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WORKING PAPER

***Rough Guide to the Impact of the Crisis
on the Third Sector in Europe***

Tony VENABLES
CIRIEC N° 2015/07



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***Rough Guide to the Impact of the Crisis
on the Third Sector in Europe***

Tony Venables¹

Working paper CIRIEC N° 2015/07

¹ The author, founder and former director of European Citizen Action Service is currently setting up ECIT, a foundation for European citizenship. However this first transitional citizenship of modern times is conceived, its development will depend on a strong civil society of the third sector, able to take on the challenges of increasing interdependence and the Europeanization of decision-making. In this way, European citizenship can become a practice, beyond the exercise of individual rights to free movement. Hence the interest for ECIT to be involved in the debate about the health and future prospects for the third sector. (Email: tonydavidvenables@gmail.com).

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Survival and recovery strategies of individual organisations (Part 3)

Conclusion and 10 Recommendations for giving the Third Sector more visibility

Abstract

This article is a revised and updated version of an earlier publication². It begins by looking at the issue of the definition of the third sector arguing in favour of a coming together of the concepts of civil society and social economy – what they share as core values outweighing their differences. The article goes on to give an impressionistic assessment of the effects of the crisis on the third sector overall. The next part takes a different perspective, looking at the impact of the crisis from the viewpoint of the individual organisation and the range of possible strategies from going it alone to merger. Finally, in the conclusion 10 recommendations are put forward for giving the third sector more visibility.

Keywords: Europe, civil society, social economy, third sector, definition, economic crisis, funding mix, hybridity.

² A first version of this paper entitled ‘Panoramic view of the funding problems of the third sector and the social economy in the European Union’ was first published in the *Revista Española del Tercer Sector* no. 27.2014. I am very grateful to the staff at the International Centre of Research and Information on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (CIRIEC) for their assistance and guidance. The CIRIEC documentation Centre in Liege is an obligatory destination for anyone interested in the social economy. I am also very grateful to Jeremy Kendall from the University of Kent in Canterbury and Ksenija Fonovic from SPES in Rome for their input and cooperation with the research project Third Sector Impact (www.thirdsectorimpact.eu).

Introduction

The title of this paper is an admission of the extent to which it is a European overview based on only scattered evidence. The rough guide is very rough indeed. This is a surprising finding. How is it that in the impact of the worst severe financial and economic crisis in Europe since the Second World War, particularly on a sector with responsibility for those most vulnerable in society has been so under-researched? In writing this article, it is true that material is available in country reports for those most severely hit: Ireland, Iceland, Portugal or Greece for example as well as the UK. There is much less comparative European research, CIRIEC's efforts being a notable exception. The impact of the crisis explains in part changes in the third sector – more emphasis on direct democracy for local community development and social innovation for example. Where there is good news with the third sector seen as part of a post-crisis strategy, much more material becomes available. To fully understand however what is happening in civil society and the social economy, one should though go back and examine in more depth the repercussions of crisis management and public expenditure cuts from the autumn of 2008 onwards, with the benefit of hindsight. In turn this should help improve policy-making ahead of future economic downturns, in order to make sure that mistakes of the last seven years are not repeated.

This paper is divided in three parts:

Part 1: The need for an inclusive definition of the Third Sector

For many non-profits struggling to survive and politicians intent on preserving front-line services, this issue of the definition of the sector appears abstract and hardly a priority. Despite differences across Europe and a certain fatigue round the complexities of such attempts, it is argued that an inclusive meta-definition is none the less important both to measure the size of the sector and encourage it to speak with the voice. The project “third sector impact” (TSI) has moreover made an important start³.

Part 2: Scattered evidence of the effects of the crisis on the sector as a whole

It is here that the state of research is so insufficient, especially when what evidence there is points to policy failures and unacceptable cuts hitting hardest the most vulnerable in society, for example those who are physically or mentally handicapped. How could much of what went wrong been allowed to happen? The article speculates that the third sector's relationship with government before the crisis was too close, so that when the crisis hit, there was a lack of strong independent leadership speaking for the sector as a whole.

³ *The Third Sector in Europe: Towards a Consensus Conceptualization*, TSI Working Paper no. 02/2014 by Lester M. Salamon and S. Wojtek Sokolowski.

Part 3: Survival and recovery strategies of individual organisations

In absorbing the impact of the crisis and finding alternative ways of operating, individual organisations' coping strategies have been better than those of the sector as a whole. Most organisations have been obliged to rethink and focus on their core mission, and to consider with more urgency how to achieve "funding in the round" from different sources. In turn, mixed funding creates new pressures to focus the mission, the impact and governance structures. This trend may run somewhat counter to the obvious case with certainly less public money to go round, for more cooperative strategies and even mergers, a word less popular in the non-profit than in the market economy sector.

In the conclusions, 10 recommendations are put forward for giving the third sector more visibility.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the perspective of this paper is European, with the emphasis on relations between the third sector and the EU Institutions, whilst drawing on national studies and material.

Part 1: The need for an inclusive definition of the Third Sector

A recent study found that "the main conclusion is that the social economy in Europe is very important in both human and economic terms, providing employment to over 14.5 million Europeans or about 6.5% of the working population of the EU-27 and about 7.4% in the 15 'older' EU member states."⁴ In the EU as many as 160 million people are members of a social economy organisation.⁵ Even after a generation since the fall of the Berlin wall, there is still a gap between the strength of the third sector in 15 old and 13 new member states of the EU, which shows that whilst civil society can emerge as a spectacular catalyst for change, growing it is a long-term process. Closing this gap is bound to be an even slower process now as a result of the crisis, a point discussed later on. The averages conceal also huge differences between countries and within regions of the same country, relative third sector deserts co-existing with some regions where the social economy is a major player. Politicians will not be convinced of the size of the sector and its contribution to employment and social cohesion without more up-to-date developed national mapping, with European and international comparisons.⁶ The need now for such

⁴ *The Social Economy in the European Union*, Report by CIRIEC for the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), 2012.

⁵ This estimate has been put forward by the European Commission which wants "to contribute to the creation of a favourable environment for the development of social business, and of the social economy at large" (ec.europa.eu/internal_market/social_business/index_en.htm).

⁶ On 13 December 2013 the Institute for Social Research in Norway announced that it is to carry out a new EU funded project on the third sector together with 13 other research institutes. Called Third Sector Impact, this research network has already organised a number of seminars with stakeholders at national and also at European level (Brussels, 15 October 2014).

a survey as European states come out of recession is apparent, but one of the first victims of recent budget cuts has been precisely the feasibility of undertaking such work.⁷ Nevertheless, it is clearly a necessary first step towards giving the third sector more visibility.

Can the notions of social economy and civil society come closer together?

In turn to measure the third sector requires consensus on its definition. Many people are saying of course “there are more urgent things to do” and given the diversity of definitions across Europe they also doubt whether this is possible. This is indeed a challenge because the third sector is not sharply delineated or clearly distinct from the other two sectors. For example mutuals managing social security payments are close to the state, whereas many cooperatives simply belong in the private sector. The third sector might be described as “a pole of social utility between the capitalist sector and the public sector”⁸ a tension field between the two, borrowing from each, but nevertheless distinct. Which organisations to include or exclude in measuring the third sector is in itself a controversial issue among scholars.

The TSI research project is responding to this challenge. In “The Third Sector in Europe: Towards a Consensus Conceptualization”, progress is made in seeking to draw lines between the social economy and purely commercial profit-making organisations, whilst accepting that some profit-making is essential, provided the organisation is “totally or significantly limited from distributing any surplus it earns to investors, members or others.” The paper draws on a number of national laws which define “significantly” to give prominence to the social objectives over commercial ones. Where further work needs to be done for this project to reach a definition is on the more difficult issue of the liquid concept of civil society, in relation to spontaneous citizens’ movements and protests on the one hand, and the commercial sector on the other. For example, when EU policy-makers claim to consult civil society, the term includes the non-profit associations of commercial companies as much as it does “Finance Watch” or the “European anti-poverty network”, or the “Green 10”. Surely too, a clearer line should be drawn between civil society and the private sphere of the family.

A key theme of this paper on “consensus conceptualisation” is that first there is the extent of diversity. In this connection, however, a number of reasons why diversity can be exaggerated should be mentioned:

- There are the broad historical and cultural differences across Europe with “social economy” more accepted in some parts “civil society” in others, whereas in reality different labels can cover the same or similar activity.

⁷ The survey done by the John Hopkins University between 1999 and 2003 “Global Civil Society: An Overview” by Lester Salamon and national teams covered a number of EU old and new member states.

⁸ See report by CIRIEC quoted above.

The TSI project divides Europe in different zones and below we quote from the CIRIEC report which defines the limited number of countries where the term “social economy” is in use, but this does not mean that it is not practiced elsewhere.

- Legislation, especially if it has to be drafted to grant tax reliefs has to be tightly drafted and in the absence of an overall definition, has to offer one in its own terms, thus reinforcing these differences and increasing fragmentation.
- In turn there is a tendency to take the latest wave of legislative reform applied to a particular group of organisations and somehow scale it up as if the whole third sector is imbued with social innovation for example, thus excluding those that are not.
- In the absence of an overall definition, there is a strong phenomenon of what the French call “recuperation”, whereby politicians fill the vacuum and produce their own version of the third sector to suit the times, whether it may be social innovation, social enterprises or the idea of the “big society”⁹ in the UK. The European Commission is particularly prone to putting forward and then changing denominations of the third sector.
- Funding and research tends to pick up on what is fashionable in a sector where change is the norm, or take a particular legislative or policy initiative to label and narrow down the sector as a whole.

Fortunately, however, the paper above comes to the conclusion that secondly the process also revealed a significant area of agreement around certain key components that could potentially be captured in a “common core” definition of the European third sector:

“Wide agreement on three underlying features: In the first place, while there was disagreement about the precise institutions or behaviours that the concept of the third sector might embrace, the field guides revealed a considerable degree of consensus about some of the underlying ideas that the concept of a third sector evoked in Europe (and perhaps beyond it). Three of these can be easily identified. They thus identify the third sector as embodying (i) forms of individual or collective action outside of for-profit businesses, government, or households; (ii) undertaken to create something of value primarily to the broader community or to persons other than one oneself or one’s family, and (iii) pursued voluntarily and without compulsion.”

⁹ A very good paper by Patrick Lenancker and Jean-Marc Roirant, “Entreprendre autrement : L’Economie sociale et solidaire” argues forcibly against reducing a sector covering all sectors of activity and all branches of the economy to just social enterprise and the “circular economy”, *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, janvier 2013 (2013-05 NOR CESL1100005X).

What is distinct and held in common in the third sector is shared values. Such values include: to be independent and self-governing and not controlled by the public sector or the market and its shareholders – a legal entity of freely associated members, brought together to share a common purpose where support for others and the common good take precedence over any personal gain or profit motive. Human nature being what it is, general rhetoric and values are sometimes observed more in the breach than in the observance, so third sector organisations should avoid a “holier than thou” attitude. On the other hand, apart from values of internal democracy, third sector organisations do promote human dignity and equality as well as citizen participation.

The third sector brings together two strands, roughly following the distinction between service delivery and advocacy organisations. In an ideal world, the two should come together with the evidence from working at the grass roots introduced to the corridors of power. There is not space here for a full description, but at European level there is roughly a twin-track policy for the third sector, which has tended to encourage conceptual uncertainty:

- the social economy said to be made up of cooperatives, mutuals, associations and foundations has been recognised in a number of communications from the Commission, represented in small administrative units and reflected in proposals for European statutes. These have been passed except in the case of the association and foundation statutes withdrawn by the Barroso and Juncker Commissions respectively. Where to place the social economy in the administrative structure is problematic, but the focus currently is on social businesses and the internal market. Progress has been made, for example in strengthening the partnership principle in European structural funds, where local community development social innovation and fighting discrimination and social exclusion are mainstreamed. It is about reaching parts of the economy not served by the market.¹⁰
- Civil society came on the agenda with the 2001 Commission “white paper on European governance”¹¹ and in the European debate was clearly a reflection of the civic movements which had led to the fall of the Berlin wall. The European economic and social committee has attempted to define criteria for representation of “organised” civil society, “civil dialogue” and partnership. An institutionalised approach coexists with a more open door policy to include “unorganised” civil society and protest movements which conservative EU officials and policymakers regard with a mixture of fascination and apprehension. Article 11 paragraph 4 of the Lisbon Treaty introduced European citizens initiatives (ECIs), but it also if properly implemented under paragraphs 1-3 would lead to the creation of a

¹⁰ On page 22, the EESC report on the social economy attempts a definition.

¹¹ Official Journal C287/11 of 12.10.2001.

European public sphere and provide a framework for a broad definition of the third sector.¹²

There are number of reasons to challenge the distinction between social economy and civil society as artificial:

- associations, by far the largest quantitative mass are in both camps often both delivering services in the community and acting as advocates for their beneficiaries and a wider public.
- different definitions based on legal structure or type of organisation overlook the fact that to an increasing extent organisations have more than one statute and a foot in both the civil society and social economy camp. The hybrid nature of the third sector organisations is receiving increasing attention.¹³
- neither definition on its own reflects the nature of a social, largely non-commercial economy underpinning related or separate invitations to strengthen deliberative and participatory democracy. Citizen participation underpins both social economy and civil society organisations. The social economy and civil society are reverse sides of the same coin. The problem about bringing them together is that the first is too narrowly recognised and the second so broad and diffuse as to be difficult to grasp, with the result that terms such as voluntary or the non-profit sector are also used.
- There has been also a recent breakthrough in recognition of social enterprise, social innovation and social entrepreneurs, but in reality is not this simply part of the process by which the third sector reinvents itself.¹⁴
- The EESC report on the social economy in the European Union provides also useful evidence of the difficulties of applying a single definition to the third sector,¹⁵ because of different geographical variations. However does

¹² An NGO forum held on 2-3 March 2015 in Riga (Latvia) approved a roadmap for the implementation of article 11 (TEU) paragraphs 1 and 2 drafted by the EESC liaison group with civil society

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?!=portal.en.events=activities=ngo=forum=riga=documents> .

¹³ See the recent book “Social Enterprises and the Third Sector: Changing European Landscapes in a Comparative Perspective” edited by Jacques Defourny and published by Routledge (2014). Practically every chapter stresses organisational variety, multi-stakeholder involvement and the hybrid nature of the sector.

¹⁴ This is argued for example by Jacques Defourny and Marthe Nyssens in an article in Option no. 33 « Pour une économie de la confiance en Europe : la contribution de l'économie sociale et solidaire » (publication by Confrontations).

¹⁵ The term “social economy” on its own has very different levels of recognition across EU-28, where it is possible to divide countries in 3 groups: countries in which the concept of social economy is widely accepted include France, Spain (the first country to have an EU law on the social economy in 2011), Portugal, Belgium, Ireland and Greece; countries in which the concept enjoys a moderate level of acceptance: Italy, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Luxembourg, Sweden, Malta, Poland, the UK and Bulgaria; countries in which there is little or no recognition of the concept of the social economy include Austria, Germany, the Czech

not the EU particularly with its regional and social fund operations offer an opportunity to recognise the diversity but also how cohesive the third sector is if its full potential is to be used?

To give it more visibility and weight, third sector leaders and academics could reflect on whether a more holistic approach to defining the third sector could be encouraged, but one which recognises its fluid nature and diversity. It is both about serving the community through practical support and advocating on its behalf. It can be seen as a “complex web of different organisational groupings...structured in various hierarchical relationships to one another and mediated by umbrella organisations and the State.”¹⁶ This includes not only the four traditional components of the social economy, but also social enterprises, local community groups or specialised service providers to the sector operating at all geographical levels. In a more holistic framework is it the type of organisation which is the defining feature? More important is the particular group in society the organisation seeks to serve whether young or old, or those suffering from disability or disadvantage or the particular cause to which it is devoted such as mental health or local community development.

Part 2: Scattered evidence of the effects of the crisis on the sector as a whole

The third sector faces a complex set of challenges: public sector cuts, major institutional change, change in the organisation of social security and social assistance from “welfare state” to “welfare mix” and increased demands for its services as a result of the crisis. “The third sector, understood as a diverse group of charities, voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises is facing a radical upheaval in its multiple political and economic environments. In many countries, the crisis in the financial system from 2008 onwards has migrated to become a fiscal crisis of public debt and spending deficits, a broader economic crisis of law, uneven and stagnant growth, and arguably a social crisis as austerity measures including significant welfare reform are implemented by governments in response (Gough 2011), commentators and advocates for the third sector have argued that organisations are doubly affected by such measures as demand for welfare services and support increases whilst financial support for organisations (via grants, donations, and public service contracts) tends to be squeezed (Wilding 2010, Clifford et al, 2013)”¹⁷

Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia.

¹⁶ The third sector in unsettled times: a field guide by Rob Macmillan and a team of researchers published by the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, Birmingham (UK), Working Paper 109, August 2013.

¹⁷ The third sector in unsettled times, see footnote 16.

The John Hopkins comparative survey published well before the crisis of 2008 already highlighted the Achilles heel of the third sector in Europe – the overreliance, by comparison with the United States, on public funding – over 60% in many countries. The sale of services and other self-generated income from the market (i.e. membership subscriptions) are at a relatively low level in Europe, whilst the contribution from corporate social responsibility is much less than in the United States. The crisis over the last seven years could mean that many organisations have to bring about major shifts in their sources of finance to survive. With cuts of say 20% in public funds to national organisations at the outset of the crisis in Ireland, matched in many other parts of Europe, there are not enough public funds to go round.¹⁸ Although this period of sluggish growth and high unemployment may lead to a better period of higher more sustainable growth, it seems unlikely that there will be a return to the levels of public expenditure accessible for the third sector from before 2008. Either the sector will shrink further, or it will have unlocked alternative sources of funding. Although the situation is by no means the same across Europe, the general trend will be towards reductions in public funding even in the strong Euro-zone countries and the European budget, with encouragement to third sector organisations to become more professional and market-oriented.

Accessing public funding has also become more difficult with administrations reduced in size seeking to manage fewer, larger and safer contracts, often opening the door for private sector service providers in areas such as home-care, the administration of voucher schemes or reintegration into the labour market which traditionally have been the preserve of the third sector. Another emerging trend is decentralisation of public expenditure towards regional and local authorities which vary greatly in their attitudes in favour or against partnerships with the third sector. The public sector funding crisis is compounded often by crisis in the political and administrative spheres so that organisations have no idea where they stand, thus making contingency and long-term planning very difficult.

Whilst the reliance in a changed form, on public expenditure will continue, the third sector will increasingly look towards private sources of income. In the immediate aftermath of the banking crisis and with the stock-market collapse reducing their reserves and earnings, many foundations cut or even suspended temporarily their grant making schemes. Similarly corporate social responsibility schemes were put on hold and many disappeared with the merger or disappearance of their parent companies. Stock markets have however recovered, so that foundations have the opportunity to step in and play a more decisive role in the face of withdrawal of public sector provision. The same is true of cash rich corporations which are coming under criticism for excessive

¹⁸ See for example in the UK “new data from the shrinking sector” published by “Third Sector” on 8 April 2014. In 2011/12 income from local and central government dropped by £1.3 billion down 8.8% in the previous year.

wage differentials and tax avoidance schemes, to show that after all, they have learned lessons from the crisis and are prepared to repair some damage caused. Above all, the third sector and civil society need to develop more decisively their links to households, whose giving, except in extreme circumstances of deprivation, has held up remarkably during this crisis. Will these trends make for a third sector more commercially minded, but also more democratically rooted in the community and more independent from government?

A report published by the European Foundation Centre (EFC)¹⁹ on the disability sector found that “Europe’s 80 million people with disabilities are at serious risk of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination as a result of their governments’ austerity measures.” For example “in Greece, the public mental health sector services are in complete disarray.” The crisis has affected long-term care in the community to the extent that many patients were being re-institutionalised in the health services. East and South European EU member states such as Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Romania reported a “devastating impact on the non-governmental social services sector, where many organisations have suspended or terminated their activities. The closure of non-governmental social services must be viewed in conjunction with decreasing volumes of social services by the public sector.” In areas where the third sector has been hit hardest—the delivery of services to the most vulnerable in society: disabled people, the growing numbers in poverty, migrants, ex-prisoners or long-term unemployed—these beneficiaries have also been hit by reductions in cash benefits and public social assistance. Cuts in services affecting those most vulnerable in society have overshadowed the cuts also to legal aid, rights organisations and those able to advocate on their behalf.

In general, social services cuts affecting the poorest and most vulnerable groups in our respective societies have been more drastic than those in social security, health care systems or education. But this generalisation would not apply to the same extent in all parts of Europe or less affected countries such as those of the Benelux, Scandinavia (with the notable exception of Iceland), Austria or Germany. Like the issue of lack of a clear European identity and definition of the third sector, the dispersed impacts across the EU and divisions within Euro-zone countries makes forging common priorities and solidarity a difficult task.

The impact of the crisis is also difficult to measure and varied within the third sector. When it comes to individual organisations, the same government policy, such as a linear percentage cut to all organisations across the sector can have very different outcomes on each. It may make little difference to small community groups run by volunteers. Attitudes also differ. Within the sector there are those resigned to crisis – “we should do more, but we don’t have the

¹⁹ Assessing the impact of European governments’ austerity plans on the rights of people with disabilities October 2012. This report was produced by the EFC consortium on human rights and disability.

money” – and those who see it as a positive opportunity “Ok, we don’t have the money, so will find another way.” The scale and impact varies considerably even among organisations in the same field. For example, centres providing information, advice for capacity building of the sector have suffered from the crisis, being dependent on government or local authority funding. After all they provide “back office” support and not frontline services to those most in need. On the other hand, centres providing physical space for sharing knowledge and services to reduce costs, particularly among smaller third sector organisations appear to have expanded their activity. The crisis is also leading to a shake-up of the sector with challenges to traditional ways of doing things. There is the explosive growth in all types of self-help initiatives for exchanging goods and services with alternative currencies, offering low-cost solutions to repairing household appliances or cars – the development of social innovation. This shows that citizens think the third sector has a capacity for mobilisation and finding new ways of solving old problems. There are also differences across policy areas with international development perhaps suffering less, given the maintenance of public support, than charity at home.

Why was there not more of a protest against the cuts?

Despite the capacity for self-renewal in the third sector, one cannot help wonder why there has not been a much more vigorous protest movement against the public sector cuts²⁰. Where there have been protests, they have been largely in the informal third sector self-help initiatives and the unorganised civil society – around the different “occupy” initiatives which achieved resonance with the public and made an impact on politicians. Were all the cuts and disruptions caused really so necessary?

There are a number of possible explanations for the relatively low profile of the third sector during the crisis:

Firstly, in the period leading up to the crisis in 2008, the third sector – in the wake of what the John Hopkins survey named the “associational revolution” – enjoyed a period of calm expansion and relative stability. After a generation of conservation and charity, then protest, the new generation was for partnership, even having a seat at the table and helping reluctant governments meet such challenges as climate change and social exclusion. The third sector was seen as a trusted partner both for the delivery of services and for its expertise and input to policy. Partnership arrangements did add to the chances for the third sector to be heard and consulted. Some trends were already apparent in this relatively benign period, which have become more pronounced with the crisis (i.e. donor coordination, aid effectiveness, new

²⁰ Of course, there are many exceptions to this generalisation. An example is a campaign led by Charities Aid Foundation in the UK called “give it back George” to persuade the Government to drop a proposal to cap tax relief on major charitable donations. The EFC report on the impact of the crisis on people with disabilities does show evidence of successful protests and lobbying by this sector of the European Parliament.

public management). The demand for professionalism for the efficient delivery of services led to the recruitment of well qualified managers to modernise the older charitable institutions, rather than to be charismatic advocates for the sector. Has the crisis revealed a lack of leadership? The third sector was ill prepared for the crisis. It also needs to reflect seriously on whether it is sufficiently independent from governments.

Secondly, the first victim of the crisis was the destruction or side-lining in many countries of the social partnership arrangements and the cuts to different services for relations with civil society or structures for cross-sectoral communication both within government and in the sector itself. Civil society organisations have lost many of their forums for influencing government policy. Where these have been maintained, there has been a sense that they have continued to exist in a kind of limbo, no longer listened to by politicians. The problem is well illustrated by changes the crisis brought in European decision-making, with a shift towards the countless crisis meetings of European heads of government remote from the third sector and civil society and away from the European institutions with which they are in regular contact. The emphasis now is certainly not on “civil dialogue” or new initiatives such as a framework agreement or “compacts” between the sector and public services, but on social innovation or social businesses which have employment and growth potential. Regular involvement has been replaced by ad hoc involvement when strictly necessary. The role of civil society has shifted away from proposing new policy developments to implementation. Where governments attempt, despite cuts, to guarantee that front-line services will be maintained, everything gets pushed towards their delivery. The third sector space has also been reduced by the dead weight of an oppressive ideological discourse claiming that there is no alternative to current government and European policies.

Thirdly, the achievement of broad sectoral yet alone cross-sectoral alliances allowing the third sector to speak with one voice are difficult to achieve requiring considerable investment in time and discussion in the best of circumstances. In a crisis creating more divisions within the sector when they are least needed, it is even more difficult. “...There is a great deal of consultation and debate about how the field is organised and operates, and how it should develop in future. An example might be the way “social enterprise” as a discourse and mode of organisation has mobilised to challenge the notion of ‘traditional’ charity, or how large service delivery organisations have regularly been challenged by smaller organisations over their financial dominance and purported closeness to government.”²¹ Such tensions are reflected in the representation of different constituencies in different national umbrella groups, with markedly different styles. Above all, however, networking is also time-consuming for participants as well as

²¹ The third sector in unsettled times already quoted, see footnote 16.

conveners when most organisations, as an issue of survival, have to attend to their own affairs. Networking within a project in response to a call for tender, takes precedence over networking for advocacy purposes. Furthermore, the impact of the crisis on third sector organisations has been extremely uneven, making it harder to identify common interests. Organisations may also become locked into a situation of powerlessness and wait-and-see with funding cuts expected but delayed, and not knowing where they stand. All this plays into the hands of governments and local authorities, allowing them to further divide and rule as they muddle through the crisis.

On the basis of my own experience I have two concerns about the future of advocacy on behalf of the third sector at the European level:

- Closing the gap between new and old member states

One of the priorities for advocacy should be strengthening civil society to support the process of encouraging democracy and the rule of law in new EU member states and neighbouring countries. This concern has certainly been stressed in programmes and events to examine ways to strengthen civil society in the new member states and neighbouring countries of the EU, the Western Balkans and Turkey. Before the crisis, progress was being made with the European Commission pushing for reforms, civil society and think tanks advocating for them, with the national administration.²² On paper much has been achieved to put in place a legal framework for civil society, freedom of information laws, better standards of consultation. However, in practice there is still a gap with Western European standards, as shown for example in Bulgaria and Hungary where freedom of association, the rights of minorities and the rule of law are in regression. The cuts, combined with the shift from grants to service delivery is bound to slow down the efforts to close the gap and support reforms, particularly at a time when the crisis in the Euro-zone has made it more difficult to present the European Union as a model of good governance. The European Commission and the third sector appear for example far less well equipped than they were before the crisis to help meet some of the challenges facing reforms in Ukraine, for example.

- Closing the gap between commercial and public interest lobbying

Another priority for advocacy should be to create a better balance between public interest and commercial lobbying not just at national but also at the European level. Again, progress was being made before the crisis, and now looks stalled. Despite the economic downturn, the increase in commercial lobbying in Brussels has continued unabated, with at least 30,000 lobbyists,

²² See for example the “Balkan civil society acquis. Strengthening the advocacy and monitoring potential and capacities of CSO’s” and other publications produced by this organisation on the development of civil society in the region. (www.balkanscsd.net)

double the amount ten years ago,²³ whereas there has been some contraction in the presence of the media, local and regional authorities and the third sector. The only way found so far to begin to redress the imbalance is for the European Commission with limited support by foundations to provide grants. On average, civil society organisations draw over 40% of their revenue for European advocacy from EU grants²⁴. More ruthless US style lobbying in Brussels and Strasbourg has led the tobacco industry and others to denounce grants and the message is well received in some of the political groups and among eurosceptics in the European Parliament. The fact is that in an economic recession, grants are hardly popular. A report published by a right wing think tank Institute of economic affairs (IEA) in the UK “Euro-puppets: The European Commission’s remaking of civil society” was particularly critical of the EU’s smallest programme “Europe for citizens” and successfully tapped into the scepticism about grants with the implicit claim that third sector organisations cannot be independent from their sources of funding.²⁵

Part 3: Survival and recovery strategies of individual organisations

In this part, the aim is to consider internal strategies for third sector organisations as Europe comes out of the crisis. These range from cost-cutting and restructuring, to diversification of funding to be more sustainable, rebranding and focus on one’s core mission on the one hand to cooperation and possible merger on the other.

Cost-cutting and restructuring

There is no doubt that over the last 5 years, hundreds of thousands of third sector employees have made huge personal sacrifices to their organisations by accepting pay freezes, reduced working time and pay, and even delays in payment. Much of the extent of the voluntary sacrifices made probably go underreported at least in small third sector organisations. There is no doubt that the third sector has managed to retain levels of employment during the crisis which would not be possible in the private sector. Cooperatives in Spain lost 9% of their employees, but the equivalent figure for the private sector was 19%.²⁶ Diversified sources of funding, rather than just relying on the markets, can be turned to some advantage, as can the reliance on trainees and volunteers, the sector’s hidden asset. The management has in the meantime been involved in

²³ Estimate derived from “The Art of Lobbying the EU” subtitled “More Machiavelli in Brussels” (2012) by Rinus van Schendelen, Amsterdam University Press.

²⁴ See study of the transparency register “Interest groups and advocacy” published on 23 April 2013 by Justin Greenwood.

²⁵ IEA research published on 6 March 2013.

²⁶ *The Social Economy in the European Union*, EESC (2012).

“rigorous and endless financial scenario planning”²⁷ as the crisis has not just been one of cuts but also uncertainty. The need to cut costs has not always been wholly negative. Over time some larger organisations have acquired complex structures linking the national headquarters with regional offices and a proliferation of local management hierarchies and structures of democratic accountability which could be simplified and reduced to achieving economy of scale, without cutting services to citizens. There are limits. The evidence available suggests in many organisations a virtual standstill on promotion and salary increases which may make it more difficult once the economy improves to retain the most talented staff in the third sector.

Creating a sustainable funding mix

It is clear that right across the sector, the preference goes towards the funding mix as advocated for example by an NCVO report as the best response to the economic crisis. The “introductory pack on funding and finance”²⁸ is a thirty page guide to sustainability. It stresses that “too often ‘sustainable funding’ is seen as a question of simply getting better at fundraising or locating one ever-lasting source of income. Indeed, it should be seen more as a strategic and holistic approach to ensuring the ongoing viability of an organisation – it’s about exploring ‘funding in the round’.” Sustainability begins therefore not with money but with planning and a widespread internal and external consultation to assess the role and capacity of the organisation and then produce a business plan²⁹. Clearly in favour of income diversification (on the grounds of not putting all one’s eggs in one basket) the guide then distinguishes how very different the skills are to access the range of income streams available to the third sector: donations, grants, contracts or trading, which in turn have their sub-categories. The guide makes the excellent point that achieving mixed funding is not enough. It has to be well managed and fit together well within the know-how and culture of the organisation³⁰. To an increasing extent also, organisations are being asked to show what results they can achieve. It is right that this excellent guide concentrates on the organisations’ strategy, not where to find the money, which is there.

This need to rely on the mixed sources of funding is even true of the emerging field of social innovation, where social entrepreneurs would probably like to break away from dependence on grants. A research network³¹ funded by the

²⁷ The third sector in unsettled times, see footnote 16.

²⁸ Deborah Turton, Sustainable Funding Project, NCVO (National Council of Voluntary Organisations) in partnership with the Finance Hub (www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp; www.financehub.org.uk).

²⁹ The NCVO guide recommends a planning cycle and 2 simple tools – SWOT and PEST analyses (page 11).

³⁰ There are third sector organisations which are just an artificial mix of different projects, but who would want to work for them?

³¹ TEPSIE stands for “the theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovations in Europe”. Running until January 2015, the project is led by the Danish

European Commission called TEPsIE concludes: “as our research has confirmed, the social innovation sector is still far from operating in established markets. The more severe the social problems, the less likely it is that they produce enough income,”³² since beneficiaries are simply unable to pay. The research suggests that concepts borrowed from the market such as the social stock exchange and social impact bonds have yet to prove they could replace grants or donations. The advice is that the preference “for a single social finance instrument will have adverse effects” and that “it seems wise to go for a well-balanced instead of a focused approach.” It is therefore suggested that “although treated as old-fashioned in the wake of new instruments, tax-breaks and subsidies will have to remain the methods of choice for promoting social innovation in a very large part of the social arena”. It goes on: “Finally, under no circumstances are donations and grants to be dismissed as unfit for promoting social innovation. On the contrary, the majority of social innovations are dependent on some kind of philanthropic support (including new forms of capital such as venture philanthropy with no or very modest financial return expectations or new ways to raise this capital such as crowd-funding).”

Whilst the social innovators are promoting new forms of investment and financial support closer to the market, they cannot ignore the need for mixed funding. On the other hand, more traditional third sector organisations dependent on grants and public service contracts might do well to look to sources of revenue closer to the market. Apart from reducing risks, mixed sources of funding also have other advantages such as improving cash flow, building the knowledge base and range of contracts of the organisations, and opening up new horizons for future development. The mix can though make the organisation difficult to manage and will never be perfect. The aim is to achieve what is called a crowding-in effect. The argument could be that since a project is already half way to being funded, matching funding will be cost-effective, and could therefore attract a consortium of funders for example. If an appeal for public funds can also be added, a real multiplier effect will be achieved. On the other hand, there can also be a crowding-out effect, with private funders not interested if the government already provides a grant; many funders want the project to be “theirs” exclusively.

Mergers and co-operation

From the point of view of governments or local authorities both in their role of policy makers and contracting authorities, it makes sense to have a single interlocutor rather than a scattering of different organisations so that as funders they have brought about some mergers. The core problem is: “we need to recognise that the sector is the wrong shape to make maximum use of the limited

Technological Institute with the Young Foundation responsible for content. The final newsletter of the project is informative for results and follow-up projects.

³² Report on the feasibility and opportunities of using various instruments for capitalising social innovations (Davies and Simon, 2013), www.tepsie.eu.

resources it is able to draw on: having a multitude of small organisations duplicating one another's work is not a good use of what capacity does exist in the sector. So we need to encourage more partnership working, more sharing or back-office facilities, and more mergers."³³

I remember attending in the immediate aftermath of the crisis a workshop of the European Foundation Centre in summer 2009 in Rome where a participant pointed out how easy it is to merge. Each organisation holds its own general Assembly in the morning with one agenda item: its own dissolution. The two groups come together in the afternoon to found the new joint body. Struck by this example, I have mentioned it many times since only to be greeted by stony silence. As a result of the crisis, restructuring is occurring with some organisations in the contrasting position of on the one hand being cut, on the other taking on a new activity or another entity. It is difficult to avoid the impression however that when organisations are preoccupied with their own survival, they are very reluctant to survey the field for possible mergers, even though that could be a logical response.

Many organisations of the third sector resist mergers because they work to a particular formula, which they regard as unique – but which in reality could still continue better supported as a department of a larger unit. For example, there is a dilemma about whether or not it is good policy to provide special shelters – which can amount to an alternative for many to sleeping rough but does not address the core problems – or whether it is better to carry out more intensive counselling and support for their beneficiaries' reintegration in society. Is it not a question of doing both in cooperation, or as part of the same organisation? When it comes to the possibility of merger between organisations doing practically the same work, there are issues of trust, particularly in a climate of crisis, as to the true nature of their financial situation.

With the shift from grants towards service contracts, many smaller organisations know that they are no longer viable or competitive. Whilst mergers will come, they will not come immediately and they are likely to involve local rather than established national organisations. Short of mergers, third sector organisations wishing to keep their independence and identity, talk of looser sharing options. This involves: coalition building for advocacy purposes, to reduce costs of lobbying alone and increase impact; creating a partnership or mixed consortium to bid for larger public sector contracts; establishing common physical premises to share and reduce the costs of services and infrastructure, whilst extending this approach to web platforms and social media. From such examples of pooling and creation of more non-profit resource centres, there could be a more ambitious scaling up of cooperative infrastructure – a new third sector model in which many more people would work for several organisations, rather than just one. For example, as a result of the crisis, Europe

³³ The third sector in unsettled times, see footnote 16.

may have a shrinking cultural sector composed of elitist and commercial organisations. Smaller organisations could fight back by forming sectoral or territorial cooperative units sharing structural and operational costs, including marketing.³⁴ There could be a possible shift too away from grants to individual organisations to providing infrastructure and covering costs common to several: more mutualisation within the third sector.

Rebranding strategies and focusing on the core mission

A strategy being followed by many third sector organisations as a result of the crisis is one of review and evaluation in order to rebrand themselves and become more effectively professional in order to take advantage of the slow improvement in the economic climate. This strategy is one going in the opposite direction to merger or cooperation, because it is primarily to signal to the outside world that the organisation is here to stay and will emerge stronger from the crisis. One senses that strategies of going-it-alone particularly after the impact of the current crisis will place a heavy responsibility on the governance of individual organisations. In a context where sources of funding are more mixed and the mixed legal structures of the social economy and civil society have become more marked, there will also be more external scrutiny of the governance of individual organisations. We have already mentioned the advantages as well as the pitfalls of managing mixed sources of funding. Whereas greater transparency in funding is likely to become an obligation for all third sector organisations, and quite rightly so, governance in the sense of the performance of the Board and the day-to-day running of the organisation will come under more scrutiny, in particular in terms of strands of activity. As one author puts it³⁵ “hybridity” challenge: “a) how to mobilise and balance different and distinct stakeholders’ interests to achieve the common goals; b) how to achieve a mix of different and distinct goals in a balance fashion, so as not to lose the support of any major stakeholders(s); and c) how to achieve a synergy through the stakeholders’ individual and collective contribution to an organisation’s common goals.”

The emphasis on evaluation and measurable impact

Governments and other funders are increasingly looking for evidence of results. Evaluation rather than an add-on, will become an obligatory part of the whole process of service delivery from start to finish. There are plenty of types of evaluations which take into account the values and specific features of third sector organisations such as creating social capital and sustainable outcomes.³⁶

³⁴ See for example “The Financial Crisis and its Impact on the Current Models of Governance and Management of the Cultural Sector in Europe” by Lluís Bonet and Fabio Donato published in *ENCATC Journal of Cultural Management and Policy*, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2011.

³⁵ Victor Pestoff *et al.* in *Social Enterprises and the Third Sector*, see footnote 13.

³⁶ See for example Roger Spear, “Social Accounting and Social Audit in the UK” in CIRIEC - Bouchard M.J., *The Worth of the Social Economy – An International Perspective*, 2nd book of the Series ‘Social Economy & Public Economy’, Peter Lang, 2009.

Such features as cost, effectiveness, participation, equity, advocacy and innovation are better built in by the sector itself. It is possible to combine processes of internal participatory evaluation and external evaluation through interviewing beneficiaries and following up their experience.

There are however a number of pitfalls for third sector organisation to be avoided in meeting the emphasis on measurable results. To an increasing extent, governments and local authorities are looking for satisfied consumers, rather than welfare impact. They know that third sector organisations spend more time and effort to improve the life chances of beneficiaries as people rather than statistics and on a community building approach which produces more lasting results, but which inevitably in the face of real life deviates from the original contract and strict evaluation criteria. On the other hand, they know that if the same service is run by a commercial company they will respect the conditions of the contract, which is their number one concern. Then however the company will wash their hands of other uncovered problems and after beneficiaries have been put through their programme, there will be no follow up so that few real welfare gains and results can be shown. There is no doubt that the third sector is populated by organisations whose impacts are difficult to measure, particularly in the area of services to hard-to-reach groups in society. Another difficulty is measuring not just result but also the third sector commitment to process and participation. Finally performance assessment is within a given set of perimeters, whereas the work and advocacy activities of many third sector organisations are undertaken precisely to challenge the assumptions on which they are based. Certainly the proliferation of varying evaluation techniques fits third sector organisations better than one-dimensional approaches. In the search for more professional rebranding and positioning themselves to guarantee results, third sector organisations may be setting traps for themselves.³⁷ One way out of the trap of being expected to change the world which is beyond the capacity of single organisations is to advocate for more emphasis on the aggregate impact of groups of them or the sector as a whole.

The third sector impact project has produced a methodological guideline for impact assessment (working paper no. 01/2014) which makes the strong point that whereas there is a wide range of choice of evaluation methods for individual organisations and projects, there is a need for further research on the impact of the sector as a whole. “There are no specific methods for impact measurement at the macro level,” the paper concludes and suggests “very much in agreement with the outcomes of the stakeholder groups for the further research of the project to concentrate deliberately on specific forms of impact of the Third

³⁷ I am grateful to Jeremy Kendall, who runs a master in civil society at Kent University, for his insights and a briefing about the pitfalls of measuring the performance of third sector organisations. The third sector impact project has focussed on this issue in discussions with national groups (Working paper no. 01/2014).

Sector i.e. on advocacy, contribution to social change, trust, social capital and so on.”

Conclusion and 10 Recommendations for giving the Third Sector more visibility

As we have already stressed, up-dated comparative surveys are necessary to give the third sector more visibility and provide the necessary facts and examples to show how it contributes to a more democratic economy. In the publications already quoted, the “selling points” of the third sector are generally identified on the following lines:

- A buffer against crisis. To what extent has the third sector been able to play this role? In some parts of the European Union the crisis has been too severe for the sector to be able to respond effectively. Nevertheless, there appears to be some scattered evidence that employment losses in the third sector have been less than in the rest of the economy. Has the sector through its recruitment of volunteers and training programmes been able to contribute to job creation more than other sectors? To what extent has the third sector been able to offer safer alternative low-cost services to people as its pioneers did in the 19th century with credit unions, cooperatives?
- An agent for change and sustainable exit from the crisis. There is an abundance of examples of best practice, showing through specific examples how the third sector can contribute to meeting unmet needs in imaginative ways. The presentation of case studies is a more effective way of explaining social innovation than abstract definitions and descriptions.³⁸ A pivotal organisation from which to trace examples of practice is the Young Foundation in the UK. “Social innovation; what it is, why it matters and how it can be accelerated” is a powerful piece of advocacy for the sector³⁹ by Geoff Mulgan who attempts to explain the dynamics of breaking new ground: “Many of the most important ideas straddle the boundaries between sectors and disciplines”. Generally too, the solutions are there, but buried: “For many decades there has been a lot of discussion on the problems of scaling up apparently excellent local initiatives. Time and again charismatic social entrepreneurs have established brilliant projects and then spent decades trying and failing to get the model to take root in other places” Scaling up the social economy can help meet needs which will not be met by the market alone or the public sector in such areas as health, education, climate change or the ageing of the population.

³⁸ An effective technique frequently used is to organise competitions and prizes to highlight and reward best practice.

³⁹ Published by the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom (2007).

- An agent for citizen engagement and democratic renewal. It has been highlighted in this paper that there is a case for bringing together the concepts of the social economy and civil society within the third sector. The areas which overlap are much more significant than those that separate them. To the extent that people really do practice what they preach about the values of free democratic association, both are equally committed to the cause of participatory and deliberative democracy. The third sector could look more systematically to use tools such as participatory budgeting or the new European citizens' initiative mentioned above. All protagonists of social innovation for example point to the value of citizen participation, without which even the most creative ideas fail to take root and spread.

10 Recommendations

1. The third sector must increase its visibility. In this paper it is argued that the issue of definition of the sector although difficult, remains essential for this purpose. The third sector can be delineated from the other two and increasingly mixed sources of funding and legal structures point towards having a Meta, inclusive definition.
2. Up-dated comparative surveys showing the size, characteristics and contribution the sector makes to employment, GDP and social capital are also needed for this purpose. They should be both European-wide and international, requiring proper resources.
3. Lead organisations and academics should consider the case for a broad definition of the third sector to include the social economy, non-profit civil society and concepts such as social innovation.
4. Governments and local authorities should be challenged and held to account for cuts to the third sector, at a time when there is increasing demand for its services.
5. Structures for dialogue between the sector and public authorities for participating in building policy, shattered or sidelined by the crisis, must be reinvented.
6. A lesson from the crisis is to go for a more mixed funding approach to reduce the dependence on the public sector and connect more to the market and households.
7. Common structures for support need to be created on a sectoral or territorial basis to allow small organisations to survive, but which must also be considered alongside mergers.
8. To an increasing extent third sector organisers will need to demonstrate value for money and results, which will make it necessary to grasp the nettle of putting appropriate evaluation techniques in place. There is a need for more research into appropriate techniques not just to measure

the impact of individual organisations, but more urgently of the sector as a whole.

9. The crisis has had very different impacts on different organisations, sectors and countries. Nevertheless the levers of power and objectives in economic policy making are increasingly subject to European coordination and standards. Therefore, the further Europeanisation of the third sector is essential, not least to increase its influence at home.
10. Finally, whilst the contribution of the third sector to developing citizen participation and democratic ownership has not been developed in this article, it needs to be expressed more powerfully. Both the social economy and civil society share such values and that is why they belong together.

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