



# EUROPE

ACTIVE CITIZENS.  
THRIVING COMMUNITIES



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## POLICY PAPER

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL  
OF THE THIRD SECTOR  
FOR SOCIAL ACTION AND  
CHANGE

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Partners



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The third sector - the part of an economy or society comprising non-governmental and non-profit-making organizations or associations, including charities, voluntary and community groups, cooperatives, etc. - has been increasingly recognised by the European Union (EU) as an important economic force, but mainly as a powerful vehicle to create more sustainable, just and cohesive communities. This sector, also known as the social economy, is the third largest economic workforce in the EU, which demonstrates how important it is to invest in and create more opportunities for it to grow. The third sector includes a wide range of organisations: NGOs, Foundations, Social Enterprises, Cooperatives, Associations, and many others. Even though they have legal specificities and may differ in the way they act, they all have something in common: a strong social mission, which they work towards daily.

The **NGEurope project** has a number of key objectives but it is primarily focused on raising awareness for the importance and value of the third sector. Despite it being such a strong workforce, the general public in many EU countries is still unfamiliar with it. Another main objective of this project was to train NGO leaders, or potential leaders, and demonstrate different, more effective and sustainable ways of managing organisations within the third sector. The training was intended to be inspiring and motivating for civic participation at a local, regional, national and even international level. NGEurope produced research on key issues faced by NGOs that will hopefully trigger further examination by decision makers at national level or within the European context, and could be considered a reference point for similar initiatives.

**The main aim of this document is to communicate the potential of the third sector and advise policy makers on why and how to invest and support it.**

**The importance of the third sector (or social sector) not only at an economic level, but also for the promotion of more resilient and sustainable communities, is recognised worldwide by governmental agencies and the United Nations. The EU, in particular, has been very supportive of this sector and made a significant effort to monitor, evaluate and quantify its impact in Europe.**

## A. Rationale

The level of impact of the social sector in a certain country or community is visible when we look at the levels of civic participation of that community, their well-being and empowerment.

A good and functional social sector can mean an increase of job opportunities within a community. This is true largely because NGOs and other social sector entities are able to respond to issues within the community (environmental, social, cultural, well-being, etc) in a an effective, fast, autonomous and personalised way. Many of these entities are local and work closely with the community, which allows them to deeply understand the problems and to find comprehensive solutions.

This is something that large public institutions and governmental agencies may struggle to do, whether for bureaucratic reasons or lack of practical understanding about the community's dynamics, problems and its people.





The third sector is a major economic force in Europe, accounting for 13% of the European workforce, which corresponds to an estimated 29.1 million workers (both paid and voluntary) across the 28 EU countries and Norway.

This means that the third sector is the third largest “workforce” of any industry in Europe. However, despite these impressive statistics, there are still some European countries where the third sector entities are not seen as important or valuable.

In countries like Portugal or Greece, civic participation levels are much lower than the European average and many people do not even recognise the importance of the sector.

**This is how NGEurope came about. There is a discrepancy amongst European countries in the recognition and valorisation of the third sector as an important sector, both at economic and sociological levels. There is a general need for more and better civic participation. NGEurope comes from the necessity of raising awareness of the importance of the work developed by NGOs and other third sector entities in Europe, and from the need to act and to take responsibility for common issues, mainly at an environmental and social level.**

## B. Objectives

The main objective of NGEurope is to empower a new generation of community leaders and to support NGOs that already exist by sharing successful stories and role models from across Europe as examples of good, replicable practices. There are seven partners from five countries that joined together to improve their understanding of the third sector within their countries and to develop tools to support NGOs and social ventures across Europe and the world: Município de Lousada (Portugal), Associação BioLiving (Portugal), PlaySolutions (Portugal), CeseFor Foundation (Spain), Leave No Trace (Ireland), E.N.T.E.R. (Austria) and Athens University of Business and Economics (Greece).

NGEurope was designed for people interested in the social sector, ranging from those who just want to be more proactive in their communities, or want to start an NGO or social venture and are unsure where to begin, to those that are already involved in and/or managing an NGO/social venture and want to learn new approaches.

As such, NGEurope seeks to:

**Demonstrate how important and effective the third sector is on issues such as employment, innovation, climate change, education and poverty/social exclusion.**

**Demonstrate that NGOs can, and should be, considered great opportunities for job creation as much as for social impact.**

**Inspire people to be more pro-active in order to build more resilient and self-sufficient communities.**

**Educate and empower people in issues as leadership and social and environmental entrepreneurship so that they feel ready to become role models as community leaders.**

**Provide opportunities for people to connect and network with NGOs/social ventures sharing common passions and missions to create change and learn from them.**

**To inspire the creation of new formal or informal civic movements or social ventures.**

**Encourage NGOs that tackle environmental issues to also foster social integration by creating jobs for socially segregated or low-skilled persons. segregadas o poco calificadas.**

**Share key competencies with the participants to embrace sustainability and align their individual expectations with environmental protection, social inclusion and economic growth.**

## C. Methodology

In order to achieve the proposed objectives and reach the target audiences, the methodology adopted in the NGEurope project included the development of several intellectual outputs, the implementation of multiplier events, in person training courses and a mentoring programme as well as several project dissemination approaches.

The first stage of the project was to establish baseline research about the social sector in each partner country. This research was an analysis of the public perception of the work and importance of NGOs and other civic movements, in solving common problems in each of the five partner countries. It highlighted the major struggles of the social sector in each country, the training needs for community leaders and the opportunities that the social sector offers across Europe. As such, the report “NGOs Across Europe: a Research Report to Diagnose Opportunities and Needs” helped to create a framework for NGEurope and a base from which all the outputs of the project were created and could be adapted to each country’s requirements.

With the initial research completed, the second stage of the project included the development of the remaining outputs and the implementation of the following project toolkits:

**“Induction to mentoring NGO Interns – Helping your intern get the most from their placement”,**

a guide mainly for NGOs or social ventures that do not have much experience in receiving volunteers and interns. In this document it is possible to find advice and tips on how to welcome the interns, how to communicate with them, how to solve conflicts and how to be the best mentor possible.

**Training Course “Green and Social NGO Leadership” Package,**

aiming at sharing practical knowledge on how to manage an NGO, identify the skills needed to be a successful NGO leader, and provide important tools for those looking to start a new project.

**Online Platform and Observatory,**

an open resource where with access to all the information about the project, the available outputs and also the Observatory to showcase examples of successful NGOs in the five different countries. We believe that demonstrating these real and replicable role models are an effective way to show new methods and approaches to leadership.

**Survival guide for NGO Founding and Funding,**

a guide adapted to each of the five partner countries where it is possible to find tips on how to found an NGO (processes, main bureaucracies, first steps, tips and advice), together with examples of funding opportunities and guidance on how to create a diverse set of funding channels.

**Policy Paper,**

a document that intends to demonstrate the need to redefine and create new strategies and policies within the third sector across Europe.

**Layman Report,**

a document that will summarise the NGEurope project, its results, outcomes and main lessons learned. This report will also provide evidence-based, critical discussion on the role that NGOs and civic action groups have in promoting change for achieving collective sustainability (environmental, social and economic).

All these outputs were aimed to reach a broader audience, however, the NGEurope project also organised face-to-face events to encourage people to interact, share experiences, learn from one another and attend training on entrepreneurship, leadership and social economy. These events and activities included seminars, training courses and job shadowing programmes impacting the lives of hundreds of people.

In order to disseminate NGEurope even further, several communication methods were adopted. Throughout the project's life cycle, various brochures and newsletters were produced and distributed via all the partners' communication channels. A set of videos about the project's message, showcasing successful examples of NGOs, was also produced facilitating a truly international outreach of the pedagogical training activities .

## D. Impact

Although the third sector is a major contributor to Europe's workforce and has a big impact on the European Communities, it still faces significant challenges to overcome. Firstly, many EU countries have complex legislation, requiring bureaucratic processes to establish and manage an NGO, which makes it harder to work within the third sector. Also, the difficulties to access some funding opportunities, the lack of creativity when looking for new funding mechanisms or even some funding restrictions NGOs may face, limits the third sector to reach its full potential. It is also important to note that in some EU countries there is still a sense of cynicism and lack of awareness of the importance of the third sector in the economy and in society. This results in low volunteering rates in those EU countries, lack of support from the communities and even local/national governments.

In addition there are issues such as lack of management, communication and marketing skills of the NGO leaders/volunteers, lack of long term vision for their project, lack of qualified people within the institutions or the "learn-as-you-go" approach. Yet despite all this, there is still a great need for projects like NGEurope to promote awareness around the third sector, communicate the work of successful NGOs as role models and to foster leadership and entrepreneurship training to NGO leaders.

As such, in every partner country, NGEurope promoted several events and activities in order to directly involve and impact members of the local communities. In total, there were seven multiplier events implemented. These seminars were community events, in a semi-formal environment where participants could get to know more about NGEurope, its opportunities and the available outputs. They offered opportunities to learn about successful NGOs/social ventures as role models in their countries and share their experiences, and to network. These events were intended to share the project's message to a vast audience and inspire the participants to be more proactive and get involved in their communities. We were able to involve around 300 participants and 30 NGOs in these events.

The project also promoted a five-day "Green and Social NGO Leadership" training course, delivered in every partner country in a multicultural setting, with people from different countries and with different backgrounds and life-experiences. These courses allowed the participants to learn from the course materials and, above all, to learn from each other.

Around 100 trainees learned more about social entrepreneurship, leadership, idea generation and evaluation, NGO management, networking, among other things. Individuals without business backgrounds were helped to evaluate their ideas in terms of feasibility.

By sharing the basics of social and green NGOs and providing practical tools to create new projects, the NGEurope project managed to reduce the gap between intention and action.

NGEurope is all about showcasing good and successful examples of NGOs (and other third sector institutions) and allowing the people involved with the project to learn from them. As such, NGEurope gave the opportunity to the participants in the training course to also do an immersion programme in an NGO of their choice.

This “job-shadowing” type of programme allowed them to see first-hand examples of good practices in the social sector and to observe and experience the work that these institutions actually do on the ground. It was an opportunity for participants to experience the “backstage” of an NGO and learn from successful community leaders.

### Some testimonials:

“I really enjoyed the fact that I could be a trainee in NGEurope program. My experience beat any expectation that I had. Both the schedule and lessons were well organized and I was given a lot of good information. I was taught a lot about associative management. All trainers were amazingly well prepared and ready to answer any of our doubts, always with lots of sympathy. An enriching week that gave me tools for life.”

*Luís Cunha* (Trainee in the 2<sup>nd</sup> course)

“It was a chance to network, to be inspired and to “start thinking in innovative ways as well as taking actions”

*Mona Fischer* (Trainee in the 4<sup>th</sup> course)

“Opportunities like these are unique in a lifetime: meeting like-minded young professionals that are eager to learn how to be more impactful in their communities”

*Verónica Belchior* (Trainee in the 5<sup>th</sup> course)

**Growing the third sector across Europe is a necessity both at a social and an economic level.** NGEurope showed that NGOs, and other third sector institutions, are great enhancers of local economy and social cohesion, representing an extremely important employment source while also suppressing social gaps in the communities. These entities address issues that the governments are not able to face and they largely represent sectors of society with little or no voice, by offering creative solutions to their needs in a more agile, dynamic, and personable way. Entities such as NGOs work on the ground within and with the communities. They deal with these people daily and, over time, they build a relationship and bond with them, learning about their needs and problems, which is a huge advantage when seeking ways to help them.

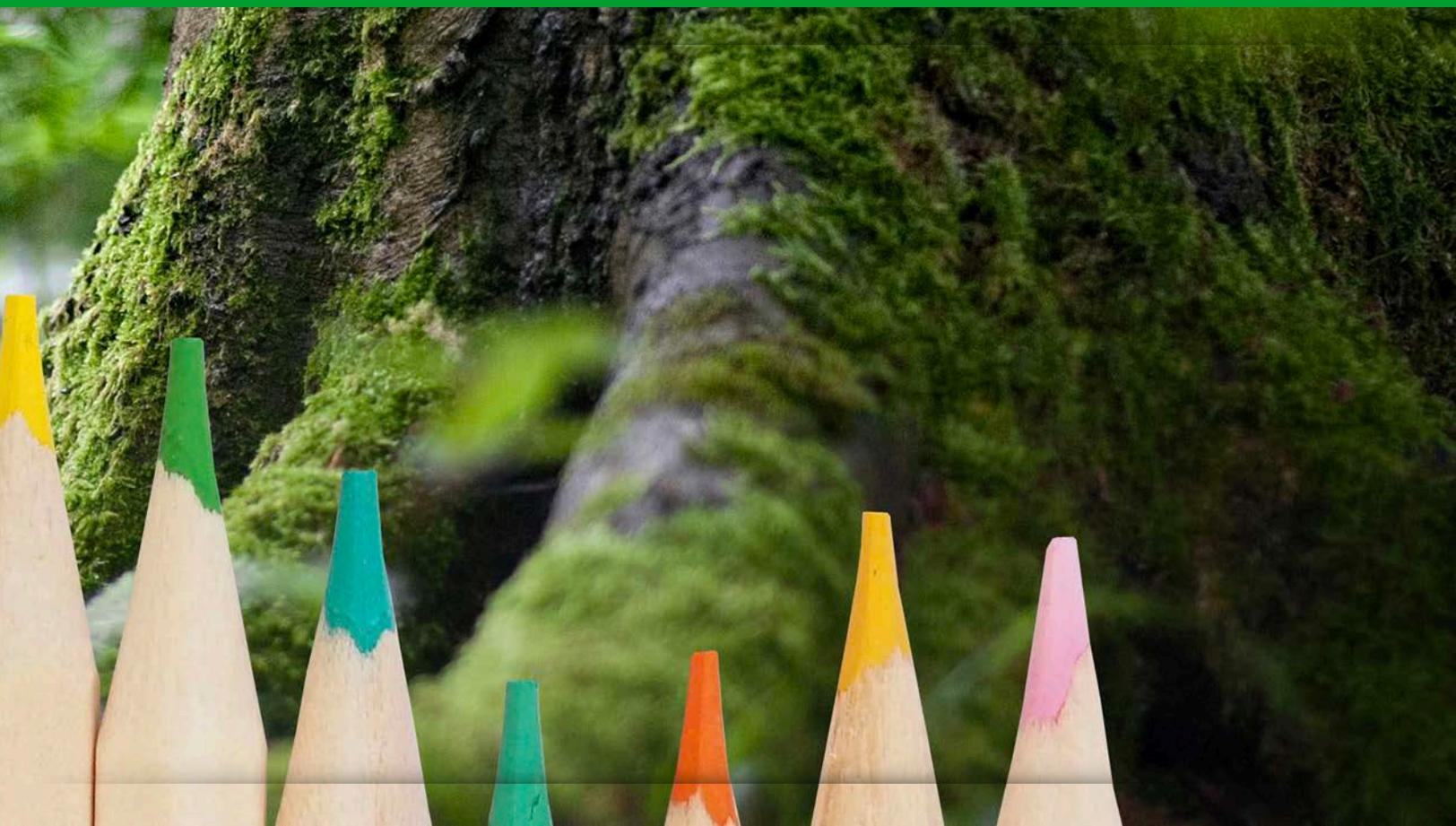
Throughout the NGEurope project life cycle, it was possible to see how effective NGOs are in their line of work and whether they deal with social issues, environmental, cultural, or other matters. They raise awareness for a multitude of issues, bring people together towards a common goal and effectively create positive change within the communities. **Combining altruism, solidarity, participation and responsibility is the basis for creating sustainable and socially just societies.**

However, in order for an NGO and other third sector institutions to have the desired



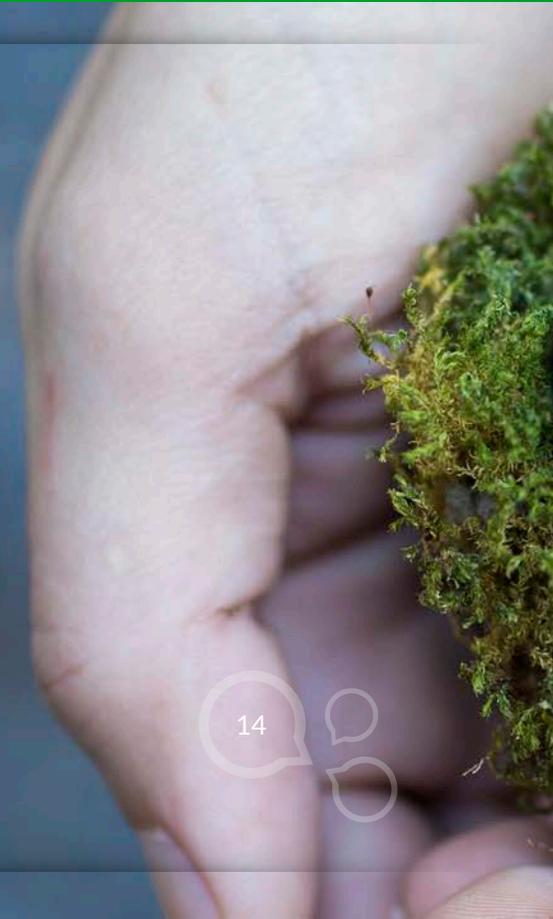
impact in communities, it is necessary for them to **be well structured**. Throughout this project and after interacting with many different entities and people from different European countries, it was possible to understand that many NGOs do not have a defined strategy for their plan of action. One of the main issues is that these entities represent sectors in which the industry or its lobbies are publicly very well represented (for example, forest protection vs forestry industry). Therefore, **if the NGO does not have a solid strategic plan of action, a vision for the future of the institution and an effective communication plan, the NGO will struggle to be heard, to be taken seriously and even to be considered useful** by the local or national governance agencies and their stakeholders.

If the main goal of the NGO (or other third sector entity) is to promote real change towards sustainability and work full time on it, then it needs to carefully chose and plan its actions, projects and funding in order to direct its energy towards its work rather than indirect tasks that don't necessarily bring them closer to their goals and mission. Some NGOs depend on tight government grants, or at least a big part of their budget comes from grants and subsidies. This means that if the money is not well managed there is a risk of spending too much time looking for the next grant, instead of focusing on the work. **If there is a solid strategic plan with clear and targeted funding goals, it makes it easier for the NGO to direct the working energy of its staff and volunteers to what really matters**, and allows them to be creative and explore other funding mechanisms.



One of the main factors for success within the third sector are the **synergies and partnerships** that these entities can create with other institutions from all three sectors (public, private and social). The NGEurope project made clear that synergies between entities in one country or a number of countries, boosts growth and social cohesion within the third sector. **A good network is a fundamental tool for NGOs.** Partnerships allow entities to reach a larger and more diverse audience, share costs and responsibilities and ultimately have a bigger impact. Partnerships are also a useful way to spread the NGO's message, its work, projects and results.

One of the most important lessons learned with the NGEurope project, is the importance of training NGO' staff and volunteers for good governance of that NGO (and other third sector entities). **Training is one of the main pillars for success.** It enhances individual and collective capacities and provides staff with more knowledge and know-how in their specific field. This means that the staff will have more technical skills, will be more



professional, and will have more confidence. This will result in increased credibility and value to the entity; both from the community and the governance agencies' points of view. **Keeping the staff informed and updated with continuous/regular training will promote the creation of new opportunities, new projects, new partnerships and more innovative solutions.**

There is a real need for training, and especially training programmes for NGO staff and volunteers which, as we have learned, is still not common. Staff and volunteers, and ultimately the NGOs, also benefit from opportunities to **network and connect with other professionals and organisations**. A direct contact with other professionals from the same sector with whom it will be possible to share good practices and build relationships, may help to solve potential difficulties. NGEurope demonstrated that events promoting this **peer-learning approach** are valuable and interaction through educational and training activities may provide **opportunities for scalability** within and beyond regional or national borders.



In today's world of many social imbalances and inequalities, it is necessary to find an economic model that is more just, sustainable, and able to meet the needs of the communities. **Given the right support and the deserved recognition, the third sector may be the answer (or at least part of the answer) for that much needed shift.** Organisations that belong to the third sector work directly in the territory, so they know the realities faced by the local communities.

With their work, these entities are able to produce evidence and turn it into knowledge. Moreover, it is not unusual that people working in NGOs and other third sector organisations have their academic or professional background linked to that NGO's field of action. The advantage for the entities is that these people are often qualified and well prepared to deal with specific issues that might affect the communities.

As such, **policy makers across Europe (and the world!) should look at the third sector as a way of effectively creating impact and positive change in society.** They can utilise their experience to take more assertive and effective measures and ultimately this will promote more sustainable and socially cohesive societies. This is true particularly for social and environmental issues that governments are not able to deal with easily, whether for lack of means, qualified personnel, or bureaucratic reasons.



NGOs and policy makers represent two distinct sides of change; NGOs have the know-how, the will and the field experience; whereas policy makers have the power to legislate. Considering all this, **it is important that decision makers, political forces and government agencies start to involve the third sector more in their decision making and legislative processes.** This involvement can be promoted in many different ways, depending on several factors such as logistics, bureaucracies, subject matter, number of entities involved etc.

There could be protocols put in place between statutory agencies and NGOs such as;

- The establishment of temporary or long-term task forces or focus groups utilising experts to contribute to the discussion and advise on certain topics.
- Cooperation in monitoring the issues being discussed.
- Invitations to round table discussions, involving the NGOs directly in the legislative and decision making processes.

All of these tools, could **create a dynamic line of communication between social society and governance agencies.** Regular monitoring of the NGO's field could also be very helpful for decision makers to have a more realistic and broader perception of the involvement and impact NGOs have on the communities.

**The more committed and involved the third sector entities are in the investigative and decision making processes, the more committed they will be to executing and implementing the decisions made.**

Giving these opportunities to the third sector entities not only demonstrates that their work and value is being acknowledged, but also gives them an opportunity to represent the groups they serve, bring their issues forward and **raise awareness with the government agencies on areas of action that they have been missed or overlooked.** The NGOs would also feel more confident and supported when developing and executing more ambitious projects that would have a bigger impact in the communities.

It is fundamental for the public and third sector to join forces and to promote **a global communication campaign to clearly disseminate the role of NGOs in the communities.** The campaign should focus on; why they are so important, why and how they are working in that particular area or with that particular group, and share success stories.

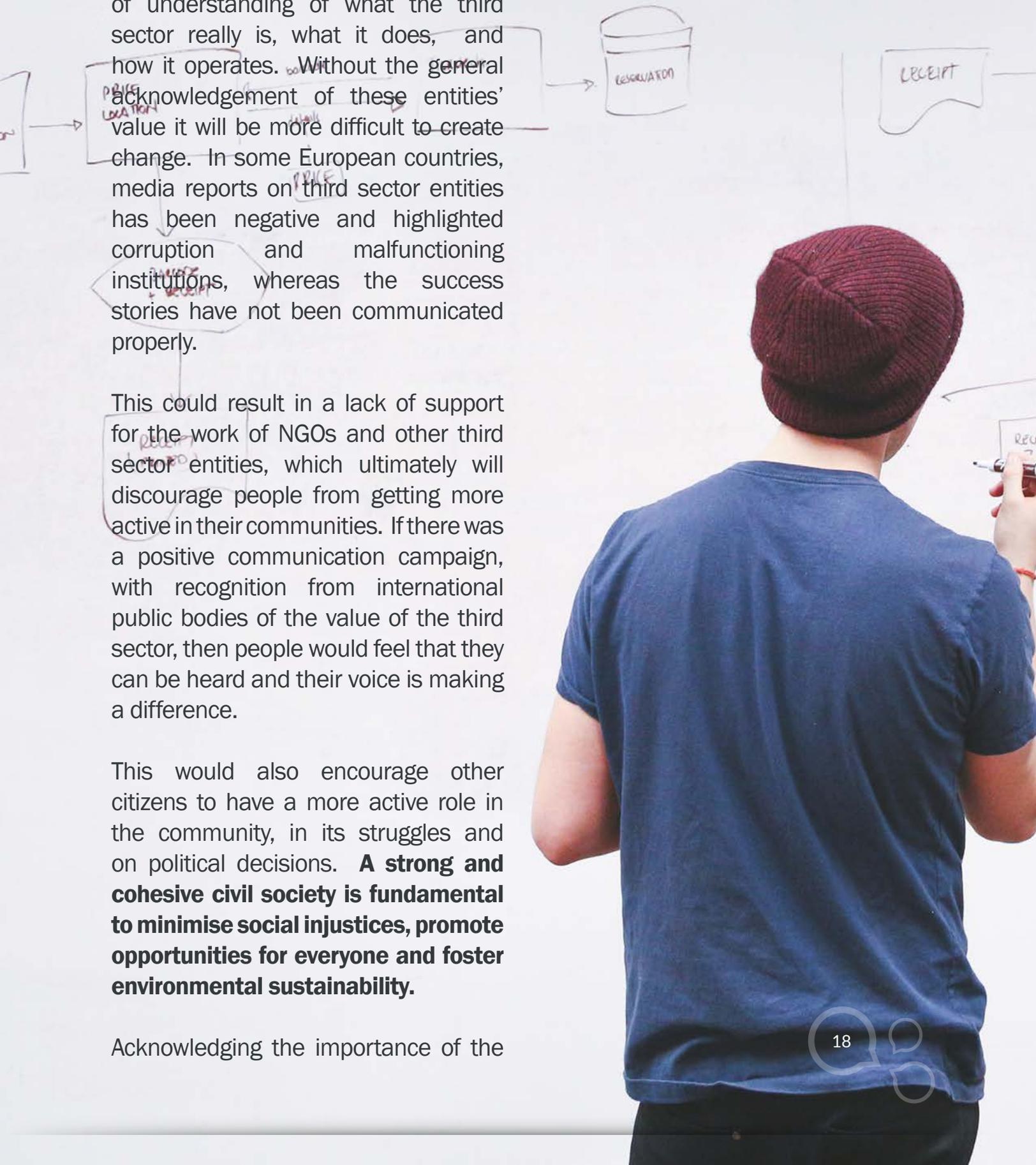
As mentioned before, the NGEurope project showed that despite the great economic impact the third sector has in Europe, there is still a general lack of understanding of what the third sector really is, what it does, and how it operates. Without the general acknowledgement of these entities' value it will be more difficult to create change. In some European countries, media reports on third sector entities has been negative and highlighted corruption and malfunctioning institutions, whereas the success stories have not been communicated properly.

This could result in a lack of support for the work of NGOs and other third sector entities, which ultimately will discourage people from getting more active in their communities. If there was a positive communication campaign, with recognition from international public bodies of the value of the third sector, then people would feel that they can be heard and their voice is making a difference.

This would also encourage other citizens to have a more active role in the community, in its struggles and on political decisions. **A strong and cohesive civil society is fundamental to minimise social injustices, promote opportunities for everyone and foster environmental sustainability.**

Acknowledging the importance of the

third sector is extremely important, as we've discussed, but **it is also essential for the governmental agencies to support the third sector.**



This support may come in different forms and doesn't always necessarily mean financial support. It could be facilitation of logistics for events and activities, such as allowing the use of venues free of charge or by including events in municipal agendas; providing a public building as headquarters allowing NGOs to have work spaces without expenses; involving them in relevant municipal projects; promoting specific training for NGO's leaders, staff and volunteers; among many others. However, despite the importance of non-financial support, it is also important that the public sector funds more projects that promote social cohesion through education and customised training for volunteers in NGOs across Europe. In such cases when a project or an NGO is being evaluated, it is fundamental that the process is impartial and transparent, giving a fair chance to all entities applying for funding.

Supporting NGOs can also mean promoting partnerships with other public entities such as schools, employment centres, nursing homes, prisons, daycare centres, among others; with entities from the private sector; or even with other NGOs and third sector entities. As discussed earlier, partnerships are fundamental for the successful functioning of a NGO and the NGEurope project revealed there are currently limited opportunities for these entities to network and showcase their work.

When several entities partner up for a project/campaign/event, they are **combining efforts and expertise in the search for a more comprehensive and innovative solution to a common problem**, which will maximise the impact on their target audience or field of action. Creating national/local platforms (conferences, fairs, round tables, debates, websites, etc) for third sector entities to **showcase their work** would be very helpful for everyone involved. Primarily the entities themselves would have the opportunity to network; then the community that would directly benefit from the work done by these entities; and ultimately the government agencies would support a more developed and well-functioning community.

In conclusion, there are many ways in which the political forces and government agencies can help the third sector to flourish and develop, for the benefit of the economy and social and environmental issues. What NGEurope highlights is that **a great part of that support will come from acknowledging the value of the third sector, its work and its results publicly.**



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