

## MAKING Europe's third sector visible

*Researchers and practitioners are teaming up to make the third sector more visible across Europe. As a sector it offers endless 'renewable resources' for social and economic problem-solving and civic engagement in Europe. However, the Third Sector faces conceptual ambiguity, lack of statistical recognition and misunderstanding of real impact and hindering barriers. The 3-year long Third Sector Impact (TSI) project, recently launched in Bologna (Italy), will address such knowledge gaps, identify needs and help the sector to move forward.*

Oslo/Liege, Thursday, January 23<sup>rd</sup> - Despite the substantial contribution of the third sector and volunteering to the socio-economic development of Europe, it remains an unknown entity for most European citizens. Even though most people are actually involved by benefitting from or contributing to a third sector organization, a wider and comprehensive picture of the sector is still missing. Even though specific efforts have paved the way for future progress the third sector continues to be left out of statistical portraits of EU Member States, despite its presence at the local level as well as at the European level via umbrella organizations and bodies,

The third sector has been defined and measured in various ways; it has been credited with generating varied positive impact; some barriers for its development have been identified. However, what really is the third sector? How can it be measured? How can we assess its impact? How can we support its development?

The Third Sector Impact (TSI) project brings together thirty researchers from 10 European universities and more than 100 stakeholders. They are determined to address these questions and shed light on a sector that offers vast 'renewable resources' for social and economic problem-solving and civic engagement in Europe. There is a long-standing European tradition of third sector research and practice. Building on existing knowledge and new research the TSI project will shed light on a sector forming a crucial part of society, particularly at a time of social and economic distress and enormous pressures on governmental budgets.

TSI will study 10 European countries and is open to input from other countries. The research framework comprises of four blocks of knowledge: conceptualization, measurement, impact and barriers. Aware of the conceptual ambiguity that surrounds the Third Sector, TSI will propose a consensus definition based on discussion with practitioners and other stakeholders. Indeed, stakeholders will be part of the the research process from the start, which is not common in social sciences comparative research projects. Bernard Enjolras, coordinator of the project, states "experts will accompany the work of researchers and together with policy-makers and practitioners will comment and provide advise on the intermediate findings. Numerous national and European exchanges with stakeholders are foreseen to facilitate this intensive feedback." Moreover, a series of public consultation rounds will be implemented via the project's website (to be launched in early March).

The third sector has been acknowledged as a fully fledged factor (partner) for smart and sustainable growth and social cohesion in Europe. TSI's objective is to promote this role by making it more visible while identifying trends that are transforming the third sector from within.

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