



# KEY ELEMENTS FOR THINKING ABOUT THE CULTURAL THIRD SECTOR IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK  
AND APPROACH TO THE FIELD

**Executive Summary**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the first time the Observatory has devoted a specific study to the third sector, although it has been approached tangentially in both qualitative (proximity, cultural rights or social return) and quantitative studies. The aim of this study is to contribute the conceptual and methodological basis necessary for the study of the cultural third sector in the Basque Country.

In general terms, the **third sector** is a blurred and rich space, in which many labels fit depending on where the emphasis is placed. Synthetically, two approaches to the phenomenon can be identified:

- European perspective, linked to the concept of Social Economy, which places the emphasis on the democratic dimension of organisations. The third sector is an alternative between the sector responding to capitalist logic and the public sector.
- Anglo-Saxon perspective, linked to the non-profit sector, which starts out from the idea of not distributing profits and the importance of volunteering. The third sector is the area located between the marketplace and the state.

Meanwhile, there are two ways of understanding the absence of the profit motive:

- In the final sense, as far as the aim of providing services to their associates or the collective dominates over the profit motive, they are considered non-profit organisations.
- With regard to the distribution of profits, when their internal rules prevent the distribution of profits among their owners or those persons responsible, they are considered non-profit organisations.

In this context, the challenge is to identify the set of common elements that characterise the third sector with regard to form and purpose. Together, they denote the importance of having features such a public and social purpose, involving citizens, volunteering and being participative, private autonomy and different legal treatment with regard to the commercial sector and the public sector.



The concurrence of these five criteria is understood to be sufficient and necessary to characterise an agent as belonging to the third sector.

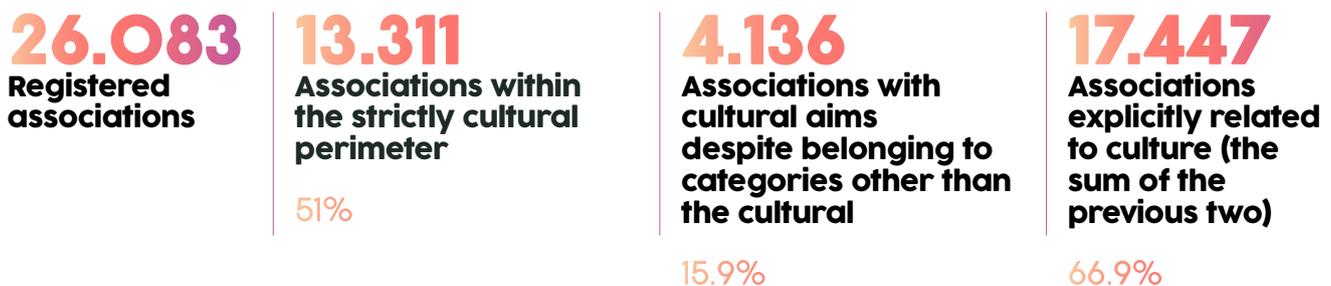
The reality of the **cultural third sector** and its agents requires that we recognise dynamics with relevant nuances. Just as there is a tendency to identify the third sector with the social third sector, when we refer to the cultural third sector, we think of two large fields of intervention: on the one hand, that of amateur practice and popular culture, with deep roots and tradition in our environment in certain artistic and heritage manifestations and, on the other hand, on the professional part of the sector formalised as the third sector, whose weight in the cultural fabric is also significant. However, a more detailed look allows us to identify cultural third sector organisations in all the functions of the value chain, in all sectors, of all sizes and with all types of vision, from the traditional to the avant-garde, from the alternative to the institutionalised, from historical organisations to others created recently which explore new forms of public intervention.



The revision of the typological diversity of the cultural third sector hides a continuum between a collaborative or instrumental role (from the viewpoint of satisfaction of cultural services and needs) and a critical and transformational role (from the point of view of empowerment and social demands). Given the amalgamation of existing organisations, an outline combining two elements of analysis is put forward to identify the characteristics belonging to the cultural third sector:

- Field of activity: understood as the sector in which they have an influence, to different degrees of specialisation and openness, and the function of the value chain they cover.
- Level of formalisation: from the informal to the structured, with diverse legal formulas and degrees of organisation.

With regard to **data**, a critical review is carried out of the available measuring tools and an approach to the field is made from that starting point. This involves an analysis of the Registro General de Asociaciones del País Vasco [General Registry of Associations of the Basque Country], the results of which are synthesized below:



The analysis of the third professional sector in the cultural offer of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (CAE), taking as a basis the data provided by the Statistics of Arts and Cultural Industries of the Basque Observatory of Culture, offers the following results:



The following conclusion can be reached from the quantitative analysis carried out: there are data about the cultural third sector, but they are structured in such a way that they do not allow it to be characterised or sufficiently known.

After the data, the **diagnosis** is undertaken. This focusses on the weight and presence of the third sector in cultural policies. The cultural third sector organisations are central actors in the development of cultural policies. They have their own logic of intervention and play a key role in proximity policies, in the anchoring of policies in the territory and in the creation of an environment conducive to cultural democracy. They are also present among the professional structures devoted to creation, production and exhibition.

All levels of administration carry out policies linked to the third sector, albeit with different emphases. Given that the cultural third sector is the result of the sum of diverse layers of different realities, the most significant problems with regard to cultural policies are analysed.

- With regard to professional organisations in live culture and, especially, performing arts, their relevance is not strictly related to their quantitative weight, but rather a significant number of the most emblematic agents adopt associative formulas.
- The so-called base culture, whose driving force function of cultural practice in the space between creation and consumption is the great space of the cultural third sector. In accordance with the Survey of Cultural Participation in the CAE of the Basque Observatory of Culture, 15.6% of the population of fifteen years old and above actively participates in cultural associations. This means that in 2018 the cultural third sector was the driving force behind a collective of 289,000 people.

There are general aspects affecting the third sector which act as barriers:

- **Financial barriers.** Financing on the part of the public sector is considered insufficient.
- **Human resources and governance.** The required dedication, along with the degree of involvement and responsibility of voluntary work, makes the recruitment of new members difficult.
- **External relationships and excessive bureaucratic requirements.** Control mechanisms have increased, the bureaucratic load is high and involves greater dedication to tasks adding little value to their aims.
- The **reduced territorial scale** and the **tendency towards "small-scale" activities** causes fragility, inefficiency and dependency on public funds.
- **Technological impact** creates difficulties in some social sectors or generations.
- There is a certain degree of **tension in the relationship with the administration**, or sometimes even distrust.
- **Difficulties involving transparency** and the involvement of all members and the conflict between **social capital and individual interest**: the use of associations for one's own benefit (information, contacts).

The diagnosis would be incomplete without paying attention to the emerging phenomena. On the one hand, informal organisations, social networks and agents linked to the alternative and emerging practices; and, on the other hand, a new group of agents working on cross-sectional projects, generating new forms of social innovation, many of them with cultural roots or bases and which, from the point of view of characteristics, can be placed in the so-called fourth sector.

Lastly, there is a chapter containing **final reflections** raised by the analysis carried out. On the one hand, its impact and link to general interest aims. These aspects are the very ones that make the third sector a relevant agent in social progress and the development of public policies, aspects which provide the rationale for the study, support and collaboration with the sector.

In fact, attention to the potential effects of the cultural third sector is both descriptive (what contribution it makes) and evaluative or regulatory (to be considered part of the cultural third sector, the activity must have socially desirable effects). Among the potential effects of the cultural third sector, the following can be found:

- Social cohesion (networks and identity)
- Participation and empowerment (cultural democracy)
- Democratisation of cultural content
- Social innovation
- Defence of collective interests



In any case, the factors defining a privileged position of the third sector with regard to other agents are connected to their characteristic features:

- Proximity puts them into contact with reality, like field agents, nearby, recognisable and more accessible.
- The freedom they act from also allows them to experiment better and develop their activity away from the weight of administrative rigidity.
- The non-profit character, given that the inclination towards social return (and a lesser –or non-existent– importance of economic return) allows a closeness with greater social commitment to reality.
- As a product of the combination of the above factors, its social legitimacy is greater, facilitating the carrying out of the task.

To conclude, the report proposes future ideas taking into account that it is a very important field in the active cultural participation of the population, involving numerous associations in the territory, it is key in the cultural action of proximity and, on its professional aspect, its weight is increasing.

The great themes in current general policies at global and local scale are sustained on models where communities play a central role. Now is the time to propose a coordinated action aimed at the cultural third sector in cultural policies.



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