



TSI Press Release No 3:

New Consensus Definition of the Third Sector

Third Sector Impact (TSI), a European research project that set out to address conceptual ambiguities in the field of third sector research and policy, has reached an important goal: the first formulation of a consensus definition of the third sector in Europe that embraces associations, foundations, volunteer work and significant parts of the social economy.

The first contribution of the Third Sector Impact (TSI) project is a “consensus definition” published under the title [“The Third Sector in Europe: Towards a Consensus Conceptualization”](#). This working paper provides a foundation for documenting the third sector’s collective contributions and for designing policies that take greater advantage of the third sector’s unique strengths. “This new conceptualization will give policy-makers and citizens generally the first full appreciation of the full range of nongovernmental and non-commercial organizations and voluntary activities through which Europe’s citizens contribute to the quality of European life, and a sounder basis for measuring the impact that results,” notes [Lester M. Salamon](#) one of the main authors. In a complementary [TSI policy brief](#), Salamon also points out that “jurisdictional squabbles, abstract definitional disputes, diverse legal regimes, and arcane statistical procedures have kept Europe’s rich associational life and the contribution it makes to European prosperity hidden in plain sight.” The lack of a definition that draws attention to their commonalities is “robbing Europe of a coherent overview of the third sector’s scope and impact and weakening the sector’s overall policy voice.”

The project’s consensus conceptualization of the third sector in Europe was formulated through a bottom-up approach that engaged researchers and third sector stakeholders from eight European countries and a wide range of disciplines. According to the conceptualization that emerged from this process, *the third sector consists of private associations and foundations; non-commercial cooperatives, mutuals, and social enterprises; and individual activities undertaken without pay or compulsion primarily to benefit society or persons outside of one’s household or next of kin.*

This consensus definition was designed so that it can be institutionalized in official national statistical systems, thus making it possible to generate meaningful and objective empirical measurement of the European third sector. Jacques Defourny, Director of the Centre for Social Economy at HEC-University of Liege, a pioneer in the fields of social enterprise and the conceptual analysis of the third sector in Europe, endorsed TSI’s definition effort as constituting “genuine progress which takes into account existing work in the field and above all the diversity of situations in Europe.”

Third sector networks operating at EU level have long been [asking for a clear conceptualization of the third sector in Europe](#) that brings key elements of social economy and civil society together in order to strengthen the recognition of the sector by EU policy-makers. Following a distinctive stakeholder engagement process, TSI is pleased to propose a definition that lives up to the fundamental criteria set at the outset of the project.

TSI is financed under the European Union's Seventh Research Framework Program (FP7). For more details about the project refer to the TSI Website www.thirdsectorimpact.eu. If you wish to interview a TSI consortium member contact Jennifer.Eschweiler@emes.net.

