmental impact of people’s consumption choices. Our research has covered many different areas, including food consumption, the use of antibiotics, transportation choices, water use, and pension savings. The interest in our research has been huge, and we have presented our research for policy-makers at government agencies, professionals in different organizations, and the general public.”



SAM DUPONT, expert on
marine global changes

“As we enter the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030), prioritizing ‘the science we need for the Ocean we want’ is more important than ever. However, identifying scientific priorities that allow for minimizing and addressing the most pressing global challenges of the time, including climate change or ocean acidification, can be difficult. CeCAR provided me with the perfect framework to redefine my work and develop a scientific strategy to devise and successfully implement solutions, from science to society.”



SVERKER C. JAGERS,
member of the United
Nations Tax Committee,
the Sub Committee of
Carbon Taxation

“The UN has recognized that the implementation of taxes on fossil fuels is one of the most effective ways of mitigating climate change on a global scale. At the same time, such policy instruments are challenging and often unpopular among many groups in most societies. The initiative by the tax committee to write a handbook on how to implement such taxes in developing countries and to include a chapter on how to overcome public resistance against them, initiated by me, is not only a sign of necessary policy awareness within the committee, but also an important recognition of much of the research conducted within CeCAR, where the study of policy acceptance is a key research field.”



DAVID LANGLET,
Department of Law

“As an academic lawyer, I’m regularly commissioned to provide judicial inquiries and other reports to government committees and public agencies working with proposals for legal reform. In this work, the theoretical approaches and multidisciplinary perspectives developed in CeCAR have provided me with new tools and perspectives, facilitating a broader and more nuanced understanding of the societal challenges that are being dealt with, as well as the potential of law. In this way, my ability to contribute to legal reform processes has benefited greatly from my work within CeCAR by an enhanced ability to place legal issues in a wider context, comprising not least behavioral dimensions.”



ÅSA LÖFGREN, member of
the Swedish Climate Policy
Council from 2018 to 2020

“Being a member of the Swedish Climate Policy Council offered a unique possibility to contribute to Swedish climate policy in practice. To be able to use insights from my own research to support policy-makers in deciding on effective and sound climate policy felt both important and rewarding. Also, since the council consists of members from different disciplines, the experience of working together with researchers from various fields within the CeCAR network was very valuable.”



OLOF LARSSON, Department
of Political Science

“The theoretical platform of CeCAR, i.e. Collective Action, has proven a fruitful basis on which to broaden my research on international cooperation between states and on international courts and compliance. Most problems facing the planet cannot be dealt with by one state alone, but cooperation among states is notoriously difficult to manage. At the same time, states successfully cooperate all the time, for example in the EU or the WTO. CeCAR has provided me with an excellent platform on which to build new joint projects, where we try to understand how recent and future international cooperation (e.g. the Paris Accords) can learn from those already established.”



ANDREAS NILSSON,
Department of Psychology

“CeCAR has provided me with an outstanding platform for diversifying and broadening my research. Almost all environmental problems are caused by human behavior, yet only a few of them include a psychological perspective. Likewise, in general, psychology or social sciences rarely includes any impact assessment. CeCAR has enabled me to expand beyond these research boundaries. To give but one example, we have started a new three-year project investigating plastics from both a behavioral and ecotoxicological perspective.”

CECAR – THE NEXT CHAPTER

CECAR'S EXPLICIT GOAL is to conduct research, which is directly useful for both policy makers, business and industry. Based on the natural and social sciences that constitute the framework of activities in CeCAR, we will increase the enabling and encouraging of truly applied social science. For example, how should policy instruments be designed so they can be implemented in countries where there is no experience with explicit environmental politics? How can industry actors be better at cooperating, and thereby both gain new business opportunities and make significant contributions to a more sustainable future?

AN IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENT is a platform for dialogue between an increasingly applied social science and decision-makers in both the public and private spheres. For example, we wish to invite and collaborate with external sources of expertise in our research projects and teaching programs to a greater extent than we have before.

CECAR WILL TAKE THE LEAD in establishing science-policy-industry workshops to be held on a regular (annual) basis. These workshops will be a venue where applied science researchers can meet and have direct dialogue with policy-makers and industry at many different levels.

CECAR WILL CONTINUE TO DEVELOP deepened cooperation among researchers in different applied sciences, as well as with stakeholders outside of academia, and at a more fundamental level. Here we envision the development of a joint interdisciplinary PhD training program, but we are also investigating the possibility of recruiting industrial doctoral students who can be employed both in industry and by public authorities. Moreover, we are currently considering commissioned training specially designed for certain needs in industry or the public sphere.



Photo: Husein Siraaj/Unsplash



A COLLECTIVE ACTION problem is typically described as a situation in which actors are motivated to take a course of action that is more beneficial than costly to them individually but is more costly than beneficial to society. This generates a substantial risk that collective benefit will not be produced. Problems of collective action permeate societies on all levels, from the very local to the global, and they cross both political borders and generations.

IN ADDITION TO THESE ATTEMPTS to bring our important science closer to the real world and make it applicable to problems that confront various societal actors, we will certainly continue the more fundamental scientific activities carried out in the centre. This includes the ongoing refining and developing of our joint large-scale collective action framework. This framework has already proved exceptionally valuable for the scientific understanding of prospects for collective action in relation to numerous matters associated with sustainable development.

ONE IMPORTANT ROUTE FORWARD will be to start comparing different types of large-scale collective action problems, including those with environmental, health, and socioeconomic origins. We will also continue to search for funding that will enable us to expand our methodological toolbox. This includes broadening our competencies in AI and big data, and we are currently seeking funding for gathering and curating global data on all environmental policies in the world, which will result in a unique world data base to be freely accessible for all users. Our short-term targets include the development of new methods of conducting experimental studies by making use of computer games. Our goal is to have large numbers of players, up to tens of thousands, located and simultaneously connected all over the world, an approach that will mimic large-scale collective resources and action better than any other research method employed today.

ABOUT US

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OLOF LARSSON
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INA MÜLLER
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Secretary at Climate law
inquiry, Government Offices
of Sweden

FICRE ZEHAIE

Swedish Environmental
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BENGT BRÖLDE

Professor, Department of
Philosophy, Linguistics,
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FREDRIK CARLSSON

Professor, Department of
Economics



**BETHANIE CARNEY
ALMROTH**

Professor, Department of
Biological and Environmental
Sciences



SAM DUPONT

Professor, Department of
Biological and Environmental
Sciences



SVERKER C. JAGERS

Professor, Department of
Political Science



DAVID LANGLET

Professor,
Department of Law



ÅSA LÖFGREN

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Department of Economics



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Senior Fellow at Resources
for the Future. Former lead
economist and research team
manager World Bank Deve-
lopment Research Group.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS 2016–2021(JUNE)

2021 (until June)

Bastos Lima, M. G., Harring, N., Jagers S. C., Åsa Löfgren, Å., Persson, U. M., Sjöstedt, M., Brülde, B., Langlet, D., Steffen, W. and Francisco Alpizar, F. (2021). Large-scale collective action to avoid an Amazon tipping point - key actors and interventions. *Current Research in Environmental Sustainability*. Volume 3, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crsust.2021.100048>

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The Centre for Collective Action Research
Box 711
405 30 Gothenburg
Sweden