



LISBON  2026

**cies** \_iscte  
Centre for Research  
and Studies in Sociology

**iscte**  
BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

**bru** \_iscte  
Business Research Unit

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Seventeenth International Conference of the  
International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR)

*Imagining the Next Generation:  
Strengthening the Foundations of the Third Sector*

**Deadline For Conference Submissions: October, 31, 2025**

### Conference Hosts

Business Research Unit (BRU-Iscte)  
Center for Research and Studies in Sociology (CIES-Iscte)  
Iscte Knowledge and Innovation Association at the University Institute of Lisbon  
Iscte Business School

### Conference Location

Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Avenida das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa

### 9th International PhD Seminar: July 12-14, 2026

Application deadline October 31, 2025

More information and to apply: <https://www.istr.org/PhDSeminar>

### About ISTR

Founded in 1992, the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) is a global community of people dedicated to conducting, discussing, and advancing research about the Third Sector worldwide. ISTR has 950+ members in 80 countries. ISTR members are researchers – in academic and non-academic settings – educators, policy makers, leaders of third sector organizations, and representatives of other networks.

## What is the Third Sector?

The 'Third Sector' is broadly defined as an umbrella concept, encompassing non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, voluntary associations, social economy organizations and enterprises, community organizations, self-help and mutual organizations, foundations, philanthropic and charitable organizations, and other local and global civil society forms such as social movements and (virtual) networks, social forums, unions, religious organizations, co-operatives, and voluntary organizations.

### 2026 Conference Theme:

#### **“Imagining the Next Generation: Strengthening the Foundations of the Third Sector”**

---

In an increasingly polarized world, communication, collaboration, and understanding are so important. Third sector organizations play a critical role in developing, building and sustaining community.

In recent years, we have observed the legal and policy spaces for civil society research closing and academic freedom of expression under threat in many countries. Nonprofit organizations and universities around the world are experiencing a deteriorating funding environment, facing a wave of cuts that has spread from a few governments to entangle more and more countries.

Despite the unfavorable circumstances, universities, independent organizations, and private groups are developing influential high-quality research. However, the ecosystem lacks effective means to share knowledge and collaborate.

In a post-COVID world, not only have we changed how we relate to each other, but also how we see and imagine the world, whether travelling, working remotely, or collaborating online. Fast-developing technologies, such as AI, create new opportunities but risk leaving some behind. Greater communication connects us, but also creates echo-chambers. Disciplines focus approach, expertise and methods, but can create silos.

In the 2026 conference, we want to envision the next generation of the third sector by building bridges and facilitating the exchange of knowledge: between research and practice; between different countries and cultures; between communities and organizations; between funders and recipients; between new technologies and established methods; and between competing interests. In increasingly troubled times, we want to focus on hope, celebrating both our diversity, developing what unites us, and exploring how we can connect different pieces together for the future of the third sector.

The development of evidence-based solutions and the sharing of this knowledge is critical if we are going to address the world's biggest social, political, and environmental challenges. However, the research environment is changing. Whereas research used to be predominantly housed inside academic institutions, now independent organizations, private think tanks, foundations, nonprofits, and private consulting groups are increasingly developing influential high-quality research. This requires new ways to effectively collaborate and share knowledge.

Given this context, we ask: how can we imagine the next generation of the third sector? What does the future of the third sector look like? How can we balance embracing innovation, with retaining core values and purpose?

How can we better connect research, practice, and teaching? How can we support emerging third sector researchers and practitioners? How can we ensure that diverse voices can contribute to research development? How can we engage in meaningful comparative work? How do third sector organizations contribute to community? What works in overcoming polarization and division? How can we build partnership and trust between communities, third sector organizations and the state?

We hope that the 2026 conference can bring us together to address these questions and more, as we imagine the future of the third sector. Submissions from around the world reflecting work that is theoretical and empirical, unidisciplinary as well as multidisciplinary, and pertaining to all continents, are welcomed.

### **Conference Tracks**

1. Teaching and the Exchange of Knowledge
2. Advances in AI / Use of technology in research
3. Funding, Philanthropy and Giving
4. Volunteering and Community Participation
5. Social Work Policy and Practice
6. Social Economy, Social Enterprise, and Social Entrepreneurship
7. Governance, Management, and Leadership
8. Environmental Sustainability and Climate Justice
9. Social Movements and Advocacy
10. Regulation and Relationship with Government
11. Emerging Areas of Research and Practice in Nonprofit and Third Sector

### **Additional Submission Tags**

After selecting a submission track, authors will be given an opportunity to indicate their submission's relevance to any of ISTR's affinity groups. ISTR's affinity groups bring members together around topics of mutual interest for connection and collaboration. With "tag(s)" attached, we hope to facilitate expanding your network during the conference.

1. Social Innovation
2. Critical perspectives
3. Decolonized research
4. Volunteering
5. Law and Regulation
6. Gender
7. Research to Practice
8. Sustainability
9. Teaching and Learning

## Forms of Participation:

1. **Individual Research Paper:** A proposal for a single research paper with one or multiple authors. See the ISTR conference website for sample abstracts.
2. **Complete Panel:** A proposal for a coordinated set of individual papers (usually 3 or 4 in number). Panel proposals require an overarching abstract identifying and justifying the theme of the panel, as well as a full abstract for each panel paper. The person submitting the panel proposal must be willing to act as the panel coordinator and ensure that all paper presenters commit to attending the conference. Note: panel papers cannot be submitted separately as an individual submission.
3. **Roundtable:** Roundtables encourage discussion and interaction among delegates. Any presentations provided are short with ample time for discussion in the group. Proposals should include details on the topic of discussion and its relevance. No more than five (5) participants should be listed as presenters.
4. **Poster:** An opportunity to display a poster about completed and/or ongoing research. Posters will be displayed throughout the conference. A session will be scheduled in which participants can meet with authors to discuss their work. New researchers in particular are invited to share work-in-progress by means of a poster if they wish.
5. **Case Study for Teaching:** A case study for teaching is “a factual narrative describing real events” that “emphasizes real-world complexity, helping students engage deeply with decision-making processes” (Naumes & Naumes, 1999). It is a pedagogical tool designed to bridge theory and practice, simulate real-world scenarios, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in diverse learning environments. A well-crafted teaching case has three components: i) case narrative describing real-world events, ii) teaching or instruction dilemma(s), and iii) teaching note/guide for instructors detailing pedagogical/instructional design elements like target audience, learning objectives, relevant theories/concepts, suggested discussion/reflection questions, possible solutions and outcomes, and assessments. To propose a case study, provide an abstract covering these components above. See the ISTR conference website for resources and a sample abstract. For additional inquiries please contact conference co-chair Aya Okada at [aya.okada.e3@tohoku.ac.jp](mailto:aya.okada.e3@tohoku.ac.jp).
6. **Alternative Presentation Format:** Alternative presentation formats may be proposed. Please provide a description of the proposed format, how the individual presentation or full session will function, and any equipment or room requirements. For inquiries, please contact conference co-chair Alasdair Rutherford at [alasdair.rutherford@stir.ac.uk](mailto:alasdair.rutherford@stir.ac.uk).

## General Information

---

### Who should submit and attend?

The conference will create space for reflection, exchange, and learning across disciplines, countries, and research institution types.

- **Researchers (Established and Emerging):** an opportunity to share and receive feedback on your work from an interdisciplinary, international cohort of scholars, teachers and practitioners in the field. Find collaborators, build networks, and help advance the research agenda for ISTR.
- **Teachers:** an opportunity to find the latest content and case studies for your syllabi, possible teaching collaborators, and guest speakers that can inspire you and your students.
- **Organization and Foundation Leaders:** an opportunity to meet and connect with an international community focusing on research on the third sector; to share important learnings and learn from others; a chance to share a dilemma you may be facing in practice and receive input from an interdisciplinary, international, cohort of scholars.

### Abstract Submissions

**The abstract must be between 350 and 500 words in length.** References are not included in the word count. Sample abstracts are available for review on our conference web page. **Optional:** Authors are invited to submit a statement about the implications of their research for practice. A separate field for this information is provided.

Abstracts will be accepted in English, the primary language of the conference.

To be considered for review, an abstract must include:

- A working title.
- A statement of empirical or theoretical concern.
- References to wider literature.
- A concise account of the methodological approach.
- The main arguments and an indication of the supporting evidence.
- A statement of the main conclusions and their relevance to an international audience.

Abstracts should not contain any information that would compromise a blind review. Do not include author names or affiliations in the submission.

## Submission Portal

To submit your abstract, visit [istr.org/2026](https://istr.org/2026) and follow the link for 'Submit a Proposal.' ISTR Membership is encouraged, but *is not required* to submit an abstract. However, login credentials *are required* to gain access to the site. Follow the instructions on the website to login. After you login, you will also have the opportunity to indicate your willingness to serve as a reviewer or moderator for specific conference tracks.

## Review of Submissions

All submissions will be subject to a blind review by at least two independent reviewers. Authors will be advised of the outcome by January 15, 2026. If you are willing to serve as a reviewer, please tick the box indicating your willingness in the abstract portal or by contacting the ISTR Secretariat.

The following review criteria will be graded:

- Is the topic related to the conference themes?
- Is the topic relevant to an international audience?
- Is there a clearly articulated research question?
- Are the theories and concepts that inform the research clearly articulated?
- Are these supported by relevant literature?
- Is the research methodology and design (empirical or theoretical approach) clearly articulated?
- Are the key theoretical and/or empirical findings summarized?

**ONCE ACCEPTED, ALL PRESENTING AUTHORS AND PANELISTS MUST HAVE AN ACTIVE ISTR MEMBERSHIP AND MUST REGISTER FOR THE CONFERENCE BY MARCH 31, 2026 TO HAVE THEIR PRESENTATION SCHEDULED IN THE CONFERENCE PROGRAM.**

## Final paper submissions

Guidance for paper drafting, poster design and printing, and presentation advice will be available on the conference website. The completed paper must be uploaded to the conference abstract submission site by June 14, 2026, to provide adequate time for participants and moderators to read the paper and to allow for a more fulsome discussion. If you are willing to serve as a moderator, please tick the box indicating your willingness in the abstract portal or by contacting the ISTR Secretariat.

## Post-Conference Publication and Working Paper Opportunities

Following the conference, authors are invited to revise their papers in the light of conference feedback with an eye to an appropriate submission to ***Voluntas***, the official journal of ISTR, or any other journals in the field. Publication decisions are the sole discretion of such journals and ISTR does not participate in the editorial decisions on such submissions. Authors can also submit their papers to be reviewed for selection for publication in the **ISTR Conference Working Papers Series** to be published after the conference on the ISTR website.

---

**Questions?** E-mail [Secretariat@istr.org](mailto:Secretariat@istr.org)

**Key dates:**

**Deadline for conference submissions and PhD Seminar applications: October 31, 2025**

Review deadlines: December 10, 2025

Author notification: January 15, 2026

Presenter registration deadline: March 31, 2026

**Conference Co-chairs**

Aya Okada, Tohoku University, Japan

Alasdair Rutherford, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK

**Conference Organizing Committee Chair**

Ana Simaens, University Institute of Lisbon, ISCTE-IUL, Portugal

Detailed information on travel arrangements, accommodations, and the conference schedule will be available on the conference website [istr.org/2026](http://istr.org/2026)



---

LISBON  2026

**cies** \_iscte  
Centre for Research  
and Studies in Sociology

**iscte**  
BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

**bru** \_iscte  
Business Research Unit