

Asia/Pacific ISTR Regional Network

The Fourth ISTR Asia Pacific Regional Conference held in Bangalore, India

By Yashavantha Dongre & Shanthi Gopalan, Third Sector Research Resource Centre, University of Mysore, Mysore

The Fourth ISTR Asia Pacific Regional Conference was held in Bangalore, India, from 16-18 November 2005. The Bangalore conference reinforced the keen research focus of scholars from the region exhibited in previous conferences in Bangkok, Osaka and Beijing. The Bangalore University, Bangalore, Acharya Institute of Management and Sciences, Bangalore, and the Third Sector Research Group, India (TSRGI) jointly organized this conference. The conference was held at the Jnana Jyothi Auditorium in the Bangalore University Campus at Bangalore. The three days' events brought together third sector researchers representing both academia and civil society organisations from across the region and included three countries from outside the Asia Pacific region.

"Civil Society and Social Justice" was the major theme addressed by the conference. Paper, panel and plenary sessions addressed the major theme from various perspectives. There were eight sub themes relating to: Third Sector and Inclusive Development, Inequalities and Empowerment, Impact and Challenges of Globalization, Disaster Management, Philanthropy, Third Sector Governance, Cooperatives, and Mutual Interest Groups.

Conference Inaugural

The conference began with a formal opening which included lighting of the traditional lamp along with a background song on peace and justice, sung by the students and staff of the Acharya Institute of Management and Sciences, Bangalore. The formal inauguration was followed by a welcome note by the co- chair of the Host Committee, Prof. Kiran Reddy.

Prof. Jenny Onyx from University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, ISTR Board Member and the Chair of Program Committee, gave an overview of ISTR's mission and briefed the gathering about the previous ISTR regional conferences. Further, she explained how the abstracts were blind reviewed and the papers were selected on a competitive setting, which has been the tradition with ISTR. She also complemented the host organisations for their untiring efforts to make the conference happen.

Mr. Rajashekharan, Honorable Minister of State for Planning, Government of India, delivered the inaugural address. Rajashekharan, a noted Gandhian and a widely known NGO activist in India, drew attention to the increasing role of the third sector, particularly in addressing the needs of the "poorest of the poor." He used the occasion to announce that the federal government, in consultation with the representatives of the voluntary sector, has finalized a draft National Policy on Voluntary Sector and that the Prime Minister would soon formally announce the same.

Prof. U.R. Ananthamurthy, noted writer, environment and social activist, winner of Jnana Peetha Award, (the highest literary award of India) and the former Vice Chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, delivered the keynote address. Drawing heavily from the experiences of Gandhi, Lincoln, and Mandela, Professor Ananthamurthy narrated how great souls have fought for social justice. He opined that the poor in the poor countries are still energetic and are capable of responding to the need of the hour. All they need is proper support emerging through people's initiatives to educate them and to show the right direction. He quoted an anecdote from a poem written by the noted saint-poet Kanakadasa to demonstrate how the poor and the marginalized have talent and energy, needing nurture and proper opportunities to achieve equality and justice. He hoped that civil society organisations would rise to the occasion when the world is passing through a crisis ridden by mutual distrust and suspicion on the one hand and unequal distribution of power and resources on the other.

Prof. Masayuki Deguchi, President of ISTR, spoke about the structure and mission of ISTR, and how the organisation has emerged as a truly international platform for third sector researchers, with a membership drawn from 89 countries around the world. He provided an insight into the various ways in which ISTR is striving to facilitate qualitative research. Prof. Deguchi welcomed all the delegates and thanked the organizers and also invited scholars to participate in the next ISTR International Conference to be held in Bangkok.

The Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and the Chairperson of the Host Committee, Prof. K Thimmappa, served as Chair of the Inaugural session and emphasized the need for a vibrant civil society. He cautioned that the third sector would have to be careful not to lose out because of proliferation and loss of credibility while specially emphasizing the need for partnership and tri-sector collaboration.

Paper Sessions

In all, there were 22 paper sessions with a total of 63 papers presented. The papers covered a wide array of issues related to third sector. Definitional issues, performance, efficiency and governance issues, gender and indigenous groups, developmental paradigms, state and civil society relationships, legal issues, and even language and media issues featured in the paper presentations. These sessions provided a platform for exchange of ideas across disciplines and country experiences. The program and host committee will prepare a comprehensive review of all of the papers presented and will explore the possibility of publishing select papers in the form of edited volumes.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion focused on Internal Governance Issues of TSOs. The panel was based on a cross country study covering six countries (Asia's Third Sector: Governance for Accountability and Performance, a study coordinated through University of Technology Sydney, covering China, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam). The panel was moderated by Dr. Samiul Hasan who explained the broad framework of the study and the need to examine the internal governance issues of third sector organisations. This was followed by two country presentations. Philippines' presentation (paper by Dr. Ma Oliva Domingo) focused on indicators of good governance as perceived by different key informants and representatives of TSOs covered in the study. Ms. Domingo narrated the experience of TSOs in the Philippines and the accreditation process followed. The presentation from India (joint paper by Dr. Yashavantha Dongre, Dr. Shanthi G, Srivalli A.J. and Rajeev I.N.) centered on the legal framework governing third sector organisations and the implications for governance. The paper analyzed the specific provisions of incorporation and fund supporting legislations and the extent of compliance with the provisions of legislations in the process of governance. Followed by these two country presentations, Prof. Jenny Onyx from UTS presented a comparative picture emerging from the cross country data. The focus of the discussion was on small and informal civil society initiatives which still seem to have indigenous methods of governance, which may have important lessons for modern organisations.

Plenary Sessions

The first plenary, "Civil Society and Social Justice," was facilitated by Mr. Saptharishi, the Honorary Co-Chair of Confederation of NGOs in Rural India. He began the proceedings by dwelling on the state policy and mechanisms of social justice. Speakers included Prof. Abhay Kumar Dubey from Centre for Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, who spoke on the issue of the conception of civil society and the framework of social justice. He expressed his concern with "civil society being more and more elitist than being pro poor." He also noted that civil society functions within the purview of the political system. To address the injustices in society he felt that civil society initiatives should address political dimensions more seriously.

The second contributor, Dr. H. Sudarshan (Founder Director Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra B an NGO working with indigenous people and Deputy Director Vigilance, Karnataka Lokayukata), mainly addressed the issues

of corruption in societies and its presence penetrating to all development related programmes. He noted that civil society is not very seriously addressing the issue and therefore corruption is destabilizing the roots of development. He narrated how the Lokayukta is addressing the problem of corruption and called for civil society initiatives to fight corruption at all levels as an important agenda, along with their other identified missions.

The final speaker, Dr. Samiul Hasan, looked at the issues of resource allocation and injustices that prevail in societies. He used data related to issues like child mortality, involvement of mafia in power and resource allocation and substantiated the idea of inequality and injustice. Dr. Hasan discussed how civil society organisations have space and have been addressing these issues and thus emerging as an important partner in addressing development issues in every country.

The second plenary focused on the theme "Indian Third Sector." Dr. Krishna Kothai, Director, Centre for Rural Studies, MAHE Deemed University, Manipal, gave a panoramic picture of the third sector in India and invited the contributors to place before the audience the different dimensions of the sector in India.

Panelist Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi, opened his presentation by giving an introduction to the multiplicity and variety in Indian third sector. He elaborated on the spread of the sector and yet how it is not visible due to the lack and gaps in documentation. He went into detail as to how the most important sector that contributes immensely to the Indian economy by way of providing employment, catering to varied needs and contributing a significant share to the GDP of the country, has been sidelined and no serious efforts being made to give this sector its due place. He chose to call this sector the "first sector" in the sense that it is the most vital organ of the society building effort.

Dr. Lalit Kumar, Deputy Director, Voluntary Action Cell, Planning Commission of India, New Delhi, noted that the government was making efforts to bring a draft National Policy on Voluntary Sector. He analyzed the state of research and academic activities related to third sector in India and referred to many new initiatives that have come up in the country.

Dr. T. N. Sreedhara, Professor, Department of Management Studies, Mangalore University, steered the discussion pertaining to Third Sector in India, locating it in cultural embeddedness rather than looking at it from a borrowed perspective outside the Indian cultural ethos. He commented on the conception of "sector" and the institutional approach to understand civil society, and argued that there is a need to move out of this trap in order to appreciate the diverse nature of civil society in India.

The discussions that followed the presentations brought to the fore the concerns of researchers and activists with regard to the state sponsored National Policy on Voluntary Sector in India. The participants were critical of such efforts and warned the planning commission about the problems that might emerge by introducing a blanket, standardized, monoglot policy and legal framework for the diverse kinds and patterns of civil society expressions found in the country.

Closing Plenary

The concluding plenary session was chaired by Prof. Jenny Onyx and showcased the status of networking and Third Sector Research in Asia and the Pacific Region. Dr. Samiul Hasan briefed the audience about Asia Pacific Philanthropy Information Network (APPIN), a part of APPC. He focused on issues pertaining to the web site (<http://www.asianphilanthropy.org>) which includes information on 12 Asia Pacific countries. He also announced that the work for India and Pakistan was finalized and would be uploaded in a month's time.

Prof. Takayoshi Amenomori from Japan presented the current status of Third Sector Research in Japan and Korea

and noted that they need to research more in finding the historical roots of TS and civil society expressions. He made particular mention of JANPORA and the Korean Third Sector Research Association.

Prof. Ledvina Carino from the Philippines presented an extensive account of Third Sector Research in Philippines. She elaborated on the works of the Center for Leadership, Citizenship and Democracy (CLCD). She noted that researchers have been able to publish their works through the Philippine Nonprofit Sector Project (PNSP). She also pointed out that many young students are now opting for their doctoral work within third sector studies.

Prof. Rosemary Leonard from Australia presented in detail the networking that exists in Australia and New Zealand. She opined that the government was trying to centralize power and drew attention to the threat that TSOs have when co-opted by the government in its discourse. She deliberated on the effective methods adopted by the growing sector to fight against this by well established networking among the TSOs in these two countries.

Prof. Yashavantha Dongre from India gave a panoramic picture of the third sector activity in India and how the Third Sector Research Group India emerged and is functioning. He noted that nearly 13 universities/institutes in India were offering courses on Third Sector / Non-Profit Sector as part of their academic programmes. He also noted that recently the University of Mysore in collaboration with Vivekananda Youth Movement has launched a Masters Programme on Non-Profit Management at Mysore.

Finally, Prof. Masayuki Deguchi presented his concluding remarks on the conference and explained the necessity to popularize Third Sector Research to address the developmental and related issues of progress in all societies.

Affinity Groups

Meetings of affinity groups on Gender, Governance, and Philanthropy took place after the technical sessions. The three affinity groups had active discussion sessions and decided to continue their deliberations through email.

About 20 people met in the Affinity Group on Gender (AGG), including Chris Lange and Uday Kumar, two of the founding members. They gave a short overview about how the AGG has come about, what the objectives are and what the group has proposed for the ISTR International Conference in Bangkok next year (two panels and a pre-conference workshop). After a round of brief introductions of the participants and statements about the interest in the subject, a lively discussion evolved that touched on various dimensions relating to gender. These included the importance of gender in general, and also in civil society/Third Sector-organizations, about how the media and other avenues (although they might not hold true any more) perpetuate stereotypes of females and males. The group drew attention to research that needs to be done on the issue, which in India is now done on a larger scale than in Europe, as the number of presentations on women indicated, particularly in combination with micro-credits and self help groups.

The affinity group on Governance, a newly formed group, met for the first time. The group, coordinated by Dr. Shanthi Gopalan from the University of Mysore had eleven members. The initial discussions brought forth the fact that there is multiple understanding of governance. Each member was addressing the concept from different angles such as the socio- historical and political framework operating in his or her respective country. Hence, the group agreed to and prepared a comprehensive list of different view points on governance. The group further agreed to re-work on the points identified and wanted to take a little more time to finalize the definitional aspect. The group members have expressed eagerness to continue the contact and exchange the findings of different research programmes that they are engaged in with others.

An affinity group on Philanthropy and was coordinated by Dr. Moodithaya, Director, Justice KS Hedge Institute of Management. This small but cohesive group included members who have already done research in the area of philanthropy. The group, after a thorough discussion, decided to focus on five broad areas. This includes (a)

organize / conduct affinity group meetings in every international / regional ISTR conference, (b) build a network of researchers in the area of philanthropy, (c) encourage and support research and publications in the area of philanthropy, (d) share information and knowledge in areas of mutual research interest, and (e) take up collaborative research work wherever possible. Dr. Moodithaya is setting up a Centre for Study in Philanthropy at the K.S.Hegde Institute of Management.

Other Highlights

The Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) brought out a special issue of its journal *Civil Society Voices* coinciding with the Fourth Asia Pacific ISTR Regional Conference, focusing on the conference theme. The Journal includes a write up on the conference by Prof. Jenny Onyx, Chair of Program Committee, and three articles on the theme "Third Sector and Governance."

The conference venue also opened space for an NGO (Samarthan, from Bangalore) working with physically challenged people. The NGO had used different posters and had housed volunteers to showcase their activities. The organisation also gave a dance and songs program by the visually challenged young artists, which drew immense appreciation from the conference delegates and other invitees.

The theme of the conference and the networking done by the host committee drew enormous interest from the media. The conference was widely covered both by the print and the television media. The print media showed great interest in the Third Sector activity, were keen to follow up with the Indian researchers about the outcome, and expressed great interest to highlight more civil society activities in their stories. Noted television channels interviewed some of the international and national researchers and telecast excerpts as part of their feature program.

Among the conference participants about 35 new members joined ISTR on a two year membership. This looks especially significant for India to expand research in the civil society related areas.

The fourth ISTR Asia Pacific Regional Conference at Bangalore succeeded in creating a good academic ambience, helped making new friends and succeeded in providing a good platform for scholarship. The third sector in India is large and diverse. The academic interest on this sector is on the increase. The Bangalore conference has succeeded in bringing together a good many new researchers to the field (thanks to the local funders who facilitated registration subsidy to Indian participants) and the prospect for networking among third sector researchers in India now has additional strength.