

Expanded abstract

The Third Sector of Social Action in the Autonomous Communities: Third Sector patterns or territorial singularities?

The development of the Third Sector of Social Action (TSSA) has responded to a wide range of economic, social and socio-historical conditioning factors which are reflected in theoretical and empirical studies, the results of which coincide: TSSA organisations have experienced very significant growth and have gone from occupying a residual institutional position in the Spanish welfare system to one of greater centrality. This institutional positioning and the very growth of the TSSA have taken place in a system of government (Autonomous Communities) which has introduced greater diversity in decentralised welfare systems in the fields of health, education, social services and, more recently, long-term care. The decentralisation of the welfare state in Spain has had a certain impact on the intensity of protection in the different territories, which has opened the way for the TSSA to become a rebalancing actor in the face of territorial inequality.

The working hypothesis is that the Spanish welfare state has been configured in parallel to the development of the “State of the Autonomies”, allowing the Third Sector to develop in a relatively differentiated manner in each Autonomous Community. In order to test this hypothesis, the aim of this article is to analyse the institutional and socio-economic setting of the TSSA in different Spanish regions. The research investigates a series of differential factors in the development of the TSSA in the Autonomous Communities in order to assess whether there are different Third Sector logics or models in the different territories under analysis.

From a methodological perspective, a review of the literature and of secondary sources has been carried out to analyse the recent evolution of the Spanish Third Sector, the European and regional Third Sector models and the trends of change (reflected in the introduction and second section). In order to analyse the institutional and social fit of the TSSA in the Spanish “State of the Autonomies” (third section), primary sources have been used; in particular, 48 in-depth interviews and 14 focus groups conducted among experts, officials of regional public administrations, managers and representatives of the organisations of the Third Sector in seven significant Autonomous Communities (Andalusia, Castile and Leon, Catalonia, Community of Madrid, Community of Valencia, Basque Country and Region of Murcia) between the months of April and September 2019 and in April-May 2021. This research is part of the PECOTSAS project (Comparative Perspective on the Third Sector of Social Action) carried out between 2018 and 2021 and funded by the 2017 Call for RDI Excellence Projects of the Ministry of Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (RFA: CSO2017-85486-P).

We highlight the following results from the literature review:

1. The significant deployment of both the TSSA in Spain (1.4% of GDP in 2018), and of the whole of the Third Sector in the EU (13% of the total European workforce in 2014) with a very significant weight of the human resources being generated in non-profit entities (59% of the whole of the Third Sector), of the provision of services (72%) and of self-financed income (54%). Within this general pattern of the European Third Sector, however, there are differences between regions representative of the different European welfare state regimes which have been attributed to different approaches. The latter adequately explain some differences but not others, such as the response of the Third Sector to state shortcomings in meeting the heterogeneity of demand, the differences between countries in terms of values, traditions, attitudes and cultural feelings, or the power relations between labour movements and their political extensions in different countries during their periods of industrialisation and modernisation (Social Origins Theory).
2. The exploratory and tentative character of analyses of European Third Sector models (Anglo-Saxon or liberal, continental, Nordic or social democratic, statist and Mediterranean), although in no welfare regime is there a closed model, but rather generic forms of Third Sector. At the regional level, there is a lack of comparative research on possible regional Third Sector models in Spain. Most of these studies on the Third Sector have a more comprehensive, all-encompassing and sectoral character and do not delve into the comparative level between the Autonomous Communities.

The main weakness of these European models is that they tend to be established on the basis of similarities in the development of the Third Sector within different welfare state regimes, which shows that even to this day, social research on the Third Sector does not carry the weight and importance accorded to studies on the welfare state, of which it tends to be an analytical appendix. This is compounded by the existence of increasingly complex and global processes in the European and national contexts, the result of which is imitation and convergence in a series of common trends in the Third Sectors of the different countries, described in the article and modulated by the specificity of each country's national path, which are blurring the existence of possible Third Sector models.

In short, after reviewing the literature, it has been found that comparative regional studies such as the one presented here are scarce in the different countries, which is what confers on this study its main added value and originality.

With regard to the question of whether there is a state-wide model or differentiated regional TSSA models in Spain, we can conclude the following on the basis of the qualitative study:

1. There is a "common style of action" in the TSSA as a whole, but not as a single actor acting with a single logic. This common style of action would be characterised by three features: institutional strengthening of social dialogue, led by the large organisations and platforms; reinforcement of joint work through the creation of networks and internal forms of collaboration; and openness to collaboration with other social and economic actors to ensure sustainability. However, despite this common style, it is not possible

to speak of a TSSA model given the internal diversity of the sector and of each sectoral sphere as well as the constant tension in the discourses on the development of the TSSA in Spain between the centripetal forces that lead it towards a common universalist logic (defence of rights, promotion of social participation, fight against social exclusion) and the centrifugal forces that lead it towards a logic of differentiation (functional adaptation to the Autonomous Communities, adjustment of action to the territory and monitoring of its own cultural and historical path).

2. There are territorial singularities rather than specific models of regional Third Sectors that are rooted in their social history and the way they relate to the welfare state. Rather than models, we should speak of regional and territorial traditions. Territorial specificities and styles are of varying degrees and at the same time share common features, albeit unevenly, throughout the territory of the Spanish state. These common features at the regional level would be the following: a) the integration of the TSSA within mixed systems of social services; b) the development of social capital or reinforcement of internal and external social cohesion as the overarching objective among TSSA organisations; c) the extension of TSSA regulation accompanied by its stable recognition by the public sector in third sector laws, social services laws or civil dialogue roundtables; and d) the functional accommodation of the TSSA to the regional and territorial governments (provinces and municipalities) in the management of social services and social services programmes. This accommodation has reinforced a functional differentiation of the sector, but not a structural one. The social purpose sector has contributed in its own way to the development of social rights in Spain, but to achieve this objective it has had to functionally adapt to the public policies on which it partly depends in terms of regulation and funding. On the other hand, such accommodation has also required an adaptation of the public administrations to the territorial and organisational characteristics of the TSSA. We are faced with an unequal complementarity, especially in the case of small organisations, and relatively symmetrical collaboration in the case of large entities and platforms.
3. It is necessary to achieve the sustainability of social entities as a way of reconciling the sector's mission with its territorial diversity, along four complementary axes: a) economic-financial sustainability: based on the plurality of relatively stable sources of funding and the use of subsidies, as a capacity-building tool, and agreements and conventions to provide greater stability; b) organisational sustainability, encouraging networking, joint contracting of activities and the creation of ad hoc consortia to bid for tenders; c) social sustainability, i.e. the capacity of the TSSA to give space to citizens, both to the people affected and to the population in general; and d) institutional sustainability: the capacity to create internal social cohesion and improve the capacity for dialogue with other social actors and, if possible, stable alliances with public authorities across the TSSA as a whole.