

# Citizens make society

## Civil socio-cultural work in Flanders today

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### Table of contents

1. A RICHLY VARIED FIELD OF WORK .....	2
1.1 PLAYERS IN THE CIVIL SPACE .....	2
1.2 BETWEEN STATE, MARKET AND LIFE WORLD .....	3
1.3 ESTABLISHED PLAYERS AND INFORMAL DYNAMICS.....	5
1.4 FIFTEEN STREAMS OF CIVIL SOCIO-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT .....	6
1.5 FOCUSED ON A THEME, A TARGET GROUP OR A REGION .....	8
2. THE SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK.....	10
2.1 THE SOCIAL ADDED VALUE OF CIVIL SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK .....	10
2.2 THE NATURE OF CIVIL SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK.....	14
3. RESPONDING TO CHANGE: DIVERSITY, DIGITALISATION AND POLARISATION .....	19
3.1 SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK IN A SUPER-DIVERSE SOCIETY .....	19
3.2 OTHER SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK .....	20
3.3 SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK IN A DIGITAL INFORMATION SOCIETY .....	21
3.4. DEALING WITH POLARISATION .....	22
4. COLLABORATING WITH OTHER PLAYERS IN SOCIETY .....	23
4.1 PLAYERS IN A HIGHLY NETWORKED CIVIL SOCIETY .....	23
4.2 PARTNERSHIP, DEPENDENCE AND STRUGGLE IN RELATION TO THE GOVERNMENT .....	24
4.3 MARKET SHYNESS? .....	26
4.4 COOPERATION BEYOND NATIONAL BORDERS .....	27
5. ALIGNING MISSION AND MANAGEMENT .....	28
5.1 PURSUING AND ACCOUNTING FOR RESULTS .....	28
5.2 SUBSIDY DEPENDENCY.....	29
5.3 BUSINESS POLICY TAILORED TO SOCIO-CULTURAL WORK .....	30
FINAL REFLECTION .....	32
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	33

Every day, citizens around the world work to build a better future. They use the civil space to unite, make their voices heard and realise their social ambitions.

In the Flemish Community, too, citizens engage and unite voluntarily and on their own initiative. As elsewhere, they are driven by interests, values, beliefs and ambitions that they share and want to realise together. They tackle social issues, formulate proposals for the organisation of society and commit themselves to collective interests. Sometimes they join one of the many socio-cultural organisations that Flanders and Brussels have to offer. Other times, they organise themselves into new citizens' initiatives. Civil society provides these civil socio-cultural actors with an ideal place to participate and actively shape society.

What does this civil socio-cultural work look like today in the Flemish Community? Using recent research findings, we outline how socio-cultural organisations and citizens' initiatives operate in Flanders and Brussels today. They do so in a changing world.

## 1. A richly varied field of work

Citizen initiatives and socio-cultural organisations run by citizens together form the civil socio-cultural field of work. This field of work has a rich tradition in the Flemish Community. Governments have long supported these players' contribution to society, including through subsidies. And time and again, citizens raise new issues, with or without government support. The combination of established initiatives and new dynamics makes the civil socio-cultural field in the Flemish Community a particularly diverse playing field.

In what follows, we explore the breadth and complexity of this field. We situate it in the civil space and within civil society, describe the main players and show how richly diverse this field is today.

### 1.1 Players in the civil space

Civil socio-cultural actors use the civil space for their initiatives. This is the space in our society where citizens, organisations, artists, academics, journalists and other actors can freely exchange ideas, take positions, develop initiatives, protest and monitor the exercise of power. Fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association and access to information make this possible.

Citizens and civil society organisations use this space to inform themselves and to influence the way in which their society is shaped politically, socially, economically and culturally.<sup>1</sup> Civil space is crucial for public debate on a wide range of social issues – from euthanasia to climate change, from neighbourhood liveability to post-colonialism, from homeless shelters to workable working conditions. It is not a residual space, but an essential part of a healthy democracy.

Actors in that civil space are not isolated from other players in society. Governments and companies also take positions or respond to what is happening in the civil space.

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<sup>1</sup> Vermeersch, L., Oosterlynck, S., De Rynck, F. & Verschuere B. (2025)

They influence the scope for action of civil actors. For example, the Flemish government recognises the importance of civil socio-cultural actors by providing operating subsidies for socio-cultural work with adults.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, tensions sometimes arise when these actors are critical or take on a political role. These frictions are at the heart of democracy: they keep the public dialogue alive.

In recent years, there have been increasing concerns that civil space is shrinking – under the influence of governments or politicians who deliberately limit the scope of civil society organisations. This debate is ongoing internationally but is also receiving increasing attention in Flanders. Some politicians emphasise the primacy of politics, including in their relationship with the organisations they subsidise.<sup>3</sup> With this primacy, they claim the authority to make decisions once elected, without much additional input from citizens.

## 1.2 Between state, market and lifeworld

Civil socio-cultural actors are one of the players that make use of civil space. They do so in civil society. In this civil society, we find independent associations, organisations, groups or movements in which citizens give shape to their social ideals. They do so voluntarily and on their own initiative, driven by shared values, beliefs and ambitions. They express themselves and show through their activities and services how they envision the ideal society.

Unlike market players, civil society actors do not seek financial gain. And unlike politicians, they are not seeking power or policy influence within government institutions. Dialogue and debate are central to civil society: civil socio-cultural actors exchange values and feed the public debate with their arguments.<sup>4</sup> This does not prevent them from fighting for their rights, values and beliefs where they deem it necessary.

For centuries, there has been a space for collective civic initiatives between the market, the state and the private sphere. In this context, British political scientist Paul Hirst spoke of an *associative democracy*<sup>5</sup>: a society in which citizens voluntarily connect with each other to take responsibility for social issues. They do so in civil society alongside other spheres of society. Figure 1 positions civil society between the market, the state and the private sphere.

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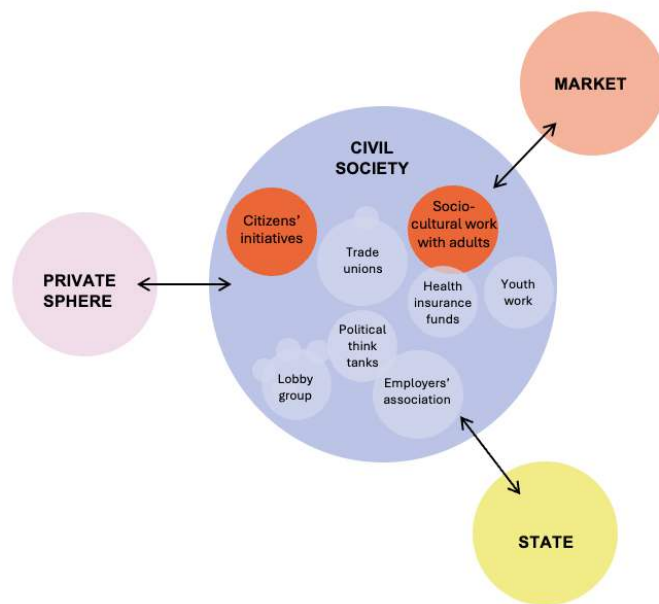
<sup>2</sup> The Decree on subsidising socio-cultural work with adults of 10 March 2023 aims to ‘contribute to a sustainable, inclusive, non-segregated, supportive and democratic society by strengthening civil society’.

<sup>3</sup> Vermeersch, L., Oosterlynck, S., De Rynck, F. & Verschuere B. (2025)

<sup>4</sup> Vermeersch, L., De Malsche, A., Otte, H., Oosterlynck, S. & Gielen, P. (2023)

<sup>5</sup> Hirst, P. (1993)

Figure 1: civil society alongside other spheres of society



Within civil society, we find a wide variety of organisations. This field is complex and constantly changing. This makes it difficult to clearly define civil society organisations. Researchers<sup>6</sup> therefore do not formulate a conclusive definition, but rather several characteristics that organisations must meet to be considered part of civil society:

- civil society organisations are mission-driven and strive for social or societal added value; any profits are reinvested in their operations or objectives;
- they strive for social change and thus take on a “political role”;
- and/or
- they provide services that are not exclusively private, such as public services or community-oriented services;
- they originate from society and not on the initiative of the government.

Many different organisations meet these characteristics. Within the Flemish Community, this civil society includes trade unions, health insurance funds, interest groups, social movements, action groups, non-profit organisations in welfare, health and education, and associations including sports clubs and amateur arts groups. Interest groups focus on representing interests. Social movements and action groups – from progressive to conservative – influence public debates. Non-profit organisations in welfare provide services, while many associations focus on social contact and community building.

To provide some clarity amid the great diversity of civil society actors, researchers at CSI-Flanders<sup>7</sup> have identified three sectors:

1. **Welfare** – institutions and associations active in care and welfare;
2. **Social economy** – social enterprises such as thrift shops and sheltered workshops

<sup>6</sup> Oosterlynck, S., Verschuere, B. & Verhaeghe, B. (2019)

<sup>7</sup> A large-scale research project on the challenges facing civil society in Flanders, supported by the Flemish Government (VLAIO-SBO).

### 3. Socio-cultural work – which we will focus on further in this contribution.

Table 1 shows the number of civil society organisations per sector that the researchers identified in the Flemish Community in 2019.

Table 1: civil society organisations from the sample population of Flemish civil society (CSI Flanders)<sup>8</sup>

Sector	Number	%
welfare	571	23.05
social economy	159	6.42
socio-cultural work (social associations and organisations)	1,747	70.53
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,477</b>	

In total, they counted 2,477 organisations. Compared to many other countries, Flanders has more structured and institutionalised consultation between the government and civil society, as well as generous financial support. This has led to a highly developed civil society and a government that relies on the expertise, organisational strength and services of civil society organisations in many areas. Today, however, these established values are increasingly being called into question by changing political power relations and growing debate about the role of civil society actors and civil space.<sup>9</sup>

#### 1.3 Established players and informal dynamics

In addition to established civil society organisations, civil society also includes countless informal associations of citizens. Citizens' initiatives come and go, bringing new dynamics to the field. They differ from temporary actions, such as demonstrations, and from very informal associations, such as neighbours doing each other's shopping. New themes keep emerging that encourage citizens to organise themselves around a shared goal. Researchers have noted a clear increase in the number of citizens' initiatives; some even speak of an exponential increase.<sup>10</sup> In many Western democracies, empowered citizens are increasingly stepping forward to counterbalance the decisions of authorities and market players. They are entering a wide range of social domains – from healthcare to welfare, security, integration, culture and international solidarity. They are also focusing on more physical domains, such as landscape, nature, food, the environment, energy and mobility.

A group of citizens with a common goal quickly develops organisational characteristics. Nevertheless, fledgling citizens' initiatives differ greatly from more formal players. They rarely have a fixed structure or meeting culture, and formalities are not their primary concern in the initial phase. Many initiatives remain informal, while others continue to grow. Some seek government support, for example in the form of subsidies for socio-cultural work with adults. Others join an umbrella organisation or federation.

<sup>8</sup> Szekér, L. & Van Gyes, G. (2019)

<sup>9</sup> Vermeersch, L., Oosterlynck, S., De Rynck, F. & Verschuere B. (2025)

<sup>10</sup> Jans, M. & Vanderhulst, N. (2021)

We cannot fully map the collection of informal citizens' initiatives. We have too little data and knowledge about these newcomers to the civil socio-cultural field. We know much more about the larger, older and recognised organisations than we do about the small, spontaneous initiatives that are emerging today.<sup>11</sup> This knowledge gap inevitably influences the picture we paint here of civil socio-cultural work in the Flemish Community.

#### 1.4 Fifteen streams of civil socio-cultural engagement

Civil socio-cultural actors differ from each other not only in the way they organise themselves – from informal to formal – but also in the themes and issues they address. Through their socio-cultural practices, they shape change in a variety of contexts: local, regional, national or international. In this way, they contribute to the development of individuals, groups and communities and give meaning to a variety of social issues.

In 2019, researchers from CSI Flanders counted 1,747 associations and organisations with a socio-cultural practice in civil society in the Flemish Community. Table 2 divides these organisations into different subgroups.

Table 2: civil society organisations active in socio-cultural work (sample population of Flemish civil society, CSI Flanders)<sup>12</sup>

socio-cultural work / social associations and organisations	number
work, profession, economie	625
youth work	181
new social movements (environment, north-south, peace)	198
religion and worldview	117
health, disease and disability	374
other	238
migrant self-organization	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,747</b>

Many of these 1,747 organisations and associations receive government support at various levels – from local to international – and from a variety of policy areas. In 2025, for example, 128 organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults will receive operating subsidies from the Flemish government from the policy area of culture. Community development work is financed from the Welfare and Health policy area, while youth work receives support within the framework of Flemish and local youth policy.

These differences in support, policy frameworks and policy areas do not always make it easy for outsiders to form a clear picture of civil socio-cultural work. In this contribution, we focus on the 128 organisations in socio-cultural work with adults and on a broader, more difficult to define group of formal and less formal citizens'

<sup>11</sup> Hurenkamp, M., Tonkens E. & Duyvendak J.W. (2006)

<sup>12</sup> Szekér, L. & Van Gyes, G. (2019)

initiatives. In their mission and strategic goals, they broadly indicate the ultimate goal or change they have in mind for society. Broadly speaking, we distinguish fifteen streams or groups of organisations in the field that pursue a similar ultimate goal, and each make a specific contribution to it<sup>13</sup>:

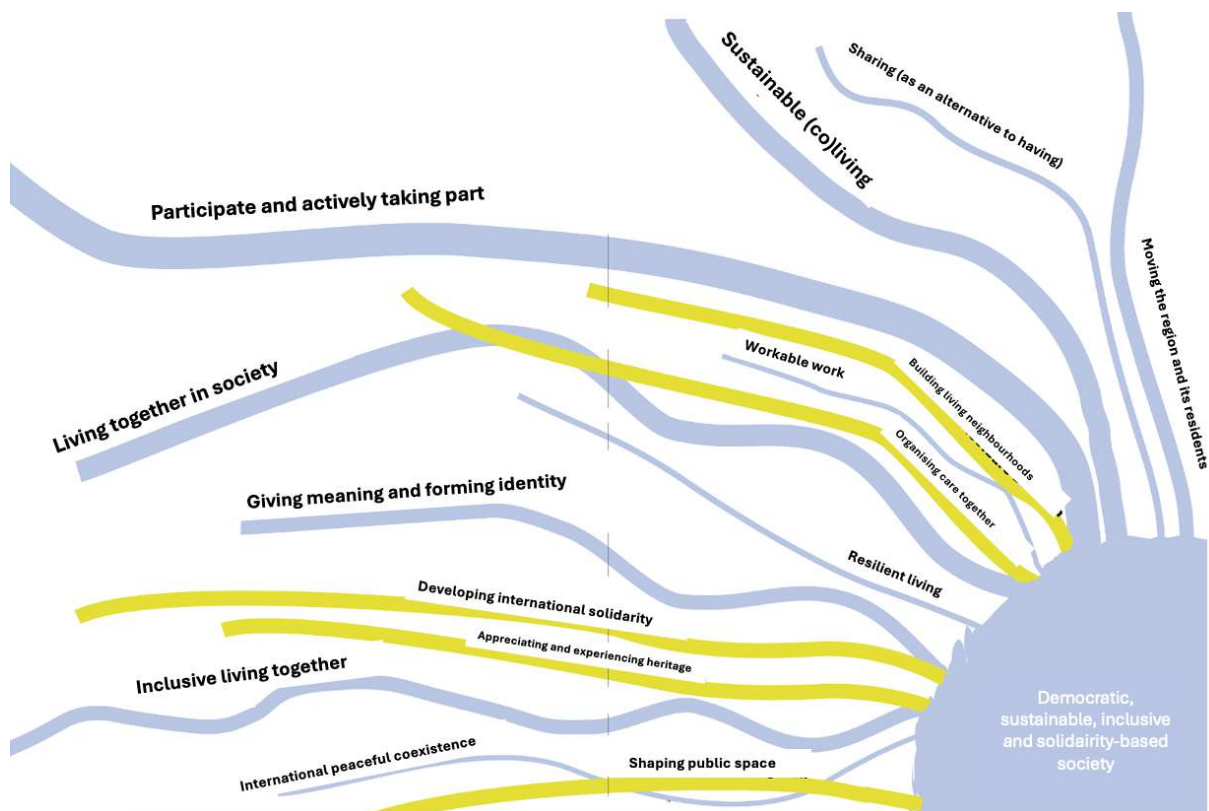
- ***Moving the region and its residents***: regional organisations that facilitate collective educational processes and public debates tailored to a region and its residents.
- ***Participate and actively taking part***: organisations that focus primarily on promoting the social, societal, political and cultural participation of citizens.
- ***Living together in society***: organisations that promote solidarity and involve and address multiple target groups or actors to this end.
- ***Inclusive living together***: organisations that focus strongly on a specific target or disadvantaged group and focus on the social position and structural opportunities of and for that target or disadvantaged group.
- ***Sustainable (co)living***: organisations that focus on the transition to a sustainable society.
- ***Sharing (as an alternative to having)***: organisations that develop sharing initiatives or build on the ideas of the commons.
- ***Giving meaning and forming identity***: organisations that work with religious or cultural meaning and significance.
- ***Resilient living***: organisations that focus strongly on personal development as a lever for various forms of active citizenship.
- ***Workable work***: organisations that work with employees and job seekers to promote workable work and employment.
- ***International peaceful coexistence***: organisations that deal with conflicts between and within nation states.
- ***Building liveable neighbourhoods***: neighbourhood committees, neighbourhood and street organisations, community centres, meeting places, neighbourhood services, etc. that make their neighbourhoods liveable.
- ***Appreciating and experiencing heritage***: organisations that share and protect the value of public goods (tangible and intangible) in their living environment.
- ***Organising care together***: organisations with which citizens shape care together and meet shared care needs that are not being met or are not being met satisfactorily.
- ***Shaping public space***: organisations that respond to opportunities or problems to move comfortably in public space.
- ***Developing international solidarity***: organisations that are committed to international solidarity and a world in which power and resources are distributed fairly.

Figure 2 visualises these fifteen streams.

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<sup>13</sup> Jans, M. (2024)

Figure 2: fifteen streams of the civil-social cultural field.



The 128 organisations in the social-cultural adult work sector are active in the ten streams marked in blue and receive support for this from the Flemish policy domain of culture. Other civil organisations, spread across all 15 streams, receive support from other Flemish policy areas such as development cooperation, welfare and living environment, or from local authorities. Some operate completely autonomously, without financial support from any government – sometimes out of a conviction to preserve their independence.

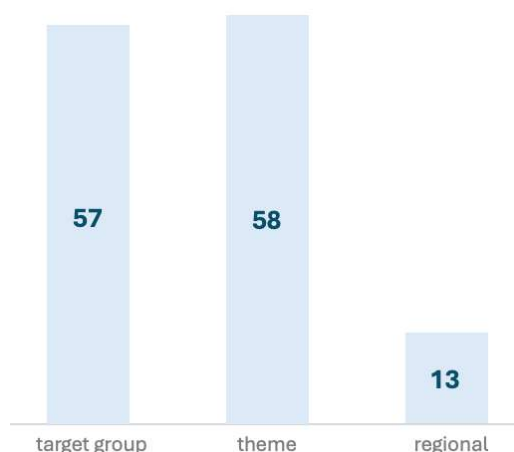
### 1.5 Focused on a theme, a target group or a region

Within the broad range of civil socio-cultural actors, socio-cultural work with adults occupies a special place. 128 organisations are subsidised based on the Flemish Decree on the subsidisation of socio-cultural work with adults of 10 March 2023. In exchange for their autonomous contribution to society, they receive operating subsidies for periods of five years. With these funds, they develop socio-cultural practices for and with adults, mainly in the field of leisure.

Based on their mission, we divide these organisations into three groups, depending on their focus on a target group, theme or region.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022) en Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

Figure 3: socio-cultural adult organisations by focus



### Target group organisations

Target group organisations are committed to a specific group in society and make this explicit in their mission. In Flanders and Brussels, there are socio-cultural adult organisations for:

- people with a migrant background
- elderly people
- women
- employees
- people with mental health issues
- people in mourning
- LGBTQIA+
- people with disabilities
- families
- rural residents
- people with an illness, those in need of care and their carers
- people living in poverty
- refugees
- people who promote Flemish identity

### Theme organisations

A theme organisation focuses on a specific social issue that is central to its mission. The 58 theme organisations in socio-cultural work with adults cover a wide range of issues, including:

- mobility, housing and sustainable food
- raw materials, nature and climate
- ecological gardening, land use and vacancy
- fair trade, sustainable consumption, sharing systems and alternative currencies
- silence, resilience, health, well-being and medical technology
- poverty, racism, gender diversity, relational violence, ethnic-cultural diversity and human rights
- (European) citizenship, political decision-making and crowdfunding
- religion, philosophy, art, culture and leisure
- literacy and work
- world peace

## Regional organisations

Twelve socio-cultural adult organisations focus – in accordance with their decree assignment – on a clearly defined region within the Flemish or Brussels-Capital Region. These *Avansas* work for a broad audience and respond to issues that are relevant to their region, or they bring new issues to the public agenda. They combine broad public outreach with target group-specific initiatives where necessary.

## 2. The specific contribution of civil socio-cultural work

The civil socio-cultural field of work encompasses many different organisations that respond to a wide range of social issues in fifteen distinct streams. Yet they all contribute in their own way to a democratic, inclusive and sustainable society based on solidarity.

How they achieve this contribution varies greatly. And yet there is a common thread running through the many different activities and practices: citizen participation.

### 2.1 The social added value of civil socio-cultural work

Civil socio-cultural work makes a significant contribution to society. It strengthens the democratic fabric and promotes social cohesion. It offers citizens space to learn, experiment and be actively involved in issues that affect them. In this way, they contribute to a democratic culture in which citizens not only vote in elections, but also actively shape their society.

It is not only insiders who are convinced of its added value. Governments, market players and participants also recognise the specific contribution of civil socio-cultural work to society.

#### 2.1.1 Social roles of civil socio-cultural work

The many different players in civil society, each with their own mission, fulfil three distinct social roles<sup>15</sup>:

- providing social services to citizens
- pursuing social and political change
- forming communities

Environmental associations working on nature conservation and volunteers providing care in the neighbourhood are examples of service provision. Trade unions that advocate for better working conditions and patient organisations that strive for better care are examples of political change. Many civil society organisations – such as youth and elderly associations or organisations of people with a migrant background – work on community building. Sometimes organisations are active in all three areas, sometimes they focus on one or a combination of two of these social roles.

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<sup>15</sup> Oosterlynck, S., Verschuere, B. en Verheaghe B. (2019)

For organisations involved in socio-cultural work with adults, three roles are laid down by decree: a connecting role, a critical role and a laboratory role. They connect people in relation to others and with groups, communities and society at large. They question values, norms, beliefs, institutions and rules and conduct and fuel public debate on these issues. And in search of answers to complex social issues, they try out new and better social rules and arrangements.

Socio-cultural adult organisations themselves look back with satisfaction on the fulfilment of their three roles when their socio-cultural practices contribute to one or more of the following results.<sup>16</sup>

### **Connecting role – possible results**

- social, cultural or diversity skills acquired by citizens
- strengthened cultural identity
- less social isolation and exclusion
- more togetherness, contacts and opportunities to meet
- more respect, mutual understanding and warm solidarity
- citizen participation in policy decisions and government institutions
- new and strengthened groups and citizens' initiatives

### **Critical role – possible results**

- more critical citizens and more critical thinking
- plurality of voices and a forum for different points of view
- fake news, disinformation, reliable sources are identified
- interests of specific groups are on the public agenda and are represented
- social support for one's own critical point of view
- participation of groups that have not (yet) been heard
- changed policy, new policy initiatives
- taboos have been broken, perceptions and prejudices have been adjusted

### **Laboratory role – possible results**

- behavioural change among citizens (*e.g. healthier, more sustainable, more critical behaviour, etc.*)
- cultural shift, change of perspective (*e.g. different view of gender differences, etc.*)
- alternative models (*e.g. co-housing, 32-hour working week, alternative currencies, short supply chain, etc.*)
- changed market supply (*e.g. more vegetarian options in the hospitality industry, etc.*)

Citizen initiatives and organisations involved in socio-cultural work with adults constantly adapt their roles to the specific social context. This means that the critical and political roles are interpreted in different ways. Sometimes the emphasis is on argumentation, advocacy, lobbying and influencing policy. At other times, the emphasis is on dialogue and discussing differences of opinion. Approaches to the connecting or community-building role differ depending on whether the emphasis is on bonding or bridging. Bonding – connecting people with shared characteristics –

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<sup>16</sup> Jans, M. & Retana, M. (2025)

forms a basis for emancipation. Bridging helps to overcome differences in society. The service-providing role quickly becomes part of a debate on core tasks, in which services are sometimes assigned to the government and the market and at other times to citizens and civil society actors. Where socio-cultural adult organisations experiment with new services and practices and thus respond to unmet social needs and requirements, they assume their role as a laboratory.

### *2.1.2 Value for governments and businesses*

It is not only the organisations themselves that are convinced of their social added value. Governments and businesses also recognise the value of civil socio-cultural work. Their appreciation largely coincides with the way the field itself interprets its roles.<sup>17</sup>

Representatives of governments strongly feel that socio-cultural adult organisations have a different relationship with citizens: they are closer to the citizen. For them, they sometimes form a useful bridge to the population, especially to groups that are difficult for them to reach. It is therefore not surprising that governments find partners in socio-cultural work with adults to strengthen social cohesion.

Companies also see opportunities in collaborating with socio-cultural adult organisations. The shorter distance between these organisations and specific target groups can be a gateway for companies to a new market for their products or services. Or companies can gain more attention for their own social engagement thanks to civil socio-cultural actors. Consider, for example, a company in the food sector that works with a socio-cultural adult organisation to promote lower meat consumption.

It is not only the bridge to the population that is appreciated. Market players and governments realise that through cooperation or contact with a single organisation, they can activate or reach an entire network. Further on, we will discuss how strongly organisations in the civil socio-cultural field are intertwined. Other civil society players who collaborate with a socio-cultural adult organisation also see this as an advantage.

In addition to the added value of connecting and networking, the research into the appreciation of governments and market players also frequently highlighted the laboratory role as an asset.<sup>18</sup> For other players in society, socio-cultural work with adults is clearly a place where new methods, activities or ideas are created and tested. It is a place where there is room to explore and where it is permissible to fail. Some governments eagerly make use of this laboratory space and pick up successful experiments to implement them in their own policies. The business community also regularly needs the socio-cultural field to explore social, ecological and economic challenges and develop responses to them. What may initially be unprofitable for governments and market players can be tried out in the civil socio-cultural field. If a social or ecological transition or an alternative business model proves successful, it

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<sup>17</sup> Vermeersch L., De Malsche A., Otte H., Oosterlynck S. en Gielen P. (2023)

<sup>18</sup> Vermeersch L., De Malsche A., Otte H., Oosterlynck S. en Gielen P. (2023)

can be adopted. For both the government and the business community, socio-cultural work with adults plays a pioneering role in social innovation.

There is less consensus about the critical role of socio-cultural work with adults. Politicians are currently engaged in a great deal of discussion about this. Civil society actors and socio-cultural adult organisations are entitled to be critical, including of government policy. That is not in dispute. However, not everyone believes that criticism of the government should be supported by government subsidies.

### *2.1.3 Value for participants*

Citizens also appreciate civil socio-cultural work. They do so as volunteers or participants in the activities of civil socio-cultural organisations. In these organisations, they learn to consult, make decisions, seek consensus and compromise. This is evident from biographical research conducted among participants<sup>19</sup>. They participate to pursue their interests. They learn new things, feel stronger in the world, stay informed about social trends and develop as individuals.

In many cases, participating and taking part in citizens' initiatives and socio-cultural work with adults is not non-binding. Some participants seek added value in socio-cultural work with adults not only for themselves. They also want to contribute to the group they join or to others who do not belong to their own group. Or they want to make a difference to society. Participation in socio-cultural practices allows them to raise social issues and do something about them.

And there are many participants in civil socio-cultural work. Population surveys show that between 15.1% and 25.5% of the Flemish population (aged 15 to 85) participated in activities organised by at least one association from a sample of associations that overlap significantly with socio-cultural work with adults in 2020.<sup>20</sup> We estimate that at least 1,250,000 adult residents of Flanders and the Brussels-Capital Region participate in social and cultural adult work activities. That is at least 20% of the adult population in 2020. And 84 organisations in the sector registered a total of 213,661 volunteers in 2022.<sup>21</sup> Figure 4 shows how all these volunteers are distributed across those 84 socio-cultural adult organisations.

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<sup>19</sup> Cockx, F & Bastiaensen, H. (2010)

<sup>20</sup> Siongers, J., De Baere, M. & Lievens, J. (2025).

<sup>21</sup> Own calculation based on SISCA 2.0, data provided by the CJM Department of the Flemish Government

Figure 4: number of socio-cultural adult organisations (N=84) by number of volunteers.



31 organisations work with more than 1,000 volunteer citizens.

## 2.2 The nature of civil socio-cultural work

Through socio-cultural practices, civil socio-cultural organisations make their own contribution to society. These practices evolve over time, but their core remains the same: they are process-oriented and based on the participation of participants. They exert a targeted influence on three spheres: individuals, groups and social structures.

### 2.2.1 Socio-cultural practices

In their progress reports, 128 socio-cultural adult organisations report on no fewer than 105 different types of activities.<sup>22</sup> This multitude and diversity of forms characterise the creativity and ingenuity of the sector. Activities rarely stand alone; they usually follow each other in a logical sequence. We refer to these as socio-cultural practices. These are goal-oriented processes of change that lead to the development of meaning and growth for individuals, groups and communities. They contribute to the construction of a democratic, supportive, inclusive and sustainable society. However, socio-cultural practices also vary greatly. In the field, we observe seven types of practices: learning pathways, group support, projects, campaigns, events, framework training and place work.<sup>23</sup>

**Learning pathways** combine different forms of learning: acquiring knowledge, developing skills, developing attitudes, critical reflection and experimentation. These are classic practices in socio-cultural work with adults. 85 of the 128 organisations report on this.

**Group support** strengthens existing local groups and project groups, stimulates new collective initiatives or guides thematic networks. For example, 80 socio-cultural adult organisations support different types of groups and group dynamics.

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<sup>22</sup> Jans, M. & Retana, M. (2025)

<sup>23</sup> Jans, M. & Retana, M. (2025)

**Projects** offer opportunities to involve disadvantaged groups or to explore new responses to social issues. 71 socio-cultural adult organisations report on projects in their progress reports.

**Campaigns** inform or influence a broad audience or a specific target group. 71 organisations also report on this.

**Events** create experiences and energy, often as the culmination of a series of preparatory activities. 63 socio-cultural adult organisations report on networking events, events or festivals. In doing so, they aim to create a sparkling, appealing and enjoyable experience for the general public or the target group.

**Framework training** supports volunteers in their development and connection to the organisation's mission. Fifty-five socio-cultural adult organisations report on this. They increasingly use trendy terms such as “volunteer academy” for this purpose.

**Place work** focuses on creating and utilising meaningful physical spaces. Thirty-two socio-cultural adult organisations emphasise the importance of place in their progress reports and find inspiration in concepts such as temporary use, safe places and outreach work.

The wide variety of activities and practices is a hallmark of socio-cultural work with adults. This diversity is both a strength and a challenge: it demonstrates the creativity of the field but makes standardised reporting and a coherent image of the sector more difficult.

### *2.2.2 In tune with the spirit of the times*

Socio-cultural activities are taking on a form that suits their time and social context. Some of the 105 reported types of activities are relatively new and are in line with trends or developments in society. For example, certain types respond to the growing demand for experiences, and in recent decades we have seen an increase in “event”-type practices. Activities that use visual material tap into the visual culture. And, of course, digitalisation offers opportunities for new online activities.

Along with developments in society, the manifestations of socio-cultural work are also changing. For example, the Flemish emancipation struggle, the pillarization, the industrial revolution, the reconstruction after World War II, and individualisation and globalisation brought with them specific manifestations.<sup>24</sup> Successively, association work, educational work and movement work took shape. These manifestations can still be found in the field today. Since their inception, they have continued to evolve with the times.

**Association work** originated in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Resistance to the neglect of the Flemish vernacular, the struggle between Catholics and liberals, and the social struggle between classes fuelled the development of cultural funds and associations. Initially, the goal was to enlighten the people and connect them with an ideological movement. At that time, the government played a minor role. It was only

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<sup>24</sup> Canon socio-cultural work Flanders ([https://canonsociaalwerk.eu/be\\_scw](https://canonsociaalwerk.eu/be_scw))

later that government subsidies gradually came into play. Associations are still active today. Nowadays, meeting, development and relaxation flow organically into one another. There is also room for political action in association life today.

**Educational work** took shape after the Second World War under the influence of Grundtvig and Rosenstock. In the post-war period, educational work supported citizens in taking an active role in society. The tone changed from enlightenment to development. Under the impetus of UNESCO and the European Union, educational work has gradually moved towards the ideas of continuing education and lifelong learning. To this day, there are still regional and national organisations active in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults that once started out as educational institutions. The twelve regional organisations, known as Avansas, now focus not only on education, but also on social movement, community building and culture.

**Movement work** gained momentum from the 1960s onwards. The Cold War, individualisation and globalisation, (de)colonisation led to protests in various parts of the world. This led to worldwide student protests, culminating in the May 1968 movement. In our country, too, students questioned *the system* with their actions. To this day, movements raise issues about peace, gender, the environment, North-South relations and human rights. Meanwhile, empowered citizens no longer always feel represented by established civil society actors and are taking their own initiatives to influence public debates.

In addition to association work, educational work and movement work, other forms of socio-cultural work also saw the light of day. Think, for example, of youth work and community development work, which, unlike socio-cultural work with adults, are ultimately supported not by cultural policy but by youth work and welfare policy. Library work and community and cultural centres also took shape over time. Today, these forms of socio-cultural work are largely public initiatives of local authorities and not civil socio-cultural work.

### *2.2.3 Process-based working*

The field develops a wide and varied arsenal of activities and practices: in different manifestations, in 15 content streams, using at least 105 types of activities and 7 types of practices, aimed at different target groups and areas of action (from the neighbourhood to across national borders). Thus, every socio-cultural practice seems to be unique. In the field, we find few blueprints or established formats for socio-cultural practices.

This is logical. Even though socio-cultural practices are goal-oriented, they are process-oriented. They take shape here and now, gradually and repeatedly. The logical sequence of activities within a practice is rarely determined in advance. Often, one activity flows from the effects of a previous activity – one thing leads to another. Sometimes organisations repeat an activity, in better or different circumstances. Socio-cultural practices are not linear, but iterative: a dynamic process in which previous steps can be revisited. Changes in the social context or in the specific situation in which socio-cultural activities and practices take place sometimes require on-the-spot adjustments. Responding to societal events from the bottom up cannot

be cast into a scenario in advance. It is often a matter of responding to opportunities and possibilities on an ad hoc and ad rem basis.

Socio-cultural practices cannot simply be copied from one place or organisation to another. They cannot be planned in their entirety. The process-oriented nature of socio-cultural practices, their iterative nature and their response to events and circumstances make it very difficult to set up unambiguous data registration in advance. This also makes it challenging to report unambiguous data on activities and practices afterwards. Case studies are recommended to understand the logic behind socio-cultural practices.

The process-oriented nature of socio-cultural practices makes the profession of socio-cultural worker a distinct craft.<sup>25</sup> Time and again, socio-cultural workers shape moments, spaces, settings, agreements, interactions, networks or frameworks. In this way, they contribute to processes of change in a concrete social and cultural context. In doing so, they consider the individual contributions of the participants, the groups and the communities with which they work. They constantly balance between imagining a desired future, connecting relevant actors and strengthening support and capacity for action. An entrepreneurial attitude, practical wisdom and intensive collaboration with experts from other fields help them to develop effective socio-cultural practices.

#### *2.2.4 Participation as a characteristic*

Participation is not only a goal of socio-cultural practices. Ownership of the activity itself – whereby participants help determine what, how and why – is also an essential characteristic. Civil socio-cultural organisations involve participants, volunteers, members and stakeholders in the day-to-day running of their organisation. They organise participation in their strategic and operational choices. They encourage their participants to have a say in the form and content of activities. Very often, they use the concept of *ownership* for this purpose.

The importance of participation becomes clear when we look at the tasks undertaken by the many volunteers in socio-cultural adult organisations. Policy plans and progress reports show us that volunteers in many organisations help to steer the organisation's mission and approach.<sup>26</sup> Volunteers take on a striking number of core tasks. These include organising, managing, working in and with groups, helping to determine and represent substantive positions. Many citizens' initiatives are even run entirely on a voluntary basis.

Thinking about and encouraging participation is evolving in a society that is itself constantly changing. Social changes constantly challenge socio-cultural work to redefine participation and give it meaning. Civil socio-cultural actors now use many different concepts to explain their own approach to participation. In the wider civil society, academia, government and society at large, the concept of participation also has many different meanings today. Participation has become an umbrella term. In the civil socio-cultural field, participation is often characterised as “take initiative”.

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<sup>25</sup> Jans (2020)

<sup>26</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022) en Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

This goes beyond merely “take part in initiatives”, joining or making use of socio-cultural practices, informal networks, social services, cultural experiences, policy initiatives or political agendas. Take initiative also means helping to shape and give substance to these things.

### 2.2.5 At the intersection of the individual, community and structures

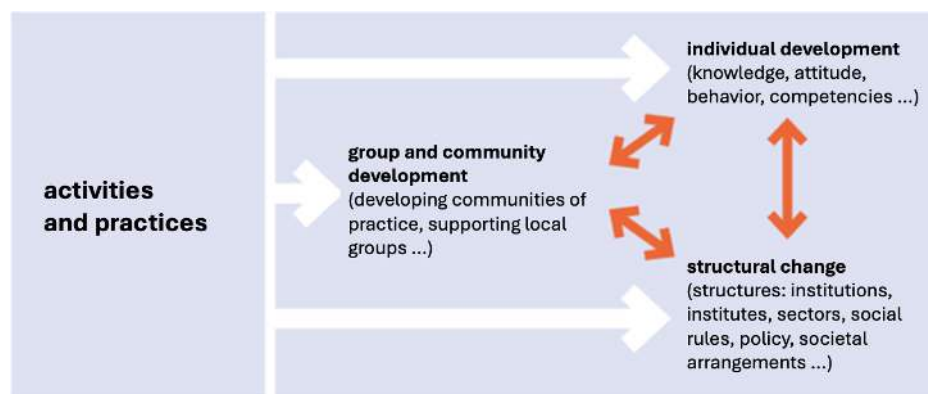
Civil socio-cultural actors take a more nuanced view of social change than what popular wisdom teaches us: “change the world, start with yourself”. In addition to individual change processes, socio-cultural adult organisations also focus on collective action and structural interventions. We learn this from their progress reports.<sup>27</sup> With their strategic goals and associated practices and activities, organisations focus on changes in three different spheres of influence:

- among individuals (*participants, members, volunteers, etc.*);
- among groups or communities (*branches of associations, member associations, citizens' initiatives, commons, neighbourhood communities, peer groups, etc.*);
- among social structures (*institutions, policy, sectors, public services, social rules, etc.*).

The prevailing logic of change in socio-cultural work with adults connects these three spheres of influence: those who want to change something in society focus simultaneously on individuals, groups and social structures. The logic of change is: *"People make society, society makes people, and groups and communities operate between them. To change something in society, it is necessary to influence these three spheres."*

Figure 5 shows the logical connections in the interplay between these three spheres of influence.

Figure 5: general logic of change in socio-cultural work with adults



Organisations do not always develop activities and practices aimed at the three spheres of influence. Nor do they always have the means to do so. They make choices in the logical connections between the three spheres of influence. In doing so, they assume that players from their chosen sphere of influence will in turn also

<sup>27</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

influence the other spheres that are necessary to realise social ambitions. An example: an organisation that focuses primarily on individual development assumes that the individuals it reaches will take the initiative themselves and thus influence the group or community to which they belong. It is then assumed that these individuals, groups or communities will in turn influence the structures in which they operate.

### 3. Responding to change: diversity, digitalisation and polarisation

Today, the world seems to be changing faster than ever. Looking back over the past decades, we see countless radical changes that have influenced the way we live together. Three developments stand out in particular: increasing diversity, digitalisation and polarisation. They are changing the way citizens, organisations and communities live together. Today, they have a strong influence on the agenda and possibilities of the civil socio-cultural field of work.

#### 3.1 Socio-cultural work in a super-diverse society

The population of Flanders and Brussels is changing. The number of inhabitants in the Flemish and Brussels-Capital Regions is increasing due to migration. This means that the evolution towards a super-diverse society is undeniably continuing. After Brussels, Vilvoorde, Antwerp and Genk, the rest of Flanders is steadily following suit.<sup>28</sup> In super-diverse neighbourhoods, no single group constitutes a majority. This shifts the focus from integration to successful practices of living together in diversity. It is not only newcomers who have to learn to navigate a new environment. In diverse neighbourhoods and communities, people without a migration background also face the challenge of learning, working, living and relaxing together.<sup>29</sup>

Not only origin, but also differences in age, gender, level of education and employment, and whether people have a disability or health problems, determine to a very large extent the socio-economic position of citizens. And in Flanders, proficiency in the Dutch language also plays an important role. Many people combine several characteristics of vulnerability, which increases the risk of exclusion.

This challenges civil socio-cultural work to involve all groups in society. Large-scale research into innovations in Flemish civil society shows that most civil society organisations have an underrepresentation of volunteers with a migrant background.<sup>30</sup>

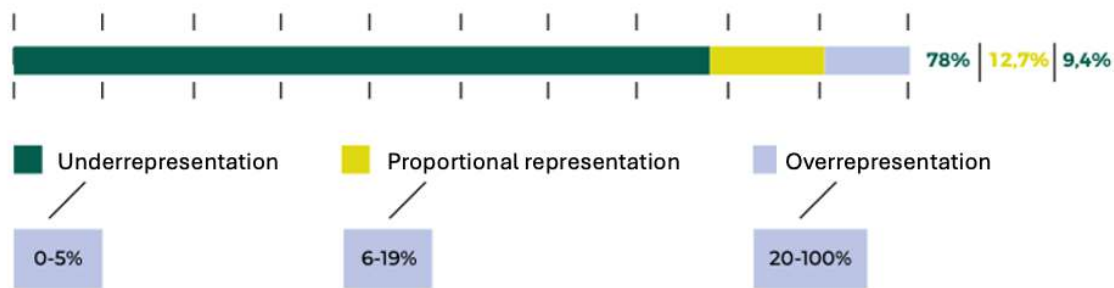
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<sup>28</sup> Geldof, D. (2023)

<sup>29</sup> Crul, M. en Lelie, P. (2023)

<sup>30</sup> Laoukili, F. Oosterlynck, S. en Cools, P. (2019)

Figure 6: proportion of volunteers with a migrant background in civil society organisations



Participants in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults do not reflect the composition of the population of the Flemish Community. The sector predominantly reaches highly educated, female participants aged 60 and over and of Belgian origin.<sup>31</sup> Although some target group organisations focus on specific disadvantaged groups, a number of disadvantaged groups remain underrepresented. Participants with a migrant background will still be a small minority in the participant base of socio-cultural work with adults in 2023. This is a challenge for a sector that strives for the participation of everyone.

Questions also sometimes arise about the potential of citizens' initiatives to contribute to a democratic society for all. Are citizens' initiatives the privilege of and for privileged citizens? At the same time, numerous initiatives are emerging from various communities that remain under the radar. These form an important but often invisible part of civil society. Several authors offer a rich overview of ethnically and culturally diverse citizens' initiatives.<sup>32</sup> Religious organisations and mosques, often organised according to ethnic and cultural origin, are numerous in super-diverse neighbourhoods such as Molenbeek. The number of self-organisations of people with a migrant background is countless. Informal practices are springing up like mushrooms: homework classes, cultural and sports activities, food distribution, legal aid or housing support for refugees.

### 3.2 Other socio-cultural work

In the progress reports of socio-cultural adult organisations, we read how they are looking for ways to appeal to more diverse participants. In the past, they focused strongly on directing new target groups to their existing offerings.<sup>33</sup> In addition to target group-oriented communication, they focused primarily on removing barriers that hinder participation. Although these efforts are valuable, they have not yet led to a more diverse range of participants. Large-scale case studies show that lowering barriers alone is not enough: organisations must also change their working methods to appeal to more diverse participants.<sup>34</sup> As long as the content and methods of the activities remain the same, it will remain difficult to attract more diverse target groups. According to the researchers, diversifying the reach requires a more profound transformation of their operations and offerings.

<sup>31</sup> Vermeersch, L., Siongers, J. en Spruyt, B. (2024)

<sup>32</sup> Schrooten, M., Thys, R. en Debruyne, P. (2019) en Swerts, T. en Oosterlynck, S. (2019).

<sup>33</sup> Jans, M. (2013)

<sup>34</sup> Schuermans, N., Oosterlynck, S., Swerts, T., Vandenabeele, J., Jans, M. (2017)

This insight is gaining ground in socio-cultural work with adults. In 86 of the 128 progress reports, we read how organisations in this sector are adapting their offerings and methods to build a more diverse participant base.<sup>35</sup> The emphasis is sometimes on the approach or method, sometimes on the content of the activities, and sometimes on a combination of both.

Organisations set up activities around widely shared interests, such as cooking workshops or poetry evenings. In this way, they bring different target groups together in a natural way. Or they focus on encounters between citizens and vulnerable groups, for example through dialogue evenings or joint neighbourhood projects. An organisation may also choose to develop its offering together with the target group or to have it developed by the target group itself. They involve them in the content and organisation of activities so that these are better suited to their lives. An example of this is a readers' collective set up in collaboration with prisoners. Or, to involve more 19 to 30-year-olds, some organisations let young people organise activities themselves. They give them the trust and space they need. The initiatives set up by young people are very diverse: from organising lectures and debates to launching campaigns, producing magazines, conducting interviews, giving workshops or setting up larger events such as parties or festivals. Another method is to organise activities that are adapted to the location of a particular target group, for example a neighbourhood park. Some organisations adapt their activities based on the interests and prior knowledge of the intended participants. They label activities according to experience level or area of interest, so that people can more quickly find something that suits them. Or they develop tailor-made learning programmes, tailored to the specific needs of a group. In the sector, 26 organisations regularly work with a buddy to make participation more accessible and attractive. For example, highly educated non-native speakers sometimes support less educated native Dutch speakers.

Some organisations opt for content tailored to specific target groups. For example, they set up a discussion group on a theme that closely relates to the lives of a particular target group. Or they develop content on themes that appeal to a specific audience, such as decolonisation, climate or digitalisation.

### 3.3 Socio-cultural work in a digital information society

In addition to increasing diversity, a digital transition is also taking place at a rapid pace. Digitalisation is continuing in various areas (the market, public services, leisure, etc.) and has become an integral part of our society, including socio-cultural work. The rise of information and communication technology is giving citizens new opportunities to organise themselves. The speed with which information can be disseminated today is changing the relationship between citizens, governments, market players and civil society organisations. Individual citizens can now express their views on social issues and the future of society much more quickly and to a much greater extent than before. It is also changing the way citizens follow the media, communicate with each other, make their voices heard and participate in social networks.

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<sup>35</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

This challenges civil socio-cultural actors to establish their own position in the digital information society. In their progress reports, socio-cultural adult organisations describe this quest.<sup>36</sup> They enrich their socio-cultural practices with digital activities, use digital tools to manage their own organisations more efficiently and increasingly communicate via digital channels. Some are seeking their place in the digital information society through rebranding (a new name, positioning or corporate identity).

The digital transition challenges the civil socio-cultural field of work not only to prepare its own organisation and practices for the future. Some civil socio-cultural actors are trying to understand the social consequences of digital developments and to adjust them where possible. This seems necessary, for example, in the areas of privacy, misinformation and disinformation, online safety and closing the digital divide.

Socio-cultural organisations also support their participants in keeping up with digital developments. In this way, they not only prevent social exclusion, but also tackle mechanisms of exclusion that stand in the way of participation in their own activities and social and cultural practices. Target group organisations that work with disadvantaged groups make a relatively greater effort in this regard. They notice that some participants have limited basic ICT skills, limited knowledge of online safety and privacy, or insufficient access to digital infrastructure. In addition, some target groups are victims of online hate and racism, which discourages them from following digital developments or participating in socio-cultural activities online. To prevent digital exclusion, organisations are focusing on various strategies:

- they work with digital buddies who offer personal support;
- they organise digital cafés and information sessions on online safety;
- they provide manuals and help desks;
- and they develop sharing initiatives in which second-hand laptops are reused.

To respond to all these opportunities and challenges of the digital transition, many organisations are looking for new profiles with communication and ICT expertise.<sup>37</sup> Smaller organisations divide these tasks among existing employees, who receive additional training along the way. Volunteers and consultants also play a supporting role in the digital transition of the field.

### 3.4. Dealing with polarisation

The digital transition also brings with it online polarisation. Online polarisation is the process whereby opinions, emotions and groups on digital platforms drift further apart because algorithms, rapid interactions and strong messages push people into opposing camps. Online polarisation can be rapid and intense, and can also fuel offline polarisation in politics, the media and everyday interactions. This leads to increasing confrontation between people and groups. This reinforces a pronounced

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<sup>36</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

<sup>37</sup> Huysmans, K., Goesaert, T. en Vermeersch, L. (2024)

us-versus-them mentality, which exacerbates the divisions between groups and individuals along social cleavages.

Public discussions and differences of opinion can be productive in bringing about change in society. A democracy needs public debate. This can clarify conflicting positions, dividing lines or conflicting interests. Public debates and discussions often result in social progress or emancipation. From a democratic and socio-cultural perspective, they should be given space. However, if the differences are exacerbated and undesirable polarisation arises, this can also cause damage. If a process of polarisation continues for a long time, society becomes divided and it becomes very difficult to reconcile opposing opinions. This can limit the space for nuanced opinions and be harmful to a democratic society.

It is not always easy for civil socio-cultural actors to deal with polarisation today. On the one hand, a democracy needs public debate to bring about change in society. On the other hand, differences of opinion can drive positions so far apart that they encourage polarisation and cause damage. The more intense this harmful polarisation, the more difficult it becomes to live, learn and work together and to contribute to a united, inclusive, sustainable and democratic society from the civil socio-cultural field of work. It is not without reason that many socio-cultural adult organisations point to polarisation as a major challenge in their grant applications for the 2021-2025 operating period.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. Collaborating with other players in society

Civil socio-cultural actors do not operate in isolation. They build mutually effective strategic relationships (functional relationships) with other actors from civil society, governments and market players. Such functional relationships are regular contacts, networks, collaborations and partnerships that directly contribute to the realisation of their mission and goals.

They attach great importance to functional relationships. Organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults invest a lot of time in maintaining contacts, collaborating, networking and partnerships.<sup>39</sup> They mainly connect with other actors from the civil space: citizens' initiatives, other civil society actors, educational actors and researchers. But they also collaborate with governments and, to a lesser extent, with market players. And they also seek partners beyond national borders.

##### 4.1 Players in a highly networked civil society

In their grant applications (2020) and progress reports (2023), organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults present themselves as partners in a highly networked civil society. Together, they report 961 functional relationships with one or more other players in civil society. This shows how strongly networked the field is today. These include other organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with

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<sup>38</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022)

<sup>39</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

adults, citizens' initiatives or other more established civil society players such as community development organisations or trade unions.

The functional relationships with citizens' initiatives and other civil society organisations are not only numerous, but they also take various forms. Together with one or a limited number of other civil society actors, they organise (one-off) activities or socio-cultural practices such as projects, events and campaigns. Or they engage in learning networks to share and develop knowledge. In addition to civil society actors, such learning networks often also involve actors from the fields of education, research and government. Sometimes they also share logistics or accommodation with strategically chosen civil society actors to create synergy. Fifty-one socio-cultural adult organisations report active relationships with citizens' initiatives that do not (yet) belong to the established civil society. They offer services and support to strengthen the functioning of the citizens' initiatives.

Some civil socio-cultural actors explicitly position themselves in a stream of like-minded initiatives and thus contribute to bringing about greater changes in society. Sometimes they do this by joining a federation or umbrella organisation. In thematic associations or associations of organisations working with the same target group, several organisations see opportunities to increase their influence on society. Examples include the NAPAR Coalition (coalition for an inter-federal action plan against racism), the Climate Coalition (a national non-profit organisation that brings together more than ninety organisations around the theme of climate justice) and NOOZO (uniting more than twenty disability organisations to advise the Flemish Government). In other cases, collaboration and networking offer opportunities to optimise one's own approach, for example to deepen or broaden one's own participant reach, professionalise the organisation's operations and enable local or regional anchoring.

#### 4.2 Partnership, dependence and struggle in relation to the government

The relationships between civil socio-cultural organisations and governments present a mixed picture: partnership, dependence and sometimes also struggle.<sup>40</sup> These are not always mutually effective strategic relationships. Sometimes civil socio-cultural actors adopt a critical stance and aim to bring about change processes within the government itself, without being asked to do so. At other times, financial motives play a role in their relationships with governments. After all, subsidies are an important source of income. Nevertheless, there are also many functional relationships, such as those discussed here. Public authorities are often partners with whom they facilitate processes of change in society or develop policy. Local authorities sometimes show interest in taking over a socio-cultural initiative and institutionalising it as a public initiative or service.

Regardless of whether they have a subsidy or combative relationship, 109 socio-cultural adult organisations report at least one functional relationship with a

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<sup>40</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022) en Vermeersch, L., De Malsche, A., Otte, H., Oosterlynck, S. & Gielen, P. (2023)

government player in their progress report.<sup>41</sup> These are relationships with various government bodies:

- politicians, political parties (coalition and opposition), civil servants, cabinets, committees
- advisory councils (*local advisory council, Flemish Council for the Elderly, Superior Health Council, etc.*)
- local authorities
- municipal services (*Public Centre for Social Welfare, cultural centre, community centre, municipal museum, youth service, etc.*)
- provincial authorities and intermunicipal collaborations (*intermunicipal, social housing association, provincial development company, etc.*)
- Flemish and federal government
- agencies and departments (*Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Service, Flemish Agency for Persons with Disabilities, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, Agency for Growing Up, Sport Flanders, Tourism Flanders, Agency for Nature and Forests, Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, etc.*)
- Government services, companies and institutions (*the Flemish Land Agency, Child and Family Support Centres, National Society of Belgian Railways, prisons, police, asylum centres, Flemish Peace Institute, etc.*)
- European or international authorities (*European Commission, Liaison Office of the European Parliament, etc.*)

67 organisations in the sector maintain working relationships with authorities at the level of the Flemish Community, the Flemish Region or the Brussels-Capital Region.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, a striking number of collaborations and networks with local authorities are mentioned (85 organisations). Such relationships promote the local embedding of organisations involved in socio-cultural work with adults and are sometimes also functional in reaching vulnerable groups. For example, they collaborate with integration services. It can also work the other way around. A local authority may call on a socio-cultural adult organisation to reach a specific target group or to achieve a specific government objective more efficiently and effectively.

Moreover, these government partners cover a wide range of policy areas. Fifty-two organisations report cooperation with players in the welfare and care policy domain, 45 organisations with players in the cultural policy domain and 36 organisations with government players active in the domain of integration. In addition, 22 organisations establish relationships with players in the environment and nature policy domain. We mainly place the latter organisations in the “sustainable (co-)living” stream.

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<sup>41</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

<sup>42</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

### 4.3 Market shyness?

Civil socio-cultural actors cannot ignore market players, if only because they purchase goods and services as customers. We do not treat such customer relationships as functional relationships here. We also disregard contacts with profit organisations for sponsorship, donations or loans. When civil socio-cultural actors point out the undesirable side effects of certain business activities, we are not talking about mutually effective strategic relationships either. These are usually combative relationships. For example, an organisation may present a “Greenwash Award” to denounce greenwashing or start a petition against unethical investments by banks. Such adversarial relationships are strategically important but fall outside our definition of functional relationships.

Collaborations with companies that, in a spirit of mutual understanding, directly contribute to the realisation of an organisation's own mission and objectives are functional relationships. Particularly within the “sustainable (co)existence” stream, civil socio-cultural actors collaborate with companies from, for example, the agricultural sector and the banking industry. For example, they are working together to find alternatives for elderly people following the closure of ATMs.

Nevertheless, we can conclude that collaboration with market players mainly takes the form as a customer rather than as a civil actor.<sup>43</sup> In the grant applications and progress reports, we observe relatively fewer functional relationships involving two-way communication between socio-cultural adult organisations and market players. Thirty-nine socio-cultural adult organisations discuss their relationships with market players in their grant applications (2020). A few years later, in 2023, 61 socio-cultural adult organisations report functional relationships with market players. This is still fewer than the number of organisations reporting functional relationships with other civil society players and public authorities. In other research, just under half of the organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults indicated that they had regular or structural contacts with a company.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, grant applications from organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults repeatedly mention how decisive the role of market players is for the change processes they aim to achieve in society.<sup>45</sup> Are civil socio-cultural actors reluctant to cooperate fully with businesses? Or do the practices and logic of the market sometimes differ too greatly from those of the civil socio-cultural field?

In grant applications and progress reports, market players are usually referred to in general terms. They are rarely mentioned specifically. An exception to this are the many references to the media sector and media companies. They play an important role in the public sphere and in public debates.

Where other market players are specified, this results in a wide range of partners.

Some examples of sectors:

- cultural and creative sector

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<sup>43</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022); Vermeersch, L., De Malsche, A., Otte, H., Oosterlynck, S. & Gielen, P. (2023) en Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

<sup>44</sup> Vermeersch, L., De Malsche, A., Otte, H., Oosterlynck, S. & Gielen, P. (2023)

<sup>45</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022)

- agriculture and food
- financial institutions
- communication and consultancy agencies
- energy and construction sector
- tourism

The civil socio-cultural field still seems to be searching for its relationship with the market: strategic cooperation is growing but remains cautious. A few socio-cultural organisations indicate that their logic and culture differ greatly from those of companies.

#### 4.4 Cooperation beyond national borders

Many organisations in the civil socio-cultural field are committed to social issues that are not bound by territorial borders. Streams in civil society such as “sustainable (co)living”, “international peaceful coexistence”, “living together in society” and “developing international solidarity” respond to social challenges that extend beyond Flanders and Brussels. Some civil society actors from these streams are expanding their scope of action and sphere of influence abroad. Europe is an important stage for them.

In their grant applications (2020), 68 of the 131 socio-cultural adult organisations announced working relationships with partners from abroad. In their progress reports (2023), 100 of the 128 organisations mention international working relationships.

These are different types of relationships:

- 76 organisations set up activities and socio-cultural practices abroad, or organise them in Flanders or Brussels with participants or partners from abroad
- 35 organisations participate in an activity abroad, sometimes with volunteers or a delegation from their target group
- 39 organisations actively seek inspiration from foreign partners or inspire foreign partners themselves through practical visits, exchanges, consulting foreign literature and documents, international publications, etc.
- 36 organisations are part of a formal network with international partners
- 34 organisations are working on specific projects financed by international funds or within the framework of international programmes, mainly European
- 6 organisations are participating in an internationally organised and structured movement or network for which they are responsible for operations in Flanders and/or Brussels (*e.g. ProVeg International, Oxfam International, etc.*).

If we compare data from grant applications with data from progress reports, the international involvement of socio-cultural adult organisations appears to be increasing. They are encouraged by European funds and programmes to look beyond national borders. International networks connect civil actors across national borders based on a shared target group or a common social issue or theme. Theme-based organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults report relatively more on their participation in international partnerships. There are numerous European networks and independent organisations for both target groups and specific thematic social challenges, which actors from Flanders and Brussels (can) join.

## 5. Aligning mission and management

Civil socio-cultural actors are mission-driven: they want to realise their social ambitions as effectively as possible with the resources at their disposal. In exchange for subsidies, governments also want them to do so efficiently and effectively. They encourage civil actors to embrace management principles and revenue models – concepts that have been adopted from the market. At the same time, government cutbacks, increasing political pressure on civil society and the rising cost of living pose a growing challenge for civil society actors to maintain their long-term financial health.

Against this backdrop, socio-cultural adult organisations report on quality assurance, their business policy and how they align this with their mission and vision in their progress reports. They attract “business” skills and seek more diverse sources of income.

### 5.1 Pursuing and accounting for results

Civil socio-cultural work is intentional. Socio-cultural practices always have a purpose. However, it is not always easy to clearly identify an “evidence-based” logic between practices and the intended results in advance. This is because these practices are process-based. Sometimes, a spur-of-the-moment idea plays an important role. Experience, knowledge and insights into socio-cultural practices help to decide why socio-cultural workers do or do not do something better and to assess what this may lead to. It also helps to demonstrate afterwards what worked and what did not work. Social-cultural workers who make the best possible use of the available knowledge and insights about their practices before, during and after implementation take an impact-driven approach.

Governments also expect civil social-cultural actors to spend the public funds they receive in a results-oriented manner in exchange for subsidies and autonomy. Impact and results-orientation are becoming increasingly important in the relationship between government and civil society. There is a trend towards commercialisation and contractualization.<sup>46</sup> Developments such as “new public management” (NPM) contribute to this. Subsidising governments encourage civil socio-cultural actors to focus more explicitly on results in addition to their efforts. This inspired the Flemish government to include expectations regarding quality assurance, strategic planning and the coordination of substantive, business and financial policy in the subsidy conditions for socio-cultural work with adults since 2003. Although researchers put into perspective the current influence of NPM on socio-cultural work with adults, they do point to more control in the form of a planning cycle with (multi-)annual plans and evaluation reports.<sup>47</sup> Compared to the social economy, another sector of civil society, market thinking has penetrated less deeply into socio-cultural work with adults.

Civil socio-cultural organisations are autonomous, mission- and vision-driven. They pursue their own goals in a complex social field where many interests and dynamics are at play simultaneously. It is by no means always easy to work in an evidence-

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<sup>46</sup> Suykens, B., De Rynck, F. en Verschuere, B. (2019)

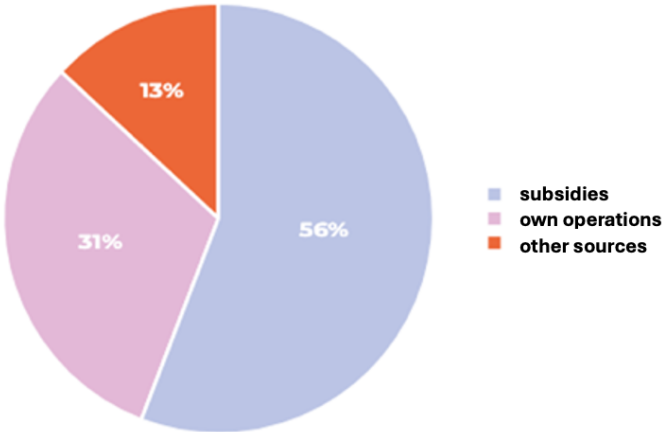
<sup>47</sup> Suykens, B., De Rynck, F. en Verschuere, B. (2019)

based manner in such a complex field. Subsidies providers, in turn, expect ever greater efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public funds. These external expectations are increasingly being translated into government subsidy conditions.

### 5.2 Subsidy dependency

Many civil socio-cultural actors derive a substantial part of their income from government subsidies. In 2022, associations in Belgium will rely on subsidies for an average of 58% of their income.<sup>48</sup> This roughly corresponds to figures for the sector of socio-cultural work with adults. In total, 56% of the income of this sector comes from various subsidies.<sup>49</sup>

Figure 8: income structure of socio-cultural work with adults, average share of income from subsidies, own operations and other sources

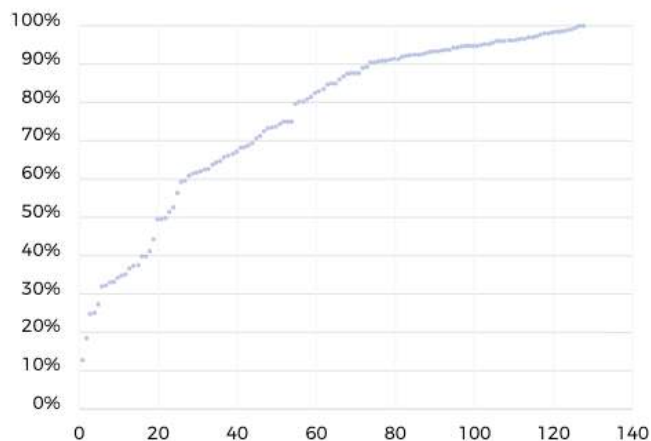


Financial dependence on subsidies – the share of subsidies in total income – varies greatly from one organisation to another.

<sup>48</sup> King Baudouin Foundation (2022)

<sup>49</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

Figure 9: Subsidy dependency, all government subsidies, per organisation (N=128, financial years 2021 and 2022)



69 of the 128 organisations in the sector are more than 80% dependent on government subsidies, 41 organisations are 40% to 80% dependent, and 18 organisations derive less than 40% of their income from subsidies.

### 5.3 Business policy tailored to socio-cultural work

Mission and impact-driven, government incentives and pressure to be less dependent on government subsidies are increasing the attention of civil socio-cultural actors to their business policy. In doing so, they seek a good balance between their own values and standards and market logic that comes from the government. They work on quality assurance and strategic financing of their operations.

#### 5.3.1 Tailored quality assurance

Civil socio-cultural actors have long been involved in the continuous planning, evaluation, adjustment, refinement and discontinuation (of sub-activities) of practices and activities. This fits in seamlessly with their ambitions to bring about social change in a complex and changing society. They continuously develop knowledge, expertise and partnerships or check their own (civil) role in society and adjust where necessary. The subsidy applications and progress reports of socio-cultural adult organisations clearly show how PDCA (Plan, Do, Check and Act) is the basic model for this.<sup>50</sup> The PDCA cycle is an approach for continuous improvement. It is an attitude of remaining constantly alert to small and larger issues that can be improved. Standardised quality assurance systems and approaches are less common in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults. A limited number of organisations do report on achieving, for example, a Qfor quality certificate because it is a condition for obtaining specific project subsidies.

Civil socio-cultural actors apply PDCA logic at various levels of their operations: from mission and vision, through strategic and operational goals, to socio-cultural practices and activities. Each of these levels has its own time perspective, from long-term to short-term activities. In their progress reports, socio-cultural adult

<sup>50</sup> Jans, M. en Van Gucht, J. (2022) en Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

organisations also apply the PDCA logic to specific areas of their organisational policy. They do this, for example, around personnel management. This is logical, given the large financial investment in employees and their decisive role in the quality of socio-cultural work. But they also plan, evaluate and adjust in other areas, such as financial, volunteer, communication and stakeholder management.

The logic of the PDCA cycle allows quality assurance to be developed in line with the organisation's needs. Even within a single organisation, we do not see a standard approach, but a wide variety of tools, processes and procedures tailored to the different levels and areas of their operations. The core of quality assurance in a socio-cultural adult organisation is a well-coordinated network of internal and sometimes external consultative bodies and moments. Such a mechanism covers the different levels of operation and the domains of organisational policy and explicitly includes the coordination between content and business policy. Some organisations maintain an overview in a cockpit or coordination cell. There, they constantly make connections with:

- other consultative bodies such as team meetings, project teams, financial committees, administrative consultations, governing bodies, general meetings, etc.
- specific consultation moments such as planning days, evaluation weekends, etc.
- documents such as policy plans, progress reports, annual plans, etc.
- data sources such as CRM systems, dashboards, scorecards, etc.

Strategic leadership is very important in such a complex mechanism. This means steering the organisation in a goal-oriented manner, with attention to the social context, the long-term vision and day-to-day operations.

### *5.3.2 Strategic financing, diversifying income*

To organise socio-cultural work with adults in a results-oriented and high-quality manner, organisations make strategic considerations about their income and expenditure. In this way, they keep their organisation financially healthy, relate to government subsidies, manage their expenditure and use financial strategies to keep their income and expenditure in balance.

An analysis of the annual financial reports of 128 organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults leads us to conclude that the sector is financially healthy.<sup>51</sup> Most organisations can meet their short-term financial obligations without any problems. Overall, the sector does not appear to have any solvency problems.

By far the largest part of the expenditure of civil socio-cultural actors goes to employees (permanent employees, freelancers and volunteers). For the sector of socio-cultural work with adults, this accounts for 70% of expenditure. In addition to acquiring socio-cultural skills, they are also investing more in communication, ICT and business skills.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Jans, M. en Retana, M. (2025)

<sup>52</sup> Huysmans, K., Goesaert, T. en Vermeersch, L. (2024)

To keep income and expenditure in balance, civil actors use various financial strategies: saving, building up reserves, spreading subsidy sources, seeking sponsors, adjusting membership fees, attracting donations and legacies, and selling and renting services and goods. When savings are made, they are usually around personnel. When they build up reserves, it is usually with a view to future investments such as internal renewal processes or larger investments in infrastructure such as housing and ICT.

In order not to be too financially dependent on a single subsidising government, civil society actors are looking for ways to diversify their sources of income. For many civil socio-cultural actors, this is still a relatively recent challenge. For organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults, concrete results remain limited for the time being.

Some organisations set up working groups on alternative financing or hire consultants to diversify their subsidies and increase income from their own operations. Other organisations assign a new or existing employee to focus on diversifying income. In addition, organisations are also taking concrete steps to recruit sponsors. They collect contact details, set up email and telephone campaigns, and make sponsorship opportunities clearly visible on their websites and social media.

Twenty-four organisations in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults report on how they intend to market a product or service. It remains a challenge for them to reconcile the search for financial income from sales with the mission and values of civil socio-cultural work.

## Final reflection

Civil socio-cultural work today operates in a society that is constantly changing. Diversity, digitalisation, political pressure and changing policy frameworks make the work more complex. Yet the core remains the same: civil socio-cultural work is a commitment by citizens, rooted in involvement, encounter and their vision of a good society.

Throughout the chapters, it has become clear how multifaceted civil socio-cultural work is. It operates in a civil space from which it establishes relationships with governments and market players. It brings added value to society by connecting people, reflecting critically and trying out new forms of living together. It does so with participation as its trademark and with attention to individuals as well as communities and structures. The strength of the work lies in its process-based nature: constantly exploring, learning and reorienting.

At the same time, it is a field of work that must relate to management logics, quality frameworks and financing systems. Civil socio-cultural organisations seek ways to reconcile business and mission without losing their social role. They learn to think in terms of results and financial sustainability, but continue to start from values such as solidarity, justice and shared responsibility.

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