"The Third Sector: For What and For Whom?"

Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland
July 5-8, 2000
ISTR Fourth International Conference

Fourth International Conference in Dublin — A Huge Success!

ISTR celebrated the Fourth International Conference in Dublin with a record number of participants and sessions—a huge success!! The 550 participants from 61 countries constituted an increase of 37.5% from our recording breaking 1998 conference in Geneva. ISTR brought together scholars, researchers, practitioners, students, and policy makers creating an international Third Sector community that explored a wide range of issues over the three and one half day conference.

Our local hosts, the Association for Voluntary Action Research in Ireland, North and South (AVARI) provided warm Irish hospitality throughout our stay in Dublin. The opening "Irish Night" reception was an opportunity for getting acquainted with Irish culture, food, music, and a "ceili"—an Irish dance event. It was a memorable evening and many of the conference participants turned out to be wonderful Irish dancers! The next evening was most inspiring as well with a greeting from our host, Dermot Ahern, Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, Republic of Ireland, at the State Apartments at Dublin Castle.

Professional Development Workshops

The conference began with a series of workshops which were very well attended and which received very positive reviews. The workshop on "Third Sector Research in Ireland: A Practitioner Perspective" received the following comments—

"I was very pleased that there were several opportunities to hear about developments in the host country (countries!—Republic and Northern Ireland) and to consider the conference theme in the context of the agencies and academic work of this environment."

"The pre-conference workshop on the Irish Sector—a great idea to embed you in the host nation at the start (especially with Irish practitioners presenting)."

Plenary Sessions

The conference featured three plenary sessions, dedicated to the concept of civil society. The opening plenary featured David C. Korten, a well know civil society activist. His speech entitled, "Civilizing Society: The Unfolding Cultural Struggle," focused on the struggle for the soul of humanity between the mega-corporations and their political supporters on the one hand, and a globalized pro-democracy movement on the other. Arguing that the Seattle protests symbolized the growing strength of the globalized democracy movement, Korten suggests that its growing vitality is premised on a global shift in cultural values from one dominated by materialism and greed, to one that focuses on the life-affirming elements of the human spirit. Optimistic of humanity, he concludes by affirming the moral legitimacy of the 'cultural creativists' whose aim is to pioneer a better life for all.
The second plenary debated the strengths and weaknesses of civil society as a concept for Third Sector research. Introduced by an insightful contribution from Adam Seligman, it included comments from Ewa Lés, Caren Wickliffe and Kumi Naidoo and was moderated by Nicholas Deakin. The contributions debated the use of the term civil society in different contexts, North and South, East and West. The session exposes the tensions within concepts of civil society and the dangers of a straightforward identification of the Third Sector with civil society—a term, as one speaker commented, which often has more resonance than meaning. The debate concluded that the concept of civil society was overall a useful one and had the potential, in certain contexts, to be transformational, but only with much more rigorous attention to the different ways in which it is used. While it can carry the sense of a shared context within which differences can be recognized, researchers need to be aware its different cultural constructions and whose interests are serviced by the frequent identification of the Third Sector with civil society. While it can help us to recognize the spaces within which different levels of citizen action arise, it also encompasses fundamental tensions, which need to be addressed in future research.

The third plenary picked up several of these themes by focusing attention on three major cross-national studies which have been examining the impact of the Third Sector in different regions of the world. James Manor presented findings from a study of civil society and governance' in 22 countries; Rajesh Tandon discussed the findings of research on civil society in the new millennium,' with its particular focus on citizenship; Lester Salamon presented initial findings from the Johns Hopkins Comparative Sector Project on the impact of the non-profit sector in eleven of the 40 countries covered by the study. The session was chaired by Mall Hellam and Julie Fisher acted as respondent, pulling together key themes. The studies represented different methodological approaches, but evidence that the impact of the sector could be systematically evaluated. They also provided empirical evidence on some of the arguments advanced in the earlier plenary on civil society. While attention was drawn to the diversity of the sector, within and across regions, there were also commonalities. The research demonstrated the value that Third Sector organizations bring to societies across the globe, but also some of the weaknesses. Thus while the sector appears to contribute to good governance,' there is a question mark over the extent to which it addresses social exclusion, and while the research demonstrates the impact of the sector and brings the pluses of the sector into focus, it also questions the extent to which it builds social capital and acts as an advocate. Both this and the previous session stressed the importance of understanding the sector in its relationship with the state rather than as an antithesis to the state, although Tandon argued that perhaps it was the Third Sector (informal as well as formal) rather than the state that should be regarded as the first sector.

**Paper, Panel, and Poster Sessions**

The program included 93 paper and panel sessions—a significant increase from 60 sessions in Geneva! Poster sessions were also well received with 27 posters displayed during the entire conference. The posters proved to be an effective way for sharing research. It is impossible to cover in this article the array of issues raised in the various sessions as they ranged from "Social Economy and the North South Divide" to "Accountability, Governance and Civil Society" to "Management Theory and Education for the Third Sector" to "Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to Studying Philanthropy." A cross section of the conference abstracts can be found on the ISTR web site and many of the papers presented in Dublin will be reviewed for Volume 2 of the *Conference Working Paper Series*.

As the number of conference participants continues to increase, the organizing committee faces new challenges of including and integrating the contributions of the members. In Dublin, this was manifested in larger physical distances which the number of parallel sessions demanded and the confusion some participants experienced over how the make the most of the conference. ISTR will be planning and working hard to ensure that future conferences maintain the ISTR spirit as they continue to grow and develop.

**Conference Evaluation**

The evaluations were most helpful in providing feedback and suggestions for future conferences. We hope that many participants agree with the following evaluation—
"I gained so much from the conference it is hard to set it all down: finding kindred spirits who are looking at critical approaches to NGO's in management and policy debates/the international perspective from Africa, Arab world, USA, etc. . . Most workshop presenters were candid and undefensive . . . it was good having so many workshop sessions. The receptions provided a good cocktail' party way of socializing. I made great contacts and found it enormously stimulating. If you can only do one international conference on NGO's — do this one!"

It is clear that there is still work to do to ensure that plenary sessions and speakers reflect the diversity of ISTR membership. There is also a delicate balance to be struck between ensuring that as many people as possible can attend, by accepting as many papers as possible, on the one hand, and providing space for more workshops, debate and discussion on the other, as well as encouraging high quality contributions. Nonetheless, our feedback suggests that the conference was an overwhelming success—due in large part to the extraordinary efforts of our Dublin hosts and because of our wonderful community of colleagues who joined in celebrating this dynamic academic and social experience. ISTR now looks ahead to an even more successful Fifth International Conference in Cape Town, South Africa in July 2002!