

ISTR *Voluntas* Best Paper Award 2012 and 2013

By Kari Steen-Johnsen, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway

ISTR's journal *Voluntas* is a highly productive journal, which has published an increasing number of articles in recent years, and which has also become indexed in the ISI Social Citation Index.. *Voluntas* published 49 papers in 2012 and 53 in 2013. This included one special issue on civil society in Africa, and several thematic sections; on non profits and the provision of social services, on fundraising and on charity accounting, reporting and regulation. Reflecting the character of this academic society, the articles published spanned a wide range of thematics, and a varied set of theoretical and methodological approaches.

The task of assessing the best articles for 2012 and 2013 thus presented the committee with the joy of encountering a richness of perspectives and insights from all over the world, and at the same time, the challenge of establishing a shared set of criteria that could be applicable to a diverse set of papers and research topics. The base line was, of course, that the award winning papers needed to be theoretically and empirically sound, and that they must possess textual clarity and even better, elegance. The committee was conscious, however, not to focus on textual qualities only, and we emphasized the strength of the underlying research both theoretically and methodologically.

Beyond these basic academic criteria, two main issues were raised as yardsticks for assessment; the question of scope of relevance, and the question of contribution to the field. The question of the *scope of relevance* of an article may be explicated either geographically, thematically or theoretically. While many good articles published by *Voluntas* report the single, nationally or locally based study, some articles stand out with a scope of relevance that transcends the context in which the findings were generated, either by way of the theoretical, empirical or conceptual insights that they provide. Likewise, there are articles that study a particular topic, such as fundraising or board selection, but that produce insights about central processes within civil society that have a wider applicability. Some articles will take on this quality through the links that they establish to theory, either within or outside of the third sector/NPO literature. Other articles will provide and develop their own new concepts, that give them relevance beyond a specific thematic field.

The question of a given article's contribution to the field, is a complex one. Depending on how the field and its interfaces is defined, this will be assessed differently. The committee

acknowledged that contributions to the field could be made both by the advancement of theory, by bringing new empirical insights and by exploring new methodological approaches. Such contributions could either be defined in relation to the field of third sector research, or move beyond this literature and speak to more general developments in social science. Finally, while the academic contribution remains the most crucial aspect of the best papers, we wanted to acknowledge the value of the broader policy implications that some papers impart.

Based on these criteria, the committee selected the following paper as the Best Paper for 2012: *Jessy D. Lecy, Hans Peter Schmitz, and Haley Swedlund: Non-Governmental and Not-for-Profit Organizational Effectiveness: A Modern Synthesis.*

The article presents a comprehensive and interdisciplinary overview of the literature on NGO and NPO effectiveness using citation analysis. The authors used a structured sampling approach that included snowball sampling within citation networks, starting from the most cited articles. The aim was to uncover commonalities across disciplines concerned with similar questions about effectiveness. Starting from a citation network of 4,879 articles, Lecy et al. identified a corpus of the 64 most cited articles, and then conducted a content analysis of these, asking such questions as whether the article was empirical in nature, how effectiveness was defined and what was the level of analysis. Based on this analysis, the authors identified three main trends in NGO/NPO effectiveness research 1) that there is a broad scholarly consensus that unidimensional measures of effectiveness are not useful – even though such measures are commonly used by NGO/NPO rating agencies; 2) that the scholarship on NGO/NPO effectiveness is dominated by conceptual works, while empirical studies remain rare; 3) that a consensus about how to operationalize effectiveness remains elusive.

The committee finds that Lecy et al. have provided an impressive overview of literature, that convinces the reader both through its thorough and systematic methodology and through the ideas and conclusions that the authors draw from their results. The article is well written and explicates well the content and the rationale for the different steps in the analysis. The authors demonstrate a creative and clever way of pulling together large amounts of information, and combine meticulous work with good interpretations and interesting conclusions.

The committee also values the fact that the article is fundamentally international and interdisciplinary in its outlook. The corpus of articles is drawn from a variety of disciplines that all deal with NGO/NPO effectiveness from their angle and within their own disciplinary

containers. The article thus bridges different parts of a fragmented research field, and enables substantial evaluations and discussions across texts. Even though NGO/NPO effectiveness is in itself a limited topic, the authors are able to raise interesting questions about organizations' ways of functioning, and how to study these, which gives their text relevance beyond its immediate topic.

In the committee's view the article makes a set of strong contributions to the field of third sector research. First of all, it points out interesting directions for future research, that are based on a systematic overview of the literature that already exists. Most importantly, the article is a powerful call for more empirically based studies within NGO/NPO effectiveness studies. Second, the article is methodologically innovative and contributes through a pedagogic and thoughtful demonstration of how such a method could be employed. Finally, Lecy et al. make use of their findings in order to create a framework for donors, that could be used to better guide performance assessments than what is currently the case. Four domains are pointed out; the domains of managerial, program and network effectiveness, and the domain of legitimacy. In framing these domains, Lecy et al. make explicit use of the findings from their literature review, in particular the acknowledgement that effectiveness is a complex and multi-level concept. This is an excellent example of how academic findings could be used to enable broader policy implications, either for organizations, individuals or governments.

For 2013 the committee selected Susan Philips'; *Shining Light on Charities or Looking in the Wrong Place? Regulation-by-Transparency in Canada* as the Best Paper.

The topic of Susan Philips' winning article is the nature of charity reporting and transparency in changing contexts. Philips takes as her starting point the premise that regulatory regimes are becoming more polycentric with the expansion of third party watchdogs and emergence of new self-regulatory bodies. As part of these regimes more open access to data has made transparency become an independent, strong force. Philips first develops a conceptual model in order to capture variations in polycentric regulatory regimes, and to shed light on the role that transparency plays in these. She takes an institutional approach, focusing on three sets of factors: regulatory goals, institutional factors and context. These factors are then used to give a comparative overview of differences in regulatory charity regimes in the five countries that form the "Anglo-Saxon cluster". In the latter part of the text Philips provides a critical, in-depth analysis of regulation-by- transparency in the Canadian context. Based on this case study the article concludes that neither states nor charities control the use and access to

information in the new polycentric context. Moreover, the article forcefully demonstrates that regulation-by-transparency is not necessarily a neutral instrument, and that it can become politicized.

The committee finds that Philips' article is an exceptionally well-written text. It provides a clever and clear analysis of a complicated issue, which is relevant beyond the specific case that it focuses on and beyond a single discipline. Phillips skillfully grasps the complexities of the civil society/government interaction and shows how politics interferes with effective regulation. A major strength of the article is that it combines the development of a conceptual framework with systematic empirical analysis. We also find the combination of comparative overview and an in-depth case study highly useful and well thought through.

The contributions of Philips' article to the field of third sector research are several. The conceptual framework that is outlined in the paper has broad relevance, both across national contexts and across thematic fields. Even though the paper treats charity regulation specifically, the overall conceptual framework is general enough to be applied in other regulatory contexts as well. Philips' successfully integrates insights and perspectives both from the more general literature on regulation and governance, and specific literature on the regulation of charities. The way she moves between insights gathered through the comparative study and the in-depth study may also serve as a model for producing an argument that has depth, but which does at the same time applies broadly. Although much of the article was about Canada Philips convincingly buttresses her conclusions with citations from other countries.

Finally, the committee would like to emphasize the critical qualities of this article. Based on her analysis, Philips is able to show that new regulatory regimes and new contexts for regulation may entail unwanted or unforeseen consequences. In particular, the conclusion that polycentric regulative contexts entail a displacement of control, opens up stimulating new research questions, as well as new policy discussions.

Based on our assessment of the 102 articles in *Voluntas* in the past two years, the committee would like to emphasize the richness and variety of studies published. The two awarded articles for 2012 and for 2013 demonstrate in an excellent manner how strong research can be made into engaging texts, that have an impact, both in terms of new concepts and new empirical insight.