

Expanded abstract

The relationship between the public administration and the third sector in Gipuzkoa under debate: one or several models in view of the heterogeneity of the sector?

The Third Sector has acquired in recent decades a central role in European welfare schemes, contributing to respond to emerging social needs (Jessen, 2019). Despite this general trend, it is possible to identify significant differences in the extent and roles assumed by private TS across the continent (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2018). Similarly, although European welfare states have converged towards decentralized models and multilevel management of public social policies, regional welfare models show great variability in their institutional framework (Barberis et al., 2017). The conjunction of both factors enables different models of relationship between the public administration and the TS. Thus, it is also clear from previous studies that, already at the state level, notable differences have been identified in the capacity of the sector in question to influence the development of the inclusive agenda (Pérez Eransus & Martínez Virto, 2020), as well as the existence of differentiated governance models of inclusion policies even within the territories themselves, as is the case of the Basque Autonomous Community (Arrieta Frutos, 2019).

The characteristics and role assumed by the different actors, on the one hand, as well as the institutional structure, on the other, account for the substantive and operational dimensions of the relationship between the public administration and the TS. However, their analysis provides little information on the dynamic nature of the spaces for interinstitutional dialogue and cooperation, and on their possible future trends. A third differentiating factor is the discourse held by the different social actors, in which there is room for different expectations and horizons as to what the ideal relationship model should be, as well as its characteristics and instruments. For some time now, this debate has also been fueled by the need to adapt collective responses to the social gap generated by the recent crises.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that the future development of relationship models between the public administration and the TS is seriously influenced by the dialogue and contrast of the interests and priorities of both. Specifically, it is a matter of analyzing the discourses and demands between the sector based on the premise that the preferences and positions on how the interrelation between both parties should be depend on the perception of the main sources of tensions and conflicts.

To achieve this, a qualitative case study was carried out in which 34 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants from both the TS of Gipuzkoa and the public administration, with special interest in identifying the key factors on which public-private relations are based in the territory and what they should be in the future. The implementation of this technique took place between November 2019 and February 2020. In order to identify the main points of interest and conflict in the public-private relationship, an in-depth review of international theory in this regard was carried out. The analysis of the information obtained has followed the multi-stage approach proposed by Taylor and Bodgan (1990) with the ultimate aim of seeking to develop an in-depth understanding of the scenarios or people being studied (Salgado, 2007) and to identify the main emerging discourses, their interrelation and relevance.

The results identify, in the first place, as one of the main demands, the need to strengthen the role of the sector as a key agent in development and in the articulation of welfare policies, but also its role as an interlocutor of the population's demands from a vindictive and/or contesting perspective, which is sometimes perceived as problematic. On the other hand, to achieve greater independence and autonomy with respect to the public administration, while reducing the negative externalities of the necessary cooperation with the latter, especially in terms of oversight and bureaucracy, since it is understood that this undermines the objective of building more horizontal relations based on mutual trust. Thirdly, there is a demand to build a public-private relationship model that allows the TS to develop its identity as a social and professional sector, that is, to promote attention to territorial problems from a logic of rights and technical knowledge. Finally, it is advocated to move towards public-private collaboration logics that do not harm the cohesion of the TS and that favor a more effective and inclusive networking.

Many of the specific proposals of the key informants are concomitant with the objectives and purposes of the governance reforms that have been promoted in the European context to improve care for people in situations of social exclusion (Berkel et al., 2011), so the text discusses to what extent this project can accommodate the aspirations of the TS, and whether this would allow reconciling the sector's own tensions and reducing the most conflictive aspects of its relationship with the public administration. If so, this would open a window of opportunity for future progress towards a consensual and cohesive model of territorial welfare and inclusion. It is therefore concluded that progress in understanding the discourses and demands of the TS is an essential element for channeling dialogue between the administration and social entities, and for building solid and stable relationship models, an issue that still needs to be resolved in many other territories at the national and international level.