



Days in Barcelona: The 2008 biennial Conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR)

Dr. Hagai Katz

In the middle of July hundreds of third sector researchers from all corners of the globe gathered at the biennial conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research - ISTR. The society, founded in 1992 and whose first president was Prof. Benjamin Gidron, has turned, throughout the years, into a leading factor in developing third sector research worldwide.

Through its activity, the society has developed international and regional networks of researchers and created opportunities for them to cooperate and exchange ideas.

The biennial conference is the society's capstone activity, which takes place every two years in a different continent. In recent years, the conference was held in Canada, South Africa and Thailand. This year the beautiful city of Barcelona, Spain, took its turn in hosting the conference, which was held at the University of Barcelona under the auspices of the University's Centre Investigació d'Economia i Societat (CIES). In contrast to previous years, this time the conference was a collaboration between ISTR and another organization - the European Network of Social Economics Researchers - EMES. The successful combination of these two important societies and the fortuitous location in one of the world's most beautiful and lively cities contributed greatly to the conference's success.

The number of abstracts submitted to the organizing committee broke all previous records - 868 abstracts were submitted for consideration out of which 581 were accepted for presentation at the conference.

Accordingly, the conference was filled to the brim and the task of choosing which room to attend out of ten or eleven rooms in each session was, at times, a quite difficult one to do for the 601 registered participants

of the conference. The central focus of the conference was "The Third Sector and Sustainable Social Change", but the parallel sessions dealt with a wide range of subjects relevant to the research activities of EMES and ISTR members: Evaluating the performance and accountability of the third sector, Social economy and solidarity-based economy, Management and governance, Social entrepreneurship and social enterprise, Corporate Social Responsibility, Gender and the Third Sector, Global civil society and democratic cultures, Conflict resolution, Government regulation, Counter-terrorism, foreign aid, and other constraints, The Welfare State, Liberalization and neo-liberal policies, Volunteering and social capital and Philanthropy.

Plenary sessions were also conducted with the participation of leading researchers in which various subjects were discussed such as: The role of global civil society in developing and preserving democracy and the relevance of the accepted distinctions between the developed North and the developing South when the issue under discussion is global civil society.

Of course, thinking is difficult on an empty stomach and the conference stayed true to previous ISTR conventions by offering the participants a number of social events which, unsurprisingly, were accompanied by superior food and drink, in the best Catalan tradition. One of these events was conducted in the historic campus of the Barcelona University, which is one of the oldest academic institutions in Europe, in the magnificent hall of the University's board of trustees. A musical duo of guitar and voice performed before the conference participants' a string of Spanish and South American songs, and the magical voices perfectly matched the hall's immense beauty.

Afterwards the audience gathered in the garden and the entrance hall, and the Cava, Spain's sparkling wine, flowed in rivers.

Israeli presence in the conference, especially those from the Israeli center for Third sector Research, was prominent. Almost the entire staff of ICTR participated and presented papers. Prof. Gidron presented his work concerning the development of policy towards the third sector. He also presented a paper about the role of research centers in the development of policy towards the third sector together with Hila Yogev.

I was a member of the organizing committee, a chairman of one of the parallel sessions and presented, with Hila Yogev, a paper on the long-term influence of the Second Lebanon War on third sector organizations. Dr. Debby Hasky-Leventhal participated in three different sessions in which she presented her various studies concerning youth volunteering and volunteering throughout the life cycle. Inbal Abbou, a doctoral student, presented her research about clients' choices in mixed markets in which third sector organizations compete with business organizations.

Dr. Varda Shiffer participated in a workshop about civic engagement in the Mediterranean Basin, and Dr. Hadara Bar-Mor from Netanya College, who is a member of the Center's steering committee, served as chair in the parallel sessions.

It goes without saying that the conference provided numerous opportunities for the participants to create professional contacts, meet new friends and colleagues, renew old acquaintances, wander around in the picturesque alleys of Barcelona, enjoy the traditional tapas restaurants and visit the charming buildings designed by the Catalan legendary architect, Antoni Gaudi.

Lecturer, Program for Nonprofit Management, Guilford Glazer School of Business and Management Chief Research Officer, Israeli Center for Third-Sector Research - ICTR
Ben Gurion University of the Negev