

## Asia/Pacific ISTR Regional Network

### Inaugural Conference of Asian Third Sector Researchers

The Third Sector, comprising organizations that are variously referred to as NGO's, people's organizations, nonprofit organizations, civil society organizations, co-operatives, along with philanthropy is as important in Asian countries as in other parts of the world. Yet, reflecting the size and diversity in history, level of economic development and political traditions in different countries that comprise the region, the Third Sector also varies in its shape and in its dynamics across the region. These were some of the conclusions that could be drawn from the Inaugural Asian Third Sector Research Conference held in Bangkok, 20-22 November 1999.

Almost ninety researchers from fourteen countries in the Asian region gathered for the conference which was held at the Bangkok Hilton International Hotel. Over seventy papers were presented on such diverse topics as the growth of volunteerism in Japan and the decline of co-operatives in India; the performance evaluation of voluntary agencies to partnerships between civil society organizations, the corporate sector and government.

Many who attended were assisted by grants from the Japan Foundation Asia Centre as well as the Asia Pacific Philanthropy Consortium and the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR).

Many of those attending were employed in Universities throughout the region. They approached their research from a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives, often drawing on more than one: from sociology, economics, political science, geography, management, psychology, accounting, history and law. Most papers located themselves in one or more of the wider debates about the changing shape and importance of the Third Sector throughout the world: on defining and measuring Third Sector, on the meaning of civil society, and on relations between non-government organizations and government in an era of globalisation. Some of the researchers were employed by NGO's; a number of academics held positions as directors or chairs of nonprofit organizations in their home countries. So the debate was not merely academic but informed by direct, practical experience.



*Relaxing before their session, "Government/NGO Relations in Health & Social Science," in Bangkok are (l to r): Afroza Begum (Bangladesh), Lu-Yi Hsieh (Taiwan), Soon-Young Moon (Korea), and Hiromi Mizota (Japan).*

As befits an inaugural conference, many papers were largely descriptive of the Third Sector within particular countries. In some cases papers reported some of the very earliest research on the Third Sector in countries such as Mongolia and China. For several countries, different scholars arrived at different conclusions about the strength or

weakness and the likely path of Third Sector development. The debates arising from such different perspectives are an essential part in the advancement of Third Sector scholarship.

A number of papers queried the application of various concepts developed by social scientists in developed countries to the countries of the region. Concepts such as civil society, social capital, corporatism and volunteering were all subject to analysis. Given the strength of the state in most Asian countries, relations between the Third Sector and government was a recurring theme in many papers. For the most part, a reduction or weakening in the power of government was seen as generative of a stronger Third Sector, although one or two papers from countries with strong nonprofit sectors warned of the dangers of nonprofits themselves becoming unwieldy and bureaucratic.

One of the features of the conference was the high proportion of young scholars who participated. Doctoral students and recently appointed lecturing staff presented at almost every session, a positive sign for the future of Third Sector research in the region. Another positive outcome was the opportunity it provided for scholars from particular countries to meet, often for the first time, fellow scholars from their own country. This in turn led to discussions about the formation of national Third Sector research networks or associations. Such associations already exist in Australia and New Zealand and in Japan but may soon be joined by associations in India, Taiwan, the Philippines and Korea.

At a regional level, it was agreed that the group attending the conference would constitute the nucleus of an Asia Pacific Regional Network within the International Society of Third Sector Research (ISTR). Network members will meet during the ISTR Conference in Dublin, July 2000, and a second regional conference will be held in 2001, probably in Japan.

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