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ISTR Conference: presentations on cross-national philanthropy

By [Christopher Baker](#) July 23, 2012 • [Leave A Comment](#)

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What an extraordinary opportunity! As advised on the CSI website, Dr Michael Moran and I recently participated in the 20th anniversary international conference of the [International Society for Third Sector Research \(ISTR\)](#). With some 650 participants from a vast array of countries, the conference was large, diverse and redolent with ideas and their exchange.

The [theme of the conference](#) was marketisation and its impact on the third sector. Our own papers were presented as part of a collaborative panel between the [Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University](#) and CSI partner, the [Asia-Pacific Centre for Social Investment and Philanthropy](#), Swinburne.

In order to provide a glimpse into the conference and its value I have adopted a framework of the dynamically interrelated themes of Context, Content, and Connections.

Context

The ISTR international conference takes place once every two years. It provides scholars who are interested in social impact from many different disciplinary backgrounds the opportunity to get together to share findings and to exchange and generate ideas. The geographical and cultural setting was Siena, Italy – one of the best preserved, ancient walled cities in Europe. It is also in one of the countries in the European Union which is struggling with high levels of debt and wrestling with just how deep the social impact of austerity measures will go. The experience of being *in situ* as representatives from across Europe articulated the challenges for their economies and their societies brought home to the two of us the relative prosperity and continuity of our own nation and its third sector.

Content

Over the four days of the conference some 450 presentations were made in concurrent sessions. Between us we attended many sessions across myriad topics including strategic philanthropy, national fundraising campaigns, volunteering, determinants of giving and volunteering, the role of foundations, research access to foundation archives, researching giving in Europe, social investment, and social redistribution.

One of the themes that emerged in many of the panels was the importance of academic researchers looking to how best to translate their findings into practical and actionable advice to relevant practitioners, in order to optimise the positive social impact of both.

Two of the plenary sessions are exemplary of the diversity and quality of the content on offer. The first involved a panel of Italian social scientists who collectively presented a very bleak picture of the future of the third sector in Italy. They advised that while the provision of social services has been gradually receding since the commencement of the debt crisis in Europe, it is probable that within two months there will be additional significant closures of Government funded services. The service providers will be unemployed and the services will cease to be delivered. While the presenters spoke to the policy challenges and the potential role of researchers to help set the agenda, the near term prognosis was presented as bleak indeed.

The closing plenary session however was encouraging and uplifting. [Rami Khouri](#) provided a very optimistic assessment of the future of those countries involved in the [Arab spring](#), which are currently striving to establish new democratic processes. It was particularly affirming that the person making this assessment is informed, involved and culturally attuned.

Khouri is an award winning journalist, an advisor to the US Government on Middle East affairs, a Palestinian-Jordanian and US citizen who has been working in the Arab world for more than three decades. He emphasised a need for patience, arguing that western democracies and their associated institutions have been developed in an iterative and sequential way over a couple of hundred years. He also argued that the third sector in countries like Egypt will be critical to the development of participatory processes and the conversion of the ideals and aspirations of the populace to practical policies. Khouri's key messages included that there is very real reason for optimism and that both patience and support are required. It was an inspirational and uplifting end to the formalities of the conference.

Connections

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of participating in a conference is the opportunity to establish and/or develop networks and relationships with individuals of similar interest. We met personally with individuals whom we have previously only known by way of citations of their work or by way of email exchanges.

Between us we have exchanged business cards and laid the foundation for ongoing exchanges and/or collaborations with scholars from the US, the UK, Spain, Italy, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and China.

Serendipity also plays a part: I presented my own paper on Chinese Australian Diaspora Philanthropy. On the morning after the conference I met in the breakfast room of my hotel a conference participant who had come from [Arizona State University](#). We quickly discovered our shared interests. Dr Wang is a Chinese American who has recently written a paper on Asian philanthropy. We have already begun the process of exchange.

The context and the content of the conference will remain with the two of us for many years to come. In addition, the connections forged there have provided a platform upon which we can build collaborations and play our part in ensuring that the work of CSI remains internationally informed and well positioned to deliver positive social impact both in Australia and beyond.

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