Building ISTR Bridges – A Mentor’s Reflection

Benjamin Disraeli once said, “The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches but to reveal to him his own.”

The opportunity to become one of ISTR’s inaugural mentors was too good an opportunity to miss when the first call went out in early 2016. I have benefitted greatly from wonderful mentors – male and female – in my own career to date and the opportunity to give something back, to be someone’s cheer-leader was too good to turn down. Anyone who has successfully come through the perils of the PhD writing process and emerged the other side; or has struggled with that blank page of paper when writing your first (or more recent) grant application or your first (or third or fourth) conference abstract; or has grappled with “revise and resubmit” requests (or, worse still, rejections) from journals and yet lived to see publication; or has survived their first few years of teaching and examining in one piece . . . has what it takes to be a mentor. Empathy for another’s plight – the “I’ve been there and survived and here’s how” story is something that we can all share.

The wonderful upside of mentorship, which is not promoted enough, is the unexpected payback. You are paired with an enthusiastic young researcher (Domenico Carolei, PhD student at the University of Aberdeen School of Law in my case) who is not alone full of interesting questions but is ready to sally forth in the quest for interesting answers. You are given this amazing opportunity to witness and to be part of their journey from aspiring conference attendee to successful conference presenter and published author and, if you are very lucky, as I was, they will allow you to enter their world of research and research colleagues (my thanks to Domenico and all his colleagues at the Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society and Rule of Law (CISRUL) at the University of Aberdeen) so that bridges between non-profit disciplines can be built and collaborative networks shaped with the hope that as we go our separate ways our paths will cross again at future ISTR International Conferences. So, if you are a mid-career or senior scholar or a professional
from outside the academy and have not yet signed up as an ISTR Mentor, make it your resolution to sign up before the deadline!

Oonagh Breen, Professor of Law at the Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin, Ireland

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**Building a bridge between past, present and future within the ISTR community and beyond: A Mentee's Reflection**

Nearly two years have passed since I attended my first ISTR Conference in Stockholm. Since then, my professional life as a PhD researcher has positively changed. ISTR brought new colleagues into my academic life -- I consider most of them as faithful friends with whom I regularly, discuss thoughts and ideas about our research while drinking ‘long-distance coffees’ on Skype.

At the ISTR Conference Stockholm I also had my first meeting with Professor Oonagh Breen, after we were ‘virtually matched’ through the ISTR Mentoring Program. As a young researcher working on regulation and self-regulation of CSOs in the Italian context, I must admit that personally meeting a well-established academic specializing in comparative charity law was truly an honor. During a coffee break, Professor Breen and I had an interesting exchange of opinions on strengths and weaknesses of self-regulation as a means of CSOs accountability at sectoral level and we also discussed the status of Italian CSOs that have been recently reformed through the Third-Sector Reform (August 2017). As a comparative lawyer, Professor Breen was extremely knowledgeable about the diverse types of Italian CSOs that populate the civil society landscape, including bank foundations, and we ended up debating about charity scandals and how the latter can trigger cyclically regulatory forces. It was a stimulating discussion. Once we left each other, I realized that our mentor match was already a success.
In September 2017, the Sutherland Law School of the University College Dublin hosted the annual conference of the Society of Legal Scholars. The Conference was a great occasion to showcase my case-note on whether the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises can be used as a means of NGO accountability. The Conference was equally a precious chance to meet up again with Professor Breen as she teaches at the Sutherland Law School. I was delighted that she came to my presentation and we were able to have a coffee during the conference break. Professor Breen gave me invaluable feedback on my paper [which will be soon published by Human Rights Law Review] and we also spoke about applying empirical methods to study charity regulation, besides traditional doctrinal methodologies. At the same time, she encouraged me to apply for the ISTR PhD seminar in Amsterdam.

I could not, however, leave Ireland without inviting her to showcase her “Regulatory Waves” project to our multi-disciplinary research team at the Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society and Rule of Law (CISRUL) at the University of Aberdeen. Professor Breen accepted the invitation and she was our guest in February 2018. She was the first lawyer to ever deliver a guest seminar on civil society at the University of Aberdeen. My research fellows, even those working beyond the area of charity regulation, were fascinated by her presentation and the academic value of Professor Breen’s work beyond the boundaries defined by disciplines was widely acknowledged. Indeed, the book Regulatory Waves represents the first tangible and comprehensive academic work to study the inter-play between State-based regulation and self-regulation of charities in different jurisdictions.

At the end of her presentation we had another coffee break and my colleagues joined us too. We had a fascinating discussion on coffee production and the related benefits that caffeine can bring to academia in terms of productivity. For example, I learnt that the Irish Coffee (it’s a false friend!) was invented at Shannon Airport and it is not consumed at academic events as it contains whisky. I also explained to Professor Breen that there is a reasonable explanation for the academic quarter in Italy [the academic quarter is a 15 minute gap between the scheduled time for a lecture and the time the lecture actually starts]: academics take their time to drink coffee especially early in the morning. Lastly, I informed Professor Breen, with great pleasure, that I had been accepted to participate to the ISTR PhD seminar and that I would be
presenting my research findings at the ISTR Conference in Amsterdam, so we left each other with a “See you in Amsterdam!!”

Our mentor-mentee relationship has been successful for many reasons, the most obvious of which are: a) mutual research interests coupled with a common professional background (we are both lawyers); b) a spontaneous commitment to keeping our professional relationship alive, regardless of ordinary rules and timeframes defined for the ISTR Mentoring Program; and c) a true love for academic debates in front of a good cup of coffee. More importantly, I learnt that the ISTR Mentoring Program is something that goes beyond mere networking and tips on research, publications or professional achievements; it is rather about the inter-generational responsibility that well-established academic and young researchers owe each other to build a bridge between past, present and future within the ISTR community and beyond.

Domenico Carolei, PhD student at the University of Aberdeen School of Law