

# The third sector



The Third Sector The Third Sector is a vast and diverse group of organizations that function to fulfill the needs of society where normal business has left a void. They operate in a not for profit environment, yet these entities are not government agencies. While healthcare, education, and social services make up the largest portion of the third sector, the group also includes organizations that provide services as diverse as legal aid, the opera, and religious congregations. We encounter the Third Sector daily as the beneficiary of medical research accomplished with a nonprofit grant, or attending a folk art display sponsored by a Third Sector group. The groups can sometimes be contradictory such as Planned Parenthood and religious congregations, or as similar as the various organizations that fight hunger around the world. Environmental advocates, civil rights groups, and public awareness promoters all fall into the Third Sector. Some groups work on a very local level while others are national and international in scope, and everyone will, at some point, take advantage of the services they provide. While the number of organizations is large, and their missions widely different, they all share the common goal of serving the public by mobilizing donors and volunteers in a belief that individuals coming together for a shared purpose can make a difference in the world we live in.

The Third Sector is grouped together according to the services they provide. The organizations within the group often serve similar if not identical functions such as within education. With education as a common denominator, the institutions will work together to promote the value of their services and work to provide greater availability and access. Groups will form coalitions to lobby for effective legislation that will allow them to function more effectively. Often times, groups such as the Red Cross and hospitals

will share resources in an effort to deal with a natural disaster. However, because the function of the Third Sector is to effectively enhance and improve our lives, similar groups will sometimes compete for clients. Yet, while this may seem counterproductive, all groups generally share the same need to fight for scarce funding. Some groups may have a profit-making arm that returns the profits towards charitable efforts, while others rely on private and public philanthropy.

Groups which we would normally see as serving the same goal, such as fighting hunger, may come at odds with one another if private donors question the destination or usefulness of the funding. Corruption, waste, and political considerations sometimes burden the otherwise like-minded organizations. This is especially true in the area of international aid organizations. Specific donors may prevent cooperation in an international relief effort if they hold the perception that their money is being wasted or exploited for political gain. Money, and aid relief, can often become a victim of political showcasing, though this may also be their intended agenda. Anti gun groups, social advocates, and scientific research may wish to influence the political system in an effort to get legislation which will benefit themselves and the people they serve. Organizations are forced to engage the political system to secure funding, and by doing so may alienate other competing organizations.

The need for funding is emphasized by the tireless work of nonprofit organizations that operate in the area of the arts and culture. This portion of the Third Sector is responsible for keeping the arts alive in a very difficult economic environment. Without the work of the Third Sector, Community Theater would not be able to function. Ethnic art and presentations that may

have limited appeal are dependent upon the public's support through the mechanism of the Third Sector. Yet, these local forums are the proving ground for new art and performers. Without the Third Sector, these vital components of our lives would be forever lost. The Third Sector fills the void where business fails to provide and governments fail to function.

#### References

Salamon, L. M. (1999). *America's nonprofit sector: A primer*. New York: Foundation Center.