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CONFERENCE LETTER

15th International Conference of the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR)

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The International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR) is a major international association promoting research and education in the fields of civil society, philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector. Founded in 1992, ISTR has spent thirty years building a global community of scholars while also raising the awareness of the Third Sector and all it accomplishes. ISTR also works to broaden the inclusion and strengthen the voices of researchers in developing nations and Central and Eastern Europe, which have active Third Sectors but are under-represented in research literature.

ISTR has several means to accomplish their mission of education, collaboration, and research. They have an affiliated journal: VOLUNTAS, the International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations. They also have an affiliated book series, regional conferences, and active affinity groups where those that specialize in voluntary sector law or another subfield can network and share research. However, one of the main events is the biennial International Conference.

After two attempts to host their biennial conference in Montreal, Canada, the ISTR successfully convened the 15th International Conference as an in-person and hybrid event on 12-15 of July 2022. The theme was appropriately “Navigating in Turbulent Times: Perspectives and Contributions from the Third Sector”. Since ISTR is dedicated to the study of the voluntary sector across the globe,

conferencing in any format can be difficult to navigate. In the 2021 virtual convening, special attention was given to the wide geographical distribution of scholars by hosting two time bands of sessions to avoid midnight presentations for as many as possible. However, it was a joyous occasion that many members of ISTR were able to make the trek to see each other in person after several years of virtual contact, in addition to joining those in other locations via remote attendance and presentation options.

The conference consists of several important tracks and pieces: parallel sessions, special sessions, professional development, and workshops designed for particular audiences. These in addition to a wealth of networking opportunities allows time for researchers to both share their existing work and develop new ideas with those who share interests but may live on the other side of the world. We will talk about each of these tracks in turn.

Parallel sessions

These are the main component of the conference; where researchers share the results from studies they have conducted in order to receive feedback from their peers. Each proposal has been through a rigorous application and review process, and accepted research presentations are grouped into twelve different parallel sessions. Each parallel session has a variety of different rooms to choose from on various themes, such as “Factors Influencing Charitable Giving”, “Advocacy from a Comparative Perspective”, and “Nonprofit Management in the Digital Era”. There is a variety to choose from in each parallel session, which allows the conference attendee to either focus on a particular area of interest or assemble a schedule with a variety of topics. The bulk of conference attendees will present in a parallel session since this is the most common way for a researcher to share knowledge. At this particular conference, the sessions were predominantly hybrid, meaning that both presenters and attendees could be located somewhere other than the physical conference location.

There are also other types of sessions that focus on research and the theme of the conference but take a slightly different format than the presentation of three-four individual research papers. The poster session challenges participants to design a visual poster of their research. There were also thirteen roundtable discussions on topics such as e.g., nonprofit resilience, European civil society, and the relationship between democratic crises and the Third Sector. This format allows experts to have a moderated conversation about the topic rather than present a slide show on a single research project. This also tends to encourage more questions from the audience, resulting in a more informal type of knowledge-sharing than the traditional research paper panels.

Special sessions: A celebration of Lester M. Salamon

The voluntary sector has lost several notable friends and scholars this year, and of particular importance to the international and comparative scholarship was the passing of Lester M. Salamon. A series of special sessions at this conference was a celebration of Salamon’s contribution to the development of the Third Sector by looking back on his work and research. It was also an opportunity to discuss the future and development of the Third Sector based on this. Within this framework, the first special session (the plenary) discussed the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP),

in which Lester M. Salamon played a leading role at Johns Hopkins University. This CNP made it possible to accumulate data in the nonprofit sector by influencing the setting of the Third Sector metrics of various international organizations. In other words, through this, research in the Third Sector was facilitated. CNP's lead partner, Helmut Anheier, explained the contribution of CNP that made this possible. Subsequently, several other colleagues of Lester M. Salamon discussed the impact and future implications of his work: Benjamin Gidron, Edith Archambault, Jacob Mwathi Mati, Naoto Yamauchi, and Dennis Young. At the end of the plenary and in a particularly heartfelt moment, Stefan Toepler presented Helmut Anheier with the first printed copy of the book on civil society that was dedicated to the recognition and impact of Anheier's work.

The second special session focused on the third-party government/voluntary failure theory devised by Lester M. Salamon in the 1980s. This is a theory that explains the relationship between the government and the nonprofit sector and has been treated as an important concept so far. In this session, scholars from several countries debated whether this theory still has explanatory power, including how it adapts or should be adapted to different contexts.

The third special session focused on initiatives. The session introduced and explained the Johns Hopkins International Fellows in Philanthropy Program, an initiative led by Lester M. Salamon for mid-career scholars and practitioners to take part in life at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies. Panelists and attendees reflected on the role of the Program in building the field, and discussed the possibilities for future initiatives based on similar or variations on the original theme.

The fourth special session focused on the discussion of international standards and measures of volunteering. The content proposed by Salamon's research team was adopted as the measurement of volunteering by an international organization. Based on this contribution, the index measuring the Third Sector has been updated continuously. In this context, there was a need to know, understand, and exchange information about international standards being refined. Thus, international standards related to the Third Sector were discussed in this session.

The fifth special session focused on the topic of philanthropy. In a situation in which the scope of philanthropy has been broadly defined through the initiative called The New Frontiers of Philanthropy Project, the need for discussion among all walks of life related to philanthropy has increased. Thus, the present and future of philanthropy were the primary focus of this session—a fitting way to close out such a notable conference.

Professional development

Six sessions during the conference were considered “professional development workshops”. Such programs all have appeal to the entire conference, and therefore they are never scheduled during the same time slot. For example, one of the workshops was about developing a strong book proposal, led by experienced authors and representatives of Georgetown University Press and Springer. Another was a conversation with the two of the three editors of VOLUNTAS about how to successfully craft an article that would eventually satisfy editors and reviewers in order to be published. There were also sessions on methodology (Inspirations from the South: Decolonized

Methodologies and Engaged Research) and teaching (Pedagogy for Instruction about Civil Society) which had broad appeal to conference attendees.

Specialty workshops and meetings

On the other side of the spectrum from the broad professional development sessions are the meetings designed to appeal to specific audiences. For example, before the conference began, there were two special workshops: one for members of the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council and one for doctoral students participating in the PhD Summit. The ISTR conference has always been especially welcoming to early scholars, with the PhD Summit and several social events dedicated exclusively to students. Similarly, Affinity groups dedicated to specific topics within the Third Sector (such as Law and Regulations; Volunteering; or Teaching and Learning) or to particular geographies (such as Africa or Asia and the Pacific) allow scholars within a specific area to form closer research connections. There were also several meetings convened by a sister organization, the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), on the conversation surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion in the United States.

Beyond the programming

Some of the most memorable parts of a conference occur beyond the formal programming. The ISTR conference has always gone above and beyond in this respect, especially compared to many of the more staid conferences found in the United States. Since the ISTR conferences are generally held at academic institutions rather than hotels, these organized social activities are crucial to the team building and camaraderie between colleagues that are otherwise geographically very distant.

The 15th ISTR Conference also excelled in the way it provided online accessibility to those near and far. There were more hybrid panels than ones solely in-person, which allows scholars that may not have the resources or ability to travel to still receive feedback on their own work and experience the work of others. There were also multiple blogging sites dedicated to the conference, both covering the sessions (hosted by Alliance Magazine¹) and providing insights on the location (hosted by ISTR²). Whether one was looking for a COVID test or a cup of coffee, there was a blog post that could point you in the right direction.

In summary, the 15th ISTR conference was a long time in development, and the theme of Navigating Turbulent Times could certainly have applied to trying to deploy a conference during COVID as much as it describes the trials faced by the Third Sector. However, the result was a welcome reintroduction to colleagues and research that had been only virtual for years. We are fortunate that such a well-planned and welcoming conference offered many of us our first in-person welcome back to knowledge-sharing.

¹ <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/tag/istr2022>

² <https://www.istr.org/blogpost/2016114/15th-International-Conference>