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## My Thoughts on the Journey with ISTR

by **Pablo Marsal**

My first knowledge of ISTR was through Andrés Thompson, while I was working with him at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation at the Buenos Aires office. Andrés has always been enthusiastic about ISTR and supported its growth wherever he was, besides being a member of the Board for several years.

I was not deceived at all. My first participation was at the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference at Toronto during 2004. Besides the excitement of traveling to Canada for the first time and getting to know the "Canadian way," I was really fascinated with meeting people from all parts of the world that had my same worries and academic curiosity about the "world of NGOs." The image of that first welcome party is still fresh in my mind after so many years. Everybody dressed with their best typical clothes full of colors and fashions absolutely diverse. Then I thought to myself: "This is it. I found my own global tribe."

Later on, my paper was accepted for Bangkok 2006, but I could not find the resources to support my ticket to that conference. Afterwards at Barcelona 2008, I was lucky that my paper was chosen and received bursaries that made it possible to travel there. Again that magic sensation that I was part of a global world crowd whom we shared interests and obstacles to get our jobs done in different scenarios but with similar problems. In Barcelona another outstanding personality, Kathleen McCarthy, from the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society Studies at the City University of New York (CUNY), made me feel "at home" at this huge international conference. She organized an unforgettable dinner at a beautiful restaurant in Barcelona with a fiery mixture of practitioners and academics from Egypt, Nigeria, Germany and other countries. They were all strong characters with fascinating stories of involvement in processes of change in their societies.

My own path is more of a practitioner than an academic. Recently after having done some research, publishing and teaching at a university I feel more of an academic, but not quite, I feel more comfortable with the expression "pracademic," with strong ties with solving practical problems and articulating solutions at the institutions where I am involved.

The other side of the coin is the ISTR Regional Conferences. Although very different, more focused on local issues, they are an outstanding complement and add value to membership. I participated actively through its Organizing Committee with other colleagues at the Buenos Aires 2001 conference on the Catholic University (UCA) premises. That conference was marked by the September 11 attack and most of our efforts were to comfort and sustain our US colleagues that were constantly calling the United States to know what had happened to their relatives. Ines Gonzalez Bombal, from the Centro de Estudios de Estado y Sociedad (CEDES) whom was scheduled to deliver the opening speech had to change her welcoming words and spontaneously gave out warm words of fraternity and solidarity with the victims and their relatives. Nevertheless, in spite of this harsh situation, the conference was a success and a crowd of enthusiastic scholars from Argentina and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean participated actively with ideas and debates. More recently, I participated again at the Buenos Aires conference of 2011, organized by ICD from Uruguay and UCA of Argentina, ten years after that 2001 conference, demonstrating – in spite of all the obstacles – continuity and sustainability of ISTR mission and determination.

Lastly, a few weeks ago, I enjoyed the IX Regional ISTR Latin America and Caribbean Conference at Santiago de Chile, organized by three distinguished universities: Universidad de los Lagos, Alberto Hurtado and Diego Portales, with all sorts of interesting ideas brought by scholars from many countries in the region. The scenario was an excited Chilean Society in the midst of the 40th anniversary of the military coup against constitutional president Salvador Allende. This exciting conference and many other Regional Latin American conferences was made possible through the permanent support of ICD from Uruguay, the Latin American hub at Montevideo, lead by Anabel Cruz and Analía Bettoni.

After participating in many ISTR conferences and looking at the evolution of societies in the regions, some issues still challenge the future of the third sector organizations and the field of civil society. Some of the questions are still the same and some are new:

What needs to be done to enhance the development of new programs in nonprofit studies in the universities in the region? Have we done enough from ISTR to provide institutional support for initiatives in the region? Can we deepen knowledge of *Voluntas* in the region as it is still not well known in this area of the world? Should we establish a journal in Spanish and Portuguese to help scholars in the area to disseminate their thoughts, with what resources and with which institutions? How can we react to the different political scene in many countries in Latin America where new elected governments take care of many social issues and oblige NGOs to a different relation with the State? Can the Third Sector community relocate to another position and still provide information and solid research to demonstrate to society and other actors that it is sustainable and independent of the current political context?

These are some of the questions and I am sure they are not all. But surely ISTR is at the moment the best community of colleagues to share ideas and inspire solutions to our evermore challenging context.