



THIRD  
SECTOR  
IMPACT

Measuring impact.  
Enhancing visibility

TSI POLICY BRIEF

# Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Development of Third Sector Organizations in Europe:

## Get the Public Back In!



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How to sustain and further develop the unique contributions of third sector organizations to both the variety and cultural diversity of European societies and to the advancement of Europe as a social, political and economic community? Research conducted under the auspices of the Third Sector Impact project detected decisive challenges that, caused by environmental changes, currently jeopardize the sustainability of the third sector in Europe. Even more importantly, these challenges increasingly endanger the civicism of third sector organizations (TSOs).

Civism constitutes the distinctive nature of the third sector that bonds individual expressions of will of citizens into public action for shared interest or common good. However, our comparative research also unravelled innovative approaches on how the third sector tackles, or accommodates, these challenges. In close cooperation with stakeholders representing numerous and varied networks of third sector organizations throughout Europe, we identified progressive approaches that aim at enhancing the capacity of TSOs to contribute to the socio-economic development of Europe. For sure, TSOs have currently to manoeuvre in difficult environments. Numerous obstacles impede the societal functions TSOs perform for the social cohesion of Europe. The majority of those are “external” and an outcome of significant changes in the economic and political settings; others are rather “internal” and inherent to certain types of third sector organizations.

All TSOs have to acknowledge that times are changing and that it is necessary to take advantage of new trends within society and economics. Backed by the outcomes of our research, we provide a set of policy recommendations for public institutions and decision makers at local, national and European Union levels. Put into practice, they would build a more beneficial environment for third sector organizations and citizens’ engagement throughout Europe.

Simultaneously, our policy recommendations also address TSOs with the goal of inviting them to make the most of their potentials. The purpose of the recommendations is therefore twofold: first, to increase the awareness of just how much the third sector throughout Europe suffers from blind or restrictive policy environments and, second, they try to trigger mechanisms able to enhance the sustainability of third sector organizations.

## **Stepping into the Limelight: Increase the Public Awareness for the Third Sector**

A distinctive and most significant characteristic of the third sector is its expressive function: it is an important transmitter of interests and needs of citizens. Its contribution to the well-being of European citizens in terms of social service provision and opportunities for leisure activities is remarkable. And yet, the third sector in Europe is still an unknown entity, almost invisible in national statistics, and hardly acknowledged by Eurostat. What is needed throughout Europe and at European Union level is to get the third sector out of the shadow and into the limelight of public awareness. The third sector and its organizations have to be appreciated as a vital element of Europe’s cultural heritage and diversity. The sector’s impact as a growing economic force, outdistancing most major European industries in the scale of its workforce, must finally be acknowledged. The third sector’s political and communicative potentials, its expressive function as well as its capacity to serve as an activator and incubator of citizens’ engagement

and, first and foremost, volunteering have to be put up front. How to achieve this? How to increase the awareness for the role and potentials of the third sector and its organizations?

We put forward the following policy recommendations convinced that this set of infrastructural elements could enhance the visibility and the potential for impact of the third sector and its organizations all over Europe and on European level:

- **Improve the third sector's knowledge base**

Put a statistical system in place that generates systematic comparative data on central features of the scale, scope and impact of the third sector and of volunteering in Europe.

- **Standardize European statutes for TSOs**

Define standard legal stipulations for associations, foundations and social enterprises to allow TSOs to be effective throughout Europe.

- **Support mechanisms of interest representation**

Acknowledge and fund third sector umbrella and infrastructural organizations; Establish Third Sector Ombuds(wo)men in key institutions at all levels of the European multi-level governance arrangement.

- **Help TSOs to modernize**

Support TSOs to show in public that they are doing the right thing: invest in digital competences and communication skills of TSOs.

- **Maintain space for third sector activities**

Provide financially accessible spaces and facilities for TSO activities, especially for sports for all and cultural activities

## Investing into the Future of Europe: Sustainability for TSOs

The Third Sector Impact project has identified several approaches how to change modes of conduct and how to invest directly as well as indirectly into the third sector, with the aim of supporting the sustainability of third sector organizations.

- **Get the Structural Funds back in**

Go back to the basics: public institutions should support TSOs in pursuing their core mission. Re-introduce structural and core funding.

- **Lift the burden of procurement procedures**

Decrease administrative burdens for TSOs by adapting procurement and reporting procedures to the specificities and capabilities of the sector.

- **Facilitate access to capital markets and to alternative sources of financing**

Support TSOs in getting access to capital markets and to alternative sources of funding: support their credibility and liability.

- **Increase the Attractiveness of TSOs:**

- **As Employers**

Safeguard good money for valuable work: guarantee decent contracts and adequate pay, in particular through public procurement procedures.

- **For Volunteers**

Enhance the infrastructure for volunteers and potential volunteers in TSOs and within the sector.

- **For Honorary Board Members**

Build up infrastructural support and provide training opportunities for incoming honorary board members.

**FOR MORE  
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