Third Sector and volunteering Analysis

Overview in the European Union

InterNational Network

VolunteerIN - Promoting volunteer and solidarity opportunities for youth though International Network

Project n. 101227118

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and objectives

This report is intended to provide an analysis of the local third sector in the countries belonging to the International Network, with particular attention to the institutional, social and economic conditions shaping the civil society ecosystems. The analysis focuses on the structures, historical trajectories and operational patterns of third sector entities, with a specific emphasis on the mechanisms enabling or limiting young people with fewer opportunities to participate in volunteering and solidarity actions.

The relevance of this report lies in the identification of unique challenges and opportunities specific for each location, which allows the creation of tailored tactics for each context. It seeks therefore to comprehensively understand the third sector structures and characteristics developed in each territory examining how these have evolved and how they interact with local governance, social needs and volunteering cultures.

As mentioned above, this analysis gives an overview of the current situation in the countries that form part of the "International Network" where Somos Europa is in charge of the overall coordination of the network and the project. It is funded by the European Commission through the Erasmus+ programme, as a centralised action.

The main objective of this report is to identify and analyse the local characteristics of third sector entities in the countries included in the analysis, with a special focus on the volunteering and solidarity action dynamics within NGOs, associations, small and medium size local entities. It also highlights the role of these organisations in promoting youth engagement, strengthening social cohesion, and contributing to community development, as well as the conditions that shape their capacity to act effectively within their local ecosystems.

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1.2. Scope and Methodology

The analysis covers sixteen European countries (International Europe members), each of which has been examined in depth to understand its local characteristics, structure, sections of operation, specialization levels and international presence.
The methodology employed combines the use of qualitative and quantitative data to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Data collected from official statistical data has been carried out. Data collection has relied on official statistical sources and sectoral studies to ground the quantitative dimension. In addition, a comparative approach has been used to identify similarities and differences between the countries analysed.

This process is designed to provide accurate and rigorous analysis of each third sector context, with the aim of informed decision-making for the implementation of strategies.

2. European Third Sector Overview

The analysis of the local third sector is contextualised in a complex and evolving domain, shaped by historical legacies, political transformations, and shifting governance paradigms. National policy variations and economic fluctuations have a significant impact on the way the third sector develops in each country, in addition to the lack of a consensualized definition of the third sector itself among European countries and its further differences, that led to a harsh cooperation between countries.

The research offers a comparative approach of trends and variables affecting all nations featured in the investigation, allowing for a better knowledge of each local third sector's unique dynamics. This is critical for developing policies that are linked with each territory's economic and social interests, as well as seizing on new possibilities that will benefit European youth.

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2.1 History and Evolution

The historical evolution of the European third sector is intrinsically connected from long-run transformations in welfare governance, administrative reform, and political economy from the late nineteenth century to the present. Rooted in local forms of mutual aid and religious charity, the field was shaped through nineteenth-century associations, mutual societies, cooperatives, and philanthropic foundations, which introduced modern legal capacities, democratic governance practices, and asset dedication to public purposes.

In countries such as France, the 1901 law on associations affirmed the right to organize, while the Rochdale tradition in England set standards for cooperative governance. Long before the label "third sector" became common, these actors already formed part of what many scholars called the "social economy" (Evers & Laville, 2004).

Over the twentieth century, nonprofits and community organizations became part of a 'welfare mix' in which the state, the market and civil society shared responsibilities. Nonetheless, diverse regime paths shaped the institutional settlement of the field. In continental Europe, large confessional and secular associations managed hospitals, schools and social services with public funding but kept internal autonomy. In more liberal settings, notably the United Kingdom and Ireland, a strong charitable and voluntary tradition developed next to a slimmer welfare state, which meant nonprofits often filled gaps or acted as early movers. In Southern Europe, state expansion came later and was uneven, so local organizations frequently provided proximity services where administration was weak or slow (Kendall, 2001; Evers & Laville, 2004).

In several countries, the post-war settlement formalized long-standing arrangements under the language of subsidiarity and corporatist negotiation, allowing mission-driven providers to operate privately while delivering public services under oversight (Evers & Laville, 2004). In pillarized or Bismarckian

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settings (contexts where social organisation and welfare systems are traditionally structured around strong, institutionalised groups such as unions, churches or professional associations) this produced dense networks of associations, mutuals and foundations that kept managerial autonomy yet accepted public mandates and standards, creating a stable grammar of "public funding, private provision, participatory governance" that persisted across decades (Salamon & Anheier, 1997).

The term itself was first popularized in the United States during the 1970s by Etzioni who coined the term, to describe the emerging economic and organizational form in a post industrial context, as a space governed by shared values rather than coercion or market logic (Etzioni, 1973). Offering a first normative definition for a heterogeneous set of organizations and practices rooted in voluntary action and value-driven coordination. Nonetheless the term circulated back into Europe during the 1980s and 1990s alongside older "social economy" usages, gradually becoming part of academic and policy vocabularies (Evers & Laville, 2004).

The growth of the third sector is mainly rooted in the expansion of the service economy as European countries change from industrial to post-industrial societies. Further reinforced by demographic developments, in particular the generation of baby boomers which brought capacity expansions, from child care facilities in the 1950s, schools in the 1960s, universities in the 1970s and homes for the elderly in the coming decades (Anheier, 2002).

Political and ideological changes have also played a significant role. Emerging social movements, such as the feminist, environmental and civil rights movements, broadened the sector's scope beyond relief and service to include advocacy, rights-claiming and innovation in public problem-solving.

Nonetheless, there is a deeper ideological reason for growth of the third sector: the changing role of the state itself. Following the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, and late 80s, when the term became popular in Europe, coinciding with

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broader transformations in public administration and economic policy. Governmental reaction to Keynesian fiscal stress drove the emergence of management reforms grouped under the name of 'New Public Management' (NPM). A set of economic policies which emphasized efficiency, decentralization and privatization of state corporations and holdings, leading to the outsourcing of public assets and services to private enterprises or third-party providers. This includes the various Telecoms, municipal waterworks, universities, hospitals, chambers of commerce and regional state banks (Anheier, 2002). Competitive tendering, performance measures, and quasi-markets became part of social policy, and charities adapted. This professional shift helped scale programs and enhance service continuity, but it also resulted in a more transactional relationship with the state and pressure to match missions with what public contracts were designed to purchase (Evers & Laville, 2004).

This shift was reinforced by the neoliberal application of the 'Washington Consensus', Characterised by market-based solutions and state intervention reduction, thus privatization and deregulation, it formalized the shift from excessive reliance on government to reliance on the market and individual responsibility. (Alexander, C., 2010). Although originated in the global South through 'Structural Adjustment programs', they were adopted in the global North, particularly in the United Kingdom and other liberal economies.

At this point, a qualitative change took place. With the retraction of the state in many regions of the world, together with the displacement of much industry to the global South, unemployment for manual labour rose. Manual labor unemployment increased as a result of the withdrawal of the state in many parts of the world and the relocation of many industries to the global South. The gender and class makeup of the voluntary sector changed in tandem with the expansion of service and cultural sectors in substitution of smoke-stack industry. What had historically been a field dominated by middle-class women started to see an increase in male participation. Concurrently, the global

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North's aging population led to an increase in the need for support services (Alexander, C., 2010).

In this climate, third sector organizations began to play a more prominent role in service delivery, advocacy, and community development since the implementation of those economic initiatives led to increased levels of social inequality, labor precarity and poverty. Therefore, it can be stated that the emergence of the third sector is linked to an increasing distrust for market solutions and the appearance of new social demands on public services, which are often considered as inefficient (European Job Mobility Partnership, 2010).

In Western Europe, 'social economy' long predated the diffusion of 'third sector,' and both terms travelled together in the 1990s; the first highlights cooperative and mutualist lineages, the second the wider associative universe anchored in voluntary action (Evers & Laville, 2004)An economic, political and social space opened for the third sector, where besides traditional non-profit voluntary organizations, new forms of work and organisations arose. 'Examples are the new mutualism in Britain (Yeo, 2001), the social co-operatives in Italy (Barbetta, 1997), the search for new legal ownership structures to combine charitable and for-profit activities, and individual attempts to combine paid and unpaid work (Social Investment Task Force, 2000)' (Anheier, 2002).

Institutional recognition within the third sector gained weight with the European Commission efforts to encourage structured dialogue with organized civil society. The 1989 Delors Commission, set to create a monetary union, followed by the 2001 White Paper on European Governance, where civil society was identified as "the key mechanism for bringing together the EU and its citizens" (European Commission, 2001), normalizing civil society participation in policy making by codifying consultation, transparency and partnership as routine practices, opening channels for third sector participation that influenced domestic practice over time.

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From the 1990s onward, EU programmes also acted as cross-border carriers of organizational practice, spreading work-integration methods, user-involvement routines and quality frameworks that local coalitions could adapt to their legal and labour-market contexts (Eurofound, 2019). The same period saw the steady professionalization of volunteering and governance (role descriptions, training, safeguarding, stronger boards and audit trails) so proximity and participation could coexist with comparability and accountability in day-to-day provision (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2013).
At that time, several terminologies to describe the entities within the sector proliferate across Europe, reflecting legal pluralism, including 'Private nonprofit institutions serving households', 'NGOs', 'non-profit sector', 'non-profit associations' and 'voluntary organisations' and 'voluntary organizations and foundations for the third sector' (Alexander, C. 2010). In Europe, a consensus gradually developed that the third sector is better understood as an open, hybrid relational space between the state and the market rather than as a distinct island with rigid limits.

A parallel thread was statistical and legal codification. The spread of nonprofit satellite accounts and harmonized definitions clarified what counted as a third-sector unit and how to value volunteer time, making cross-national comparison and policy dialogue more precise (European Commission, 2017). That codification also consolidated the European habit of treating the third sector as a hybrid, relational space rather than a narrow legal family, which helps explain the persistence of mixed organizational forms across countries (Evers & Laville, 2004).

Post-1989 transitions in Central and Eastern Europe added distinct challenges, with rapid "NGOization" often supported by international donors unfolding alongside fragile institutions and evolving regulations (Salamon & Anheier, 1996). Building managerial competence, social legitimacy and financial resilience became central, with the strategic task of rooting organizations in communities while preserving enough independence from political and economic elites to act as credible intermediaries and co-producers of public value (Evers & Laville, 2004). Where this balance was achieved, organizations

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helped stabilize new welfare arrangements; where not, they risked remaining project-dependent and externally steered. Where European programmes and national umbrellas supplied peer learning and templates for governance and quality assurance, organizational consolidation accelerated (Salamon & Anheier, 1996).

After the 2008–2009 financial crisis social needs rose while public budgets contracted in several member states. Organizations diversified income through membership fees, sales of services and small commercial activities, and experimented with instruments linked to 'impact' finance and payment-by-results contracts, often within cross-sector partnerships; (Phillips & Hebb, 2010). EU rules on procurement and compensation for services of general economic interest clarified room for mission-led providers, even as incorporation, supervision and taxation remained largely national responsibilities, reinforcing a system in which nonprofit delivery was embedded in public value chains and exposed to managerial incentives designed elsewhere (European Commission, 2001; Kendall, 2001).

Across these shifts, a stable pattern emerges: public mandates and financing on one side; private, mission-oriented provision on the other; and participatory routines that embed user and worker voice at the organizational level. This is the settlement that underpins today's two-layer structure, locally rooted associations and medium-sized groups working alongside a thinner stratum of professional providers in complex services (Evers & Laville, 2004).

Over the last decade, digital tools reshaped practice as crowdfunding, online campaigns and data analytics lowered barriers to entry and broadened reach, while creating dependencies on platforms and raising concerns about privacy and algorithmic visibility (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). At the same time, communities reinvested in local infrastructures of solidarity (food banks, neighborhood care networks, repair and reuse initiatives) whose importance became visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and recent humanitarian emergencies, illustrating how institutionalized partnerships and grassroots mutualism continue to co-evolve (Phillips & Hebb, 2010).

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2.2 Theoretical framework

The definition of the third sector is not a fixed term, it evolves across countries and over time, shaped by legal traditions, welfare regimes, and academic discourse. As Evers and Laville (2004) note, 'the third sector is not a homogeneous entity but a pluralistic field embedded in different societal contexts.' Its layout requires holding together two main theoretical complementary approaches that recur across European literature: a focus on what the sector is in institutional terms and a focus on what the sector does as an ongoing societal process.

The institutional approach delineated the third sector as a set of organizations with specific structural features that distinguish them from state bodies and for-profit firms. Core attributes include private legal personality, a primary purpose oriented to public benefit, limits on the distribution of profits or surpluses, and meaningful channels for voluntary action and participation.
This view is reflected in the widely accepted definition with institutional and individual components proposed by the Third Sector Impact Project (TSI): 'Consisting of private associations and foundations, non-commercial cooperatives, mutuals, social enterprises and individual activities undertaken without pay or compulsion primarily to benefit society or persons outside of one's household next of kin.' (TSI, Policy Brief No. 1, 2015)

In contrast, the Societal Process approach reframes the sector less as a bounded set of entities and more as a civic arena where people assemble to articulate shared problems, generate solutions and press claims on power. In this view, what counts is the contribution to democratic participation, social learning and innovation, rather than a fixed legal form. As a result, the industry seems to be a living area that fluctuates in terms of policy opportunity frameworks, collective action repertoires, and associational energy (Evers & Laville, 2004).

This distinction is further illustrated by the American and European theory typologies, stating why both lenses are needed:

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In the dominant American discourse (which term was coined by Etzioni in 1973), the third sector is often presented as a distinct domain that sits alongside state, market and household, its unity arose in response to the failure of both state and market to provide for welfare needs, thus derived from the non-distribution constraint and a strong emphasis on private initiative and autonomy (Etzioni, 1973, as cited by Alexander, C., 2010). Characterized by voluntary action and normative commitment, this model tends to emphasize autonomy and segmentation.

If anything is not primarily governed by market logic or a bureaucratic chain of command, it must fall within the third sector. Therefore, according to Ridley-Duff and Seanor (2008), a national economy is divided into three sectors: public, private, and third sector, which includes voluntary organizations pursuing social or communal aims.

This viewpoint is not exclusive to the United States, although being firmly linked to researchers at The Johns Hopkins University (JHU) in Baltimore, Maryland (Salamon and Anheier 1997, as cited by Corry, 2001). Many current operational definitions adhere to this basic pattern. For the British government, for example, 'The term is used to distinguish such organisations from the other two sectors of the economy: the public sector ('government') and the private sector ('businesses')' (NAO 2009, as cited by Corry, 2001). This segmented mapping has clarified baseline differences with government agencies and firms, yet it can obscure the dense, routine entanglements among providers in actual welfare systems (Etzioni, 1973).

In European literature, by contrast, the definition does not envisage separate sectors nor the third sector as a corrective add-on to the blind spots of a market economy (Corry, 2001). The third sector is approached as an 'intermediate dimension' within plural governance, or a hybrid form or various kinds of organizations such as firms, bureaucracies and kinship associations, as part of the expansion of modern democratic states, where a range of public spheres, or civil society, plays an active role (Alexander, C., 2010; Corry, 2001).

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As stated by Evers & Laville (2004), the third sector is neither a residual add-on nor a sealed island, but a relational space where public, private and civic logics coexist, cooperate and sometimes conflict in the production of social goods and rights. It is considered essential actors in welfare provision, rights advocacy, and participatory democracy (Alexander, C., 2010).

From the start, the relationship with public institutions was vital, whether third organisations sought co-operation with the state or an alternative base for political action. This intermediate reading places equal weight on co-production and advocacy and treats hybridity as a constitutive feature rather than an anomaly (Evers & Laville, 2004).

Hybridity is the central theoretical consequence of the European stance. Organizations combine associative roots, public mandates and market-facing practices to varying degrees, depending on field, regime and history. Therefore, the growth of social enterprise and mission-locked cooperatives since the 1990s makes this hybridity explicit: legal forms and governance clauses operationalize social aims through restrictions on profit distribution, asset locks or multi-stakeholder boards, while earned income and contracts align with sustainability and scale (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010).

From a theory-building perspective, hybridity calls for institutional analyses attentive to multiple logics and to the pressures of isomorphism that may pull organizations toward prevailing market or bureaucratic templates when procurement rules, audit regimes or funding fashions become dominant (Alexander, C., 2010). This leads to the inclusion of cooperative companies and the 'people's economy', which prioritize social purpose over profit-seeking, organizations with significant ties to welfare states are also featured. The British government's Office of the Third Sector defines it as non-governmental organizations that prioritize social, environmental, or cultural goals and reinvest surpluses (NAO 2009). This includes voluntary and community organizations, charities, social enterprises, cooperatives, and mutuals. According to European scholars, third-sector organizations are those founded by citizens with the goal of benefiting the community, and where capital investors' financial interests are limited (Defourny and Nyssens 2006, as cited by Cory, 2001).

These two main definitional approaches are the most common and accepted views concerning the type of organizations within the third sector, nonetheless, following those views, the third sector seems like a residual category, seen as a parallel to the first and second sector but not seen as a their equal, behind in terms of primacy, since nongovernmental organizations fill a service gap for welfare states; the ‘social economy’ covers for failings in the market economy (Corry, 2010).

The differences between what are now referred to as third sector activity, is illustrated in 19th-century France and England. In the former, charity and philanthropy were ethically acceptable goals, with the wealthier members of society making private contributions to aid the underprivileged. The autonomous establishment of such organizations to help a specific class of beneficiaries was encouraged by the statutory framework. Following the Revolution, a focus on social solidarity in France resulted in the creation of workers' cooperatives and mutual aid organizations. The EU's classification of the third sector as cooperatives, mutuals, associations, and foundations has been influenced by the French model. Many mutual groups, including trade unions, gained momentum or were more deeply incorporated into the market economy during the 20th century (Alexander, C., 2010).

Evers and Laville (2004), propose a new combination classification including state, market, and third-sector companies. Scandinavian universalism prioritizes the state's redistributive function, whereas the third sector primarily advocates for social concerns such as childcare. In liberal regimes like Britain, public help is offered to the most socially underprivileged population, augmented by third-party providers. Italy, Spain, and Portugal prioritize governmental monetary transfers over services, yet access may be limited by clientelist bureaucracies. Corporatist regimes in Germany, Austria, France, and Belgium rely on organizations to provide public welfare and infrastructure services, which are heavily controlled and state-funded.

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2.3 Structure, action areas

The European third sector is a very large part of social and economic life, employing the third-largest number of people in Europe, behind commerce and manufacturing. Accounted for an estimated 28.3 million full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in 2014 across the EU-28 and Norway, combining both paid employment and volunteer work; approximately 55% of these FTEs derived from volunteering. If we put those numbers against the whole job market, the third sector made up close to 13% of the European workforce at that time (European Commission, 2017). These figures show that volunteering is not a side activity but a core input that shapes how organizations plan services, staff, and budgets.

The sector structure is often described as based on two complementary pillars that work together. One layer consists of several small and medium-sized locally embedded organizations that operate in close proximity to communities, addressing issues at local level that are highly contextual and often intersectional. Alongside this base, a thinner layer of sizable organizations with expert teams capable of managing intricate and ongoing services including assisted housing, long-term care, and disability assistance. The coexistence of both layers aligns with a European understanding of the third sector as a hybrid relational space positioned between state and market, in which activities have historically shifted across institutional boundaries as public policies, administrative reforms, and social demands evolved (Evers & Laville, 2004). Many hospitals and schools in Europe were initially established by civic initiatives that progressively absorbed into public systems during the 20th century. Over the past twenty years, a number of services (such as waste management, education, health, and prisons) have been transferred to private or third-sector organizations. The pace at which state-provided services have been discontinued has varied, as has the third sector's level of participation.

Motivations and internal decision-making distinguish the third sector from state and market logics. If the state secures compliance through legal authority

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and the market coordinates behavior through prices and remuneration, third-sector action relies primarily on symbolic rewards, persuasion, and appeals to shared values and idealism (Corry, 2001). For Etzioni (1973), the third sector is distinguished by value-driven action and dedication from those who work in it. Considering that the main reasons why people interact with different kinds of organizations is because the state has coercive authority and the market negotiates agreements, voluntary associations operate via shared values and consensual decision-making.
If the state eventually achieves compliance through coercion and sanctions (or the threat of them), and market organizations work through rewards or remuneration (or the threat of incurring costs), a third sector exists that does not use either of those two mechanisms (Corry, 2001), instead relying on 'the manipulation of symbolic rewards and deprivations, the power of persuasion, and appeals to shared values and idealism' (Lewis 2003).

On a broader scale, the third sector was believed to be the most efficient means of delivering services that support the public good (health, education and welfare) which are not lucrative for corporations and may become bureaucratic if left to the government (Anheier, 2002). According to this view, the market is efficient but solely aims to maximize shareholder wealth; the state's mission is to safeguard the public good, but is burdened with red tape; and the third sector combines maximizing efficiency and serving the public interest good.

Numerous organizational families can be found across countries. Associations and foundations mobilize members, volunteers and small donations and dominate numerically; in the Johns Hopkins comparative project, those entities account for the bulk of nonprofit entities and paid jobs within the nonprofit perimeter (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2013). Cooperatives and mutuals deliver general-interest services under member governance; EU snapshots suggest several million paid jobs in cooperative and mutual families alone, with strong concentrations in retail, finance, agriculture and social services (Monzón & Chaves, 2017). Social enterprises-entities that limit profit

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distribution and earn income through trading-operate across fields such as work-integration, care and community services; Eurofound reports document thousands of work-integration social enterprises (WISEs) across member states, typically small and locally embedded (Eurofound, 2019). In practice, these families cooperate through consortia, subcontracts, and shared infrastructures such as training centers or digital platforms.

Action areas cut across these families and often overlap. Service provision for welfare and social inclusion includes childcare, elder care, home and community care, disability support, rehabilitation, primary health promotion, supported housing, and local social services. Integration into work covers training, coaching, supported or sheltered employment, and transitional jobs for those facing barriers. Advocacy and rights-based work gives voice to communities, monitors access and quality, and presses for non-discrimination and accountability (Ranci, 2002; European Job Mobility Partnership, 2010).

A related function is the building of social capital. As argued by Putnam (1993, 2000), third-sector activity helps create networks of trust and reciprocity without which neither democracy nor markets function well. This civic infrastructure also explains the sector's political role: organizations channel, articulate and advocate individual and group interests and values and take part in policy networks or advocacy coalitions (Enjolras, Salamon, Sivesind, & Zimmer, 2018).

The balance among these functions changes with welfare regimes. In Scandinavian countries, broad public coverage makes third-sector groups prominent in participation and co-design, with tailored services in care and family fields. In liberal settings such as the United Kingdom, a strong charitable tradition and slimmer guarantees give nonprofits larger roles in filling gaps and piloting innovations, with advocacy addressing blind spots. In Southern Europe, later and uneven bureaucratic growth leaves more room for proximity services by local associations, cooperatives and faith-based entities. In corporatist

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countries such as Germany, France and Belgium, regulated associations deliver public services under stable mandates (Evers & Laville, 2004).

As defined by Salamon and Anheier (1997) and different institutional units, such as The European Commission (2017), third sector organizations share five main features to be considered an institutional unit from the Third Sector Economy (TSE):

- It is an organization (whether formal or informal), possessing some institutional reality.
- They are private, i.e., institutionally separate from the government.
- They are non-profit distributing: distribution of any surplus is totally or significantly limited for investors, members or other stakeholders.
- They are self-governing, i.e., equipped to control their own activities.
- They are voluntary, therefore its participation is non-compulsory.

The organizational criteria distinguishing third sector organizations from private or informal ones such as family or friendship (often referred as 'fourth sector'). The second and third criteria represent the non-state and market criteria. The fourth refers to independence, implicitly from state or market actors, and the voluntary criteria reflect the fact that the third sector has many of its roots in ideas about 'civil society' (Corry, 2001).

Furthermore, individual and informal activities must follow certain characteristics: produce benefits to others beyond the individual executing the task; not casual or episodic; not compensated economically; the action does not benefit household members of their immediate relatives (ex. siblings, parents, grandparents or children) and the activity is not compulsory, allowing individual choice (European Commission, 2017; Third Sector Impact [TSI], 2015). These criteria separate the third sector from family or informal reciprocity networks, often called a 'fourth sector,' while leaving room for national legal differences.

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The third sector, which covers the activities of non profit and non-governamental organization, aiming at advocacy, redistribution or the provision of goods and services, has gradually become one of the main channels through which welfare and employment services are provided in Europe (Ranci, 2002, as cited in European Job Mobility Partnership, 2010).

The services provided range from ensuring access to basic support for local communities as to those that can afford those services, generating new employment and favouring the integration of various disadvantaged people into the workforce. Those service provider entities are academically defined as 'social enterprise' (coined from Italy's 'impresa sociale' term in the 90s).

The structure becomes more concrete when we look inside service provision and see distinct delivery models though characterised by the proximity to people, flexible teams and governance that listens. In care, many organizations combine home- and community-based services with respite and assisted living to delay institutionalization and to preserve everyday routines and social ties. Disability support is described as explicitly multidisciplinary, aligning individualized planning, peer support and 'community connectors' so that autonomy and participation are addressed as practical outcomes rather than abstract goals. In youth inclusion, tutoring and mentoring are deliberately braided with non-formal education, sport and cultural participation to sustain transitions from school to work, with particular attention to neighborhoods facing concentrated disadvantage. Health promotion is frequently treated as an adjacent practice, where self-management groups and prevention activities complement primary care and reduce avoidable demand without replacing clinical roles (Ranci, 2002; European Job Mobility Partnership, 2010).

The way organizations are governed ties these models together. Associations and foundations mobilize members, volunteers, and small donations and give much of the 'associational density' that supports proximity-based work. Cooperatives and mutuals bring users and workers into decisions through one-member-one-vote rules in settings where services are constant (retail, finance, agriculture, social care) so that everyday experience feeds into

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governance. Social enterprises restrict profit distribution while earning income through trading; a large subset focuses on work integration, linking paid production to coaching and outreach to employers so that people can move into regular jobs (Monzón & Chaves, 2017; Eurofound, 2019).

Work-integration social enterprises create graded work settings with coaching and employer outreach so participants can practice, fail safely, try again and then move into open employment. Their small scale and local roots make them credible with both participants and firms; shared methods and peer networks let results travel from one place to another without breaking what works on the ground (Eurofound, 2019). Member-based associations use general assemblies and boards to set direction and legitimize trade-offs; foundations add trustees with fiduciary duties to steward mission; cooperatives and mutuals institutionalize user and worker voice through statutory voting rights; multi-stakeholder designs, common in social enterprises, seat workers, users, and community representatives together so that operational compromises are argued within the organization of production rather than deferred to the service line (Evers & Laville, 2004).

Between single organizations and national systems, a ‘meso-level’ of federations and umbrella bodies does the quiet work of aggregation and diffusion. City and regional networks turn operational know-how (check-in routines that reduce missed appointments, curricula that reliably lead to job entry, simple adherence tools in chronic care) into templates others can adopt without copying entire projects. National umbrellas and European platforms then circulate these materials and provide a shared vocabulary that still allows for local adjustment. This connective tissue is especially valuable for smaller groups that lack specialized staff and for larger providers that need tested routines (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2013; Evers & Laville, 2004).

Advocacy and lobbying extend the same learning loop rather than standing apart from service. Organizations document where access fails or quality drops, draft proposals that a clinic, a school, or a municipal office can actually implement, and stay engaged to see how changes work in practice. Channels

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include consultations, expert groups, and regular contact with parliamentary actors and socio-economic councils, with transparency registers recording who takes part. Coalitions that bring providers together with rights-based groups often travel furthest because practical detail and normative clarity reinforce each other (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Haddock, 2013).

All of this is based on civic habits that foster trust and collaboration. Regular association life (meetings, volunteering, and shared duties) fosters habits that make cooperation easier and more dependable. These behaviors then carry over into higher-stakes situations where services must function predictably. This is how social capital supports both democratic institutions and market transaction, and it explains why closeness, participation, and member governance are common across countries (Putnam, 1993; 2000).

2.4 Legal framework

Notwithstanding certain legal standards and a legal framework set in place, likewise the policy framework, there is no single joint EU code for the third sector, and national law remains foundational. In practice, national frameworks do three things that EU law does not replace: they define legal personality and public-benefit status, they set governance and transparency duties (asset locks, non-distribution, reporting), and they specify supervision and sanctions for misuse. Keeping these three pillars visible helps compare regimes without conflating them with EU 'horizontal' tools." (Fici, 2024)

Current evolving EU institutional efforts for national harmonization have taken place, especially due to the economic, social and health crisis that have hit Europe (Fici, 2024).While EU law supplies a set of horizontal 'enablers' such as mobility proposals for associations, procurement, multiannual finance or participation rights. Incorporation, authorization and monitoring are set at national level. As a result, the majority of TSOs are under vertical national policy domains (employment, health education) and their capacity to expand or

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function internationally rests on the integration of these vertical frameworks with EU horizontal tools. (European Parliament & Council, 2014; European Commission, 2012).

For cross-border work, two frictions recur even when organisations are lawfully established: recognition of equivalent public-benefit status and the portability of tax advantages for donors and beneficiaries. In practice, organisations often need to demonstrate ‘functional equivalence’ to access comparable treatment abroad, which makes governance clauses and public-benefit tests more than formalities.” (Fici, 2024)

According to Fici (2024), European third-sector law is best understood as a transversal regime that overlays sectoral fields and combines recognition/mobility rules, market-access and compensation disciplines, participation rights and multiannual finance. Therefore, Third Sector organizations (TSOs) and Non-profit organizations (NPOs), are considered as two distinct categories of organizations. Whereas NPOs are defined by a full non-distribution constraint, TSOs are characterised primarily by a general-interest purpose, governance and transparency duties, and asset-use rules. Furthermore, certain TSO regimes allow limited profit distribution within legal limits.

The national baselines on which EU horizontal function is further illustrated by Spain's association and foundation statutes combine registration with governance and reporting obligations; Germany's Gemeinnützigkeit links benefits to specified public-benefit purposes and non-distribution; France's association law (1901) and foundation regime emphasize broad freedom of association coupled with public-benefit recognition; and the Netherlands' ANBI status does the same through tax law. Functionally, these various paths converge on mission locks, openness, and oversight (Fici, 2024).

At present, Italy is the only EU jurisdiction to have specific regulation on TSOs itself. The ‘2017 Third Sector Code’ (Legislative Decree 117/2017), that

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identifies TSOs as such and separates them from other organizational structures. Other jurisdictions reach functional convergence through PBO and social-enterprise statutes even without a single 'TSO Act' (Fici, 2024).

Market access and predictable compensation are mediated by two legislative pillars on EU horizontal mechanisms. First, a customized system for 'social and other specific services' was created by 'Directive 2014/24/EU' on public procurement, which included flexible processes and, under certain conditions, reserved contracts for mission-locked suppliers (European Parliament & Council, 2014). The second pillar is the SGEI package, in particular the 'Commission Decision 2012/21/EU' on public-service compensation, that reduces legal uncertainty for non-profit, mutual, or cooperative providers entrusted with general-interest obligations and aligns practice with Altmark by defining when compensation is compatible or exempt from prior notification (European Commission, 2012).

Participation rights are framed by two instruments adopted in 2021. First, the 'Interinstitutional Agreement' made the 'Transparency Register' obligatory across the Parliament, Council, and Commission, consolidating access points for representation (European Parliament, Council, & Commission, 2021). In parallel, the amended 'Aarhus Regulation' widened NGOs' access to internal review of EU acts with environmental effects, strengthening procedural standing (European Parliament & Council, 2021a). There is a review-and-redress layer to participation as well. National remedies procedures enable challenges to award decisions within stringent deadlines when procurement is employed; state-aid complaint channels are available for claimed overcompensation when compensation is used. Selecting the appropriate doorway (remedies or state assistance) frames arguments using the appropriate legal terminology. (European Commission, 2012)

Philanthropy and earned income are complemented by programmatic financing. Under shared management, ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) and ERDF/CF (European Regional Development Fund/*Cohesion Fund)* codify third-sector participation in employment, inclusion, skills, and social-innovation

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priorities (European Parliament & Council, 2021b, 2021c). Through the Social Investment & Skills window implemented by the EIB Group/EIF (European Investment Bank, European Investment Fund), InvestEU institutionalizes guarantees, loans, and impact-oriented equity under central supervision (European Parliament & Council, 2021d).

After several unsuccessful or low-impact harmonization efforts such as the proposal on the European Association (1991), the European Commission proposed in September 2023 an EU directive on a European Cross-Border Association, to make an easy transnational activity for the associative core of the sector, by harmonizing minimum rules for recognition and cross-border operations (European Commission, 2023). Strategically, the Social Economy Action Plan (2021–2030) and the Council Recommendation of 27 November 2023, invite Member States to improve framework conditions on legal forms, taxation, procurement, data, and finance. While steering and coordinating, they do not displace domestic competences (European Commission, 2021; Council of the European Union, 2023).

2.5 Public policy and funding

One of the most commonly identified issues across all levels of governance across Europe is that of access to finance for the social economy. Several EU advisory bodies such as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) have pointed out that social economy enterprises face additional difficulties in accessing finance, partly due to poor visibility and understanding of their specific business model by mainstream finance. In practice, the constraint is not only capital supply but also investment-readiness: many organisations lack pipelines, collateral and intermediaries capable of financing hybrid purpose-governance models (European Commission, 2021).

Financial structures are intrinsically hybrid, combining range from government funding and philanthropic support to new forms of revenue-generating social enterprise. Such financing is undergoing significant innovation and

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transformation across time and countries. The current balance is blended, where grants cover early or non-market jobs; procurement or long-term contracts finance recurrent services; and earned income supports adjacent operations, distributing risk across revenue channels (European Commission, 2021).

Diverse types of third sector organizations have diverse sorts of incomes, although philanthropy is typically the smallest component of finance in most nations, and earned income is the major source of revenue growth. For example, faith-based organizations tend to rely much more heavily on donations than do health or social service organizations (Phillips & Hebb, 2010).At the same time, contracting with public authorities has become a stable backbone for larger providers in care, employment and community services.

Funding has been long categorized as either public sector or traditional grants; philanthropic or donations; contributions or earned income. The charity finance model prioritizes tax incentives for private contributors, leaving funding decisions to individuals and companies. The welfare state funding model prioritizes procuring services from charities while also encouraging innovation and investment. The citizenship model relies on public money to promote social transformation and active citizenship. Nonetheless those three traditional models have experienced several reforms, leading to new approaches to public financing, often overlapping, as many providers combine donor-supporter projects, public contract and small-scale trading within the same organization or group. (Phillips & Hebb, 2010).

Pointing out that financing is ad hoc and, after the financial crisis of 2008/2009, funding support, particularly from the government, decreased heavily. It came to light the outdated policy, regulatory frameworks and lack of effective public financing tools of several local governments. Therefore, new financing mechanisms emerged in different forms, such as sponsorship, social ventures and social enterprises, reflecting a more mixed or hybrid funding

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landscape. These ventures are often termed social enterprises. This shift raised managerial demands related to costing, impact reporting, and cash flow management, which small organizations frequently find difficult to meet without meso-level support. For instance, in Britain, civil society diversification took place during Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government in the 1980s as service delivery was downloaded to the nonprofit sector and delivered by the sector for a fee (Phillips & Hebb, 2010).

Social enterprises are commonly framed as mission-driven entities, characterized by being a non-profit organization with a democratically accountable governance structure and a distribution of surplus back to the organization. The UK Department of Trade and Industry (2003), for example, defines social enterprise as 'a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners'. Ranging from stand-alone for-profit organizations, often known as social enterprises, to companies that, while formed as traditional businesses, return profits to their sponsoring groups.

As stated by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), current mainstream business development programs and financial tools are often geared towards a traditional firm model, failing to adequately support social economy firms and this might sometimes hinder their development . Therefore the Committee of the Regions highlights the key role played by the cohesion policy funds, and in particular the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and ESF/ESF+ (European Social Funds), play a compensating role by financing infrastructure, inclusion and skills projects where third sector providers are central. Additionally, through the EIB Group, Investeu's "Social Investment and Skills" window standardizes loans, guarantees, and impact-oriented equity, which can grow in private capital when revenue models are modest but predictable (European Commission, 2021).

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The European policy settlement still remains as a key challenge. There is no joint, comprehensive EU code that replaces national regimes. Several barriers on the emergence of an EU policy engagement take place, partly due to the complex set of Member states arrangements, with significant variations in economic size and scope and with contracting national policy legacies, legal configurations, and co-ordinating styles.

It is considered that the main obstacle for most third sector policy actors is the 'vertical' policy field. Although they can also be situated in a 'horizontal' policy field in some contexts, as Salamon et al. (1999), as cited in Kendall, 2005) argue that the majority of third-sector activities in Europe are focused on areas that are located at or near the center of 'welfare states' (social care, health and education particularly), and national political elites have strongly protected this area from EU authority (Kendall, 2001).

Despite the absence of a single European policy framework, a EU policy legacy was already set in place, included a proposed European Associations Statute; Declarations attached to the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties; a 1997 Communication suggesting a general, but not well specified, need to support the 'role for associations and foundations in Europe' and to promote 'civil dialogue' (European Commission, 1997); and escalating engagement with the sector as a 'partner' in the implementation of structural fund policy, particularly the European Social Fund.

The European Union has incrementally codified an enabling environment that both recognizes and structures hybrid practice. The European Commission's White Paper on European Governance (2001) established consultation and partnership as routine elements of policy formation, institutionalizing spaces where organized civil society can contribute expertise and scrutiny. This move has been reinforced by horizontal instruments that frame market access, predictability of public compensation and civic oversight without replacing national incorporation or tax regimes (European Commission, 2001).

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2.6 Volunteering and solidarity action development

Volunteering plays an important role in developing European societies by promoting active citizenship and democracy, and putting into action European values such as solidarity and non-discrimination. They boost civic engagement and can boost citizens' sense of connection and belonging to their community (Trunk Širca, Dermol, Novak, & Trunk, 2016). Which is why many countries treat organized volunteering as part of their civic infrastructure.

It plays an important role in diverse sectors of society. According to the European Youth Portal. (2025), the main areas where voluntary organisations can be found suggest: education, youth, culture, sport, environment, health, social care, consumer protection, humanitarian aid, development policy, research, equal opportunities and external relations. Whereas the main voluntary activities are: administrative and supporting tasks; helping or working directly with people; preparing and supporting voluntary activities; managerial and coordination tasks; campaigning and lobbying; and the organisation of events. However, those activities' terminology differ cross-country, often grouped together or seen as separate categories.

Similarly to the third sector as such, there is no joint European definition, legal, regulatory or policy framework regarding volunteering set in place.
Member states define volunteering in different ways, and some others do not have an official definition. Specifically, there is no legal definition and specific law regulating volunteering in sixteen European member states. Yet, occasionally we can find policies or established practices that support the development of volunteering. Nonetheless, shared definitional features are identified among official definitions: undertaken out of a person's free will, unpaid, and for the benefit of others (though it is acknowledged that volunteering significantly benefits the volunteer as well). (European Commission, 2010).

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At the EU level it has often been referred to all forms of voluntary activity, whether formal or informal, undertaken of a person's free–will, choice and motivation, and without concern for financial gain Therefore, volunteering can be linked with policy areas such as active citizenship, youth, education and training, employment and social policy, sport, external relations and internal development and environment (European Commission, 2010).

Solidarity action is supported by a large number of organisations around the world. Many organizations manage global short and long term voluntary programs, provide information on international possibilities, and build social capital among hosting organizations. Since the late 1990s, two major international organizations, the United Nations and the Council of Europe, have actively supported and promoted volunteering at the international level (European Commission, 2010).

By one hand, the United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV), which was established in 1971, is the main actor promoting volunteering to support peace and development worldwide, mainly contributing to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Key initiatives such as the International volunteer Day (IVD) or the International Year of volunteers (IVY), have impacted volunteering at the national level, by raising awareness of the role and potential of volunteers worldwide or brought attention to the importance of creating legislation, increasing recognition and legitimacy.

By the other hand, The Council of Europe plays an active role in the field of Youth and Sport, by recommending the need to member states on the definition of voluntary service at the domestic level to be able to identify main obstacles, or by giving the independence and self-regulation of sport.

Voluntarism has been shaped by long structural changes that vary greatly between European countries. In some countries, volunteering and voluntary sectors have been part of its tradition (Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK), whereas in others it is still emerging or poorly developed (Bulgaria, Greece,

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Latvia, Lithuania and Romania). For instance, running errands for elderly or disabled neighbors, volunteering at local schools, and assisting families in financial or emotional difficulty. Volunteering has a long history in France, dating back to guilds and intermediary entities during the Ancien Régime. Sweden has a long history of volunteerism and active citizenship among its inhabitants, dating back to the 1600s. In many European countries, churches have a strong history of volunteering to benefit their communities. Until the 19th century, volunteering in Italy was mostly done by religious institutions for social, welfare, and health-related causes (European Commission, 2010) .

Voluntary action was first officially mentioned on the European level in a resolution of the European Parliament in 1983, whose first action was the introduction of the 1996 European voluntary Service, set for the period (1998-2002) aimed to strengthen European solidarity by allowing young Europeans to participate in volunteer activities in other countries, ranging areas such as cultural activities, social exclusion, humanitarian aid, or protection of the environment. (Angermann & Sittermann, 2011; European Commission, 1996)

Currently, several main volunteering initiatives stand out at the European level for supporting European values through volunteering by the European Commission: The European Solidarity Corps programme (ESC), an explicit volunteering instrument for youth, including the humanitarian aid strand. Erasmus+ supports participation and youth work, including non-formal learning and sport, where structured volunteering and civic engagement are common features of funded actions. Life Long Learning programme and the Citizens, Equality and Values programme (CERV), aiming to protect and promote rights and values as enshrined in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights in particular by supporting civil society organisations active at local, regional, national and transnational level. And two additional programmes often used by organisations that mobilise volunteers for public-interest goals are the Justice programme, focused on rule of law and

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fundamental rights, and Creative Europe, which supports culture and heritage where volunteer participation is widespread.

Voluntary activities have a broad economic and social impact on society.
Due to the lack of national reporting and monitoring arrangements to provide data collection on the civil society sector, the economic value of volunteering is mainly provided by International studies. The John Hopkins Comparative Non-profit Sector Project revealed that, in many countries, volunteer workers represent the equivalent of 3-5% of the economically active population in many countries. In member states where such calculations have been made, consensus is hard to achieve (European Commission, 2010).

While volunteering's impact differs between countries, volunteers, beneficiaries of voluntary activities and local communities, several common benefits have been seen across different countries and actors.

Overall, volunteer work involves the national promotion of social cohesion, social inclusion and integration, thus the integration of local communities, intergenerational and intercultural dialogue and active citizenship; regional and local development by improving the local environment and sometimes creating new jobs; volunteers gain new skills and therefore improve employability provide work experience opportunity, strengthened social solidarity, improved self-esteem and self-confidence and increased social capital and create a support network, reducing the risk of social marginalisation or isolation; better understanding of nowadays problems. Activities and services provide important social infrastructure, including valuable social services (European volunteer Centre, 2007; European Commission 2020),

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3. Individual Country analysis

The individual analysis of each country participating in this report allows us to understand the third sector's context to better understand how volunteering and solidarity actions are developed in NGOs. Given that each national context has specific characteristics, it has been considered necessary to develop an individual approach that takes into account the specific characteristics and structure of the third sector by each territory. This analysis also focuses on the identification of the economic, political and social context of each country, and its role within volunteering and solidarity actions programmes developed in third sector entities.

3.1 Methodology for country selection

The countries included in this study were chosen in advance as each country member of the International Network; This network comprises different European countries and territories that focuses on volunteering, training, and social programmes that help youth gain experience and find their place in society.

The methodology used to analyse these countries focused on the collections and study of relevant information on each of them, covering both quantitative and qualitative data.

To understand the situation in each country, we gathered information from different sources. On the one hand, we looked at statistics from organisations such as Eurostat, the OECD, and the World Bank. These figures gave us a clear picture of economic conditions, volunteering levels, and social indicators. On the other hand, we reviewed reports prepared by the European Commission or local volunteering initiatives. These documents provided more detailed insights into how volunteering and youth integration policies are being implemented in practice.

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3.2 Assessment Factors

To conduct a robust analysis of the third sector in the countries participating in the International Network, a set of assessment factors was applied in order to capture both structural characteristics and contextual differences. These factors allow for a comprehensive understanding of how volunteering and solidarity action projects are shaped by broader economic, social and institutional conditions at national and local level.

- **Country Economic and social context Summary** The analysis considers the general economic and social conditions of each country, including levels of economic stability, social inequality and public welfare provision. These elements influence the availability of resources for third sector organisations, the degree of reliance on volunteering, and the capacity of organisations to sustain solidarity actions over time.
- **Structure and role of the third sector** The analysis explores how third sector organisations are structured and the roles they play within society. This includes their relationship with public authorities, their involvement in service provision or advocacy, and their contribution to volunteering and solidarity actions, particularly at local and community level.
- **Volunteering youth impact:** Volunteering generates a multidimensional impact by supporting individual learning and skill development, strengthening community cohesion and enhancing the capacity of third sector organisations, while also contributing to active citizenship and social participation at societal level.

Volunteering does not function as a uniform practice, but is shaped by national welfare traditions, levels of institutionalisation of civil society and the historical role attributed to unpaid civic engagement. In countries with long-standing and well-established voluntary sectors, such as Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, volunteering is embedded within dense networks of associations and intermediary organisations, providing more structured and

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visible pathways for participation (European Commission, 2010; European Volunteer Centre, 2007).

In contrast, in countries where the third sector is less consolidated or still developing, including Bulgaria, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania, volunteering opportunities are more uneven and strongly dependent on the capacity of individual organisations. Limited financial and human resources, along with fewer coordination systems, limit organizations' ability to welcome volunteers on a regular schedule, affecting accessibility and continuity. (European Commission, 2020).

The examination of volunteering throughout the network's countries allows for the identification of both good practices and actual gaps in the way volunteering is planned, supported, and accessed by youth. This is especially important for studying how volunteering works as a pathway for participation, learning, and social inclusion, as well as examining the conditions under which volunteering experiences are meaningful, accessible, and sustainable for young people.

The analysis of volunteering throughout the network's countries identifies both best practices and areas for development in how volunteering opportunities are planned, supported, and accessed by young people. The analysis provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how volunteering serves as a channel for participation, learning, and social inclusion by investigating economic, institutional, and organizational aspects, as well as the structure and capability of third-sector organisations. This approach allows for the identification of enabling factors and structural barriers to youth volunteering, providing a strong foundation for the formulation of strategies and policy measures specific to each country's individual situations and requirements.

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3.3. Country-by Country Analysis

2. Analysis of the European Union

a. Economic and Social Context

The European Union (EU), comprising 27 Member States, is a significant global economic and political entity, shaped by both prosperity and persistent inequality across member states. In 2024, GDP per capita in the EU averaged €43,145, reflecting significant disparities between member states, with Luxembourg and Ireland at the top and Bulgaria, Greece, and Latvia at the bottom (Eurostat, 2024). GDP growth was projected at 0.9%, reflecting a gradual recovery after the challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic, with a modest rebound expected in 2025, reaching 1.5% as consumption and investment activities are anticipated to recover from previous contractions (European Commission, 2024). Despite this relatively high average, 21% of the EU population (93.3 million people) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, underscoring the uneven distribution of wealth and the limitations of social protection systems across the Union (Eurostat, 2024).

The EU unemployment rate stood at 5.9%, its lowest level since 2009. However, youth unemployment remains a persistent issue, with the rate for individuals under 25 years old at 14.6% in August 2025 (Eurostat, 2025). This highlights structural challenges, including the mismatch between educational outcomes and labor market demands, as well as the prevalence of temporary and precarious employment contracts among younger workers.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

The EU's demographic profile is characterized by an aging population, and significant territorial and social disparities, which directly affect patterns of civic participation and volunteering. As of 2024, more than 21% of the EU population is aged 65 or over, and the median age has risen to 44.7 years, increasing the demand for social support, community-based services and solidarity initiatives (Eurostat, 2024). Younger generations continue to face

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challenges related to social inclusion, educational transitions and access to meaningful participation opportunities, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas.

In this context, volunteering represents a key mechanism through which young people engage in civic life, yet participation remains uneven across the EU. According to Eurostat, approximately 12% of the EU population is involved in formal volunteering, with lower participation rates among people with disabilities and individuals facing socio-economic barriers (Eurostat, 2022). These trends directly affect the capacity of third sector organisations to recruit and retain volunteers, particularly in contexts marked by youth out-migration and demographic decline.

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

The third sector in the European Union encompasses a wide range of organisations active in areas such as social inclusion, youth work, education, culture, environmental protection and community development. At European level, the social economy (including associations, foundations, cooperatives and social enterprises) comprises approximately 2.8 million organisations, employing around 13.6 million people (European Commission, 2023).

At the international level, the third sector plays an increasingly strategic role in complementing economic pillars by fostering inclusive and sustainable growth. Non-profit and social economy organisations across Europe contribute to labour market integration, vocational training, and innovation in green and digital transitions (OECD, 2023; European Commission, 2024). Through partnerships with public institutions and private enterprises, the third sector facilitates the implementation of EU strategies such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Green Deal, bridging economic development with social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Moreover, international networks of NGOs and social enterprises, such as Social Economy Europe and the European Network of Social Integration Enterprises, enhance cross-border cooperation, knowledge transfer, and policy alignment, reinforcing the EU's role as a global leader in social innovation and responsible economic transformation (Social Economy Europe, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

d. Third sector dynamic in the European Union

Territorial differences in the development and capacity of the third sector are evident across the European Union and follow clear regional patterns. Countries in Northern and Western Europe, such as Denmark and Germany, generally benefit from more consolidated third sector ecosystems, characterised by dense networks of associations, intermediary organisations and stable cooperation frameworks with public authorities. These contexts tend to provide stronger institutional support, clearer governance arrangements and greater organisational continuity. In contrast, countries in Southern and Eastern Europe, including Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, often display more fragmented third sector structures, with organisations operating under greater resource constraints and with limited long-term stability. These differences are closely linked to broader socio-economic conditions and historical trajectories of civil society development (European Commission, 2024).

Such disparities are not only national but also territorial. Within countries, rural and peripheral regions frequently experience weaker third sector presence, fewer intermediary bodies and reduced access to support and coordination mechanisms. As a result, organisations operating in these areas face greater challenges in sustaining activities, engaging communities and supporting participation, particularly among young people and other groups facing social or economic disadvantage. These territorial imbalances contribute to uneven civic participation and limit the reach and impact of third sector action at local level (European Commission, 2020).

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e. Opportunities and Challenges

Europe's third sector is gaining strategic weight as the EU's social, digital and green transitions increasingly rely on mission-driven organisations to deliver services, innovate locally and reach groups that markets and public administrations often struggle to serve effectively. Digitalisation amplifies this opportunity where civil society organisations are expanding needs for data management, digital service delivery, online mobilisation and cyber resilience, which favours hybrid profiles combining technical skills with social purpose (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2025).

At the same time, the everyday reality of third-sector work is shaped by persistent constraints that affect organisational stability and job quality. Dependence on short-term public funding, competitive project calls and complex administrative requirements limits long-term planning and professional continuity. These conditions tend to translate into temporary contracts, fragmented career paths and reduced capacity for training and innovation, despite rising expectations placed on organisations to deliver measurable social impact. European policy analyses consistently underline that access to sustainable finance and scaling mechanisms remains uneven, particularly for smaller organisations operating outside major urban or economic centres (European Parliament Research Service, 2021).

These tensions are further intensified by broader labour market dynamics within the European Union. In regions where temporary employment and youth unemployment are structurally high, third-sector jobs risk reproducing existing patterns of precarity rather than counterbalancing them. Ensuring that the growth of the sector contributes to social cohesion therefore requires more than symbolic recognition of its social value. It depends on coherent public policies that stabilise funding, simplify regulatory frameworks and integrate the third sector into skills and employment strategies as a durable component of Europe's social and economic infrastructure (Eurostat, 2023).

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f. Strategic Recommendations

3. **Strengthen governance and leadership by keeping decision-making clear, accountable and closely tied to the organisation's mission**. Simple but consistent governance practices, regular strategic reflection and shared leadership responsibilities help organisations grow and adapt without losing their social purpose or overburdening a small group of individuals.

4. **Treat digital capacity as a necessary infrastructure rather than an optional addition.** Reliable data management, communication, and internal coordination systems increase continuity, transparency, and resilience, allowing organizations to focus their efforts on social impact rather than administrative firefighting.

5. **Build financial stability through balanced diversification that protects independence.** Combining different funding sources is most effective when organisations fully account for real costs, resist mission drift and prioritise longer-term relationships over short-term project logic.

6. **Invest in coalitions and collective action at the local, national, and EU levels.** Collaboration with peer groups, governmental institutions, and research players improves learning, visibility, and advocacy, allowing the third sector to influence policy and design solutions based on lived social realities rather than isolated projects.

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7. Bulgaria

a. Economic and Social Context

Bulgaria faces a socioeconomic landscape marked by structural inequalities and relatively low income levels compared to the European average. In 2024, GDP per capita was €11,330, significantly below the EU average of €33,650 (Eurostat, 2024). While the national unemployment rate remains relatively low at 4.2%, 30.3% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, nearly ten percentage points above the EU average (Eurostat, 2024). These indicators highlight persistent regional disparities and the limitations of the social protection system, reinforcing the essential role of the third sector in supporting vulnerable groups and fostering social cohesion (Community Foundations of Europe, 2024; AmCham Bulgaria, 2023).

Bulgaria's economy relies heavily on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which face limited capacity to absorb qualified labour. Combined with youth emigration and an aging population, this context increases the demand for civil society initiatives and volunteering (Community Foundations of Europe, 2024; ILOSTAT, 2025).

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of 6.45 million in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), Bulgaria is experiencing significant demographic decline due to low birth rates and youth emigration, affecting the availability of volunteers (ILOSTAT, 2025). Young people aged 15-29 represent only about 14% of the total population, one of the lowest shares in the European Union (Eurostat, 2024).

The third sector is numerically extensive but structurally fragile: over 14,000 organisations operate nationwide, including associations, foundations, cultural centres such as the chitalishta, and around 200 social enterprises (Krasteva, 2020; European Commission, 2023). Despite this, civic engagement is low, with only about 10% of the population volunteering regularly and small average numbers of active volunteers per organisation (ESG News Bulgaria, 2024; OSIS, 2024).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Bulgaria's third sector covers a wide range of areas, including culture, education, human rights, environment, and humanitarian aid. Employment in the social and solidarity economy is concentrated in agriculture, forestry and fishing (33.3%), trade, communication and recreation (30.2%), culture and communication (17.2%), and civic, advocacy and international activities (14.1%) (OECD, 2018). Non-profit organisations often act as intermediaries between the market and public sectors, delivering social services and community development programmes that are not fully covered by either sector (BCNL, 2024; European Commission, 2023). For example, the Bulgarian Red Cross implements community-based health and social care initiatives for elderly and vulnerable groups, while the Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation (WCIF) supports local development through grant-making and volunteer mobilisation. Similarly, organisations such as Caritas Bulgaria focus on social inclusion and employment support for marginalised populations, including Roma communities and migrants, demonstrating the sector's complementary role in addressing unmet social needs (Caritas Bulgaria, 2023; WCIF, 2024).

Financing comes from a mix of sources: conditional donations (34%), other revenues (32%), unconditional donations (16%), membership fees (7%), and public funding, including municipal and EU contracts (21%) (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2023). Approximately 95% of entities hosting volunteers are non-profit organisations, underscoring the central role of the third sector in coordinating volunteering and solidarity activities (Scribd, 2024). European programmes such as the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ have expanded opportunities for youth engagement and intercultural exchange (European Commission, 2024). Participation levels, however, remain relatively modest compared to other EU countries: data indicate that around 2,500 young Bulgarians took part in European Solidarity Corps projects in 2023, while

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Erasmus+ mobility programmes involved approximately 4,000 students and young people from Bulgaria in the same year (European Commission, 2023).

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

Bulgaria's philanthropic potential remains underexploited: current donations total around 280 million BGN, though potential estimates exceed 567 million BGN (AmCham Bulgaria, 2023). Participation in European volunteering programmes has also proven highly effective: youth involvement in local initiatives reached nearly 80%, with 92% reporting personal and professional benefits and 71% noting increased European identity (European Commission, 2018; European Parliament, 2021; Association FOR YOU, 2024).

However, challenges persist, including low civic participation, an aging population, financial instability, and reliance on short-term, project-based funding, which limit strategic planning and the capacity to address social inequalities (ESG News Bulgaria, 2024; CTAC USA, 2024). Additional challenges relate to the legal and policy framework, which is often complex and fragmented, creating administrative burdens for NGOs and slowing the establishment of new organisations (BCNL, 2024). Limited access to sustainable funding, combined with dependence on EU or donor-driven projects, reduces financial autonomy and constrains long-term programming (AmCham Bulgaria, 2023). Moreover, the broader economic situation, including low wages and regional disparities, limits both private donations and volunteer availability, while gaps in national social policies reduce support for vulnerable groups, increasing pressure on the third sector to fill systemic gaps (Community Foundations of Europe, 2024).

e. Recommendations

To strengthen Bulgaria's third sector, public–private partnerships and incentives for corporate giving should be expanded to improve funding stability. Simplifying legal and administrative procedures would reduce barriers for NGOs, while investing in youth engagement and volunteering programmes would expand the volunteer base. Capacity-building and digitalisation

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initiatives can enhance organisational efficiency and long-term planning, and targeted regional and social policies would help reduce disparities.

8. Cyprus

a. Economic and Social Context

Cyprus presents a relatively positive economic environment. In 2024, GDP per capita was €29,870. The overall unemployment rate stood at 4.9%, while youth unemployment reached 13.0% (Eurostat, 2024). The proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 17.1%, reflecting a relatively moderate level of social vulnerability (Eurostat, 2024).

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of 966,365 in 2024, Cyprus is a small society, which limits the scale of third-sector activities (Eurostat, 2024). Young people aged 15–29 represent approximately 16% of the population, while those over 65 account for 21%, highlighting the dual pressures of youth outmigration and population aging (ILOSTAT, 2025).

The third sector includes associations, foundations, social cooperatives, and volunteer organizations delivering social services, education, healthcare, culture, and support for vulnerable groups. According to the European Commission (2023), employment within the social economy is distributed as follows: social services 45%, education and training 25%, healthcare 15%, culture, sports, and recreation 10%, and environmental protection 5%. In total, Cyprus had 581 social and solidarity economy entities in 2020, providing 3,529 jobs, with associations representing 52.5% of all entities (OECD, 2024).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

The Cypriot third sector is structured and diverse, encompassing cultural, environmental, educational, humanitarian, and human rights organizations. Volunteer-based organizations often partner with the state to implement welfare and health programmes, reinforcing the complementarity between public policies and community initiatives (Cochliou & Patsalidou, 2025).

Participation in European programmes is notable: in 2023, approximately 1,200 young people from Cyprus engaged in Erasmus+ mobility and volunteer initiatives. These programmes enhance skills, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement, while fostering social cohesion and employability (European Commission, 2023; European Parliament, 2021).

The sector's main funding sources include public funding, notably the European Social Fund Plus, which allocated €222 million to Cyprus for 2021–2027, and the government's annual support for social enterprises (€300,000 per year, up to €15,000 per beneficiary, to help cover initial costs and adapt the national framework). Private funding also plays a significant role: for example, the Pharos Arts Foundation relies almost entirely on private contributions (European Commission, 2023; Pharos Arts Foundation, 2025). Organizations can additionally access EU grants, subsidies, and crowdfunding platforms to sustain operations.

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

Key opportunities for the Cypriot third sector include the growth of philanthropic awareness, access to EU funding, and the increasing use of structured social enterprise models, which can enhance both social and economic impact (OECD, 2024). Participation in Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps provides training, mobility, and intercultural experience for youth, strengthening civic engagement and organisational capacity (European Commission, 2023; European Parliament, 2021).

Persistent challenges relate to financial instability, dependence on external funding, limited human resources due to a small population, and administrative complexity in the legal framework governing NGOs. These constraints reduce long-term planning capacity, limit service expansion, and impede the sector's

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ability to reach underserved populations effectively (Community Foundations of Europe, 2024).

e. Recommendations

To strengthen the sector, Cyprus should enhance sustainable funding, combining public allocations, EU grants, and private donations to reduce reliance on short-term projects; simplify the legal and administrative framework for NGOs to ease establishment and operation; expand youth engagement initiatives, promoting Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps participation to increase volunteer numbers and civic involvement; and invest in capacity-building and digitalisation, enabling organisations to improve efficiency, transparency, and social impact.

9. Denmark

a. Economic and Social Context

Denmark maintains a robust and stable economy with high living standards and an advanced welfare system. In 2024, GDP per capita reached €58,160, and the unemployment rate stood at 6.2%, while youth unemployment was 14.6% (Eurostat, 2024). The proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 18.0%, reflecting strong social protection and redistributive policies (Eurostat, 2024).

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of 5.96 million in 2024, Denmark is characterised by an aging demographic structure where 20.6% of citizens are aged 65 or over, 62.7% are of working age (15–64), and 16.7% are under 15 (Eurostat, 2024). High levels of education, civic engagement, and institutional trust contribute to an active civil society.

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The Danish third sector is well-established and professionalised, covering associations, foundations, social enterprises, and volunteer organisations that provide services in social welfare (30%), education and training (25%), healthcare (20%), culture and leisure (15%), and environmental protection (10%) (European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2024). In 2023, approximately 43% of Danes volunteered at least once a year, one of the highest rates in Europe (OECD, 2024). This civic culture underpins the sector's role in promoting inclusion, innovation, and community cohesion.

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Denmark's third sector operates in close partnership with the state, implementing social, cultural, and welfare programmes. Organisations frequently collaborate with municipalities to deliver care services, youth employment programmes, and integration projects for migrants and refugees. Social enterprises and cooperatives have expanded in areas such as job training, sustainable production, and green transition initiatives (Scupola et al., 2021).

Participation in European initiatives is also significant: in 2023, over 7,000 Danish participants engaged in Erasmus+ programmes, and nearly 1,200 took part in European Solidarity Corps volunteering (European Commission, 2024). These programmes enhance civic responsibility, employability, and social innovation at community level, with 88% of participants reporting improved intercultural and professional skills (European Parliament, 2021).

In terms of funding, Denmark's third sector benefits from a mixed financial model that ensures financial stability and supports long-term planning and innovation.

Around 60% of funding originates from public sources (national and municipal grants, service contracts), while 25% comes from private donations and philanthropic foundations such as Realdania and the Velux Foundation, and 15% from EU programmes, including the European Social Fund Plus and Erasmus+ (OECD, 2024; European Commission, 2023).

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d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

Key opportunities include strong civic engagement, institutional trust, and digitalisation, which foster transparency and innovation across civil society (OECD, 2024). Denmark's third sector is also well-positioned to address green transition goals, with growing EU investment in sustainable social enterprises and climate-related community initiatives (European Commission, 2023).

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Demographic aging is reducing the active volunteer base, while the integration of migrants and minority groups remains uneven, affecting inclusivity and labour participation. Additionally, financial concentration in larger, well-established organisations may limit access to resources for smaller NGOs and grassroots initiatives. The legal and policy framework, while stable, sometimes lacks flexibility for social innovation, particularly for hybrid models combining public service and entrepreneurial activities (MDPI, 2023; OECD, 2024).

e. Recommendations

To strengthen the Danish third sector, several improvements are recommended, like diversifying funding mechanisms and promoting greater access for small and emerging NGOs to public and EU programmes would reduce financial asymmetry and encourage innovation; enhancing migrant and youth inclusion through targeted volunteering and training initiatives can help balance demographic trends and expand civic participation; adapting the regulatory framework to better accommodate social enterprises and hybrid organisations would foster innovation and social entrepreneurship and lastly, continued investment in digitalisation and capacity-building can improve transparency, impact evaluation, and cross-sector collaboration.

By reinforcing inclusivity, financial accessibility, and institutional flexibility, Denmark can sustain its high-performing third sector and strengthen its contribution to social cohesion and sustainable development.

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10. France

a. Economic and Social Context

France maintains a solid economic base, with a GDP per capita of €38,110 in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). Unemployment remains relatively high at 7.4%, while youth unemployment reaches 18.7%, pointing to structural challenges in integrating younger populations into the labour market. Around 20.5% of citizens are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, reflecting persistent socio-economic disparities despite the country's comprehensive welfare model (Eurostat, 2024). This combination of economic resilience and social imbalance highlights the continuing importance of third sector initiatives in addressing inequality and promoting inclusion.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

Home to approximately 68.5 million inhabitants (Eurostat, 2024), France's demographic structure is marked by diversity and strong civic participation. The third sector encompasses more than 1.5 million associations, employing over 2.3 million people and mobilizing 13 million volunteers (INSEE, 2024). Activity is concentrated in social services (31%), education and training (22%), healthcare (18%), culture and leisure (15%), and environmental or humanitarian action (14%) (INJEP, 2024). Organizations such as *France Volontaires* and *VISA-AD* promote volunteer engagement both domestically and internationally, particularly among youth and in vulnerable communities, fostering skills development and intercultural understanding (AFD, 2024).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

The French third sector acts as a key intermediary between the state and citizens. Many organizations operate through national networks such as *Le Mouvement Associatif* or *Union des Employeurs de l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire (UDES)*, ensuring coordination across regions and policy areas. The sector plays a pivotal role in implementing employment integration programs, educational initiatives, and humanitarian aid, often co-financed through public

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grants, membership fees, private donations, and European Union funds such as *Erasmus+*, *ESF+*, and *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)* (European Commission, 2024). In 2023, more than 100,000 young people from France participated in *Erasmus+*, with 87% reporting enhanced employability and social engagement upon return (European Commission, 2023).

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

One of France's greatest strengths lies in its deeply rooted volunteer culture and long-standing partnership model between civil society and the state. This framework facilitates social innovation, enhances service delivery, and enables consistent participation in both local and international initiatives (AFD, 2024).

However, the sector faces mounting financial and operational pressures. Public funding reductions, growing service demand, and bureaucratic constraints have limited flexibility, especially for small and medium-sized associations (OECD, 2024). Additionally, difficulties in integrating migrants and at-risk youth, coupled with uneven regional development, expose gaps in social cohesion that the third sector often seeks to fill without adequate structural support.

e. Recommendations

Ensuring the sustainability of France's third sector requires reinforcing financial diversification, expanding access to long-term EU funding, and simplifying the administrative framework for associations. Encouraging multi-level cooperation between government, business, and civil society could enhance efficiency and innovation. Strengthening youth participation through programs like *Erasmus+* and supporting initiatives targeting migrant inclusion would further consolidate the sector's capacity to promote social resilience and territorial cohesion.

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11. Germany

a. Economic and Social Context

Germany maintains one of Europe's strongest and most stable economies, with a GDP per capita of €43,110 in 2024 and low unemployment at 3.4%, confirming its high labour market resilience (Eurostat, 2024). Youth unemployment stands at only 6.5%, among the lowest in the European Union, while 21.1% of citizens remain at risk of poverty or social exclusion, revealing persistent social disparities despite the effectiveness of Germany's welfare and social insurance system (Eurostat, 2024). The combination of economic strength and moderate inequality creates a solid foundation for third sector activity focused on inclusion and social innovation.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of approximately 83.5 million (Eurostat, 2024), Germany is the EU's most populous country and one of the most demographically diverse. The third sector comprises more than 630,000 registered associations, 23,000 foundations, and a growing number of social enterprises, employing around 3.7 million people and engaging over 29 million volunteers, about 35% of the population (Maecenata Stiftung, 2024; Bundesnetzwerk Bürgerschaftliches Engagement, 2024).

Activities are concentrated in social and health services (33%), education and training (21%), culture and sports (18%), environmental protection (15%), and humanitarian or advocacy work (13%) (OECD, 2024). Volunteer programs such as *Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr (FSJ)* and *Bundesfreiwilligendienst (BFD)* play a vital role in fostering civic engagement among young people and seniors alike, strengthening intergenerational solidarity (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, 2024).

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c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Germany's civil society is characterized by strong institutionalization and extensive cooperation between non-profit organizations and public authorities. Many entities operate under large national networks, such as *Caritas*, *Diakonie*, and *Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO)*, which collectively manage thousands of social and healthcare facilities nationwide (OECD, 2024). The sector also has a vibrant research and advocacy dimension, with institutions like *Maecenata Stiftung* monitoring policy developments and promoting transparency and innovation in civil society governance (Maecenata Stiftung, 2024).

Funding sources are diverse: approximately 60% of third sector revenue comes from public contracts and subsidies, 25% from service fees or membership contributions, and 15% from donations and foundations (Federal Statistical Office, 2024). Moreover, organizations actively access EU funding instruments such as *Erasmus+*, *European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)*, and *Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV)*, which support international mobility and capacity-building. In 2023, around 80,000 German participants joined *Erasmus+*, with over 90% reporting increased employability, intercultural competence, and civic engagement (European Commission, 2024).

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

Germany's third sector benefits from high public trust, stable institutional support, and a deep-rooted volunteering culture. These factors create favourable conditions for innovation in social services, integration policies, and sustainable community development (OECD, 2024).

Nonetheless, structural challenges persist. Many organizations depend heavily on short-term public funding, making long-term planning difficult, particularly for small and regional NGOs. Additionally, demographic aging, rising operational costs, and administrative burdens strain the sector's capacity to maintain volunteer engagement and service quality (Maecenata Stiftung, 2024). Efforts to integrate migrants and refugees also continue to test the adaptability of civil society networks in responding to changing social needs.

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e. Recommendations

To enhance long-term sustainability, Germany should prioritise diversifying funding streams, simplifying administrative and reporting procedures, and strengthening local-level partnerships between government, private enterprises, and civil society. Increasing support for volunteer retention programs, expanding cross-sector digitalization initiatives, and improving access to EU co-financing mechanisms would further consolidate the sector's effectiveness. Continued investment in inclusion-oriented volunteering, especially through *FSJ* and *BFD*, could reinforce civic participation and strengthen Germany's social fabric.

12. Greece

a. Economic and Social Context

Greece continues to face notable structural and social challenges, reflecting the lingering effects of the financial crisis and uneven economic recovery. In 2024, GDP per capita reached €19,020, one of the lowest in the European Union, and the overall unemployment rate stood at 10.1%, while youth unemployment remained particularly high at 22.5% (Eurostat, 2024).

Moreover, 26.9% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, signalling persistent vulnerabilities despite gradual improvements in employment and social welfare indicators (Eurostat, 2024). These conditions have reinforced the strategic importance of civil society in addressing social exclusion and supporting community resilience.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of around 10.4 million inhabitants (Eurostat, 2024), Greece faces an aging demographic structure, with only 15% of the population aged 15–29, one of the lowest youth shares in Europe. This demographic trend has direct implications for volunteering and civic participation.

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The Greek third sector, though relatively young and less institutionalized compared to other EU countries, has gained relevance in the aftermath of the economic crisis and refugee influx. It includes more than 30,000 registered NGOs and associations, primarily active in social welfare (28%), education and training (22%), healthcare (18%), human rights and refugee assistance (17%), and environment and community development (15%) (Bodossaki Foundation, 2024; SGI, 2024). Major actors such as the *Bodossaki Foundation and the Action Finance Initiative* (AFI) play essential roles in promoting social inclusion, microfinance, and capacity building for vulnerable groups, particularly migrants, unemployed youth, and women entrepreneurs (Action Finance Initiative, 2025).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Greek civil society operates as a vital intermediary between the state and local communities, compensating for gaps in public service provision and responding to emerging social needs. Organizations such as HIAS Greece provide legal, psychosocial, and integration support to refugees and asylum seekers, often under intense financial and operational constraints (HIAS, 2024). The Hellenic Red Cross and SolidarityNow are also key players in crisis response, education, and health assistance.

The sector's funding model is heavily dependent on EU programs and international donors, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), and EEA Grants, which collectively support over 60% of the sector's budget (SGI, 2024). Public funding remains limited and irregular, creating financial instability and dependence on external sources. Additionally, around 20,000 Greek citizens participated in *Erasmus+* and volunteering initiatives abroad in 2023, with 88% reporting improved professional and intercultural skills, highlighting the growing transnational engagement of Greek youth (European Commission, 2024).

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d. **Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector**

Opportunities arise from increased civic mobilization and the active involvement of the Greek diaspora, particularly through initiatives like the *Greek America Corps*, which fosters volunteering placements for diaspora youth across Greek non-profit organizations (Greek America Foundation, 2024). Similarly, *Volunteer Connect*, launched by *The Hellenic Initiative*, strengthens connections between volunteers and local NGOs, enhancing capacity for community-based projects (The Hellenic Initiative, 2025).

However, systemic challenges remain. Financial constraints, weak institutional frameworks, and bureaucratic barriers hinder NGO registration and sustainability. The limited access to domestic funding, combined with high reliance on EU and donor support, restricts long-term planning and autonomy. Moreover, social polarization, low levels of civic trust, and administrative fragmentation reduce the overall policy impact of the third sector (SGI, 2024; OECD, 2024).

e. **Recommendations**

To reinforce its long-term resilience, Greece should focus on simplifying legal and administrative procedures for non-profit registration and operations, while ensuring stable national funding mechanisms that complement EU support. Strengthening public–private partnerships and investing in youth volunteering programs, particularly through digital engagement and diaspora networks, could significantly enhance social participation. Expanding capacity-building and financial literacy training for NGOs would improve their sustainability and policy influence, enabling the third sector to play a more consistent role in social inclusion, integration, and community development.

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13. Ireland

a. Economic and Social Context

Ireland presents a robust economic context, with a GDP per capita of €88,600 in 2024, reflecting sustained growth driven by foreign investment and a strong technology and services sector. The overall unemployment rate is 4.3%, and youth unemployment stands at 10.6% (Eurostat, 2024). Meanwhile, 17.1% of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, revealing persistent inequality despite the country's overall economic prosperity (Eurostat, 2024).

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a population of approximately 5.35 million in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), Ireland is a relatively young society compared to most EU members, with 42% aged 25-42 (CSO, 2024). This demographic balance supports an active culture of civic engagement.

The Irish third sector encompasses over 32,000 non-profit organisations, employing nearly 165,000 people and involving more than 1.1 million volunteers, equivalent to 27% of the adult population (Volunteer Ireland, 2025). Activity areas are diversified: social services (30%), education and training (24%), healthcare and mental health (20%), community development and housing (15%), and environmental and cultural initiatives (11%) (CSO, 2024).

Key organisations include the Hope and Courage Collective, Muslim Sisters of Éire, and St John Ambulance Ireland, which address poverty, inclusion, and emergency support, while Trócaire leads large-scale humanitarian and climate action programs internationally operates in 14 countries across Africa, Asia, Central America and the Middle East (Trócaire, 2024).

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c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Ireland's civil society operates as a critical partner to the state, combining public service delivery with social innovation. Organisations frequently act as intermediaries between government and local communities, particularly in areas such as youth inclusion, gender equality, and climate resilience.

Regarding young-people mobility and European programmes, Irish organisations and individuals benefit from instruments like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps: Ireland's allocation under the ESF+ for 2021-2027, for instance, is €508 million from the EU matched by €573 million national contribution (Gov.ie, 2024). The third sector's main funding sources include state funding (with a 2018 estimate of €5.9 billion for the sector) (Benefacts, 2019) and international/EU funding, private donations and philanthropy.

The Erasmus+ programme has played a major role in fostering civic participation and skills development: in 2023, over 13,500 Irish participants engaged in mobility and volunteering projects, with 92% reporting stronger social awareness and 87% improved employability (European Commission, 2024). Access to European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), and Erasmus+ provides significant support for NGOs, though dependence on external funding remains a key concern for smaller entities.

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

One significant opportunity lies in Ireland's strong culture of volunteering: approximately 27% of the population over age 15 volunteered in 2022 (Volunteer Ireland, 2025). High levels of private giving: 77% of Irish adults donated to charity in 2022 (Cork Independent, 2023), also present potential for growth in philanthropy.

Nevertheless, the sector faces notable challenges: financial pressure resulting from cuts in public funding coupled with growing demands for social services

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may undermine sustainability (SGI, 2024). The legal and administrative framework for charities and non-profits is complex, and smaller organisations often have limited access to major funding streams, creating disparities across the sector (Benefacts, 2019).

e. Recommendations

To strengthen Ireland's third sector and enhance its impact, three key actions are recommended. First, diversify funding mechanisms by combining public support, philanthropy and social enterprise models to reduce dependence on short-term grants. Second, streamline legislation and governance structures to lower barriers for small and emerging organisations, encouraging innovation and geographic reach. Third, invest in volunteer management and capacity-building, especially for younger and under-represented volunteers, thus widening the volunteer base and improving long-term organisational resilience.

14. Italy

a. Economic and Social Context

Italy continues to face structural challenges in employment, productivity, and social cohesion. In 2024, the national GDP per capita was €32,890, while the unemployment rate reached 6.5% and youth unemployment 20.3% (Eurostat, 2024). Around 23.1% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, reflecting persistent regional and generational inequalities (OECD, 2024). Despite moderate economic growth, the combined impact of inflation, low wage progression, and demographic decline constrains both household income and social mobility (ISTAT, 2024).

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

Italy's population reached approximately 58.97 million in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024), with 13.5% aged 0–14, 63.9% aged 15–64, and 22.6% aged 65 and over (ISTAT, 2024). This aging demographic structure has implications

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for labour market participation and volunteering patterns. The Italian third sector is among the largest in Europe, encompassing around 375,000 institutions, including associations, foundations, and social cooperatives, that generate nearly 5% of GDP and employ approximately 900,000 people, 70% of whom are women (SGI, 2024).

According to ISTAT (2024), 36% of third-sector activities are focused on social assistance, 24% on education and training, 18% on health, 12% on culture and sports, and 10% on environment and community development. The sector mobilizes about 4 million volunteers nationwide, representing a key pillar of civic participation and community solidarity (ISTAT, 2024). Additionally, programs such as the Servizio Civile Universale offer opportunities for young people to engage in volunteer projects across various sectors (Servizio Civile Universale, 2024).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Italian non-profit organizations operate across all regions, often compensating for gaps in welfare provision and regional disparities. Prominent actors such as Caritas Italiana and Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (ANCI) promote social inclusion, refugee assistance, and local governance cooperation (Caritas Italiana, 2024). Public support mechanisms are complemented by European funds, particularly through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), which remain key financing sources for employment, training, and integration programmes (OECD, 2024).

Furthermore, participation in Erasmus+ initiatives is growing: in 2023, around 47,000 Italian students and youth workers engaged in mobility and volunteering projects, reporting increased intercultural skills, employability, and civic engagement (European Commission, 2024). These experiences strengthen transnational collaboration and reinforce the sector's contribution to European social cohesion.

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d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

The Italian third sector benefits from a long-standing culture of solidarity and an expanding ecosystem of social innovation. However, the sector continues to face structural fragilities related to financial sustainability, limited access to national funding, and administrative complexity (SGI, 2024; OECD, 2024). Many organizations rely heavily on project-based or EU-driven financing, which restricts long-term planning and institutional growth.

Moreover, the uneven implementation of the 2017 Third Sector Reform Law (Codice del Terzo Settore) has led to inconsistencies in legal and fiscal frameworks, limiting the sector's overall policy impact (Government of Italy, 2024). Low civic participation in southern regions and regional disparities in welfare coverage further constrain the inclusiveness and equity of the sector's activities (ISTAT, 2024).

e. **Recommendations**

Strengthening Italy's third sector requires a coordinated approach combining regulatory simplification, fiscal incentives, and stable multiannual funding. Expanding access to domestic financial mechanisms, such as the National Social Economy Fund, would reduce dependence on European funding cycles.

The state could also reinforce partnerships with municipalities and cooperatives to enhance local resilience and public service delivery. Increasing investment in digitalization, management training, and youth volunteering, notably through Servizio Civile Universale, would help renew civic participation and ensure the long-term sustainability and impact of the third sector.

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15. Martinique

a. Economic and Social Context

Martinique, as an overseas French region in the Caribbean, faces persistent economic and social challenges. GDP per capita reached €27,179 in 2022 (INSEE, 2024), while unemployment stood at 12.3%, peaking at 13.5% in the fourth quarter (INSEE, 2024). Around 29.3% of the population lived below the poverty line, a figure considerably higher than the metropolitan France average and highlighting structural economic vulnerabilities and social inequalities, particularly affecting youth and single-parent households.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

In 2024, the population was estimated at approximately 343,195 (Worldometers, 2024). The population structure in Martinique is composed of approximately 22% aged 0–14, 63% aged 15–64, and 15% aged 65 and over (INSEE, 2024). The society is culturally diverse, primarily of African descent, with European, Indigenous, and Asian influences. The third sector is relatively active despite resource constraints, encompassing around 1,200 registered NGOs, associations, and foundations. According to local surveys, 32% of third-sector activities focus on social assistance, 25% on education and training, 20% on health, 15% on culture and sports, and 8% on environmental and community development initiatives (INSEE, 2024).

Key organizations include Caritas Martinique and Croix-Rouge Française – Martinique, which provide support for vulnerable groups, emergency relief, and community programs. Participation in Erasmus+ and EU mobility programs is emerging, with around 1,150 young residents engaged in 2023, reporting enhanced professional skills, civic engagement, and intercultural competencies (European Commission, 2024).

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c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Martinique's third sector acts as an essential intermediary between public authorities and local communities, particularly in social welfare and crisis response. Organizations such as Croix-Rouge Française – Martinique deliver emergency medical services, psychosocial support, and youth training programs, while Caritas Martinique coordinates poverty alleviation and community development initiatives (NGO Base, 2024). This organization offers volunteering programs that allow individuals to contribute to community well-being.

Funding relies primarily on public sources from both metropolitan France and regional government programs, with supplementary EU financing through programs like ESF+ and AMIF, which together support approximately 55% of sector activities (European Commission, 2024). These resources enable the sector to sustain critical operations despite limited local financial capacity.

d. Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector

The third sector benefits from strong local volunteer engagement, particularly in social assistance and education. Regional integration initiatives, such as Martinique's accession to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 2025, present opportunities for cross-border collaboration in health, education, and sustainable development (Le Monde, 2025).

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist: financial dependency on external funding, limited national subsidies, and rising demand for social services constrain long-term planning and sector sustainability (International Viewpoint, 2024). Administrative complexity and uneven implementation of regulatory frameworks further limit the policy influence of civil society organizations.

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e. Recommendations

To enhance resilience and effectiveness, Martinique should prioritize stable national and regional funding mechanisms, reduce bureaucratic obstacles for NGO operations, and strengthen public-private partnerships. Expanding youth participation through Erasmus+ and local volunteer programs could enhance civic engagement and community cohesion. Capacity-building initiatives, including financial literacy and project management training, would improve the sustainability and impact of local organizations. Leveraging regional cooperation via CARICOM and EU programs can further support social inclusion, poverty alleviation, and resilience to economic and environmental challenges.

16. Poland

a. Economic and Social Context

Poland in 2024 displayed a relatively solid economic performance, with GDP per capita reaching €16,470 (Eurostat, 2024). The overall unemployment rate was 2.9%, while youth unemployment stood at 10.8%, reflecting effective labor market integration. Additionally, 16.0% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, highlighting persistent vulnerabilities among marginalized groups despite a strong economic recovery (Eurostat, 2024). These conditions underscore the importance of civil society in complementing public policies and addressing social inequalities.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

The Polish population in 2024 was approximately 36.6 million (Eurostat, 2024), with 16% aged 0–14, 65% aged 15–64, and 19% aged 65 and over. The third sector in Poland is well-established, comprising over 100,000 registered organizations, including associations, foundations, and social cooperatives (NGO Monitor, 2024). Around 30% of activities focus on social welfare, 25% on education and training, 20% on healthcare, 15% on

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cultural programs, and 10% on environmental and community development (Polish Ministry of Family and Social Policy, 2024).

Major actors such as the Polish Red Cross and Caritas Polska provide support for vulnerable populations, including the elderly, youth, and marginalized communities. Approximately 12,500 Polish citizens participated in Erasmus+ and other EU mobility programs in 2023, reporting enhanced professional skills, civic engagement, and intercultural competencies (European Commission, 2024).

c. **Structure and Role of the Third Sector**

Poland's third sector acts as a critical intermediary between public authorities and local communities, particularly in social welfare, education, and disaster relief. Polish Red Cross delivers humanitarian aid, health services, and emergency response, while Caritas Polska focuses on poverty alleviation, elderly care, and social integration of marginalized groups (Caritas Polska, 2024).

Funding is mainly derived from public sources, including national and local government grants, complemented by EU programs such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and AMIF, which together finance over 55% of the sector's activities (European Commission, 2024). These resources enable the sector to sustain its operations and respond to emerging social challenges.

d. **Opportunities and Challenges for Third Sector**

The third sector benefits from a strong legal framework and high civic participation, with an estimated 2.8 million volunteers active in 2022, representing 7.7% of the population (NGO Monitor, 2024). Programs such as the Voluntary Labor Corps offer avenues for youth participation in social initiatives. Cross-border collaboration through EU funding and programs like Erasmus+ enhances skills development, intercultural awareness, and youth engagement.

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However, challenges persist, including reliance on public funding, limited financial diversification, and uneven organizational capacity across regions. Administrative barriers and regulatory complexity also constrain the sector's ability to expand and innovate (SGI, 2024).

e. Recommendations

To strengthen long-term resilience, Poland should prioritize the diversification of funding sources, including private donations and international grants, while simplifying legal and administrative procedures for NGOs. Enhancing capacity-building programs, particularly in financial management and project design, would improve organizational effectiveness.

Expanding youth volunteering initiatives and Erasmus+ participation can foster civic engagement, professional development, and social cohesion. Strengthening public-private partnerships and integrating civil society into policy design will further enhance the impact and sustainability of the Polish third sector.

17. Portugal

a. Economic and Social Context

Portugal reported a GDP per capita of €22,350 in 2024. The national unemployment rate was 6.5%, while the youth unemployment rate reached 21.6% (Eurostat, 2024). In the same year, 19.7% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024). These indicators point to persistent labour-market challenges for young people and continuing social vulnerabilities that shape demand for third-sector responses.

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b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

Portugal's age structure in 2024 is marked by population ageing and a modest youth share: 15.7% of the population is aged 15–29 (Eurostat, 2024). National estimates show roughly 12.7% aged 0-14, 63% aged 15-64 and 24.3% aged 65+ (INE, 2024). The Gulbenkian diagnosis reports that Portuguese NGOs concentrate their activity in social assistance, education and training, health and community services; recent aggregated distributions put 32% of activity in social assistance, 22% in education/training, 18% in health and social care, 14% in culture/community and 14% in environment and local development (Gulbenkian Foundation, Diagnosis of NGOs, 2024).

The sector has professionalised: paid staff in surveyed NGOs increased by 58.62% between 2014 and 2024, while the average number of beneficiaries reported rose from 3,804 (2014) to 14,259 (2024) (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2024).

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Portuguese civil society acts both as a partner of public authorities and as an independent service provider, delivering welfare, education support, health promotion and community development. Funding patterns in 2024 show a heavy reliance on private donations and non-refundable public funding: 47.3% of NGOs' revenues come from donations by individuals and 42.53% from non-refundable public sources; 52.87% of organisations now report having formal fundraising plans and 32.18% have adopted tax-consignment campaigns as a fundraising mechanism (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2024).

The diagnosis also highlights innovative younger organisations (e.g., MEERU, Zero Waste LAB, Pão a Pão, Surf for Good - Wave by Wave, Reshape) that combine social impact with scalable models, alongside long-established organisations with visibility and institutional networks (e.g., CAIS, APAV, Bagos d'Ouro, ILGA Portugal, APPC) (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2024).

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Portugal is an active participant in Erasmus+ and other EU mobility and cooperation programmes: the 2023 Erasmus+ factsheet indicates that in 2023 roughly 55,810 Portuguese participants travelled abroad under Erasmus+ (participants leaving Portugal) and around 49,896 participants travelled to Portugal, with youth organisations forming a large share of mobility projects and cooperation grants supporting youth and education initiatives (Erasmus+ factsheet Portugal, 2023). The Erasmus+ flows have contributed measurably to participants' employability, intercultural and language skills and civic awareness in national evaluations (Erasmus+ factsheet, 2023).

d. **Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector**

Strengths and opportunities include an increasingly professionalised NGO ecosystem, growing use of fundraising instruments (notably tax consignment), and access to EU structural funds (ESF+, Erasmus+ and thematic grants) that finance employment, inclusion and youth programmes (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2024).

Main challenges are twofold. First, financial fragility: the sector still depends heavily on short-term, project-based funding and on a narrow set of revenue streams (private donations and non-refundable public funding), which limits multi-annual planning and investment in monitoring. Second, capacity and governance gaps: although staff numbers grew, NGOs report difficulties in board renewal, volunteer retention and management skills, and many smaller organisations face administrative burdens and limited access to larger funding instruments (Gulbenkian Foundation, 2024). These constraints reduce the ability to scale promising pilots and to sustain long-term social programmes across regions.

e. **Recommendations**

To consolidate impact and sustainability, Portugal should: develop multi-annual co-financing schemes that combine national co-funding with EU project support to stabilise NGO budgets; expand and professionalise fundraising capacity (wider adoption of tax consignment, digital fundraising

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and corporate partnerships) so organisations rely less on short-term grants; invest in governance and human-resource development (board renewal, volunteer management and managerial training) to reduce turnover and increase strategic planning; and simplify administrative compliance for small organisations and create tailored access routes to EU funds (fast-track consortia, capacity grants) to reduce entry barriers and regional asymmetries. Concrete examples of where these measures can have immediate effect include scaling proven models such as Pão a Pão (social inclusion through food-based services) and supporting innovation hubs like Zero Waste LAB to move from pilot to stable operations with longer funding horizons.

18. Romania

a. Economic and Social Context

Romania reported a GDP per capita of €13,100 in 2024. The overall unemployment rate was 5.4%, while youth unemployment stood at 23.9% (Eurostat, 2024). Moreover, 27.9% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). These figures reflect a mixed scenario: relatively low general unemployment but very elevated youth unemployment and social exclusion, underlining major structural and inclusion-related challenges.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

Romania's youth population (ages 15–29) comprised 16.0% of the total population in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). The population structure shows approximately 15% aged 0-14, about 66% aged 15-64, and 19% aged 65 or over (Eurostat projections).

According to a 2024 report by the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF), the NGO sector generated revenues exceeding RON 21 billion (1.51% of GDP) at the end of 2022, signalling its scale (CSDF, 2024).

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In terms of sectoral distribution, data indicate roughly 28% of NGOs focus on social and medical services, 25% on culture and sport, and 15% on education and training (National report: Romania, European Commission, 2016; CSDF, 2024). Major organisations including the Romanian Red Cross and Caritas România, the key actors addressing humanitarian aid and social services (Caritas România, 2024).

c. **Structure and Role of the Third Sector**

The third sector in Romania serves as a key intermediary between public authorities and disadvantaged communities. The Romanian Red Cross delivers disaster relief, health services and community education, while Caritas România focuses on poverty relief, elderly care, and social integration of marginalized groups (Caritas România, 2024).

Funding remains heavily reliant on external and EU-source funding: many NGOs depend on EU structural funds and grants rather than stable domestic funding. A review of Romanian NGO financing noted that public funding, donations and service contracts are inadequately diversified and insufficiently sustainable (Ceptureanu et al., 2017). Data on Erasmus+ or similar youth mobility programmes in Romania are limited, reflecting a gap in available statistics (National Report Romania, European Commission, 2016).

d. **Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector**

In Romania, the third sector benefits significantly from the country's membership in the European Union, which provides access to EU funding and programs, as well as increasing recognition of civic engagement and opportunities for growth in volunteer activities and youth inclusion. However, the sector faces several challenges.

Financial sustainability remains a pressing concern, as many NGOs rely heavily on project-based and external funding, limiting their ability to engage in long-term strategic planning (CSDF, 2024). The legal and policy framework also poses difficulties: multiple administrative burdens, a lack of comprehensive data on volunteering, and weak infrastructure for monitoring hinder the overall effectiveness of the sector (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, while there is an emerging volunteer culture, limited reliable data on its scope and scale, combined with high youth unemployment and significant social exclusion, create additional constraints that restrict broader social engagement.

e. Recommendations

To strengthen Romania's third sector, key strategies should be: diversify funding mechanisms by increasing domestic fundraising, corporate social responsibility, and service-contract opportunities beyond reliance on EU grants; simplify regulatory and administrative processes for NGOs, create national volunteering registries and build infrastructure for measurement of impact; expand youth inclusion programmes, amplify participation in mobility schemes (Erasmus+ or regional equivalents) to improve employability, civic skills and cross-border exchange; encourage regional capacity-building for smaller NGOs (particularly in rural and under-served areas) so the sector can scale and sustain interventions targeting social exclusion and marginalised communities.

19. Slovenia

a. Economic and Social Context

In 2024, Slovenia recorded a GDP per capita of €25,480. The unemployment rate stood at 3.7%, while youth unemployment (under 25) was 10.9% (Eurostat, 2024). Further, 14.4% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024). These figures reflect a relatively healthy labour market and comparatively low social-exclusion rate within the country's context.

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b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

Slovenia’s youth demographic (ages 15-29) constituted 15.0% of the total population in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). According to recent national statistics, more than 27,000 non-governmental organisations were registered in Slovenia as of 2025, including around 23,000 associations, 4,000 institutes and 260 foundations (CNVOS, 2025).

In 2023, NGO revenues exceeded €1.3 billion, and NGOs employed roughly 13,100 people, representing about 1.31% of the active population (CNVOS, 2024). Sectoral activity is broad, though older studies estimate: sports and recreation (27.6%), culture and arts (17.7%), fire protection (8.7%), education (4.5%), social welfare (3.6%) (National report Slovenia), newer data suggest more activity in social services and inclusion but detailed percentages are less up-to-date.

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

The Slovenian third sector performs a crucial intermediary role by complementing public sector services and fostering community cohesion. For example, the Slovenian Red Cross provides both emergency and development support, while organisations such as ‘Slovenska Filantropija’ coordinate volunteering campaigns and local civic action.

The funding structure is increasingly transparent: in 2023, public funding to NGOs reached around €617.25 million, of which 54.2% of active NGOs received budgetary funds, and the largest share was from ministries (€346.8 million) and municipalities (€138.1 million) (CNVOS, 2024). Formal volunteering is also significant: in 2022 about a quarter of the adult population engaged in organisation-based volunteer work (Statistical Office, 2023). Access to EU funding is visible: for instance a social-economy advocacy organisation project was supported under the ESF+ with roughly €687,000 EU contribution (Gov.si, 2024).

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d. Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector

Slovenia's third sector benefits from strong institutional support, growing public-funding volumes and a robust legal framework (Gov.si, 2024). Yet, challenges remain. Financial sustainability is a concern: many organisations rely heavily on public funding, with limited revenue diversification (Štremfelj et al., 2020).

The sector also suffers from low professionalisation and minimal paid staffing: NGO employment is only about 1.24% of active population (SGI, 2024). Volunteer supply is robust but uneven, and small NGOs face entry barriers and limited access to large funding instruments. Another challenge is the evolving policy/legal framework for social enterprises and social economy models, which remains underdeveloped (EURICSE, 2019).

e. Recommendations

To bolster the third sector in Slovenia, it would be valuable to: diversify revenue streams, including more private philanthropy, social enterprise models and corporate partnerships, reducing dependence on state grants; enhance capacity building, with training in governance, monitoring & evaluation and strategic planning for smaller NGOs to improve professionalisation; strengthen youth and volunteer engagement, for example by expanding structured youth mobility and civic participation programmes, thereby enlarging the volunteer base and injecting new skills and streamline regulatory and reporting burdens, particularly for smaller organisations, and create tailored access paths to EU funds.

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20. Saint Martin (The Netherlands)

a. Economic and Social Context

Saint Martin recorded a GDP per capita of €50,880 in 2024. The unemployment rate in that year stood at 3.7%, while youth unemployment was 8.7% (Eurostat, 2024). Approximately 15.4% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024). Together these indicators suggest a relatively strong labour market environment for the island's size, but one that nonetheless must contend with external economic vulnerabilities and dependency on tourism and external aid.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

In 2024 the youth population (ages 15-29) made up 18.8% of the total population in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2024). On the island of Saint Martin specifically, community reports list around 44,254 residents in 2023 (European Commission, 2024) and active civic-volunteer engagement is reported by local NGOs. The third sector on the island includes environmental NGOs, cultural foundations and social service organisations.

For example, the Nature Foundation Sint Maarten engages youth and schools in environmental education and monitoring projects in the mangroves and coral reef zones of the island (Nature Foundation Sint Maarten, 2023). Another, the St Maarten Sea Rescue Foundation (a volunteer organisation) provides maritime rescue services relying on a 100% volunteer crew and links into community safety, training and youth involvement (Visit St Maarten NGOs list, 2024). These organisations highlight the value of the third sector in a small-island context: delivering services, engaging youth, mobilising volunteers, and responding to local needs that public authorities alone may struggle to cover.

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c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

The third sector in Saint Martin operates across multiple domains: social assistance, education and training, environment, culture and emergency services, often in partnership with government bodies, regional donors and international programmes. The St Maarten NGO federation model, for instance the St Maarten Development Fund which was established in 2012 as the successor to the Dutch-government-funded AMFO, supports local NGOs via grants, capacity-building and social-development funding (Transparency NL National Integrity System St Maarten, 2015).

Environmental NGOs such as the Nature Foundation have signed a cross-border MoU in 2025 with their French-side counterparts to jointly conduct reef monitoring and educational programmes, enhancing volunteer training, data-sharing and project scale (Island Innovation, 2025), illustrating how the third sector contributes to local resilience and cross-border cooperation. Funding sources include local government grants, donor contributions (e.g., through tourism industry partner associations), and eligibility for EU Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) assistance programmes such as the 2021–2027 Caribbean regional programme (EUR 21 million) and the GO Green Overseas envelope (EUR 17.8 million) for island OCTs (European Commission, 2024). This access to EU cooperation mechanisms is a key dimension of third-sector support on the island.

d. Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector

Opportunities for the third sector in Saint Martin include leveraging high levels of volunteer willingness (common on small islands with tight-knit communities), access to EU OCT funding streams that focus on resilience and sustainable development, and the ability to form cross-border partnerships (e.g., the MoU with the French side's reserve NGO) that strengthen organisational capacity and regional impact.

At the same time, major challenges persist. Financial sustainability is a core issue: many NGOs rely on tourism-linked donations, project-based grants or one-off external funds rather than predictable multi-year core funding. Administrative burden and capacity constraints are also prevalent: small NGO teams often have to combine operational, fundraising and service-delivery functions with limited training and support. Volunteer management in a tourism-driven economy can also be uneven, with fluctuations in availability and retention. Additionally, the island's vulnerability to hurricanes and climate-related disasters means that the third sector is subject to external shocks that can disrupt both funding and operations.

e. **Recommendations**

To strengthen the third sector in Saint Martin, it is essential to ensure more stable and diversified funding, reducing dependence on short-term or tourism-related sources. NGOs should enhance managerial and fundraising capacities, supported by training and cross-sector collaboration. Expanding youth participation and regional partnerships, particularly through Erasmus+ and EU OCT initiatives, can reinforce civic engagement and innovation. Finally, improving monitoring and impact assessment would increase transparency, attract donors, and support long-term sustainability.

21. Spain

a. **Economic and Social Context**

Spain reported a GDP per capita of €27,800 in 2024. The overall unemployment rate was 11.4%, while youth unemployment reached 26.5% (Eurostat, 2024). Additionally, 25.8% of the population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2024). These figures highlight significant labour-market and social inclusion challenges, especially among younger generations, despite the size and maturity of Spain's economy.

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b. **Demography and Third Sector Profile**

In 2024, youth aged 15-29 comprised 16.2% of Spain's total population (Eurostat, 2024). The Spanish third sector is large and diversified: reports state that the sector employs around 3% of the workforce, with more than 100,000 non-profit organisations active in social inclusion, health care, education, environment and cultural activities (Career Guide Spain, 2024).

Activity breakdowns indicate that approximately 74% of NGOs work mainly in social action (social welfare) programmes (NGOs Across Europe report, 2017). In terms of funding structure, Spanish non-profits are increasingly diversifying: by 2021, public funding accounted for about 47% of total income, private giving 22% and income-generation activities 31% (EFA-Net news, 2023). Notable organisations include Fundación La Caixa, Asociación Española Contra el Cáncer and Fundación Ciudad de la Cultura de Galicia, which illustrate the size and reach of the sector (CIVIDATA, 2025).

c. **Structure and Role of the Third Sector**

Spanish NGOs operate as key partners of local, regional and national governments in delivering services and implementing public policies, particularly in social welfare, health, immigration integration and education. For example, Coordinadora de ONG para el Desarrollo-España (Coordinadora) unites around 400 organisations working on development and global citizenship in more than 100 countries (GCAP Spain, 2025).

The sector also links into European mobility and inclusion programmes: Spanish NGOs participating in Erasmus+ and other EU-funded projects report improved youth employability, intercultural competence and civic engagement, though detailed national participation data are less publicly available (NGOs Across Europe report, 2017). Funding sources are varied: many organisations receive nearly half of their funding from public government sources (autonomous regions, municipalities, national) and the rest from

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income-generation or private donors (European Commission National Report Spain, 2018).

d. **Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector**

Spain's third sector benefits from the breadth of organisations, growing professionalisation, and increasing public awareness of civic engagement opportunities. However, major challenges remain. First, financing and sustainability: many NGOs depend on short-term project grants or public subsidies, which limits long-term strategic planning (NGOs Across Europe report, 2017; EFA, 2023). Second, the legal and policy framework presents complexities: regional decentralisation, varied regulations across autonomous communities and reporting requirements hinder small organisations (European Commission National Report Spain, 2018). Third, although volunteering is widespread, the high youth unemployment rate and social exclusion context reduce the potential pool of engaged participants, and reliable nationwide data on volunteer numbers and impact are limited (EFA, 2023).

e. **Recommendations**

To strengthen Spain's third sector, it is advisable to: promote multi-year stable funding mechanisms that reduce reliance on short-term project grants; simplify administrative and regulatory requirements for NGOs, especially in smaller municipalities and autonomous communities, to ease entry and reduce compliance burden; enhance youth participation and volunteer-mobility programmes (Erasmus+ and national volunteering platforms) to mobilise younger cohorts and improve their civic and professional skills; and encourage fundraising and income-diversification strategies, including corporate social responsibility programmes and individual giving, as private donations increased to 22% in recent years but still lag potential.

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22. Turkey

a. Economic and Social Context

Turkey recorded a GDP per capita of approximately US $15,463 (≈ €14,250) in 2024 (Lloyds Bank Trade, 2025). The overall unemployment rate reached 8.7% and the youth unemployment rate, for ages 15-24, stood at 15.57% in 2024 (Global economy, 2024). With about 44.2% of the population under 30 and a labour-force participation rate of only 54.2% (UN Turkey Country Results Report, 2024), the country faces persistent labour-market and demographic challenges in terms of moving from a youth-rich to a youth-employed society.

b. Demography and Third Sector Profile

With a significant proportion of young people, Turkey presents a demographic structure in which the 15-29 age group accounts for roughly 24.4% of the total population (IFAD, 2025). In recent NGO needs-analysis surveys, 27.6% of organisations reported operating youth-oriented volunteer programmes and 62.9% noted volunteer management as central to organisational effectiveness (AydınDoğan Vakfı, 2024).

Well-known civil society organisations such as the Green Generation Association and Turkey Protection Association (Korunma Derneği) operate nationally and link environmental education, social inclusion and youth mobilisation, illustrating how the third sector addresses emerging social needs.

c. Structure and Role of the Third Sector

Turkey's third sector acts as an essential intermediary between public institutions, communities and donors. NGOs such as the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) deliver humanitarian aid, health services and youth training, while organisations like the Green Generation Association focus on environmental and civic engagement through volunteer programmes, linking youth training, skills development and community action.

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Funding is a mix of public contracts, international grants (including EU-funded cooperation) and private donations, though detailed breakdowns are limited and many organisations face short-term funding constraints (Turkonomics, 2025). While Turkey participates in EU mobility programmes such as Erasmus+ through associated national agencies, comprehensive data on participation numbers remain limited, pointing to a gap in monitoring the impact of youth exchange and volunteer mobility.

d. Opportunities and Challenges for the Third Sector

Turkey's third sector benefits from a large youth population and growing global connectivity, which present opportunities for expanding volunteer programmes, youth skill development and social entrepreneurship. However, the sector faces multiple serious challenges.

Financial sustainability remains fragile, as organisations often rely on short-term project funding and lack stable core grants, which limits their strategic planning capacity (AydınDoğan Vakfı, 2024). The legal and policy framework adds complexity through administrative burdens and a lack of reliable national data on volunteering and sector outcomes (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, high youth unemployment, low labour-force participation (especially among young women) and regional disparities reduce the potential pool of volunteers and constrain the sector's reach and impact (Turkonomics, 2025).

e. **Recommendations**

To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Turkey's third sector, the following approaches are suggested: establish multi-year funding mechanisms and stable core grants to reduce reliance on ephemeral project funding and enable long-term strategic planning; simplify registration, reporting and compliance procedures for non-profits, while investing in capacity-building (governance, monitoring and evaluation) for smaller organisations; expand youth engagement and mobility schemes, including enhanced participation in Erasmus+ type and national volunteer networks,

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with special focus on young women and marginalised youth to increase civic participation and employability. And yet promote diversified income strategies through private philanthropy, corporate social responsibility and social enterprise models to complement public and international funding and enhance organisational autonomy.

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4. Conclusions

The analysis of the third sector across the partner countries reveals a highly diverse landscape, shaped by different historical trajectories, legal frameworks and cultural traditions of civic participation. At the same time, it highlights a set of common challenges and dynamics that cut across the European context. Regardless of their level of institutional development, third sector organisations play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, supporting vulnerable groups and promoting democratic values and solidarity at local, national and European levels.

In countries where the third sector is more consolidated, organisations tend to show higher levels of professionalisation, stronger relationships with public authorities and a more stable integration of European programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps into their long-term strategies. Nevertheless, even in these contexts, structural challenges persist. Financial sustainability remains a key concern, with many organisations heavily dependent on public or European funding, which can limit their strategic autonomy and long-term planning capacity. Administrative complexity and increasing reporting requirements also place significant pressure on organisational resources, often diverting time and energy away from direct work with communities and volunteers.

In partner countries where the third sector is less structured or still evolving, the analysis points to a strong social commitment and a high level of motivation among organisations and volunteers, particularly young people. In these contexts, volunteering often takes on a more informal and community-based character, closely linked to immediate local needs. However, the lack of clear legal frameworks, limited access to stable funding and reduced experience in managing European projects hinder the consolidation of organisations and their ability to scale up their impact. As a result, many initiatives remain small-scale and highly dependent on individual engagement rather than institutional capacity.

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Across all countries, youth volunteering emerges as an area with significant untapped potential. While many young people express interest in solidarity actions and social engagement, this interest does not always translate into sustained and meaningful participation. Barriers such as limited access to clear and accessible information, the perceived complexity of European programmes, and the lack of social and professional recognition of volunteering experiences contribute to this gap. These challenges are particularly pronounced in rural, remote and insular areas, where opportunities for participation are scarcer and organisations often operate with fewer resources and weaker support structures.

The comparative analysis also underlines the added value of transnational networks and European cooperation. Organisations that are part of international networks tend to demonstrate greater resilience, enhanced learning capacities and a stronger ability to involve young people with fewer opportunities. In this sense, European cooperation goes beyond funding mechanisms and acts as a catalyst for social innovation, capacity building and the strengthening of a shared European identity rooted in participation and solidarity.

Overall, the findings suggest that the European third sector is at a critical point of transition. Recent social, economic and environmental crises have increased both the demand for social action and the pressure on civil society organisations. Volunteering and solidarity initiatives have proven to be essential tools in responding to these challenges, but their long-term effectiveness depends on the existence of supportive ecosystems that ensure quality, sustainability and meaningful impact. Strengthening the third sector and youth volunteering should therefore be understood as a shared responsibility involving civil society, public institutions and European programmes alike.

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5. General recommendations

Based on the analysis, there is a clear need to further strengthen the structural foundations of the third sector across all partner countries, while respecting national specificities and promoting a shared European vision. Supportive legal and policy frameworks that recognise the social value of volunteering and facilitate the daily work of organisations are essential. Reducing administrative burdens and improving access to stable and predictable funding would contribute significantly to enhancing organisational sustainability and long-term planning.

Capacity building should remain a strategic priority, particularly for smaller organisations and those operating in rural, peripheral or insular contexts. Access to practical training, mentoring and tailored tools can greatly enhance their ability to participate in European programmes and to offer high-quality volunteering opportunities. In this regard, transnational networks and cooperation projects play a key role as spaces for peer learning, mutual support and the transfer of good practices.

To foster stronger youth participation, it is important to reinforce information and outreach strategies that are accessible, youth-friendly and adapted to different social realities. Clear communication about the benefits and impact of volunteering, combined with more flexible and inclusive participation models, can help lower existing barriers. At the same time, greater recognition of the skills and competences acquired through volunteering, both socially and professionally, would contribute to increasing its attractiveness and long-term value for young people.

Finally, the analysis highlights the importance of promoting volunteering and solidarity as core elements of European citizenship. Strengthening cooperation between civil society organisations, public authorities and young people not only improves the quality and reach of social interventions, but also reinforces a sense of belonging to a common European project grounded in shared values. Within this framework, initiatives such as the present project represent a strategic opportunity to contribute to a more connected, resilient and inclusive third sector capable of responding collectively to current and future societal challenges.

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