

# Chapter 22

## Future Challenges Facing Third Sector Research



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The realm of societal advancement is multifaceted, involving a balance of public and private attention. Yet, nestled within this framework lies the Third Sector, a constantly evolving and dynamic entity. Comprising non-profit organizations, charities, voluntary groups, and social enterprises, the Third Sector is crucial in fostering social change, community empowerment, and humanitarian efforts. To comprehend the forthcoming hurdles that Third Sector research must overcome, it is essential to delve into its historical origins, scholarly underpinnings, research infrastructure, and emerging trends that shape its trajectory.

While we are editing (writing) this book, it is apparent that the scientific research field that could broadly be encompassed under the label “Third Sector” has reached a high level of academic recognition and scientific reputation. After more than 30 years of studies and research on that topic, several indicators show the visibility and the status achieved by the subject through the constitution of a research scholarship.

When Peter Dobkin Hall (1992) described the emergence of the research field of nonprofit management in the 1970s and 1980s, specifically in the US and UK, he observed that while there might have been some resistance to the teaching of non-profit organization management, the field was relatively new and beginning to gain

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traction in academia. Despite this, Hall (1992) noted significant growth in the field's serious research work, as seen in the increase in journal articles, conferences, books, and other publications related to nonprofit management.

The development of any scholarly field requires a substantial amount of theoretical and empirical knowledge. In this regard, Ma and Konrath (2018) have emphasized that the emerging field of Third Sector studies we are currently exploring has been no exception. Therefore, we must devote ourselves to acquiring and building upon the necessary research infrastructure to advance this field to its full potential.

## **The Research Infrastructure**

The research infrastructure for the nonprofit and civil society sectors is similar to that of the social sciences but also showcases some key differences. The infrastructure supporting research in these areas, much like in the social sciences, includes durable institutions, technical tools, and platforms that enable research as a public good (Farago, 2014). However, the research infrastructure for the nonprofit sector and civil society also encompasses intangible aspects such as networks, relationships, and partnerships. These elements are instrumental in empowering researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to delve into and enrich the nonprofit sector and civil society.

Critical components of this research infrastructure include *data and information repositories, academic research centers, technological tools and platforms, funding mechanisms, training and educational programs, the establishment of ethical and transparent research practices, interdisciplinary collaboration and public engagement and knowledge dissemination.*

### ***Data and Information Repositories***

Access to comprehensive and reliable data on nonprofit organizations and civil society initiatives is essential for conducting meaningful research (Appe, 2022). This includes the development of international “nonprofit data environments” (Bloodgood et al., 2023) that include databases, surveys, and datasets that provide insights into organizational structures, activities, funding sources, and community impact. Also, as we learned from Salamon and Sokolowski (2016), data repositories help legitimize the field.

### ***Academic Research Centers***

Dedicated research centers, think tanks, and academic departments focused on the nonprofit sector and civil society provide scholars with physical and intellectual space to collaborate, share resources, and conduct in-depth analyses. The structuring efforts of the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council, founded in 1991, have explicitly provided some knowledge of the activities of their existing membership, focusing mainly on US-based centers (Weber and Brunt, 2022), which were primarily created during the 1990s, when multiple private funders supported the creation of the field and also new educational programs (Mirabella & Wish, 2001).

### ***Technological Tools and Platforms***

Advanced technological resources, such as sophisticated data analysis software, interactive visualization tools, and online platforms for seamless data sharing and collaboration, significantly bolster researchers' capacity to gather, process, and interpret data pertinent to nonprofit organizations and civil society. These tools enable researchers to employ innovative methods, like computational mapping, as demonstrated in LePere-Schloop et al. (2022), who utilized computational maps to chart civil society organizations.

Additionally, platforms such as the "Mapa das OSCs in Brazil" (IPEA, n.d.) provide structured, interactive information hubs facilitating comprehensive insights into the landscape of civil society organizations. Moreover, integrating Artificial Intelligence presents opportunities and challenges in civil society research, offering the potential for enhanced analysis and understanding alongside considerations regarding ethical implications and biases (LePere-Schloop & Zook, 2023).

### ***Funding Mechanisms and Support Structures***

Sustainable funding models and grant programs are vital in supporting long-term research on Third Sector topics. These mechanisms enable researchers to access necessary resources and maintain the continuity of their work. However, examining critical aspects of civil society research sponsorship is essential, such as obtaining reliable funding data, identifying knowledge production patterns, and addressing resource allocation biases (Sogge, 2022). One significant challenge is that while research on civil society and the Third Sector received favorable funding in the 1990s with projects like the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, large-scale research projects with a global focus are unlikely to resurface unless they remain apolitical (Biekart and Fowler, 2022).

## ***Ethical and Transparent Research Practices***

Upholding ethical standards and transparency in nonprofit and civil society research is critical. This includes ensuring the integrity of data collection, analysis, and reporting and respecting the rights and dignity of research participants. Beyond the conventional ethical considerations of data integrity and participant rights, the field of Third Sector studies might assume decolonial ontologies and epistemologies that demand a deeper engagement with the ethical dimensions inherent in the colonial legacies that have shaped the field. This entails challenging and dismantling the colonial hierarchies, biases, and power dynamics that persist within academic research and knowledge production (Mendonça, 2022; Fleschenberg et al., 2024).

## ***Training and Education Programs***

A field of research needs to establish academic degrees to be institutionalized; many undergraduate (bachelor), graduate (Master), and postgraduate (PhD) programs on nonprofit organizations and social enterprises have been developed worldwide in recent years. Programs that provide training in nonprofit management, public administration, and civil society studies contribute to developing a skilled workforce equipped to conduct high-quality research and apply findings in practice. Civil society organizations globally surged in the late twentieth century, expanding the Third Sector. Hall (1992) pointed out an evident rise in interest in Third Sector studies, with more teaching programs focused on nonprofit management emerging on both sides of the Atlantic. This trend suggested that nonprofit scholarship was gradually gaining recognition and acceptance in higher education, marking the development and maturation of the field.

This proliferation of Third Sector organizations (nonprofit organizations, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, social enterprises, and so on) was paralleled by a rise in education and training initiatives aimed at preparing and supporting managers within these organizations (Mirabella et al., 2007). Although many programs were concentrated in the US, a worldwide structure was created and laid down the cornerstone of the living research field (Mirabella et al., 2007).

## ***Public Engagement and Knowledge Dissemination***

Research infrastructure should ensure that research findings are effectively communicated to various audiences, including policymakers, practitioners, and the general public. Making research outputs freely accessible and engaging in public discussions can help translate academic insights into practical applications.

Additionally, the availability of reputable outlets such as international scientific journals like *Voluntas—International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, and the establishment of series in highly ranked publishers like the Nonprofit and Civil Society Studies—Springer Book Series, are essential to achieve this goal.

The creation of *Voluntas* should be attributed to the endless activity of Helmut Anheier, who, during his entire career, operated as a fundamental scientific/academic “entrepreneur” and as an “institutional innovator.” His scholarly career made him a crucial “bridge” between two academic worlds—the US and European nonprofit research communities—through his research roles and teaching duties on both sides of the Atlantic. He worked at the London School of Economics, where he was appointed the new Director of the Centre for Voluntary Organization in 1998, refounding it as the Centre for Civil Society. Then, he moved to the University of Heidelberg, where he co-founded the Centre for Social Investment and remained until his retirement. In between, he served as founding director of the Center for Civil Society at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

The two editors’ editorial of the first issue (Anheier & Knapp, 1990) states: “Through *Voluntas*, we hope to help advance the frontiers of social science knowledge on the voluntary or non-profit sector and to aid the international dissemination of the fruits of scholarship. (...) *Voluntas* will be the first journal in this area devoted to the international domain” (pp. 2–3). Moreover, they underline: “The study of the voluntary or non-profit sector has emerged as a truly interdisciplinary field of the social sciences. Through *Voluntas*, we wish to strengthen its interdisciplinary character.” “(...) the journal will not confine itself to publishing papers which report international comparative research (...), but we will be looking for articles which have international relevance, and which are accessible to readers in most countries” (p. 3). They conclude the editorial with the following final statement: “The study of the voluntary sector has become an international field of research involving a worldwide academic community. Our substantive interests are catholic, and we invite papers that either have international relevance, deserve worldwide circulation, or deal with international issues concerning the voluntary sector. We are interested in both country-specific research and work which compares the voluntary sector in different countries at the national, sectoral, industrial, and organizational levels” (p. 10). “(...) We believe that *Voluntas* will serve as the central forum for international research on the voluntary or non-profit sector” (p. 12).

As the attentive reader would have noticed at the time, among the scholars and researchers, there was yet to be an agreement about the terminology to describe the sector. Indeed, the editors used two terms to refer to the journal topic: “nonprofit” and “voluntary” sectors. The first comes from economics and management disciplines, and the second was adopted mainly in sociology, political sciences, and history. As Andrea Bassi discussed in chapter 4 on the building of the research field, the term “Third Sector” emerged as a possible terminological solution, and undoubtedly, *Voluntas* served as a vehicle to advocate this new terminology. However, it would take a few more years before the term “Third Sector” became “normalized” in the field.

## ***Interdisciplinary Collaboration***

Research on nonprofit and civil society issues often spans multiple disciplines, such as sociology, economics, political science, and public policy. Collaborative networks and interdisciplinary partnerships enable researchers to approach complex challenges from diverse perspectives, leading to more comprehensive and impactful findings. Most of these networks are nested in the different academic societies created: ARNOVA (1971) and especially ISTR (1992), which has a more extensive international and multidisciplinary outreach.

Even though many actors are involved in this sector of society, more scientific research and debates are still necessary. The multidimensionality and variety of the field have been recognized since the beginning of the study and reflections on the topic. In the editorial of the first issue of *Voluntas*, Helmut Anheier and Martin Knapp stated, “We urge potential authors to make plain the nature of the beast they are describing” (1990, p. 6). Marilyn Taylor also recognized the difficulty of determining the extent of the sector’s research community and whether researchers in different countries were all studying the same animal (1992, p. 383). This plurality continues to characterize the sector, as recently recognized by Dennis Young et al. (2016) with the metaphor of the “Zoo.”

### **Prolegomena of the Foundation of the ISTR**

The first international scientific meeting was in June 1987, when researchers from 14 countries met in Bad Honnef, Germany, for a conference on “The non-profit sector and the welfare state.” From that gathering, 3 years later, an edited book by Anheier and Seibel (1990) was published that, to our knowledge, is the first one to systematically adopt the term Third Sector and fully introduced it into scientific debate.

The Second International Conference of Researchers on the Nonprofit Sector. “Voluntarism, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), and Public Policy” was held in Jerusalem in May 1989, organized by Benjamin Gidron. From this symposium, in 1992 a well-known book was published on the relationship between the government and the Third Sector (Gidron et al., 1992).

Finally, the Third International Conference of Researchers on the Nonprofit Sector. “The Third Sector in International Perspective: Developmental, Organizational and Ethical Issues” was held in Indianapolis, Indiana, in March 1992. During this conference and in the months later, an “interim board” was established to conduct towards the birth of the ISTR, which was officialized in the first International Conference “Towards the Year 2000: ISTR Inaugural Conference”—held in 1994 in PECS—Hungary.

In light of its remarkable heritage, the impending pages shall delve into the challenges that the Third Sector research arena faces in the current era and beyond. It is imperative to acknowledge the significance of addressing said challenges as they are crucial in shaping the trajectory of research within the Third Sector. With a focus on clarity, concision, and accuracy, the following discourse shall endeavor to maintain a formal and professional tone that is befitting of scholarly and business settings.

## Trends Likely to Impact Future Third Sector Research

As we noted in this book's introduction, the world is changing, leading us to use the word "construction" in the book's title. Third Sector studies began in earnest following the change termed by Lester Salamon (1994, p. 109) as a global "associational revolution" and his predictions of a burgeoning number of "self-governing private organizations, not dedicated to distributing profits to shareholders or directors, pursuing public purposes outside the formal apparatus of the State." As he expected (and noted by many authors in this volume), the Third Sector is diverse and this spurred research to define it, to theorize the rise of the sector and the organizations within it and generally make it an area of study. Bassi provides a historical analysis of the rise of different definitions and Part II shows us that the concepts forming the sections of this volume (theory, definition, classification aggregation) are interrelated—good theory cannot be developed if the definition is not generally accepted or there is no "definition" of the entity or group that one is working with.

Four decades ago, Salamon (1994, p. 110) also reflected on the corresponding decline in political participation by individuals and suggests the rise of Third Sector Organizations (TSOs) "closely resembles the 'third wave' of democratic political revolutions identified by Samuel Huntington, but that goes well beyond it, affecting democratic and authoritarian regimes, developed and developing countries alike." This was a time of the State in crisis, re-shaping and re-shuffling it through movements we have continued to observe.

As noted by Rathgeb Smith et al. and Young in Part I, attempts were made to theorize the rise of TSOs in the last years of the twentieth century in order to further understand them, their relationships with the State and market and to strengthen them in their work. But as noted by many of this volume's authors, starting in Part I, many of the older theories need updating (or overturning) and globalizing in order to deal with the challenges of today. Increasing numbers of hybrid organizations (particularly the 'zoo' of social enterprises noted by Young et al., 2016) challenge the TSO definitions used in the past. The authors in this section challenge us to develop relevant theories for countries other than the US and to benefit future Third Sector research.

The aim of this book is to highlight future possible pathways in which Third Sector research could progress through illustrating, commenting and criticizing the state of the art and to lead to a more inclusive dialogue that, through encouraging diverse voices, shapes our collective understanding of the sector, its potentialities and to ameliorate difficulties. Hence, how might we perceive the future?

A number of trends or drivers are regularly predicted as being likely to affect the next generation. Futurologists often use scenario planning to both identify drivers and then to picture a world affected by those drivers (Cordery et al., 2017). In this short chapter we cannot present all the possibilities that might emerge from certain drivers, but we draw on those identified by some major publications in the last 5 years which can generate thinking about future possible pathways for Third Sector research.

The National Intelligence Council's (2021) 2040 report identifies four megatrends: *Technology, Climate, Demographics, and Politics*, developing five scenarios that could define futures in the United States. PwC (2022) analyse the last three and, rather than democracy, add "fracturing world" and "social instability" in looking forward to 2030. While, the European Political Strategy Centre (EPSC) (2019) considers how democracy might develop by 2030, these themes of fracturing and instability are highly present in that analysis. Similar to 40 years ago, the OECD's (2021, p. 3) global scenarios for 2035 states that: "Social, technological, economic, environmental, political and geopolitical changes are occurring arguably faster than ever before, and our unprecedented interconnectedness means that a development in one part of the world can quickly go global. Faced with this reality, human societies and their governments cannot afford to be passive or complacent." Both the EPSC (2019) and OECD (2021) note that dire predictions may overwhelm people and result in inaction; nevertheless, they encourage us to take action and "change the game." How can we shape our own future and that of the world we are living in?

It is apparent that the effects of the drivers of change (*technology, climate, demographics, and politics*) are evident already and will continue to impact the future in which Third Sector organizations will operate and the way we research. This book has encouraged us to base our question of where the associative world might be in the future, on aspects of theory, definition, classification, and aggregation. In this chapter, we draw together those themes as well as considering how different trends or drivers of change could create future possible pathways for global Third Sector research and the contributions in this volume.

In terms of **technology and definitions**, Domaradzka analyses digital activism, to summarize the steps that could be taken to work towards a new definition for Third Sector organizations. While Part IV of this volume considers arguments for including faith within the Third Sector definition, and the challenges faced in this, defining social movements brings further challenges (Della Porta, 2020; Gaby, 2020). Macías Ruano et al. (2021) use technology to explore the development of the term "social economy" across the world. As noted by the authors in Part V, definition and classification of a particular entity (or entity type) as a Third Sector Organization may result in some organizations feeling uncomfortable.

With regards to **technology**, in Part III of this book, Rutherford et al. warn as to the challenges brought by digitalization of classification. The opportunities afforded by classification provide a way forward in aggregation, although Bloodgood notes that "Future potential is limited, however, by the quality and accessibility of the administrative systems and data at the national level." Nevertheless, Fonović provides an example from the ILO module of how volunteering data may be adaptable to aggregation to improve policy making and organizational choices. Hence Santamarina calls researchers to expand comparative Third Sector research and potentially expand the availability of Third Sector data (see also Santamarina et al., 2023). It is apparent that the future of Third Sector research depends on data and classification interoperability. Without a comprehensive understanding of such systems, rather than opening spaces in society, research could instead lead users astray. In line with the concerns noted in Parts III and IV regarding technology and

classification and aggregation, Sandberg et al. (2023) challenge researchers to address the fundamental ontological and epistemological issues big data presents for the Third Sector.

Different research methods—already prefigured in Part IV are being increasingly used to analyse aggregate data (Bloodgood et al., 2021, 2023; Chen & Zhang, 2023). This includes methods such as netnography and digital ethnography (Goncharenko, 2019; Oreg & Babis, 2023).

While the holistic concern for our planet's future saw the challenge of the Millennium Development Goals and now the *Sustainable Development Goals* (United Nations, 2015), in the 2020s, **climate** concerns have increased in urgency, catapulting it into a major environmental issue. With the incidence of a hotter world and more negative climate events increasing citizens' stress, sea-level rise exacerbating vulnerabilities, and escalating pressures on city planning, it is unsurprising that there are predictions of lower productivity levels, food & water insecurity and housing loss. An intensification of climate hazards will disrupt supply chains and negatively impact biodiversity. Coincident with regulation to reduce these negative impacts (e.g greenhouse gas emissions), the cost of living is likely to increase, leading to increased violence, business failure, and some predict, financial catastrophe. The Third Sector is a vocal mover in seeking global action, but this is a space beset by conflict and instability.

The foundational subjects this volume considers are also impacted by the other two trends—**politics and demographics**. These multipolar political issues—which no single State can resolve alone (EPSC, 2019)—repeat or continue the notion of a State in crisis (Salamon, 1994) and certainly prefigures changing roles for the Third Sector. Increased fragmentations & contestation over economic, cultural & political issues suggest that the Third Sector must work with nation States and with international actors to revitalise multilateral institutions and ameliorate these multipolar issues. Politically, increased societal disillusionment also is likely to place democracy under threat (as will technologically-spread disinformation) sparking a rise in *populism* that excludes rather than includes (EPSC, 2019). This is observed in many countries limiting freedoms in the Third Sector. Such an environment is also like to change the mix of government funding into the Third Sector and public service provision, independent of government funding that would increase nonprofit advocacy (Yanagi et al., 2021).

Politics will be impacted by **migration** and **societal ageing**. The world's population continues to increase (<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population>) and the population above the age of 65 years is expected to rise from 10% in 2022 to 16% in 2050 (it is growing more rapidly than the population below that age). By 2050, the number of individuals aged 65 years or above across the world is projected to be twice the number of children under age 5, and almost equivalent to the number of children under 12 years (<https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/ageing>). Consequently, it will be important to re-examine the theory and findings of prior Third Sector research to assess how it applies in an older world. For example, in light of a significant increase in older people's civic engagement, Serrat et al. (2022) call for new

definitions of civic engagement in later life to develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of elders' activities, including their volunteering.

The Civicus Monitor (2023) report highlights a concerning trend: two-thirds of the world's population now live in areas where **civic space is restricted**. This poses significant challenges for Third Sector organizations. Despite these constraints, the Third Sector has continually demonstrated an innovative capacity to foster new forms of civic engagement by leveraging digital platforms and forming transnational networks. Looking to the future, focusing on the sector's transformative potential is crucial. The Third Sector can pioneer new methods of engagement that harnesses technology and mobilizes society from the grassroots to advocate for and support marginalized communities. This proactive approach can empower Third Sector organizations to continue their crucial work, even in the face of adversity, thereby enriching the field of Third Sector studies with fresh perspectives and innovative solutions.

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