

ISTR's Stockholm Conference Attracts Largest Attendance: 785 Delegates from 62 Countries

ISTR's Twelfth International Conference was held at Ersta Sköndal University College from June 28 to July 1, 2016, with 785 delegates from 62 countries. The conference venue was a stunning campus on the water with amazing views of the City, which provided a relaxed and warm atmosphere for open exchange and dialogue. To accommodate the large number of participants tents were set up on campus for registration, exhibits, coffee breaks and lunches and provided excellent additional meeting space.

For the Opening Reception, the City of Stockholm hosted all of the participants in the beautiful Stockholm City Hall. The City Hall is famous for its grand ceremonial halls and unique art pieces and is the venue of the Nobel Prize banquet held on 10th of December each year. The venue at the Blue Hall which is also the place for the Nobel festivities will be remembered as a very special evening. After the Closing Plenary Session on the last day of the conference, the Swedish hosts invited conference participants to Gala Reception at Norra Latin Conference Center in the Stockholm City center and included drinks, buffet, live music and dancing. It was a fun and festive way to close the conference.

Plenary Sessions

Alice Bah Kuhnke, Swedish Minister for Culture and Democracy, welcomed the delegates to Sweden at the Rival Hotel Theatre, where we gathered for the plenary sessions. Minister Bah Kuhnke stressed that "... we want a civil society that challenges the Government to do more, to do better. We want their strong critical voices. When other countries want to silence civil society when they raise their voices, we invite them to the table. It is what any responsible Government should do – in my opinion."

She concluded, "Finally, of course in order for us politicians to make better decisions on regulations for civil society, the dialogue between research, civil society and the public sector are necessary. In this way this conference is contributing to the creation and strengthening of contacts between academia and practice, which we believe to be value to all involved."

The full transcript of her speech is posted [here](#).

The panel, *Nordic Civil Societies: Mutations and Continuity*, was chaired by Lars Trägårdh, Professor at Ersta Sköndal University College, and included the following prominent scholars from Nordic countries and the US: Kari Steen-Johnsen, Kirsten Grønbjerg, Per Selle, Lars Skov Henriksen and Eeva Luhtakallio. They provided a series of insightful reflections in response to the question of Nordic exceptionalism; can we speak of a Nordic civil society regime or are we perhaps witnessing a trend towards convergence as Nordic countries adjust to changes that affect not just the Nordic countries but global civil society more generally? Much of the discussion then concerned patterns of change vs continuity and enduring "sticky structures" that continue to shape and set Nordic civil society apart in long-standing historical patterns of path dependency. Some suggested that it would be more helpful to speak of "mutations" rather than drastic change or sharp

discontinuity. Finally, observations were offered regarding challenges and opportunities ahead, not least those associated with transnational migration flows.

One of the conference highlights was the keynote speaker, Theda Skocpol, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University and Director of the Scholars Strategy Network, a national organization that encourages public engagement by university-based scholars in the U.S.

Professor Skocpol's address, *Changes in American Civil Society and the Rise of Political Extremism*, addressed the trend that America is growing rightward tilted with partisan and ideological polarization and racial and ethnic tensions on the rise. She posed 3 questions: 1) What is the nature and roots of Trumpism and its takeover of the Republican presidential politics; 2) Why are challenges from the right more potent than the left and 3) Will Trumpism in the US follow the path of Brexit in Britain? She then examined recent shifts in societal trends and civil society networks—as they interact with the US federated, two-party political system. It was a timely, thought-provoking and highly engaging lecture.

Professor Skocpol's presentation is posted [here](#).

Conference Innovations

We introduced several so-called “conference innovations” such as “round tables” that allowed scholars and/or practitioners to discuss a “hot topic” without presenting elaborated papers. This innovation resulted in 21 roundtables as well as a new teaching theme. These sessions brought rich and vibrant added content to the conference and worked well as a new addition. The evaluations included the following suggestions: limiting the number of discussants to allow for more time for discussion; making sure that they are distinguished from panel sessions; and having all of the roundtables at the same time.

A Conference Blog was introduced and proved to be a great source for information about Stockholm, the host University and its researchers, as well as providing background on sessions. Session moderator Angela Eikenberry provided an overview about the roundtable discussion on *Finding a Place for Critical Perspectives in Nonprofit Management Education*. We look forward to continuing and expanding the blog! Click [here](#) to read our Stockholm conference blog.

Lecture Award

The inaugural “ISTR Lecture Award” was launched in Stockholm and is intended to serve as an honorary award and acknowledgment for scholars who as members and friends of ISTR have significantly contributed to the growth and scientific development of our multi-disciplinary field of research.

Our first ISTR lecturer, Stanley N. Katz from Princeton University, a long-time member and supporter of ISTR, addressed, *Can We Save the World Through Generosity? Philanthropy in the Age of the Megafoundation*. Prof. Katz reflected on a period of forty years, where he moved from

a narrow academic interest in the history of large philanthropic foundations in the United States to a much broader concern with philanthropy and the Third Sector as factors in the viability of democracy. His story has two interwoven narrative threads. The first is the history of organized scholarly research on the Third Sector; the second reflects his current research interest in the emergence of what he terms “mega-philanthropy,” and his concern that the emergence of huge grant-making organizations poses a threat to democracy in the United States and elsewhere. His full lecture is located [here](#).

Sessions and Publications

The program included 126 paper sessions, 48 panels, 21 roundtables and 20 posters. A report on the Roundtable session organized by the Rockefeller Archive Center follows on page . The program and conference abstracts can be found on the ISTR website. Many papers presented are currently being submitted for Volume X of the *ISTR Conference Working Paper Series* and we anticipate that some papers will be published in *Voluntas*.

A Report on the Plenary Session at the ISTR Conference, Stockholm, 29 July, 2016

What the Field Needs from the Researchers: Listening to the International Civil Society Community

by Sarah Albrecht, Maecenata Institute, Berlin, Germany

The plenary panel “What the Field Needs from the Researchers: Listening to the International Civil Society Community” took place on Wednesday afternoon in the Ersta Church on Ersta Campus. Amidst the impressive and vibrant gathering of civil society researchers the ISTR Conference has become, this panel had the explicit aim to confront scholars not only with one another’s arguments and findings, but in particular with potential beneficiaries of their research in the field: the civil society practitioners. The panel was facilitated by Rupert Graf Strachwitz (Maecenata Institute) and featured a diverse group of participants, namely Lia van Broeckhoven (Human Security Collective), Gerry Salole (The European Foundation Centre), Elisabeth Field (Amnesty International) and Balthazar Bacioni (Croix-Rouge Burundi). In the run-up to the conference the panelists had been asked by Strachwitz not to prepare a formal presentation, but to offer an informal insight into their unmet needs as practitioners instead – even at the risk to seem provocative in front of an audience mainly consisting of academics.

First up was Ms. Van Broeckhoven who began by outlining the Human Security Collective’s field of work by describing how national and international counterterrorism policies led to a continual narrowing of the civic space. She then inquired about the current status of research on this topic, and if such research was purely academic or somehow involved with policy makers. The next panelist to speak was Mr. Salole who emphasized his general belief that research could be successfully deployed to help the field. In his experience however, he had observed that often ill-fitting methodologies and the excessively abstract terminology academics tended to apply, made it difficult for practitioners to put the results to any use. He went on to express the wish that academics enhanced the practicability of their results by co-designing their research with practitioners, instead of maintaining an attitude he described as “I have the knowledge, come to

me for it.” Ms. Field stated that in her daily work research literature often was of little help when it came to finding explanations for specific questions, such as the sometimes unexpected dynamics of conflicts. In a similar perspective Mr. Bacioli recalled being in charge of implementing a volunteer network in post-conflict Nigeria, that was to replace outside funding. He was therefore particularly interested in research findings regarding such political and financial constellations.

The discussion with the highly engaged audience reflected the main aspects of the panelists’ statements: First, a facilitated access to already existing research for practitioners, second the questions of relevance and applicability of said research, and finally the willingness of both researchers and practitioners to co-operate and listen to each other. Members of the audience affirmed the existence of research on the topics that had been inquired about. It was additionally pointed out that some research databases, blogs as well as specific organizations were already in place to facilitate civil society actors’ access to research. But there were also critical observations about the CSO’s way of dealing with all sorts of unpleasant findings and critique. A very open and self-reflexive conversation about this aspect ensued. Various panelists admitted the lacking willingness of foundation to admit failures, often in order to protect their reputation. Instead, improvisation and failures should be perceived and accepted as part of an evolutionary process, best summed up under the concept of “bricolage,” coined by Lévi-Strauss. As a member of the audience then conceded, researchers as well were not overly receptive for the practitioners’ objections, even if their increasing specialization often led to findings that lacked a general overview and thus were of little value for the field. All those present agreed that opportunities to co-operate and co-create should be facilitated not only by creating platforms and special programmes, but first and foremost by keeping up an open and constructive dialogue.

Feedback from panelists and the audience after the session was very positive. It was generally agreed that this dialogue between academia and the field should become a regular feature of ISTR conferences.

Conference Evaluation

The evaluation results provided insight into the conference, which received excellent or very good marks overall from 85% of attendees. Many responses focused on the opportunity to hear from a variety of international and disciplinary perspectives. Delegates enjoyed being around researchers from so many disciplines, all looking at the same thing through different lenses. Suggestions for 2018 included having the affinity group and regional network meetings earlier in the program and making the full papers available on the website and app. In addition, some suggested a more concentrated campus and we are pleased to report that we will be in one building for the majority of the conference in Amsterdam.

Conference Support

The Conference would not have been possible without the support from generous funders and our hosts, Ersta Sköndal University College, Ministry of Culture Government Offices of Sweden and Riksbankens Jubileumsfond Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences. We thank our many other Swedish sponsors and patrons as well as our great onsite

team at Ersta Sköndal.

In the spirit of voluntarism the strong academic program was made possible by the scholarly contributions of many, many reviewers and the Academic Conference Committee and we thank them for their continuing commitment and support for the Society!

The Society's goal is to welcome every participant in a friendly academic environment and with thanks to our hosts –we believe that a supporting and welcoming atmosphere was achieved in Stockholm!