

SSHRC Partnership Grant Proposal for the Comparative Third Sector Project Overview

In Brief: We propose to develop a comparative third sector¹ project building on work from the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (Johns Hopkins University, 1995-2020), the Third Sector Impact (2014-2019), and the ISTR Center Directors network that is open access, globally governed, and is more inclusive in terms of countries and datapoints represented.

Background: The CNP framework primarily reflected Global North experiences, limiting their applicability in diverse regional contexts (Anheier, Lang, & Toepler, 2020; de Morais Holanda, Kim, & Appe, 2023). Additionally, existing studies largely relying on these frameworks tended to static, large-scale comparisons that do not capture the rapid evolution and complexity of today's civil society, especially with the rise of hybrid organizations that blend nonprofit, public, and market logic (Toepler et al. 2020; Anheier 2023; Dipendra and Lorsuwannarat 2019; Kumi 2017). A focus on national official data can miss the dynamic, multi-layered relationships and specificities that are critical to understanding contemporary civil society (Appe 2022; LePere-Schloop et al. 2021; Levine Daniel et al. 2023). The near-term future of solid, cross-national empirical research and empirically based theory-building in the third sector field will depend, however, on the sustained engagement and growth of the research community. New challenges to the third sector require adding tools to examine smaller, less formal organizations as well as new types of organizations, including digital advocacy organizations, social enterprises, and nonprofit corporations.

Outcomes: The proposed project will create global data architecture to incorporate new data types from new countries while preserving and sharing existing data, and ensure interoperability, transparency, and accessibility through a global governance structure. Proposed project outcomes would include shared definitions and methodology, research networks across countries and disciplines, community engaged research processes, data collection and aggregation implemented in a data infrastructure enabling comparative analysis, and training for the next generation civil society scholars and leaders. As just a starter, the data produced by this project could address important research questions about the relative economic size and policy influence of the third sector around the world, the diversity of organization types and relative density in different legal and philanthropic environments, the economic and legal-political institutions that frame cultures of volunteering and philanthropy in different countries, and the real world impacts of localization, foreign aid retrenchment, and rising authoritarianism on civil society and social goods.

¹ The term third sector is used to encompass all organizations that are non-profit, non-governmental (i.e. outside of the market and government) and includes non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSO), nonprofit organizations, voluntary associations, charities and public benefit organizations, nonprofit corporations, foundations and private philanthropies, social movement organizations, advocacy organizations, and grassroots organizations. Practical applications of the definition can vary but in many countries this category includes religious organizations, trade unions, political parties, private hospitals, universities, cultural organizations, professional and scholarly associations, business groups, and public interest associations. The third sector is selected as more inclusive than nonprofit sector and often used as synonymous with civil society and the voluntary sector.

Funding: The Government of Canada’s Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has a Partnership Grant (PG) program that could provide some necessary funding. PGs “provide support for new and existing formal partnerships over four to seven years to advance research, research training and/or knowledge mobilization ... through mutual cooperation and sharing of intellectual leadership” (<https://sshrc-crsh.canada.ca/en/funding/opportunities/partnership-grants/2025/stage-1-competition/instructions/applicant.aspx>). Partnership Grants can be up to \$2.5 million CAD with required matching funds from partners and other external sources of at least 60% and ideally more. SSHRC funding can be used for a wide variety of research costs including research assistance, training, travel for research or conferences, hospitality, survey research, supporting research centers or nonprofit organizations to participate in or conduct research, platforms for knowledge dissemination, and publications. Partners and collaborators can include academics, nonprofit organizations, international organizations, and research centers. Indirect costs are calculated on top of any successful award but cannot leave Canada.

Application: The application is in two stages. Stage 1 is due February 10, 2026. Applicants will be informed by June 2026 if they are moving to the second stage. Funding is provided to support the development of materials for Stage 2. The Stage 2 application would be due in October 2026.

Project Structure:

The grant will be submitted by Elizabeth Bloodgood, Professor, Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Country teams for the grant would include individual academics/researchers as well as research centers and nonprofit organizations. Participating centers and nonprofit organizations would sign formal partnership agreements with the project specifying relevant roles, responsibilities, contributions, activities, and expectations from the partnership. Individual researchers would be collaborators in the application. ISTR will serve as the global convenor and home of the future data infrastructure. ISTR would provide space for convening and project meetings at its events and events of its partners and share project updates and results.

In order to submit a SSHRC Partnership Grant, the organizing team will develop:

- A concise proposal of research activities, including information to be collected, methodologies for collection, research outputs, data storage and sharing plans, and proposals for knowledge mobilization.
- A governance structure plus clear agreements upon principles and procedures for making key decisions about membership, data collection, data release, data storage, data use, privacy, and publication and attribution.
- A budget, including contributions from partners (cash and in-kind, these need not be uniform across different types of partners and countries) as well as how the budget will be allocated across student assistantships and training, travel, management, focus groups, support for local nonprofit partners, conference travel, equipment, data storage, data management, etc.

Conclusion: Participation in the SSHRC partnership grant involves managing a relatively complex and non-intuitive online portal and required paperwork. However, if we are successful, the SSHRC

grant offers the opportunity to collect and compare data from a large set of countries and data points not previously included in the Johns Hopkins CNP. The resulting data will help us to answer important questions about the social origins of the sector, its current condition, and will help to provide clues for its future.

Next Steps: We invite you to join us for two online information sessions in early December 2025 to discuss the project and grant proposal in more depth and gauge interest in participating in the application. Please see the ISTR Website Calendar for more information.

Questions? Contact [Megan Haddock](#), ISTR Executive Director