



Giving the Third Sector the visibility it deserves!

Brussels, 9 November 2016. TSI held its final conference at the European Economic and Social Committee with 80 participants representing national and European third sector, statistical agencies, policy and research. The issue of improving visibility of the third sector emerges as key demand and challenge, as a variety of stakeholders must work together to shine a light on the distinctive impact and contribution of citizens towards common good, shared values, democracy, well-being and social equality in Europe.

Keynote speaker Gerry Salole, Chief Executive of European Foundation Center, clarified the challenge posed by the fact that the third sector is like a “many-headed hydra, which, each time a neck is severed, sprouts a head more varied than before.” First task of the TSI project was to formulate a [consensus definition of the third sector](#) capable to capture this variety, a pre-requisite to understand a series of further challenges, namely the expectation that TSOs and SSEs can replace state funding for social welfare and public services while at the same time becoming subject of regulations and public scrutiny; losing autonomy and being pressured to demonstrate impact short term. In order to clarify what the sector can and cannot realistically provide, suppose it is embedded in a supportive ecosystem, it needs more visibility.

Making the sector visible needs data. Many activities at national, European and even global level concern themselves with this aspect of visibility. One success of the TSI project is the inclusion of its third sector definition in the new edition of the [UN Handbook on Third, or Social Economy \(TSE\), Institutions and Household Volunteer Activity](#). Collecting data requires statisticians to go that extra mile, as it takes some resilience to convince agency superiors of the importance of gathering data on the third sector, to define the right indicators and to link data, as Cristina Ramos of the National Statistical Agency of Portugal explained, who is part of a working group of statisticians from a number of countries to develop guidelines for national satellite accounts.

Making the sector visible needs political support. Jens Nilsson, MEP from Sweden and Co-Chair of the Intergroup for Social economy pointed out: “This flurry of activity of representatives of research, third sector and SE professionals and bodies advising policy at European level avails to not much impact if nation states do not pull along.” National governments must implement supporting policies, and it is the combined advocacy power of third sector, researchers and committed statisticians who must hold politicians accountable. Wojciech Kaczmarczyk, Director of the Department for Civil Society in Poland pointed out that evidence-based policy is scarce. You have to make front-page news before policy-makers take notice, and the sector in its diversity rarely speaks with one voice. Luckily, in numerous European countries cross-sector platforms are emerging to better represent their interests in public and political discourse.

Making the sector visible needs testimony. TSI conducted some 20 in-depth case studies to understand how third sector organisations working in the fields of social services, culture and the arts, sports and leisure are coping and adapting to eco-systems or environments that are increasingly tough. The rolling back of structural and core funding, difficulties in recruiting long-term volunteers, including for Boards; the burden of bureaucracy; the need to employ market strategies and to professionalize, especially for TSOs providing services, are just [some of the difficulties](#). Participants from third sector initiatives in different countries gave testimony of their



strategies of survival. Sometimes TSOs locate new opportunities in their local ecosystems and combine them with longstanding and trust-based relationships with municipalities, others count on networking and mutual support. Often it is a form of bricolage, addressing a challenge as it arises, but how far do you want to go, as Rebecca Geritse from Humanitas Netherlands expressed so well. There is a risk of the sector losing its civic function, despite the [many stories of TSOs improving well-being every day](#).

Making the sector visible needs research. As Risto Raivio, expert for Social Entrepreneurship at DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission pointed out, the contextualisation of third sector activities is crucial. We need to show the problems that cause market failures and to tell the success stories of TSOs. TSI's case studies on third sector barriers and strategies of resilience [at national levels](#) are just as important as the latest [mapping studies](#) of Social Entrepreneurship carried out by the European Commission, to enhance the visibility of social economy and third sector across Europe by zooming in on the eco-systems. Research is not a predictive tool, but an analytical one that can inform and advise other actors in their codes of conduct.

“As a society, we should debate on whether we think it important to make certain life quality enhancing activities possible or not. Do we want nature and landscape taken care of? Do we want a wide variety of cultural events and activities? Do we want a strong sports sector? Do we want strong networks on informal care?” asks Mark Molenaar of the Dutch Association of Voluntary Organizations. Yes, we do. However, how to transform individual success stories of coping in times of crisis into a supportive policy environment that acknowledges and commits to the third sector, acknowledges its special function of producing trust and social capital, of strengthening the civicness of individuals and thus contributing to a culture that is geared towards the common good, solidarity and inclusion?

Visibility depends on data and evidence showing third sector impact on jobs and GDP, well-being, social capital and social inclusion or the active inclusion of citizens in policy making in the tradition of co-production of public services. We need better numbers, but we also need more platforms for testimony, story-telling, further research on impacts and the exchange of experiences. As concluded by TSI Coordinator Bernard Enjolras, fundamental to this end is the capacity of the third sector itself to articulate its own counter-narrative, that centers the public debate on the distinctive traits and values of the sector, based on the participation, self-expression and self-organization of citizens.

All final conference materials and all outputs of the TSI project are available on the website www.thirdsectorimpact.eu. The messages of the project are condensed in a [short animation film](#) released during the conference that all are invited to share and use.

