



"The Contribution of the Third Sector to Social, Economic and Political Change"

Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland

July 8-11, 1998

ISTR Third International Conference

ISTR CELEBRATES GROWTH IN GENEVA

The third biennial conference at the Université de Genève celebrated a major success for ISTR! The conference attracted nearly 400 participants from 65 countries, an increase in participation and country representation of one third over Mexico City in 1996. This increase parallels the expansion of the Society which now includes more members from more countries working in more disciplines.

Our host institution, the Université de Genève, sponsored the opening reception that offered a wonderful venue with ample space, allowing participants to meet and network. A reception at the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum offered an opportunity to explore the history of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The object of the museum is "to reassure the visitor by showing that man, while continually involved in conflict, is also and with equal fervor capable of generosity of spirit towards his adversary." The optional boat cruise was a "sell out" and the combination of the view from the lake and perfect July weather made for an exceptional evening.

For the first time, ISTR offered pre-conference workshops. Three successful workshops were held, each attracting a larger number of participants. "Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice" was designed to enhance understanding of how to conduct research and disseminate results so that the research becomes more accessible and a more effective tool for Third Sector organizations. "Methodology" examined several types of research methodologies--comparative, participatory action, and historical--which can be used for project research around the world. "Fundraising: How to Raise Research Funds" provided an opportunity for researchers to meet with representatives of various grantmaking organizations and to discuss what funders are looking for in the field of nonprofit research.

The Geneva conference led to the formation of three new regional networks--Asia, Europe, and Arab-Speaking--which met during the conference. The two networks established in Mexico City--Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa--met following the conference to evaluate their inaugural meetings and to plan for 1999. These regional networks demonstrate the growth of the sector and the interest in developing local research efforts.

ISTR brought together scholars, researchers, and practitioners creating an international community of Third Sector researchers that explored a wide range of issues over the three and one half day conference. The program included 176 papers, nine panel sessions, and three plenaries. Poster sessions were introduced for the first time as an alternative to presenting a full research paper. The posters were displayed during the entire conference, with a special time set aside to meet the authors. The 22 posters displayed proved to be an effective way for sharing research. .

Her Excellency Mary Robinson, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, joined us in the opening plenary. She focused on her interest in NGOs and encouraged ISTR's efforts to seek comparative papers--either across state boundaries or between the third sector and other sectors--as she sees this as the future. Mrs. Robinson encouraged NGOs, whether they are working locally, nationally, regionally or internationally, to have a fundamental

predisposition to co-operating with colleague organizations and to similarly co-operate with the for-profit and state sectors.

While visiting a city which has had a central role to play in international negotiation and conflict mediation, the preliminary findings of the International Study of Peace/Conflict Resolution Organizations (ISPO) were presented in a second plenary session by Professors Benjamin Gidron (Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel) and Stanley Katz (Princeton University, USA). Consistent with the overall theme of the conference, this study focused on peace organizations in three highly conflicted parts of the world--Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and South Africa. The study represents a first attempt to view this phenomenon of peace/conflict resolution organizations in a comparative fashion.

The study, supported by the Aspen Institute Nonprofit Research Fund, was initiated in light of the breakthroughs in all three conflicts in the early 1990s on the one hand and, on the other hand, the activities of peace/conflict resolution organizations in those regions during the 1980s. The study focuses on both the organizational characteristics of this category of organizations and on their perceived impact on the respective peace processes. The presenters stressed the difficult conceptual and methodological issues facing such a study, which drew on different theoretical frameworks and used a comparative case study methodology.

Not surprisingly, the preliminary findings presented at the session showed some common threads in certain organizational features of these organizations but, at the same time, the differences between the conflicts and societies studied were also clearly observed.

The presenters noted that, in addition to the actual findings on this previously un-researched area, the study is an important contribution in the methodology it developed for studying advocacy and social change-oriented organizations cross-nationally and cross-culturally. This study also promises to highlight theoretical issues pertaining to the interface between Third Sector and Social Movement theories.

The presentation was followed by comments by Professors Mayer Zald (University of Michigan, USA) and Bert Klandermans (Free University, Netherlands), both esteemed scholars of social movements. They responded by adding some valuable insights and raising a few questions which will no doubt assist in the ongoing analysis of the project's rich data-set.

The third plenary session, "The Social Economy: The European Union and the Third Sector--What does the Future Hold" provided a European analysis of the Social Economy and the Third Sector. The session began with a presentation by Gabrielle Clotuche, Director of DGV/E, a section of the European Commission which is concerned with Social Security and Social Integration and which is responsible for civil society issues. Ms. Clotuche discussed the development of European policy towards what it defines as the 'social economy' and the directives and guidelines relating to the sector.

This was followed by Karl Birkhölzer (Technische Universität Berlin) who introduced the concept of social enterprise and entrepreneurs independent of the legal forms that enterprises take. The concept of the solidarity economy was introduced by Jean-Louis Laville (Center de recherche et d'information sur las démocratie et d'autonomie (CRIDA). Both Birkhölzer and Laville spoke of a new social economy in Europe which includes both initiatives in the form of associations and foundations, as well as small workers' cooperatives that are providing personal social services ("proximity services"). In addition, both contrasted the emphasis of social economy approaches with that of non-profit definitions prevalent in cross-national research.

The panel was unanimous in concluding that, especially in a situation when much of Europe will be bound together by a single currency but is still divided on a political level, social economy institutions may contribute immensely to transforming a common market into a social and cultural entity.

This session was planned to provide a platform for European researchers to express their method of analysis. This session was a priority of the Academic Committee as this was the first time that ISTR has held its conference in

Western Europe. Isabel Vidal, the session moderator, expressed her hope that this plenary session represents the beginning of a path based in diversity of analysis and cooperation among Third Sector researchers.

The conference was an overwhelming success--overwhelming because of the many more on-site registrations than expected and because of the great demand for the limited number of tickets for the boat cruise. A success because of the great efforts of our Geneva hosts and because of our wonderful community of colleagues who joined us in celebrating the growth of the Society. ISTR now looks ahead to July 5 - 8, 2000 at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, to an even larger and more successful Fourth International Conference.