

The Third sector in Europe: Does it exhibit a converging movement?

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The European Union in its widening movement shows five clusters of civil society organisations with complex bonds and ties with the surrounding societies and national identities

In introduction, we compare briefly the Europe's Third sector features to North America's ones (Historical and ideological roots, relationship with central and local governments, sources of income and composition of the Third sector...)

In a first part, the European Third sector is broken up into five clusters (Esping-Andersen, Salamon and Anheier) : Continental, Anglo-saxon, Nordic, Mediterranean and Oriental according to :

- The relationship to the government (central/local, high/low level of taxation)
- The ratio of social protection to GDP, the share of public social expenditure and the dominant type of social security regime
- The main religions and their links with parts of the Third sector
- The labour market situation (unemployment, flexibility, security) with a special attention devoted to female work (employment rate; full time or part time) in relation with volunteering.

Then we give data issued from the Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP2, Salamon et alii, 2004) on paid employment and volunteering, level and orientation of the partnership with the government, sources of income in every cluster. We show how these data are shaped by the above mentioned surrounding features as well as by historical background.

The second part is devoted to the question of a likely convergent evolution of these clusters :

- A faster growth rate in new member states makes them catch up gradually the other ones and choose "best practices" regarding social policies and social security regimes
- The trend to decentralisation in larger member states combined with the retrenchment of central government is in favour of local solutions to local issues and of public-private partnerships especially with nonprofit organisations.
- More attention is paid by European authorities to civil society organisations to fill the gap of democracy and fight European bureaucracies.