

## **Third Sector Professionals in the Delivery of Public Services in Slovenia**

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*Abstract.* The delivery of public services is a complex phenomenon, shaped by different and layered institutional pressures. The traditional model of organizing public service delivery emphasizes the role of the state, and the expertise and know-how of professionals employed in public service organizations. New public management promotes ideas of efficiency, productivity, and value for money, introducing a market of providers and competition in public service delivery. More recently there has been a drive to involve users and partners in the co-creation and co-production of public services (new public governance, network governance and digital era governance).

Alongside the state and the market, the third sector (non-profit sector) is increasingly involved in public service delivery, whether because of welfare state traditions, marketisation reforms under new public management, or the new wave of public management reforms promoting co-production, co-creation and citizen engagement. The assumption is that third-sector organisations are effective proxies for public service delivery because they are close to users and communities. They can be more flexible and lean in adapting and thus can adopt innovation faster than state services.

While there is an increasing interest in understanding how the non-profit sector operates in the changing environment of public services (e.g. Osborne and McLaughlin 2004; Davies 2011), few researchers have investigated the micro level, that is the individual rather than organisational and institutional perspectives (e.g. van Gestel et al. 2019; McMullin 2023). This article explores the role of the third sector in public service provision by looking at the perspective of professionals (frontline staff).

Based on focus group research with a social service non-profit, the article explores to what extent are different institutional pressures felt among third-sector professionals in Slovenia, and what coping strategies professionals invoke to deal with institutional pressures. We combine the insights from institutional theory with Oliver's framework (1991) of coping strategies (acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and resistance). By exploring the first-hand experiences of third sector professionals, the article contributes to a better understanding of the role of the non-profit sector in the renewal of the welfare state in Slovenia.

Evidence from the focus group shows that collaborative endeavours can run counter to the values associated with both market-driven and state-regulated approaches. While coping with different mixes of institutional pressures, professionals in the Slovenian case do not lose sight of their mission as third-sector organizations, showcasing the tenability of the third sector in their collaborative endeavours despite paradoxes and value conflicts between market, state and civil society logics.

*Keywords:* third sector, public services, public service delivery, professionals, social policy, welfare

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