

Expanded abstract

The relationship between the Third Sector of Social Action and the public administrations. A regional comparison

In parallel to the development and consolidation of the welfare state in Spain since the 1980s, the Third Sector of Social Action (hereinafter, TSSA) has emerged as a dependent collaborator of social policies, adopting the role of service provider under a regulatory and funding framework conducive to its integration into a mixed welfare system. This has been articulated on the basis of a decentralised system, in which the Autonomous Communities (hereinafter, ACs) are responsible for the provision of education, health and social services. The decentralisation of the welfare state in Spain has had a certain impact on the intensity of protection in the different territories, as well as on the role that the TSSA has played both in the provision of welfare at the local and regional levels and in terms of territorial rebalancing. This reality has led some authors to suggest the hypothesis that the Third Sector, like the welfare state, has been configured relatively independently in each AC.

In the framework of the Comparative Perspective on the Third Sector of Social Action in the Autonomous Communities (PECOTSAS) project, funded by the State Research Plan of the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (ref CSO2017-85486-P), we have analysed whether there are differential factors in the development of the TSSA within each region. In this article, we examine the relationships between the TSSA and the regional administrations along three dimensions: its presence in the legislation on social services, the predominant type of financial relationship for the provision of services and the channels established for the participation of the TSSA in public affairs.

To this end, a qualitative **methodology** was used based on 48 interviews and 14 focus groups with experts, professionals, volunteers and other relevant actors of the TSSA and of the administration in the ACs of Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Catalonia, Community of Madrid, Community of Valencia, Basque Country and Region of Murcia. In addition, an analysis of the regulations on social services in the aforementioned ACs was carried out.

The **objective** is to analyse the factors that influence the forms of relationship established between the TSSA and the administration and to identify possible differences between the ACs under analysis, in the indicated dimensions.

First, the **regulatory impact on the TSSA** takes into consideration four fundamental axes. Two primary axes correspond to the regulations governing social services and the specific regulation of the TSSA. Two secondary axes, which correspond to the regulatory development in two particular areas: social covenants (and by extension, the forms of financing) and the dialogue roundtables (and by extension, the forms of participation of the TSSA in institutional

bodies). The analysis shows that regulatory advances in some ACs tend to be progressively incorporated in others, at the request of the TSSA itself or through the transfer of innovative practices from some administrations to others, in addition to being driven by state-wide legislation and, in the first instance, by European legislation, which sets a trend (social covenants, public procurement) that is being incorporated gradually and at different paces by all the ACs.

With regard to the **forms of financial collaboration** for the provision of social services, we have analysed three issues: the predominant forms of cooperation, the role of for-profit provision and the influence of the decentralisation of the 0.7% of personal income tax subsidies. In terms of the predominant forms of financial collaboration, the ACs are moving towards social covenants for the management of centres and services, although subsidies continue to predominate, especially to finance programmes. The trend suggests that the social covenant will gradually relegate subsidies as the main form of financing, since the subsidy model is not considered adequate to finance essential benefits of subjective right such as those managed by the TSSA, but at the same time public procurement, in which the commercial sector is hegemonic because the TSSA cannot compete with it on the basis of pricing, will progressively assume greater prominence. The weight of private for-profit provision compared to the TSSA in the provision of services depends to a large extent on the type of services and the group to which they are provided (the elderly, dependency or children being the preferred ones).

Thus, the penetration of the for-profit sector in one area or another depends on its profit expectations. Whether the for-profit sector is more or less established in the ACs depends on the strength of the TSSA in the region, its organisation into second- or third-level entities, the historical roots of collaboration with the administration and the political orientation of the regional governments, although the tendency is for the presence of for-profit companies to grow in all the ACs, under a rationale of commercialisation. On the other hand, the decentralisation of the management of the 0.7% personal income tax subsidies reverses the purpose of territorial structuring that these subsidies had in the past, making coordination and management of second-level entities difficult on the basis of economies of scale, and precluding the development of inter-territorial projects of wide-ranging scope. This decentralisation is perceived more positively in the peripheral communities (Valencia, Andalusia, Catalonia), Murcia and Castile and Leon. At the regional level, large organisations and federations have been affected by this change, losing weight in the receipt of funds to small and first-level entities, which were previously ineligible under the previous system, generating greater competition for resources, but also an increase in the workload (for entities that previously received funding via federations, but did not manage the process). In the case of the regional administrations, the change can be interpreted as positive in that it provides funds with a greater degree of proximity and enables administrations to adapt funding to their technical or political priorities (but also to strengthen clientelist networks). In any case, the continuity underlying its implementation has not lived up to expectations, as it has not distanced itself so far from previous forms of financing as to generate significant transformations in the regional TSSA.

With regard to the **participation of the TSSA in public affairs**, factors such as the existence or not of dialogue roundtables or other channels for participation; their constitution process,

i.e. whether it was at the initiative of the administration or the TSSA; the geographical distribution of the sector, e.g. with regard to the centre-periphery dialectic; the internal cohesion of the sector and its organisation around representative platforms; the existence of second-level organisations (federations); the relevance and nature of informal channels (social capital); as well as the presence of entrenched social capital (social capital); and the entrenchment of an associative culture in the ACs. In any event, the tendency is for the ACs to institutionalise the participation of the TSSA in public affairs by creating dialogue roundtables or equivalent bodies, although they do so at different rates and with different characteristics, which is fundamentally influenced by the strength of the TSSA in that region and its capacity to organise around platforms that provide them with a single voice.

In **conclusion**, the TSSA and the public administrations are developing a necessary but economically dependent form of cooperation. In all the ACs, there is a growing penetration of the market logic in the provision of social services, albeit at different rates and intensities in each of them. This commodifying rationality is not only confined to service procurement (with pricing taking precedence over quality or social clauses) but, as an objectifiable criterion for the allocation of funds or resources, it is also being transferred to covenants and subsidies, under market-based competitive logics that are gradually forcing TSSA entities to adopt management-based organisational forms that may well distort their very identity. In this tension underlying the TSSA-public administrations-market trinomial, the TSSA is struggling to define its own space in the field of social services, with legislation (as a performance-oriented instrument) being one of the key frameworks in which this struggle for formal recognition of its preferential role as a service provider takes place. This occurs either by providing it with economic stability and security, through formulas such as covenants; or by providing it with legitimacy as a valid interlocutor with the administration, through the dialogue roundtables, which essentially serve to defend its interests, in the manner of a Third Sector employers' association. In this transformation, the TSSA runs the risk of losing part of its identity, whether at the technical level, by subordinating itself to the intervention model of the public network; at the relational level, through the loss of the linkages that had sustained many entities until then; or at the political level, by subordinating its advocacy or defence of the groups it represents to the iron chains of its financial dependence.