

RePORT

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THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THIRD-SECTOR RESEARCH (ISTR) IS PLEASED TO PRESENT
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“The Role of Civil Society in Development Processes: A Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue”

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Over one hundred researchers from fifteen Latin America countries, the United States and the Netherlands met in San Jose, Costa Rica, to participate in the IV Regional ISTR Conference in Latin America and the Caribbean entitled “The Role of Civil Society in Development Processes: A Multi-stakeholder Dialogue.”

The three-day event created opportunities for meeting and reflecting on research, presented in two round tables, three panels, three workshops, and one plenary session.

The IV LAC Regional ISTR Conference made significant advances in conceptualizing the “Third Sector” and “Civil Society,” as well as understanding the political, ideological and methodological implications of using these concepts in social research. The event also increased awareness of the diversity of research foci and the need to develop more workable concepts of Civil Society.

A large number of new participants, especially from Central America, were instrumental in broadening the scope of research and identifying new themes. The conference also confirmed that creating bridges between academia and other sectors dedicated to applied research can enrich, expand, and deepen not only processes but also impact civil society. The participants confirmed their support for strengthening dialogue between researchers and practitioners, in order to achieve a more regional and integrated vision of civil society’s links to governments and the private sector.

Contents and Conclusions

Margarita Bolaños, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Costa Rica; Ana Elena Badilla, President of Fundación Acceso (IV ISTR Conference Secretariat); and Rosa María Fischer, ISTR Board of Directors, inaugurated

the conference. They focused on the need to renew links between academia and civil society in order to take on the challenges following the opening of markets, the reconstruction and strengthening of democracies, and the increasing impoverishment and vulnerability of large sectors of Latin America. In this regard, they emphasized the need for new forms of dialogue, accountability and multi-sectoral collaboration.

Round Table #1: “Implications of the Concepts of Civil Society / Third Sector for Social Research” reflected on the scope, limitations and the political, ideological and methodological implications of using civil society concepts. Chaired by Rodrigo Villar (Colombia), the round table included four researchers who emphasized different dimensions of the concepts.

Gonzalo de la Maza (Chile) presented the paper “Civil Society and Building Social Capital in Latin America: Where is Research Going?” in which he highlighted the need to “redirect research on Civil Society towards describing and understanding the internal structure of civil societies in the region, and towards linking that structure with the larger socio-economic changes that determine its shape and reach.” He maintained that, without a clearly defined theoretical basis for understanding the terms Civil Society, Third Sector and social capital, it is impossible to establish plausible hypotheses about relations between “Third Sector” and “generating social capital.”

Inés González (Argentina) in her paper, “Ideas about Civil Society: Past and Present,” reviewed a number of sources of discussion on Civil Society and introduced into the academic debate, and reviewed their impact on the socio-economic reforms in Latin America in the 90’s, in particular in Argen-

tina. Based on this review, she made recommendations that support civil society organizations in formulating public policies in the context of neo-liberal reforms.

Manuel Rojas Bolaños (Costa Rica) reconstructed the meaning of civil society from different philosophical and political traditions, and discussed the implications that these meanings have when analyzing current political phenomena.

Finally Alberto Olvera (Mexico), in his paper “Civil Society, Democratic Governance, Public Spaces and Democratization: The Outlines of a Project,” warned of the risk of simply falling back on the civil society concept, “since it is a term with different meanings that is the object of endless debate, upon which it seems a consensus will not be reached.” He also noted the way in which “more common definitions limit their object of study to the formal characteristics of certain civil organizations and social movements, unaware of how the original notion of civil society was thought of in the field of political philosophy; that is, civil society as a plural social space, constituting a way of life, and offering a critical alternative to the State and the market.” He affirmed that “empirical definitions do not make the concept operational but reduce it to one of its components, generally to the independent networks associated with it.”

During the first day, the attendees had the opportunity to take part in three panels. These panels were conducted with an innovative methodology that prioritized dialogue and learning through active participation among panelists and audience members.

Alejandro Ochoa (Venezuela), Rodrigo Villar (Colombia) and Mario Roitter (Argentina) contributed to **Panel 1: Links between Diverse Analyses of Civil Society** and identified differences, similarities, contributions, and gaps in ‘Third Sector’ and ‘Civil Society’ concepts. They concluded that these concepts are used for different purposes to begin developing theories, which is why a prescriptive definition determines the extent of the findings. They assured that the political implications that underlie each definition cannot be avoided.

The panel noted the following needs with regard to the goals and challenges for research in this topic:

- Promote diverse approaches;
- Clarify assumptions - deepen methodological rigor and transparency;
- Maintain academic purpose a priority;
- Create criteria that allows processes to be compared without sacrificing the specifics, and;
- Emphasize the analysis of context and relationships.

Panel 2: Characteristics, Scope and Impact of Civil Society consisted of Anabel Cruz (Uruguay), César Barrantes (Venezuela), Alvaro Fernández (Costa Rica) and Adriana Rofman (Argentina).

These papers centered on the socio-political context, the role of cooperation, and the agenda of research on Civil Society.

Each case highlighted contextual factors which have most influenced Civil Society, such as:

- Transitions from dictatorships to pseudo-democracies;
- Processes of structural adjustment;
- Commercial liberalization and free trade agreements;
- Fixing of agendas by international cooperation, and;
- State reforms.

These inter-related processes have resulted in much societal fragmentation and sectoral division; corruption and State patronage; a closed government that excludes Civil Society; reduced volume and quality of investment and public spending; culminating in a large degree of State substitution of Civil Society.

Panel 3: Paths of the Third Sector analyzed the scope and limitations of strategies different sectors of Civil Society employ in building citizenship and inclusion. The presenters were Raymi Padilla (Costa Rica), Guillermo Mayer (Argentina), Adelina Vásquez (Honduras) and Yuri Giovanni Melini (Guatemala).

The majority of authors identified a connection between Church and Civil Society organizations, as well as the tendency for Civil Society organizations to distance themselves from the State. The presenters’ experiences showed considerable differences in terms of focus (citizenship formation versus multi-objective) and intervention strategy (structural change versus charity). Regarding the latter, the participants concluded that in practice, the majority of organizations act in charity models.

The authors said Civil Society has built citizenship and social inclusion by creating a relevant social agenda, identifying areas of their competence, enriching the notion of citizenship and association, advocacy on social and environmental policies, and building alliances with other sectors.

Following the panels, the participants enjoyed a night out in the outskirts of San Jose, filled with traditional food, folklore dancing and fireworks.

On the second day, the keynote speaker, Sofía Montenegro (Nicaragua), addressed “The Relationships Between State and Civil Society in the Construction of Central American Democracies.” She identified the challenges in this relationship which limit the capacity of Central American Civil So-

ciety to act autonomously and systematically.

For Montenegro, the State and Civil Society are autonomous political and public spheres that have an ongoing relationship. But due to the convergence of diverse interests, Civil Society is converted into the area where ideological, economic, social and religious conflicts are expressed, which the State has the job of resolving, whether by mediation or suppression.

However, with the prevailing state of poor governance in the region, the remaining challenge is that Civil Society – more than just NGOs – reappropriate the State, which is the fundamental arena from which democracy is constructed.

Following the keynote speech, further reflection continued with three simultaneous panels.

Panel 4: Experiences of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives identified factors and key strategies for fostering local and national joint initiatives through efforts to link the State to Civil Society, and the private sector to Civil Society.

Ricardo Claverías (Perú), Jorge Vargas Cullell (Costa Rica) and Renzo Lautaro Rosal (Guatemala) presented on national initiatives in their respective countries and discussed the weak relationship between Civil Society and political parties, which do not reflect Civil Society's interests.

They also considered the way in which State exercise of power conditions the relationship with Civil Society. The resulting loss of multi-stakeholder space and government taking greater control weakens Civil Society (heterogeneity, dispersion, little proactive capability, little advocacy articulating demands and their translation into policies) which results in the high polarization of Latin American Societies.

Some of the factors and strategies mentioned to better articulate Civil Society's role are:

- Extending and strengthening participatory electoral–democracy;
- Democratizing political parties;
- Move from intrasectoral to intersectoral articulation;
- A more proactive attitude on the part of Civil Society;
- Strengthened communication with local governments;
- Inclusion of intercultural strategies, and;
- More influence of Civil Society in public policy.

Felipe Pérez (Nicaragua) and Mónica Bosée (Brazil) presented their experience in joint Private Sector–Civil Society initiatives. They concluded that this type of alliance tends to take on functions abandoned by the State, and frequently strengthens traditional roles because of its incapacity to criticize the prevailing model. According to the participants' analysis, Civil Society organizations enter into these kinds

of alliances because of their dire need to access resources, but it is important to recognize the limitations as well. These types of alliances should be valued to the extent that they produce mutual support and contribute to the creation of citizenship.

The authors identified the following factors and strategies which are fundamental for Private Sector–Civil Society relationships to work:

- The need to define alliances based on joint agendas with agreed upon minimum common denominators, in which the generation of citizenship has a central role;
- Clarity and transparency in deciding objectives, interests, and key players;
- Integrating small businesses into the process;
- Building an environment of confidence and credibility, and;
- Integrating sectors according to their objectives, and possibly linking sustainability strategies, and generating income for social reinvestment.

Panel 5: Relations between the Third Sector, Academia and Knowledge Generation concentrated on identifying and analyzing strategies and mechanisms for enabling knowledge generation through the academia–Civil Society link.

Vanessa Paternostro (Brazil), Pedro Rangel (Venezuela), Sandra Carro and Gabriela Etchebehere (Uruguay), Hannia Franceschi (Costa Rica) and Rosa Maria Fischer (Brazil) presented a wide range of local experiences on this theme, which outlined some of the general characteristics of knowledge generated from this link.

The authors highlighted an enormous gap between theory and practice, a result of university isolation from reality as well as highly fragmented knowledge, both geographically and thematically.

In spite of their heterogeneity, all of these experiences took place in processes complementary to traditional and non-traditional learning spaces, as well as revalidated and legitimized applied knowledge in the processes of social transformation.

Some of the conditions for replicating and sustaining successful links between academia and Civil Society are: a) a high level of participation, b) an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary focus, c) practical knowledge generation by bringing universities closer to the needs of social actors, d) establishing open, horizontal relations for the socio-affective aspect, and e) the capacity for self-evaluation in both sectors.

Panel 6: Methodologies and Tools for Evaluating the Impact of the Third Sector identified and analyzed criteria for building conceptual frameworks, methodologies and indicators, relevant and pertinent for evaluating the impact of Civil Society's work.

Kees Biekart (Holland) and Fernando Salamanca (Chile) sketched conceptual developments that served as points of departure for outlining the characteristics of Civil Society impact evaluations. They emphasized the need to explicitly define Civil Society, as well as operationalizing impact indicators that take into account the desirable features of Civil Society.

In the second part, Sandra Rapetti (Uruguay), Sergio Pace (Brazil) and Kemly Camacho (Costa Rica) presented applications of different evaluation models, which served as the basis for the participants to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the different evaluations.

They concluded that it is fundamental to explicitly define what constitutes an impact in regard to the evaluations political context, purpose, and target population. The group agreed that evaluation makes sense if its primary aim is change and to facilitate social improvement, so that the concept of evaluation is a pedagogic exercise, which implies ongoing negotiation with the social actors involved.

They mentioned the following factors that hinder impact evaluations:

- The epistemological problem of evaluation (differences from research);
- The dilemma between quantitative and qualitative;
- The tendency towards empiricism;
- The preference of donors and consultants for linear models and 'hard' methodologies;
- The importance of inter-subjectivity;
- The complexity of the object of the evaluation (disputes on the notion of Civil Society), and;
- The necessity to define concepts about what is understood by impact.

On the last day, the results from each panel were presented to give participants an overview of the different themes covered in the conference. These conclusions constitute fundamental input for outlining a shared agenda for research on Civil Society in Latin America, which ought to be revisited in subsequent ISTR spaces for reflection. (See Points for a Common Agenda).

The Round Table: Civil Society and International Cooperation, which served as a conclusion to the event, illustrated the multiple challenges that the region faces in

order to secure support, not only at the level of Civil Society research, but also to promote sector strengthening activities.

In his paper "Civil Society and International Cooperation: Lights and Shadows," Mariano Valderrama (Perú) highlighted three factors that hamper collaborative relationships between the two sectors: 1) fragmentation of cooperation in dispersed projects executing NGOs outlooks, 2) the absence of a cooperation agenda that responds to the priorities of the country and the population, and 3) the low optimization of available resources.

In this context, the cooperation agencies invited to the table, presented their institutional viewpoints with regard to how they contribute to strengthening Civil Society.

Susana Rochna (Costa Rica) of the international NGO HIVOS, presented the results of an evaluation carried out in Central America, which highlighted the dilemmas of Dutch cooperation. It showed how the flow of financial resources does not necessarily strengthen Civil Society, and that there is a need to put emphasis on sector articulation and collective design of proposals.

Janine Perfit (United States) presented the Inter American Development Bank (IDB) perspective on the participation of Civil Society in the Bank's multilateral cooperation activities and analyzed the results of IDB's efforts since 1998 to strengthen Civil Society. Although the initiative achieved a high degree of transversalization of the theme at the IDB level, they recognize that the strategy has limitations in tackling and resolving complex political relations between Civil Society organizations and governments, hence their interest in being linked to organizations like ISTR to acquire feedback on their operations.

Finally, José Luis Alvarez (Costa Rica) presented the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) cooperation policy as an example of bilateral cooperation between governments, in which the relationship with Civil Society is indirect. Nevertheless, CIDA also has a small program which supports very specific initiatives at the local level. According to Alvarez, the existence of regional strategies along geographical lines does not imply the disappearance of the cooperation in the area, but a shift in the methodology geared to more in-depth work in certain areas. Unfortunately, research about Civil Society is not a current priority.

Lessons Learned

The conference highlighted the need to reflect on creating dialogue between academics and practitioners, as well as the urgency for designing joint work strategies that promote Civil Society's growing autonomy and political sustainability.

The IV ISTR Regional Conference provided an excellent opportunity for Central American researchers to exchange ideas in a way that the ISTR Latin American Network has initiated for more than half a decade. The event was an enthusiastic meeting space of diversity that exposed gaps that can only be narrowed through intense multisectorial dialogue and by bringing together actors willing to contribute to the process of constructing a society with solidarity and equity.

For Fundación Acceso and the organizing committee, this event represented an opportunity to identify and meet many researchers from the region who are making contributions to understanding Civil Society's complex dynamics. Their diverse work, both conceptual and methodological, represents significant points of departure in the process of articulating efforts to define a shared agenda for research and action. (See Points for a Common Agenda).

Generating enthusiasm prior to the conference was complex, especially in Central America, where there are few organizations and people with the resources to give priority to research. In order to foster research, given the overall situation, it is indispensable to give continuity to ISTR as a knowledge generating space.

Finding mechanisms to rediscover and understand Civil Society's practices through research, continues to be an inexhaustible challenge, that goes beyond the exchange of experiences. Building bridges between academia and Civil Society presents enormous opportunities for innovation and cooperation with regard to the development of research models that are useful and relevant to the realities of Civil Society in Latin America.

The next regional conference is planned for Lima, Peru in 2005. Fundación Acceso, together with organizations on the local and international committees, has taken the first steps in the hope that the preparation of this new conference will turn into an excellent opportunity to promote collaboration and mutual support between the countries of the region.

POINTS FOR A COMMON AGENDA

The Civil Society Agenda in Latin America:

- When, how and why have agendas been created in LAC?
- How can sectors of Civil Society be differentiated and their agendas distinguished?
- What have been the roles and influence of the different actors in the creation of agendas for Civil Society?
- How can building a common agenda advance new paradigms and build effective bridges, especially between Central and South America?

Civil Society's Links with Other Sectors:

- What are the key features of Civil Society in relation to its sustainability, current abilities, public mobilization and advocacy, the cost – benefit relation of its functioning, and the impact of processes that promote transparency and accountability?
- Which social sectors, institutions and practices encourage social integration? Which encourage democratic consolidation?
- Why and how is local–regional–national articulation produced?
- How is tension between democratisation and social exclusion expressed and confronted?
- What is the Civil Society – State relationship like? Is it a functional relationship? Is citizenship being built?
- What has been the role of the media in the process of strengthening Civil Society?
- What ability does Civil Society have for negotiating in free trade agreements?
- How can Civil Society be strengthened in such a complex decision-making framework, and with temporary gaps?
- What is the people's perception of the work taken on by Civil Society Organizations?
- In what way has the political party-Civil Society relationship developed?
- How can the theme of Civil Society Organizations political advocacy be dealt with (local, regional, and national)?

Civil Society Research in Latin America:

- Who finances research on the topic and what outcomes are expected?
- How can research on Civil Society achieve useful shared knowledge? How can the media (mass and community) and the participatory methods of this process be

used to the best advantage?

- How can a multidisciplinary and multicultural research focus be achieved that will allow for the subjective aspects of the actors?
- How can the exchange of knowledge from lessons learned be fostered?
- How can a better understanding of the different realities be achieved to integrate the richness of heterogeneity?
- How can networks for the exchange of experiences and knowledge be created and strengthened?
- In what way can the dialogue between social movements (to develop their potential) and academic communities (to raise awareness) be expanded?

Civil Society Impact Evaluation:

- To what extent can the impact of Civil Society be evaluated? How can the distinction of society (collective) or organizations and their projects as objects of evaluation be deepened?
- How can results and impact be measured? By what conceptual and methodological premises?
- To what extent is the impact of Civil Society actions due to methodological limitations?
- How can the value of evaluation be promoted as a learning process? How can the role of monitoring and aims evaluation be integrated into this process?
- In what way can the complementary evaluation strategies and models best be benefited from?
- What is required for Civil Society Organizations to produce their own impact evaluation indicators?

LIST OF PAPERS

Round Table: Implications of the Concepts Civil Society / Third Sector for Social Research:

- Alberto Olvera, Universidad Veracruzana (México). *Civil Society, Democratic Governance, Public Spaces and Democratization: Outlines of a Project.*
- Gonzalo de la Maza, Fundación para la Superación de la Pobreza (Chile). *Civil Society and Building Social Capital in Latin America. Where is Research Going?*
- Inés González, Centro de Estudio Desarrollo y Sociedad (Argentina). *Ideas on Civil Society: Past and Present.*
- Manuel Rojas Bolaños, Universidad de Costa Rica (Costa Rica). *What Are we Talking About? Points for Discussion on Civil Society.*

Key Note Speech:

- Sofía Montenegro, Centro de Investigación y Comunicación (Nicaragua). *Democracy: Key Problem of State – Civil Society Relations.*

Papers:

- Adelina Vásquez, Centro de Desarrollo Humano (Honduras). *Paths of the Third Sector / NGO Sector. The Case of Honduras. Central America.*
- Adriana Rofman, Universidad General de General Sarmiento (Argentina). *The Role of Social Organizations in Local Development: A Study on a Suburb in Buenos Aires.*
- Alejandro Ochoa, Universidad de Los Andes (Venezuela). *Systemic-Interpretive Study into the Organization of Civil Society in Latin America.*
- Álvaro Fernández, Observatorio del Desarrollo – Universidad de Costa Rica (Costa Rica). *Recent Evolution of the Costa Rican Environmental Movement (1990-2003).*
- Anabel Cruz, Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo (Uruguay). *Civil Society Organizations in Honduras. From Consultation to Participation.*
- César Barrantes, Universidad Central de Venezuela (Venezuela). *Civil Organizations for Social Development and Crisis in the Bolivarian Venezuela.*
- Felipe Pérez, Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas (Nicaragua). *Knowledge Network Project on Social Businesses.*
- Fernando Salamanca, El Agua, SA Consultores Asociados (Chile). *A Model for Impact Evaluation in the Third Sector.*
- Gabriela Etchebehere y Sandra Carro, Universidad de la República (Uruguay). *Social Organizations in Rural Areas. The Role of the School.*
- Guillermo Mayer, Centro Nacional de Organizaciones de la Comunidad (Argentina). *State – Third Sector: A Road that Meets or a Crossroads.*
- Hannia Franceschi, Universidad de Costa Rica (Costa Rica). *Tensions of the Research Subject in a Process of Understanding the Socio-Environmental Conflict of Rural People in Protected Areas.*
- Jorge Vargas Cullell, Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (Costa Rica). *Conversations About the Experience and Challenges of the 1998 National Agreement in Costa Rica.*
- Kees Biekart, investigador independiente (Holanda). *Evaluating the Impact of Interventions Aimed at Strengthening Civil Society: Methodological Lessons From a Study in Nicaragua.*

- Kemly Camacho, Fundación Acceso (Costa Rica). *How we get Closer to Valuing the Impact of the Internet in Civil Society Organizations.*
- Mónica Bosé. Centro de Empreendedorismo Social e Administracao em Terceiro Setor, Universidad de Sao Paulo, Brasil. *Paths and Challenges to Multi-Sectoral Collaboration.*
- Pedro Rangel, Universidad Simón Rodríguez (Venezuela). *Simon Rodríguez University and the Third Sector.*
- Raymi Padilla, Colegio Universitario de Alajuela (Costa Rica). *New Social Movements and Building an Integrated Citizenship in Latin America. The Challenge of Exclusion.*
- Renzo Lautaro Rosal, Universidad Rafael Landívar (Guatemala). *National Spaces for Seeking Consensus in Guatemala 1985 - 2000.*
- Ricardo Claverías, Centro de investigación, Educación y Desarrollo (Perú). *Organizational Culture, Agreement and Overcoming Poverty in the Rural Area of Cajamarca.*
- Rosa María Fischer. Universidad de Sao Paulo (Brasil). *The Role of the University in Knowledge Generation.*
- Sandra Rapetti, Universidad de la República (Uruguay). *An Evaluation Methodology of Social Organizations: The Experience of the Civil Society Organizations' Evaluation Indicators System Used by the Program for Relationship Building with the Community of ANTEL.*
- Sergio Pase, Universidad Presbiteriana Mackenzie (Brasil). *The Joint Elaboration of Financial and Non-Financial Indicators for Occupations in the Third Sector.*
- Vannesa Paternostro, Núcleo de Estudios sobre Poder a Organizaciones Locales (Brasil). *Articulating Education, Research and Extension: The Experience of a Development and Social Management Program.*
- Yuri Giovanni Melini, Centro de Acción Legal Ambiental y Social (Guatemala). *The Participation of Civil Society in Building Environmental Institutionalisation in Guatemala.*
- Mariano Valderrama. Asociación Latinoamericana de Organización de Promoción (Perú). *Participation of Civil Society and International Cooperation.*
- Susana Rochna. Oficial de programa. HIVOS-Centroamérica (Costa Rica). *Towards Measurable Results: A Challenge for the Third Sector and Co-Financing Organizations Like HIVOS.*

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Report of the IV Regional ISTR-LAC Conference is available at: <http://www.acceso.or.cr/istr/memoria/>

Round Table: Civil Society and International Cooperation:

- Janine Perfit, División de Estado y Sociedad Civil, Departamento del Desarrollo Sostenible, Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (Estados Unidos). *Civil Society and International Cooperation: Civil Society Participation in IDB's Activities.*
- José Luis Álvarez. Fondo Canadá para Iniciativas Locales, Agencia Canadiense de Desarrollo Internacional (Costa Rica). *CIDA's Cooperation Policy.*

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