The Unsung Hero Dialogues – Promoting Solidarity and Diversity through Awareness and Policy Reform

European Survey About Work in Civil Society Organisations: Unsung Heroes?

Final data analysis

1. Introduction

The project, 'The Unsung Hero Dialogues – Promoting Solidarity and Diversity through Awareness and Policy Reform', aims to strengthen civil society by promoting the overall value of civil society and civic education – and the labour rights/rights to fair payment of those working in these fields. To achieve these objectives, the project focuses on 1) increasing attention to the economically unstable position of those working in small NGOs; 2) empowering civil society workers to advocate their rights through collective action by creating a local and international network of small civil society organizations (CSOs) within Europe and building a dialogue with policy makers; 3) increasing awareness of the importance of civil society through an international campaign to promote European values and the importance of civic education to a wider public.

The project started with a survey to gather data on the economic situation of civil society in the EU. After the survey, the Autumn School for civil society workers was organized to promote the value of civil society, including the development of promotional campaigns by its participants. Simultaneously, each partner organization conducted four local meetings of civil society workers (CSWs) to share their ideas, discuss issues and challenges in CS professionals' work and develop policy recommendations. Those policy proposals will be combined by the project consortium into policy recommendations at the European level and presented to the public during its final event.

2. Methods

Quantitative data collection: European Survey about Work in Civil Society Organisations: Unsung Heroes?

This explanatory survey aims at gaining a better and broader understanding of the labour situation among civil society workers in Europe. In order to collect data on this issue, the partnership planned an online survey addressed to civil society workers. In this frame, civil society workers are understood as every person engaged in civil society, regardless of their formal working status including: volunteers, freelancers, employees or employers, consultants, trainers, etc.

The survey was launched in June 2020 with a goal of 500 completed questionnaires by the end of the project, and the questionnaire was filled out on a voluntary basis. The survey was closed at the end of June 2021, with a total of 534 responses. The invitation to fill out the questionnaire was publicized by the partner organisations on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn), by email and newsletter. The invitation to fill out the questionnaire was also spread via partner organization networks and umbrella organisations, i.e., Bridge 47 and the Lifelong Learning Platform.

We ensured the anonymity of the answers following the EU Regulation 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation). The data collected will not be sold or shared with any third parties not involved in the Unsung Hero Dialogues project.

There is generally a lack of data and information on civil society workers and organizations in European and national member institutions. The data collected in this survey is an explanatory study which helps *to assemble the puzzle* of the European civil society work sector, but it is not representative of the European civil society worker population at large.

The questionnaire was composed of six sections:

1. Kind of occupations and types of organisations;
2. Work experience;
3. Work satisfaction;
4. Professionalisation of the working field;
5. Labour rights;
6. European initiative for labour rights.

We have included the most meaningful data based on the project's goals.

Qualitative data collection: Expert interviews

In order to supplement the quantitative data collected through the survey, interviews were conducted with experts and practitioners in various civil society sectors at both the international (European) and national levels. In order to gather a diverse set of perspectives, interviewees representing six types of organizations/sectors were selected: youth organizations; academia; labour union/legal; institutional, non-EU, and European-level civil society organizations. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted between April and August of 2021 by six interviewers who represented the project team.

Excepting those that wished to stay anonymous, the interviewees included:The interviewees include (with the exception of those who wished to remain anonymous):

Name of interviewee	**Organisation**
Elisa Gambardella	**SOLIDAR**
Brikhena Xhomaqi	**LLLP**
Emanuele Polizzi	**University of Milano Bicocca**
Paola Bonizzoni	**University of Milan**
CSO Worker in Brussels and Board Member of large INGYO	**INGYO**
European Economic and Social Committee Member and Policy & Advocacy Director at one of the largest youth organisations in the Republic of Ireland	

Waltraud Heller	**European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights**

These interviews focused in particular on five main topics - these were identified through a participatory process among the partnership staff and the Autumn school (2020) participants (see Appendix 2: qualitative interview scheme).

1. Understanding of Civil Society both as a work sector and as a part of society with a political vision and perspective.
2. Value of the voluntary-based characteristic and professionalised component of CS in current societies.
3. Working conditions in the CS work sector
4. Recognition of the role and value of the CS sector in society and in the economy: benefits and drawbacks of increased professionalisation of the sector.
5. The role of CS as a work sector and a political lever in the future of our societies and democracies.

The analysis process consisted of identifying the different perspectives collected with the exploratory interviews as well as the convergent elements. As mentioned, the purpose of the interviewees was to gain situated and well-informed insights from the CSOs or experts in order to enrich the analysis of the data collected through the survey.

The analysis and statements provided here are the responsibility of the report authors and the UHD project partners and cannot be attributed to the interview subjects themselves.

In the following section, a brief understanding of the topics dealt with during the interviews is introduced in order to give some context for understanding and interpreting the quantitative data. Some elaborations and reflections based on the qualitative data collected have been integrated in the survey data presentation.

3. Civil society in a nutshell

Understanding of civil society both as a work sector and as a part of society with a political vision and perspective.

It is not possible to identify a common understanding of the concept of civil society. This concept, in fact, refers to a very wide variety of occupational sectors or fields - e.g., social, cultural, educational, human rights, sport; types of organisations - for example in terms of purpose, size, legal nature, etc.; and professionals working in it.

In particular, at the European level, it is not possible to identify a single definition of civil society; each member state has different legislative, cultural and social ways of understanding civil society, as well as different traditions and ways of relating to public institutions. But despite all these differences, it is possible to point out some similarities that help to identify a shared idea of civil society that allows us to discuss it, the conditions in which organisations and workers operate and what demands are necessary to make their work more effective and improve working conditions.

As Eikenberry and Kluver (2004, p. 133) well summarised, it is possible to outline three roles played by civil society.

1. *Delivering of a variety of public and quasi-public functions: organisations aid or directly act to provide services in the community.*
2. *Assume a representative and contestary function of social organisation outside the state (Edwards an Foley, 2001, 6).*
3. *Assume a major role in building citizenship skills and attitude crucial for motivating citizens to use these skills (Edwards an Foley, 2001, 6).*

The desire to contribute to the well-being of society, to fight for the rights of those in a vulnerable position, to demand a fairer society and to guarantee services and access to rights for all, are all elements that differentiate civil society in different local, national or regional contexts compared to other occupational sectors. The value dimension, inspired by principles, is something that makes civil society not only an employment sector but also a set of actors promoting a political vision. This political vision is not a unified one; there are many perspectives that inhabit civil society, from the religious to those oriented around certain political ideologies to certain values that have human dignity as their cornerstone. NGOs and CSOs *"enhance civil society through their role as value guardians, service providers, and advocates, and builders of social capital"* (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004, p. 133).

Emphasising the diversity that characterises "civil society" and the organisations that are part of it explains one of the limits that was difficult to overcome in our survey, which is that it cannot be representative of all this diversity at the European or even national level. At the same time, however, if taken as a whole, the data collected can provide us with some information that goes beyond specific sectors, types of organisation and types of profession, and therefore tells us something about the role of civil society in contemporary societies and about certain working conditions, which are transversal and widespread.

Value of the voluntary-based characteristic and professionalised component of CS in current society

What distinguishes CSOs is the double component that animates them - on the one hand, voluntary activity, and on the other hand, work carried out by professionals. This dual role

allows organisations to fulfil the different responsibilities mentioned above, which include a value-based, ideal dimension and a technical dimension of providing services and offering high quality initiatives. In most cases, in organisational terms there is a voluntary component that often gives direction and is responsible for the strategic choices of the organisation itself. These choices and visions are implemented by professionals who can guarantee the quality of the activities, and the effective and efficient performance of them. Moreover, in some cases, volunteers are engaged in specific activities (not at the core/top of the organisation) over a limited period of time.
There are a multitude of nuances created by the mix of the two components - voluntary and professional. We see organisations and informal groups composed exclusively of volunteers/activists, but also very structured organisations, which provide robust social services. The purpose and composition of voluntary and professional activity therefore gives rise to different organisational structures, in terms of legal formalisation and working culture.

Over the last decades, there has been a progressive professionalisation of NGOs and CSOs due to the assumption of function by public institutions; the cultural transformation of European and Western societies (see the role of cultural work); and the competition and marketisation that has taken place with the transformations of the labour market and with neo-liberal policies in a broader sense. Following this perspective, it is possible to highlight a hybridisation between the for-profit and non-profit sectors which has increasingly led to the recognition of civil society as an economic sector - civil economy - although always different and separate from the production sector in the strict sense, because it also contributes to the well-being of society and social progress.

In dealing specifically with CS, we must consider certain elements:

- the double scope of the organisation: contesting and advocating for certain policies, while simultaneously delivering social services;
- the double nature of its members: volunteers and professionals;
- the multiple “necessary” components: ethics – values – and technical competences;
- the non-profit purpose and the need to survive

Volunteering and professional work, as mentioned, are both fundamental and complementary components of CS, which both impact significantly social wellbeing and fulfil different functions: guaranteeing access to rights, acting as advocates for public institutions to ensure that those rights are guaranteed to all and that civil society does not replace the institutions themselves.

They are complementary and not interchangeable components and it is important to promote reflection within CSOs, as well as toward public institutions, in order to make clear the difference between voluntary and professional activities. A volunteer is not a zero-cost worker and a professional is not a "person dedicated to the cause". What is required and recognised of these two different figures must be clear within the individual organisations and to all stakeholders who relate to the areas covered by civil society.

Finally, it should be added that in some cases we talk about *professional volunteering*, i.e., professionals - pro bono lawyers, pro bono communicators - who devote part of their time and competences to CSOs. This is a sought-after and very useful asset, but one that goes beyond the organisational structure in the strict sense. This mechanism may have positive effects on the quality of services provided and savings for organisations, but at the same time, it may have negative effects because it seems to reaffirm a lack of professionalism in the CS sector.

Working conditions in CS work sector

People working in the CS sector - as volunteers, employees, freelancers - often experience simultaneously challenging and motivating conditions within their work contexts. What makes this work challenging are the precarious or discontinuous contractual conditions of jobs in this sector and access to types of contracts that do not have full protection: e.g., in terms of economic recognition; social security; pension payments; access to parental leave or sickness protection - conditions that strongly influence a person's life beyond their role as a worker. At the same time, these jobs nurture and stimulate the worker who often shares the ethical and value dimension pursued by the organisations working in this field. This is something that can be considered positive both from the point of view of the worker and the organisation. But, at the same time, if and when the motivational lever takes over, this can lead to self-exploitation, burnout, and negative impacts on mental health and for work-life balance more generally.

The negative conditions that characterise work in the CS sector depend, in part, on the worsening of rights and working conditions in general due to the neo-liberal policies of the last 30 years (at least). They are due, then, to the lack of full recognition of the CS sector as an employment sector in its own right and the consequent recognition of the professional skills that inhabit it. Organisations - also depending on their size - are often poorly structured and therefore people find themselves engaged in different activities in which high skills are required, not only specific and technical, but also transversal. This is seen as a lack of professionalism in the sector rather than an added value brought by the workers. Perhaps both of these last two observations are true, but they could be seen in a positive way, because this type of organisational model, less structured and bureaucratised, is also the one that opens up the creativity and flexibility needed to respond in a timely and appropriate way to people's needs and promotes social innovation.

Another aspect that makes working conditions difficult concerns the funding model of organisations: the economic and human resources available to them. Organisations are often

understaffed, which means that those who work have to take on more tasks which increase working time. Workers in CSOs are often strongly committed to the purpose of the organisation and believe their work can contribute to society, so they dedicate more time than the regular work schedule even when organisations cannot afford to pay extra working time.

Moreover, since most funding is linked to winning projects or contracts, the staff of CSOs in addition to implementing activities are simultaneously engaged in developing new projects in order to be able to provide continuity of funding to the organisation, and thus to "their" employment contract. This often exacerbates already overburdened CSWs with additional responsibilities, but, more positively, it also may give workers a high degree of freedom to creatively develop and orient their work toward specific interests. The issue of the organisations' funding is a crucial one and it will be elaborated more in the following sections, but it is important to add here how that in terms of organisational structure, it makes CSOs particular organisations in which often the management level and the labour level, even if split, are not on opposite sides, but rather are allied in seeking sustainable solutions to guarantee the rights of the workers and the survival of the organisation itself. Sometimes this alliance also emerges to claim recognition and guarantee of the just rights of workers, even in the labour courts.

CSO’s funding systems

As anticipated, and as will be better shown with the data collected through the survey, the working conditions of those who work in CSOs are often precarious and lack economic recognition and various benefits that are more likely guaranteed in the public and private sectors. These conditions, as mentioned, are in part due to a general worsening of the employment conditions of younger generations of workers. On the other hand, however, they are determined by the specific features that characterize the civil society sector and the non-profit organizations that operate within it. In most cases, these are organizations that obtain funding through calls for proposals or contracts from public institutions (local, national, or European) or private donors (foundations) through the presentation of projects or bids for the provision of services. Project-based public funding entails some negative consequences in organizational terms, giving rise to what Goggins and Howard (2009) call "The nonprofit starvation cycle": this type of funding recognizes the economic and human resources for carrying out activities but does not take into account the structural costs that organizations have for the very existence and work carried out beyond the individual activities funded, which are equally essential for the performance of the work and the continuity of the organizations' work. Donors (public, but also private foundations) therefore have unrealistic expectations that are pandered to by the nonprofit organizations themselves in order to obtain funding. This generates a vicious cycle because by not adapting to this mode of funding, the unrealistic expectations are confirmed. Breaking this vicious circle is the only way to give respite to CSOs, fully recognize the work they do, and ensure the impact and quality of their work. The funding system generates organizational conditions that force organizations to behave ambiguously with respect to what they intend to pursue and how they can work. For example, organizations are often understaffed and require workers to work more hours than they are paid; taking advantage of precarious contracts, internships and volunteer and civil service for positions that relate to structural functioning.

The main role of funding and recognition in the broadest sense that public institutions have with respect to CSOs, moreover, calls into question their full autonomy and ability to exercise their role as a counterbalance in the full exercise of democracy (indeed strengthening democratic functioning). Squeezed into this mechanism, organizations are constantly focused on proving their efficiency and, in the last decade, on demonstrating the impact of their work - an impact that must be demonstrated in the short term and monetized for it to be recognized. The focus on impact, as important as it is, is another piece that influences the long-term strategic and cultural thinking of CSOs. Strategic thinking and cultural work often take a back seat because they are deemed less important and not economically recognized.

In addition, the current funding system generates forms of competition for resources rather than dynamics of collaboration and cooperation among CSOs, and this has negative consequences in terms of the goals and impact that CSOs achieve and could achieve. Fostering coordination and collaboration, in fact, could create systems that would not only allow for high quality activities and services, but enhance the social capital generated by CSOs for society and democracy (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004).

It would be important for CSOs to have access to a funding system capable of supporting the entire organization in the goals it pursues and not just individual activities on a project basis. This could guarantee greater flexibility in the management of funds, favouring greater stability of the organizations themselves, the possibility of having a long-term strategy, as well as the creative capacity to give appropriate and timely responses to the needs of a society in continuous transformation.

Professionalisation and the future of the sector

Increased professionalisation and full recognition of civil society as a work sector are phenomena that would bring numerous benefits to CSOs and its workers. Recognizing the professionalism needed to carry out the activities and services included in the civil society sector could lead to a recognition and improvement in working conditions. This would activate a virtuous circuit and could bring better performance and quality of work performed. Since the objectives of CSOs have the common good of communities and the improvement of the quality of life of its vulnerable groups as their goals, there would be a positive impact on society as a whole with greater social cohesion and strengthening of democratic processes. Greater professionalisation is not an optional element that would bring many benefits, but a necessary element to contribute in a concrete and effective way in an increasingly articulated and complex system. A system that requires civil society organizations to be able to operate from a global perspective and therefore to confront not only the local reality, but also on a national and European level. Operating at an international level and in relation to European institutions requires greater professionalisation, for example, in terms of communication, advocacy and networking.

Greater professionalisation and its formal recognition by public institutions could lead to greater specification of functions and tasks within individual organisations and thus lead, as mentioned earlier, to improved performance. Recognizing the need for different professional skills for the healthy functioning of CSOs would also have an impact on the training offered by universities,

which could have specific courses for the insertion of highly qualified figures in the civil society sector. A process that has already been underway for some years, but still not fully developed; in many cases, in fact, are specific trainings in the non-formal sector. This implies an effective professionalisation of those who work in the sector, but a lack of formal and institutional recognition that could instead have an impact in terms of workers' rights.

A negative element that could lead to greater professionalisation and structuring of CSOs is a greater rigidity of processes and organisational culture in the corporate sense and standardisation that could have a negative effect on the creative capacity and flexibility that characterises CSOs. In addition, it could affect the motivation and involvement of the workers themselves due to the risk of losing their purpose – “a work with a sense/purpose”. These processes could also be favored by the increasing propensity for recognition of the sector through the claiming of the economic value produced - also known as hybridization with profit.

Looking to the future, the development of regulatory frameworks for labor rights in the civil society sector could foster greater protection for workers, but at the same time it could put a strain on smaller organizations where the professional and voluntary components are not completely distinct and the organizational structure not highly developed. This would lead to a loss for civil society and democratic participation.

Although the direction to be pursued remains full professional recognition, it is important that the specific values and principles remain at the basis of the sector itself so that there is no assimilation with either the private or the public sector. It is important that civil society does not act as a substitute for the public sector, but continues to challenge institutions to make our societies more democratic and cohesive. The dimensions of solidarity, care and social reproduction are crucial elements from the perspective of social justice and should be recognized as such, beyond economic quantification. This means that greater professionalization does not necessarily have to come at the expense of the political and/or values component, even though this may be the case for organisations that prioritize technical development from a service delivery perspective. At the same time, even those organisations that claim more of a value contribution to their work do not necessarily forgo increasing professionalisation. In the future, it seems that the two components, professional and voluntary, will remain the constitutive dimensions of the civil society sector, in some cases equally present in the same organization. In others one or the other may be prevalent. What is important about the future of the sector and its recognition is the value that both – professionalism and voluntariness - have for the common good, social cohesion and the democratic process. Besides the institutional and public recognition, it is also crucial to raise the awareness within the CSOs about their role in the society and their engagement for the promotion of human and social rights and the need to claim proper labour rights for themselves in order to be able to develop and improve their work.

4. Findings

In this section, we present key results of the survey conducted as part of this research between June 2020 and June 2021.

I. Demographics of survey respondents

Figure 1 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents represent organisations that fall into the category of civil society or non-profit organisations, as compared to those that indicated they are public institutions or government bodies or social enterprises.

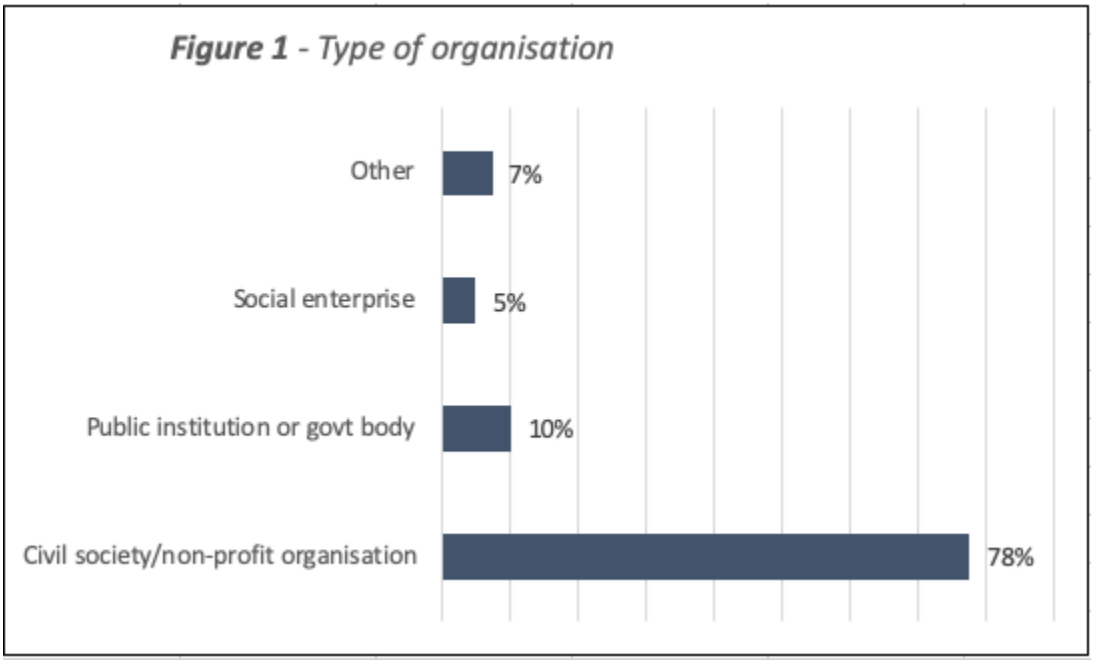
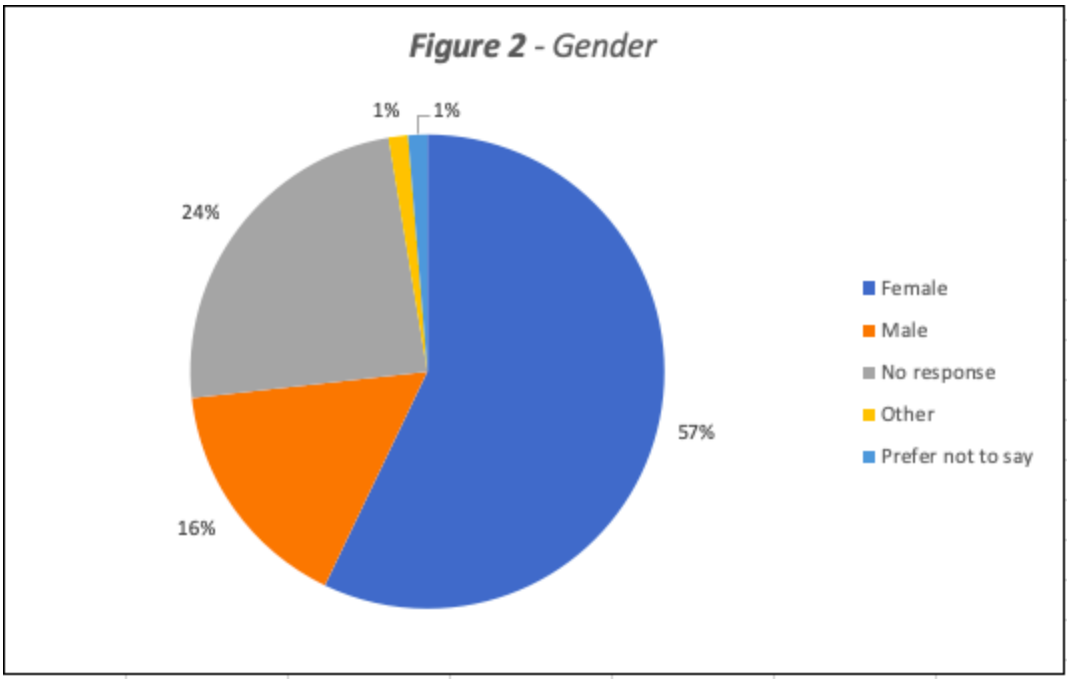
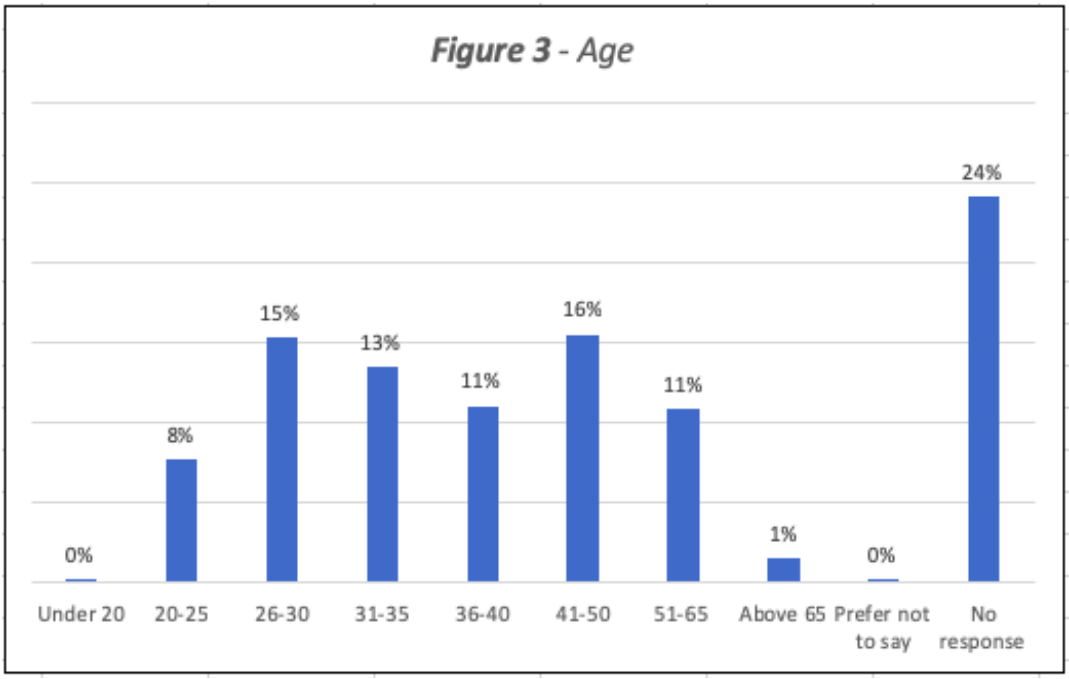


Figure 2 shows that the majority of survey respondents are female at 57%. Only 16% indicated they are male, confirming that the ‘third sector’, as it is often called, is predominantly female. Around 26% of respondents either did not complete this question, elected not to share their gender or marked ‘Other’. It should be noted that demographic questions came at the end of the survey, which is why there is a higher share of people that did not respond to the questions in this section.

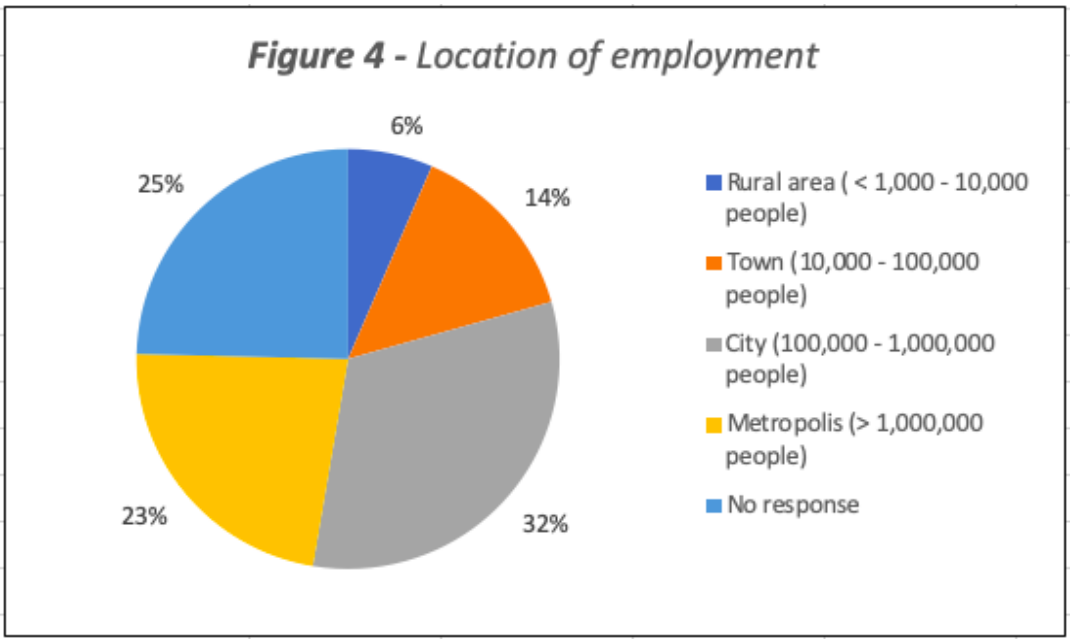


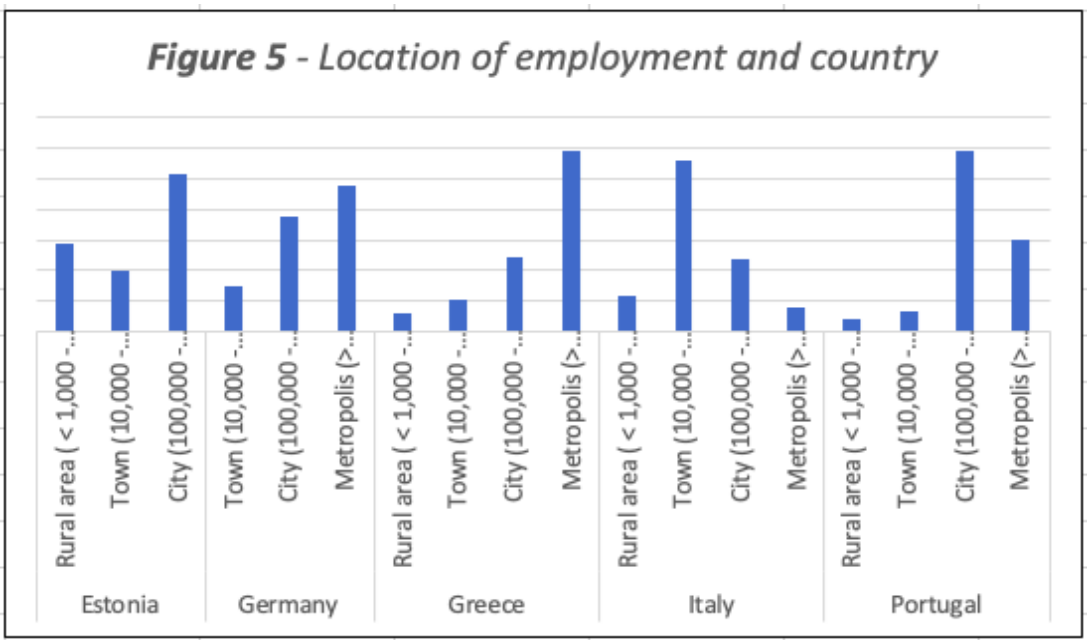
In terms of age, respondents were distributed fairly evenly across age groups between 20 and 65 years of age, as can be seen in Figure 3.



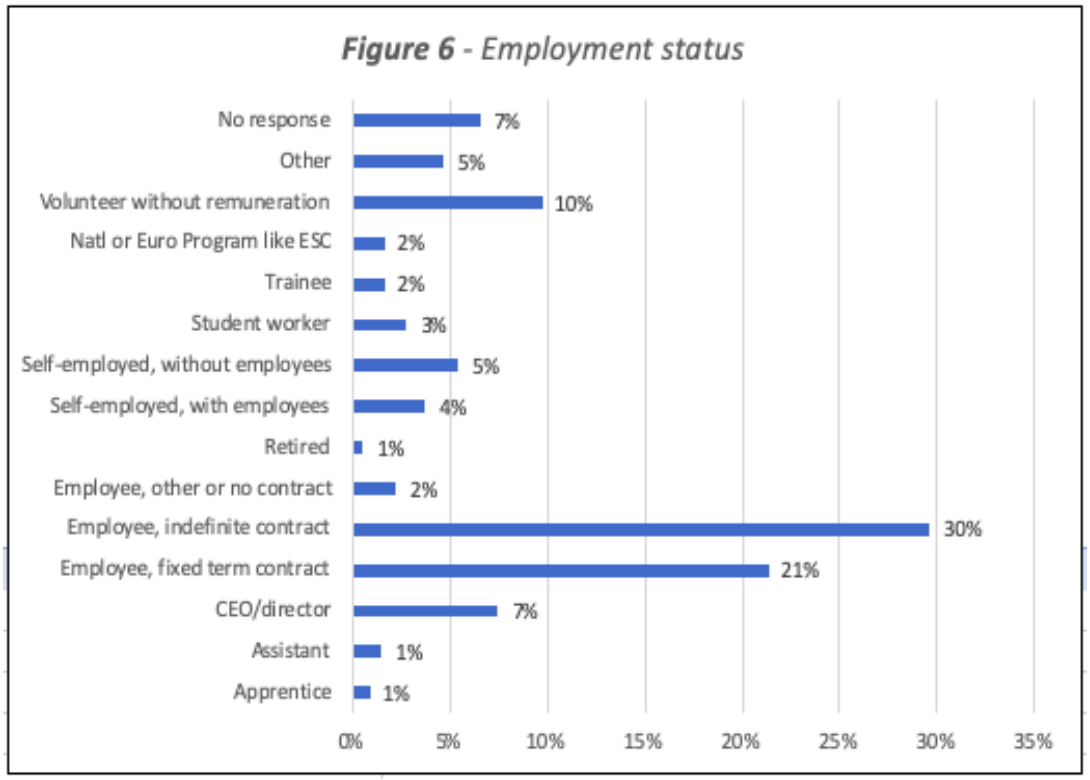
In terms of geographic location, respondents represented 30 countries to include countries inside and outside the European Union. The majority of respondents, however, predictably came from UHD partner countries, where survey marketing efforts were more active. The survey was also only offered in the native languages of the partner countries and English. The six countries most commonly reported were: Portugal (18.91%), Estonia (10.67%), Italy (9.74%), Greece (9.36%), and Germany (8.05%). The full list of countries can be found in the Annex (Table 1).

The majority of survey respondents are located in urban areas per Figure 4, with 32% and 23% in cities (population of 100,000 - 1 million) and metropolises (population of over 1 million), respectively. Figure 5 further looks at the correlation between this rural/urban variable for each of the five countries with the highest number of responses. We see that the only country where the majority of respondents are not based in cities or metropolises, is Italy, where the highest percentage live in towns.

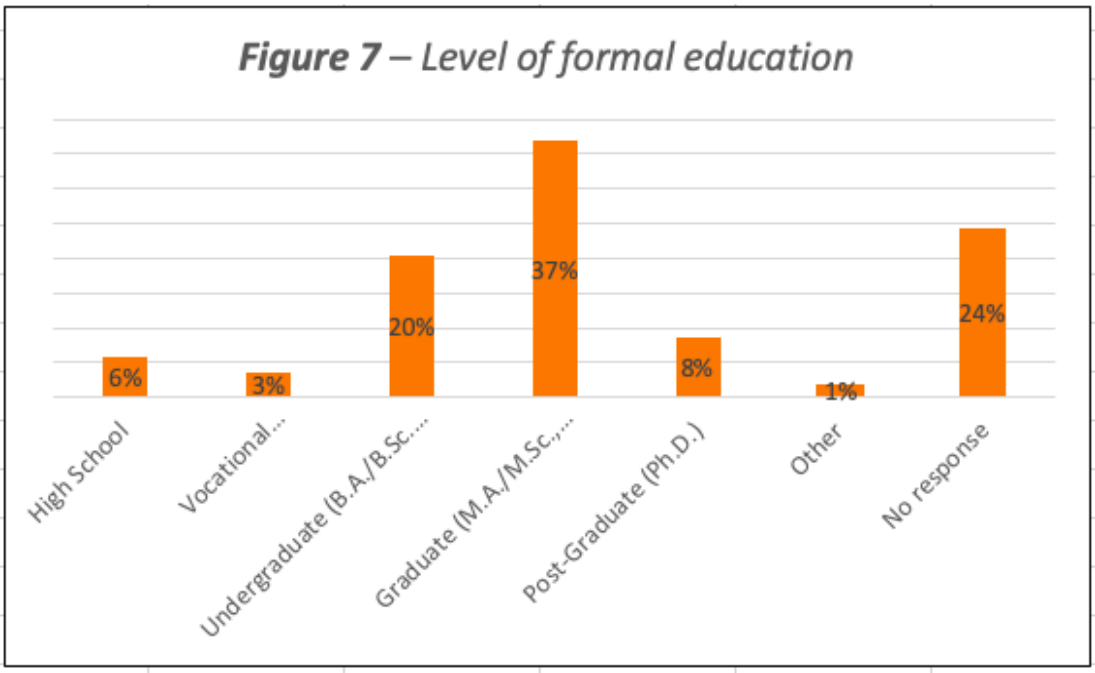




As seen in Figure 6, the majority of respondents are employees with permanent contracts (30%), while the second highest response was employees with a fixed-term contract (21%). Unpaid volunteers make up 10% of the total, reflecting the often voluntary nature of the civil society sector. The statistic showing that the majority of respondents have permanent positions is counter to expectation, given the typically assumed precariousness of the CS sector, however this may be explained by the pre-selecting nature of filling out a survey - those with enough time/security on their hands are more likely to take the time.

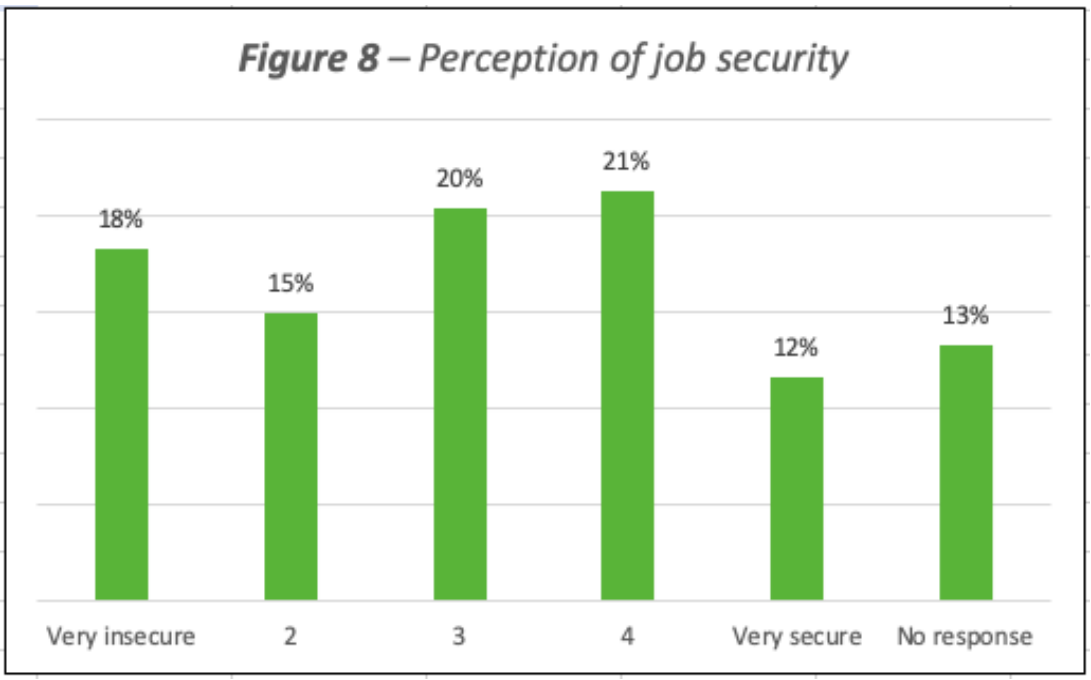


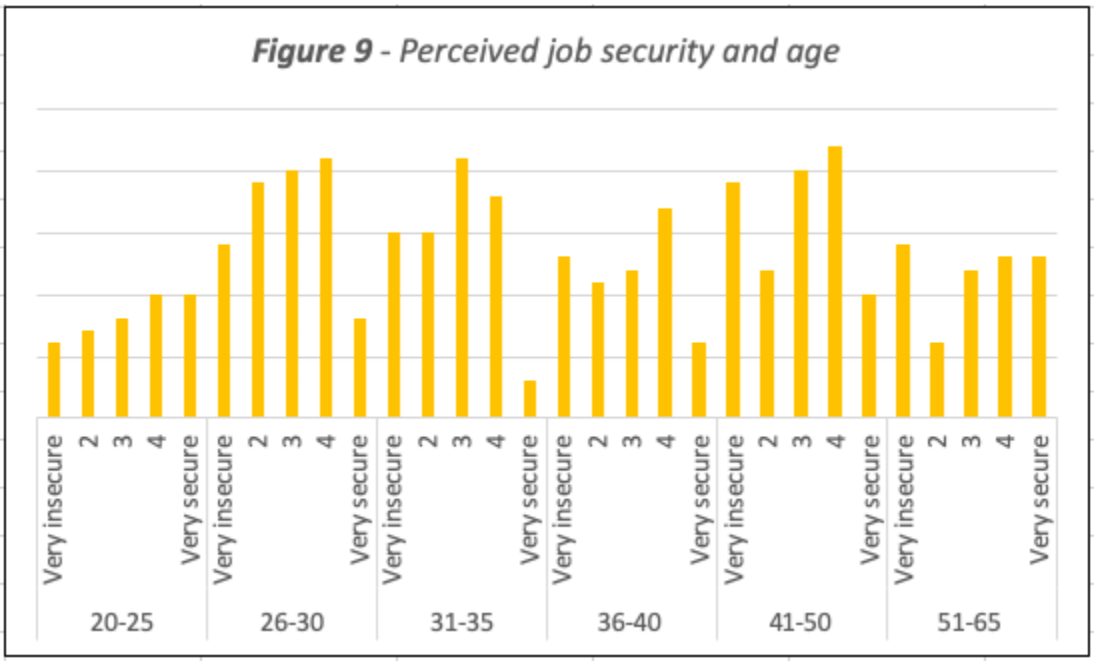
Lastly, Figure 7 shows the level of education reported. The vast majority have a tertiary degree: 20% at the undergraduate level, 37% with a Master's, and 8% with a PhD.



II. Work conditions: job security and income

In recent decades, job security has declined in every work sector, particularly in the wake of the 2007 financial crisis (Van Gyes & Szekér, 2013). The civil society was not left out of this trend, so it is particularly interesting to see in Figure 8 that respondents were fairly evenly split as to their perception of job security. 33% felt to some extent insecure, 33% felt to some extent secure and 20% responded as neutral. There is no clear pattern when looking at the level of security against the variable of age.





In Figure 10, we further explore the job security variable by analysing it in combination with the variable indicating whether someone has a position that is dependent on project-based funding or one that is independent of project-based funding. We find that there is low to moderate correlation between having a job that is independent of project funding and feeling more secure in one's job. Those

who are in project-based contracts (dependent) are more likely to feel insecure and vice versa. A relatively high number of respondents selected “other” in reporting whether their position was project-based or not, so it would be interesting in the future to see what other types of positions this category may include.

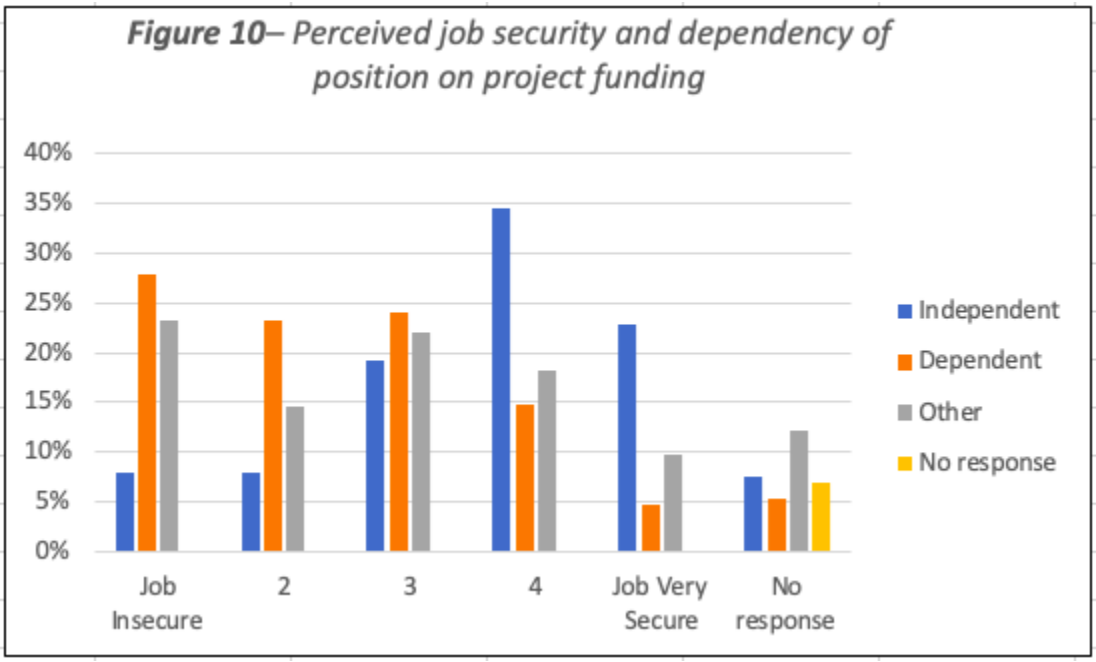
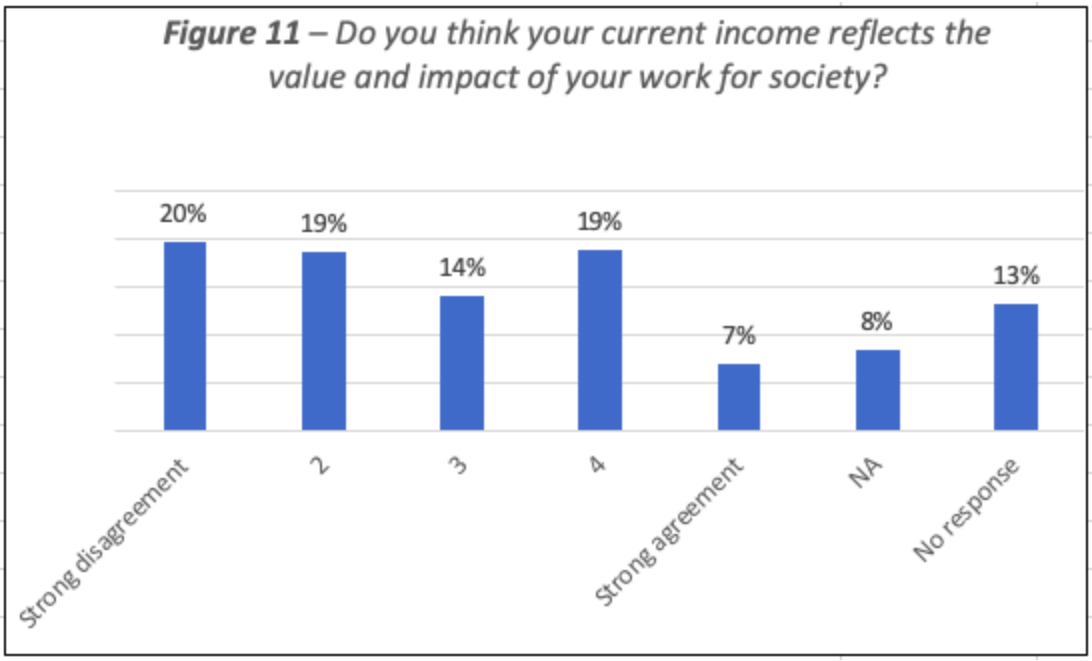
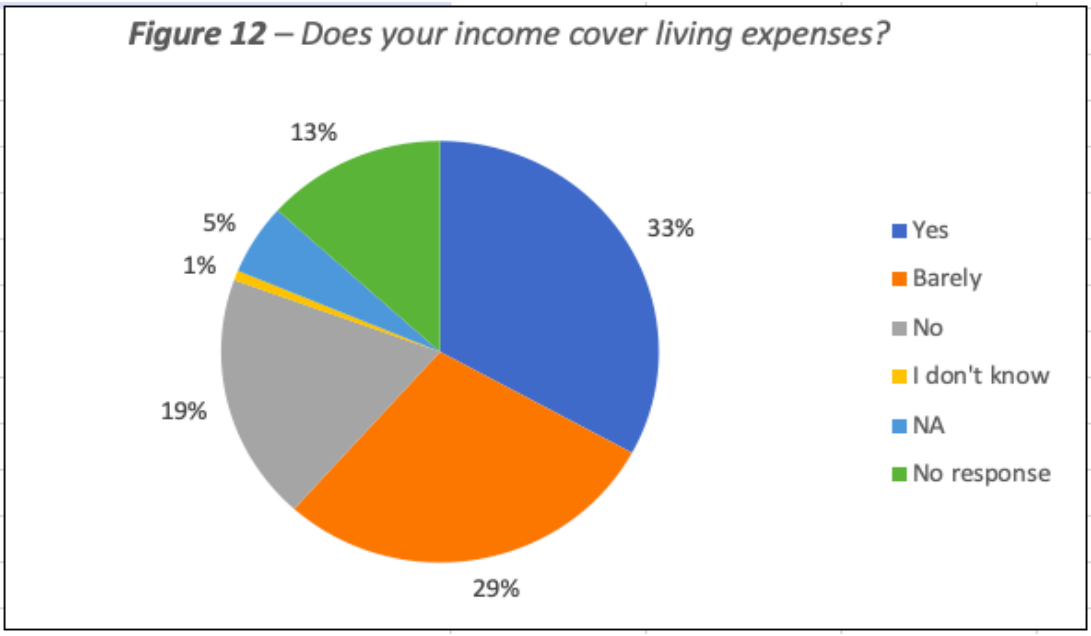


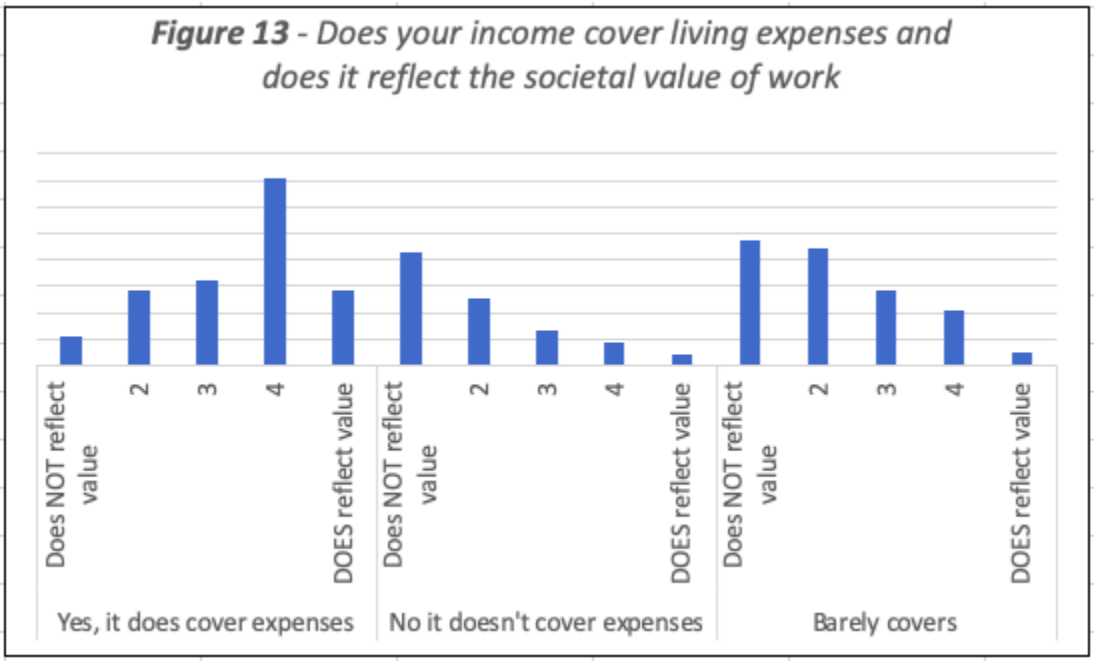
***Figure 10**– Perceived job security and dependency of position on project funding*

In focusing on the economic recognition of their work (Figure 11), respondents in 39% of cases do not think their income reflects the value and impact of their work for society. 26% think they have fair economic recognition, and 14% expressed a neutral position.



Looking at overall financial security of workers in the sector is also vital for understanding work conditions. As Figure 12 shows, 48% of respondents report that their income does not or barely covers living expenses in their countries, compared to 33% who agree that their salary is sufficient. Not surprisingly, Figure 13 shows that those who say their income does cover expenses are also more likely to say the income reflects the societal value of the work at least to some extent. For those that say their income does not or barely covers expenses, this trend is reversed; they are more likely to say it does not reflect the societal value of the work.

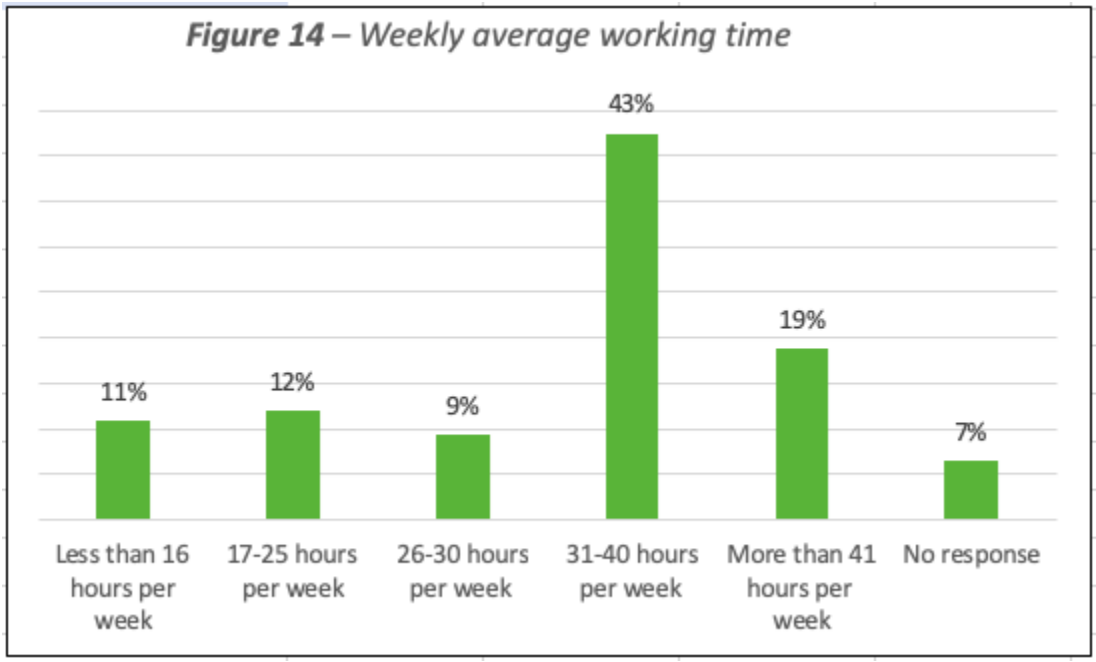




Deepening our statistical understanding of job security and income of professionals in CS sectors will further the discussion on pay and afford attention to the motivations of people employed in the sector. Generally speaking, the risk is that CS sectors are considered to be voluntary, and also that professionals in the field themselves justify the lack of job security or economic recognition in relation to the social utility that their work provides. This (macro and micro) perception prevents professionals from claiming recognition of their labour rights.

III. Work-life balance

As shown in Figure 14, the majority of respondents work in full-time positions of 31 to 40 hours per week (43%). 19% regularly worked extra hours – more than 40 hours per week. A total of 21% work between 17 and 30 hours per week and 11% work under 16 hours per week in their respective roles. In addition to their primary roles, respondents reported on average 5 hours of volunteer work during a week on other projects.



In Figure 15, a similar percentage (16%) of respondents compared to the percentage that typically work more than 41 hours per week, feel that they do not have enough free time on average. Positively, 38% agree they do have enough time and 31% reported they sometimes do.

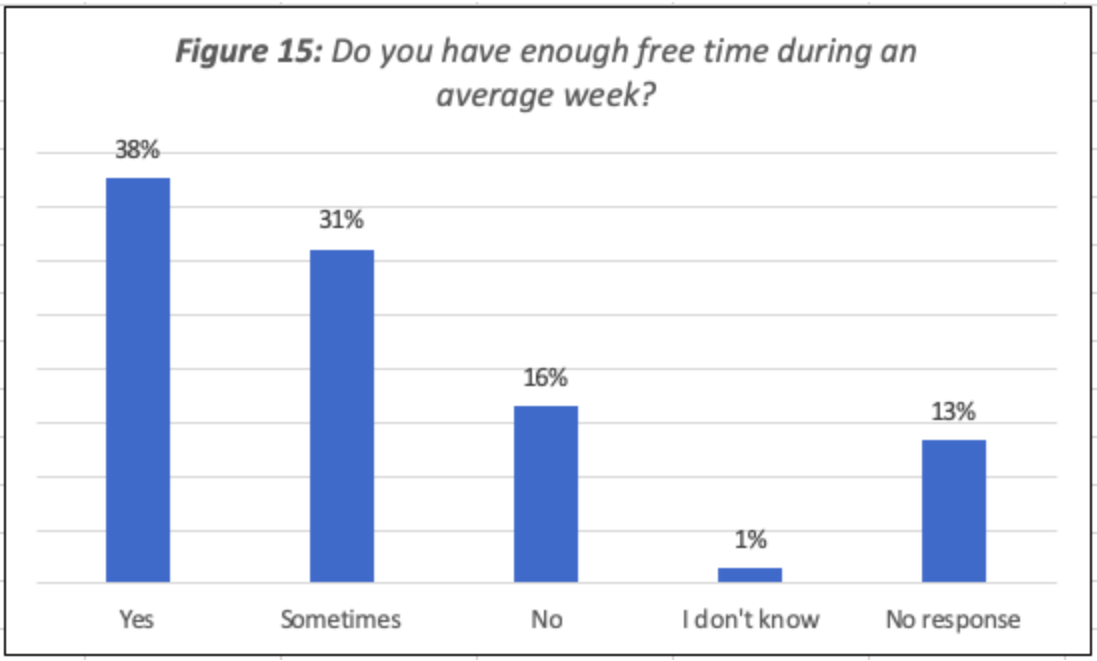
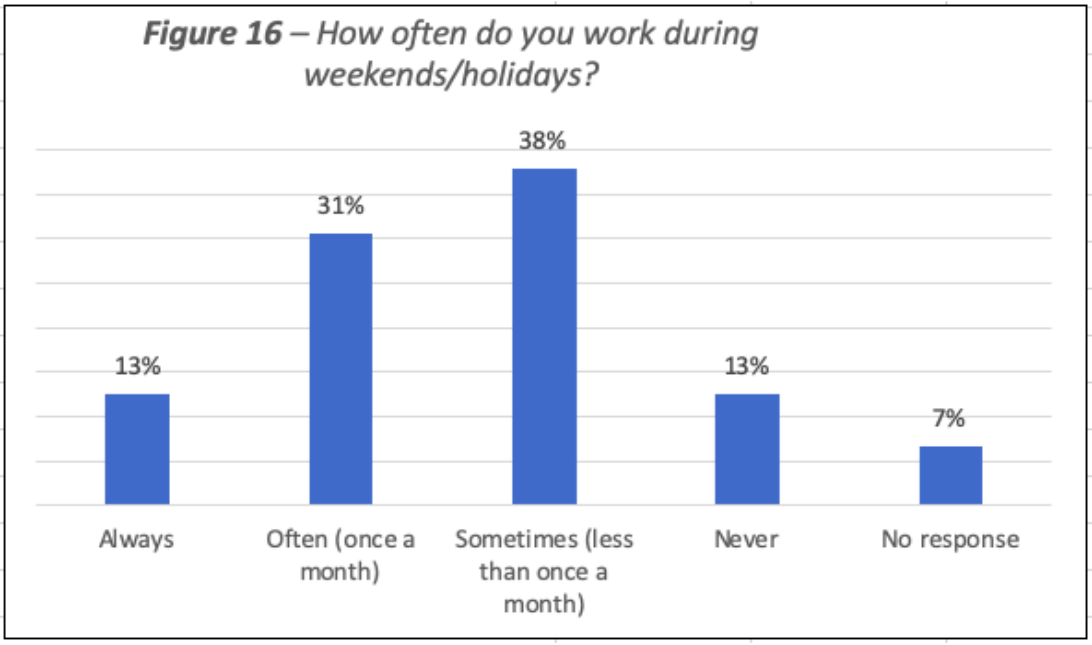
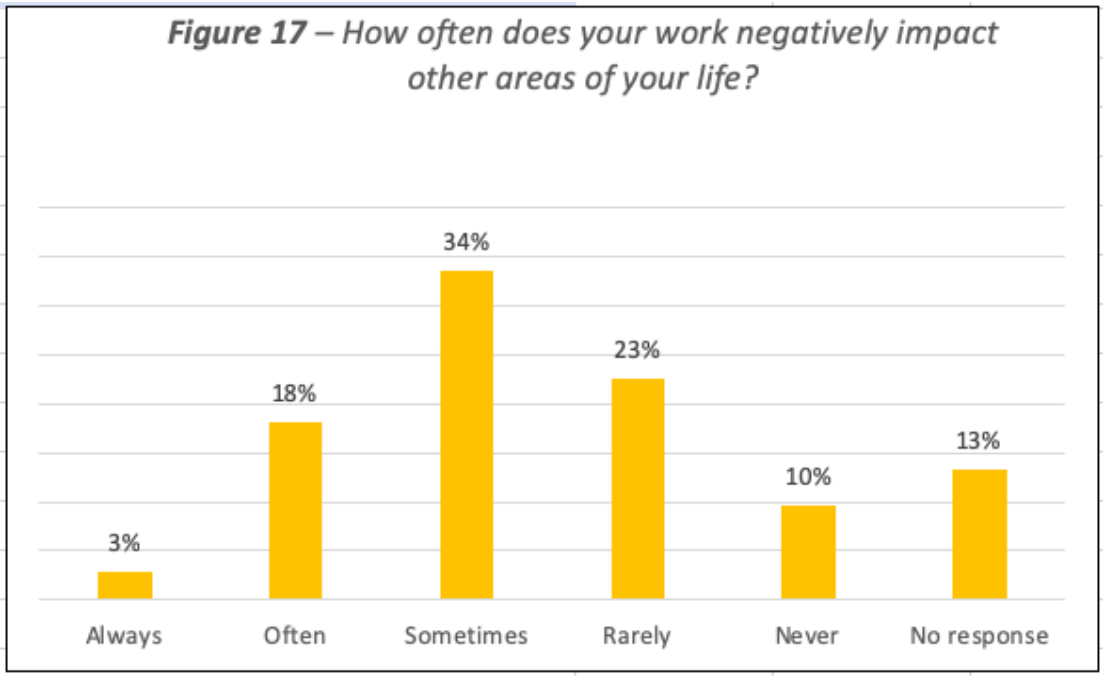


Figure 16 shows that a vast majority of participants report working on weekends or holidays at least some of the time (total of 82%). Broken down, we see that 44% 'often' or 'always' work weekends or holidays and 13% 'never' do.



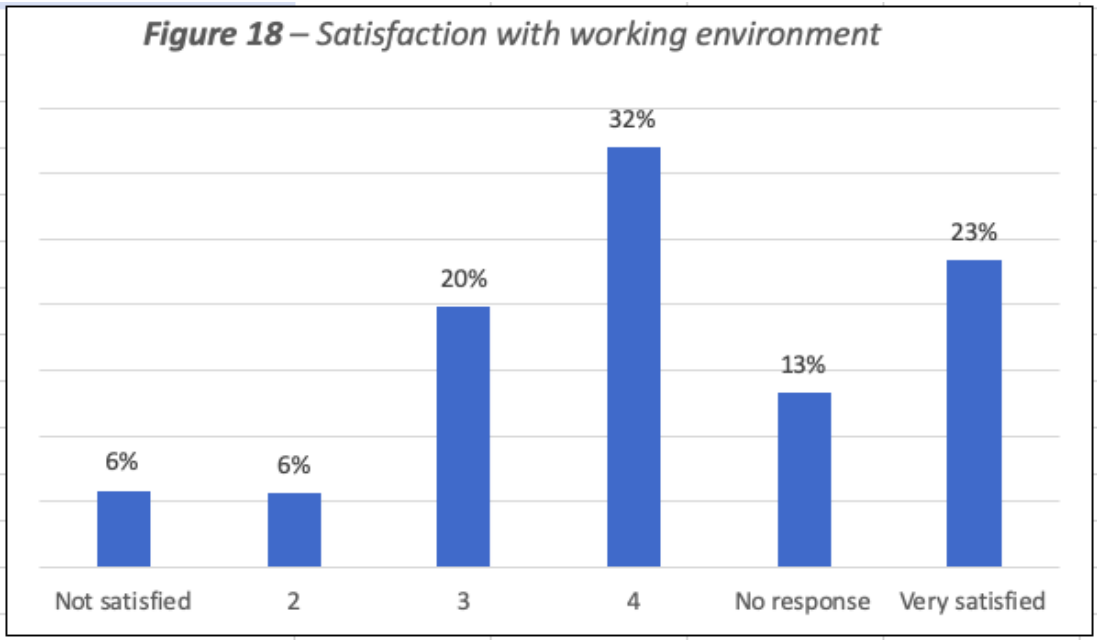
Despite these responses which point generally to a perceived reasonableness of time dedicated to work, 34% said work negatively impacts other areas of life at least some of the time (Figure 17). 33% reported never or rarely feeling that work negatively impacts their life compared to 21% which said it always or often does.

Of course, the amount of time dedicated to work is not the only factor which may influence this variable. Certainly deadline pressure, instability of work conditions, and income may also play a role.

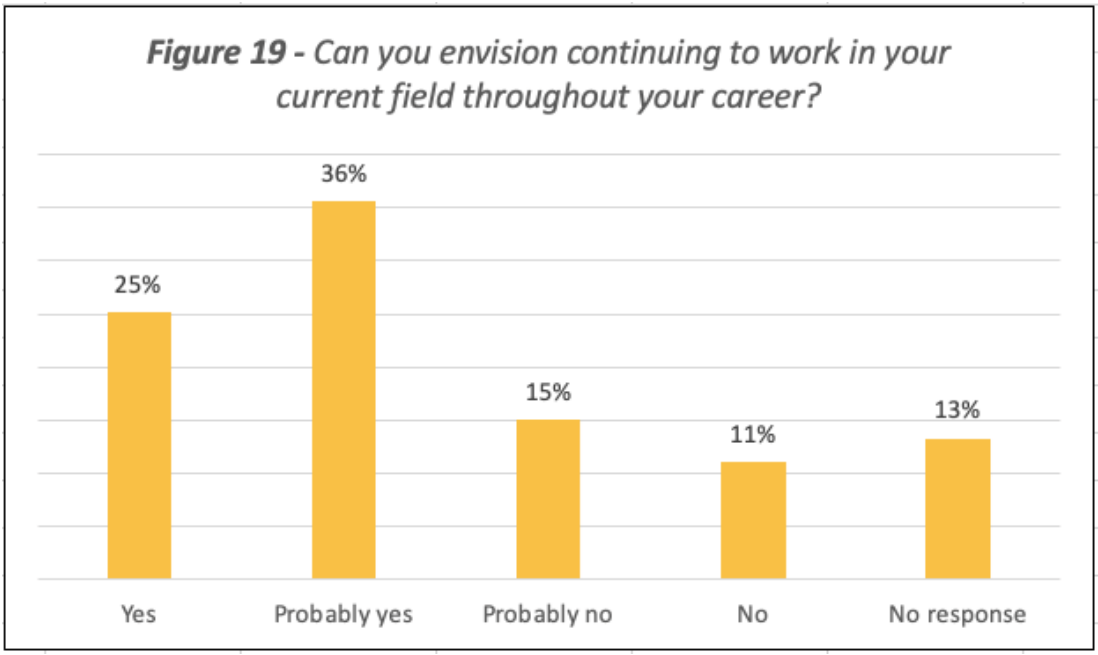


IV. Satisfaction

The survey also sought to understand better satisfaction with work conditions. Figure 18 shows that there is generally a high degree of satisfaction among respondents. A total of 55% reported feeling at least somewhat satisfied, in comparison to just 12% who were at least somewhat dissatisfied and 20% who responded neutrally.

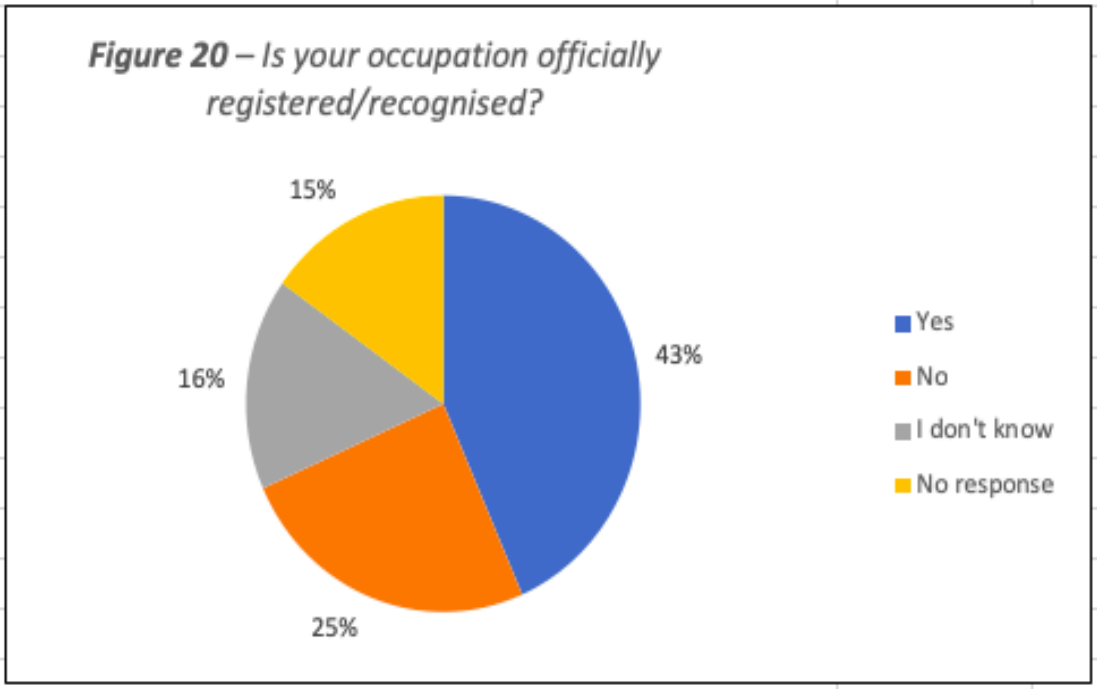


Given this relatively high degree of satisfaction, we would expect that respondents may be interested in continuing to work in these capacities into the future. This is confirmed in Figure 19, where we see that 25% say they can imagine continuing to work in their current field throughout their career, 36% saying ‘probably yes’, 15% saying ‘probably no’ and, finally, 11% clearly saying they will not. As one might imagine, the percentage of respondents who respond ‘probably yes’ and ‘yes’ generally increases by age group, such that the youngest age group (20-25) has only 51% responding affirmatively and the oldest (65+) has 75%. These two points do not encapsulate a full picture of job and career satisfaction, but it gives limited insight into the motivations that compel workers’ in the civil society sector. Of course, this is likely to vary by specific profession and other conditions, but it is nevertheless interesting to see how satisfaction applies to the sector as a whole.

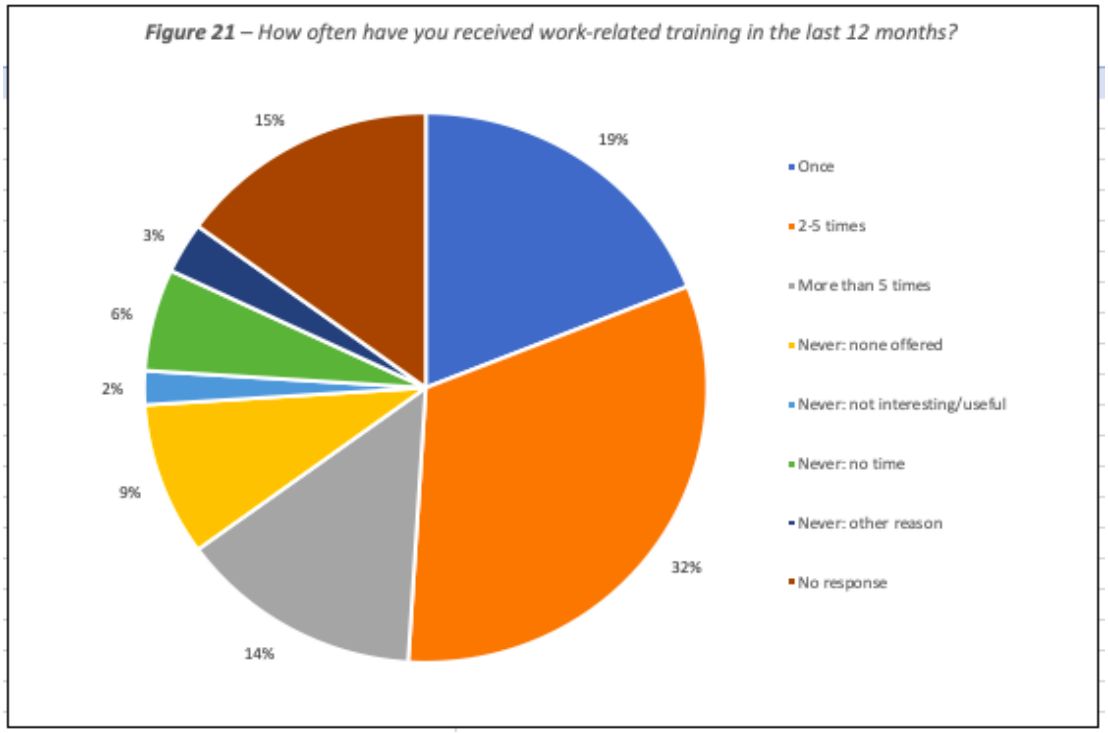


V. Professionalisation of the field

Several questions were included in the survey which attempted to evaluate the level of professionalisation of the CS sector. First, the question of whether respondents' occupation is officially registered or recognized was posed (Figure 20), with 43% affirming that it is. 16% said they 'did not know', reflecting a low level of awareness about the official recognition of professions and related rights. Future analysis should investigate this question of recognition in combination with data on profession and by country.

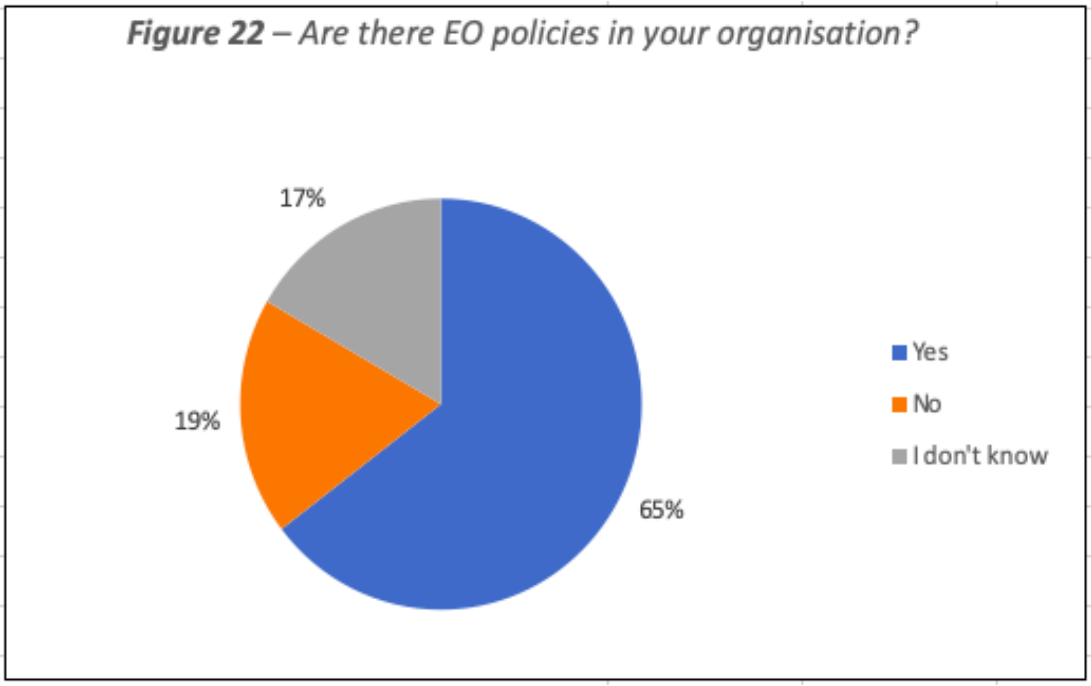


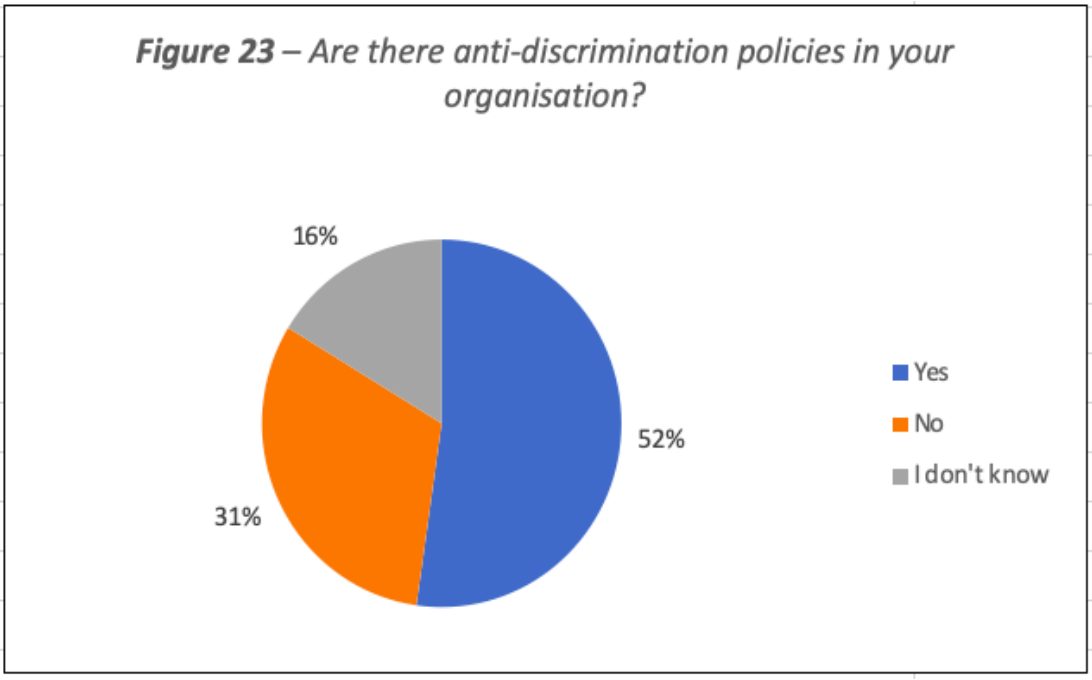
Another feature of a professionalised field may be the existence of professional training opportunities. This is not to say that lacking professional training opportunities precludes a field from being professionalised, but it does point to some degree of a networked field and investments at the organizational or field levels to continue skill-building. For this reason, a question about training attendance was included. As seen in Figure 21, 20% of respondents had not attended professional training in the previous 12 months, 9% of whom said it was because there was no training offered to them. Conversely, 65% reported attending at least one, with the majority taking part between 2 and 5 times. Given that the survey was distributed by UHD partner organisations, it is plausible that the survey participants are more likely to be engaged with networks with access to and information about training opportunities, which may bias the sample. In order to more fully understand the relation between professional development participation and degree of professionalisation, further research is needed.



VI. Equal opportunity and inclusion

As Figures 22 and 23 show, the majority of respondents state that their organisations have effective inclusion or equal opportuity policies (65%) and anti-discrimination and/or harassment policies (52%). 17% and 16% report not knowing the answer to these questions respectively, which is interesting in the project frame, because it could be interpreted as a lack of knowledge about the rights and services workers should have access to. It would be useful to understand more deeply the characteristics of the policies and of the workers that have access to these (e.g., those that have permanent contracts, the level of the contract type, specific profession, etc.).





Equal opportunity and inclusion are important issues in the civil society sector as well as in all other employment sectors. Looking at the data collected through the survey, but also data that focuses on individual sectors included in the broader civil society sector - education, human rights, international cooperation - one can see that these sectors are highly feminised, meaning that the majority of people employed are women (Federation of European Social Employers, 2019; EIGE,

2018). The majority of those working at the executive level are women, but in many cases those at a coordinating or managerial level are men. The sector under analysis therefore does not differ from the characteristics of the labor market in general. As can be easily guessed, this is the result of a cultural system that shapes the labor market, the organizational culture and the behaviors of men and women. A culture still strongly influenced by gender stereotypes that still produces dynamics of horizontal and vertical segregation in training and occupations, which means that women are more dedicated to the educational, health and care sectors in general, while men are more committed to technical and scientific sectors. In addition, again for reasons related to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, the civil society sector is not particularly attractive to men given the precariousness of employment contracts, low wages, lack of full recognition of professionalism and the absence of career prospects. Women who encounter greater obstacles in entering, remaining and progressing in the labour market tend to look for a job with meaning - with a mission - and since their principal value within their families is not the salary they earn, they settle for lower salaries. Also, again due to gendered upbringing, women are less likely to assert their rights or claim raises or more favorable working conditions. This could therefore contribute to the sub-optimal working conditions described through the data collected.

VII. Labour rights and unionisation

Figure 24 shows that the majority of those who responded are unaware of labour rights initiatives at the EU level for workers in the civil society sector. In Figure 25, a higher percentage say they are aware of unions at the national level (28%), although a greater percentage report not knowing (34%). It is not surprising, then, that membership in unions is low (as seen in Figure 26). Only 13% say they belong to a labour union. 26% report that they are not currently, but are open to the idea, and a high percentage (44%) say no, without also indicating interest in the idea of joining one were it is available.

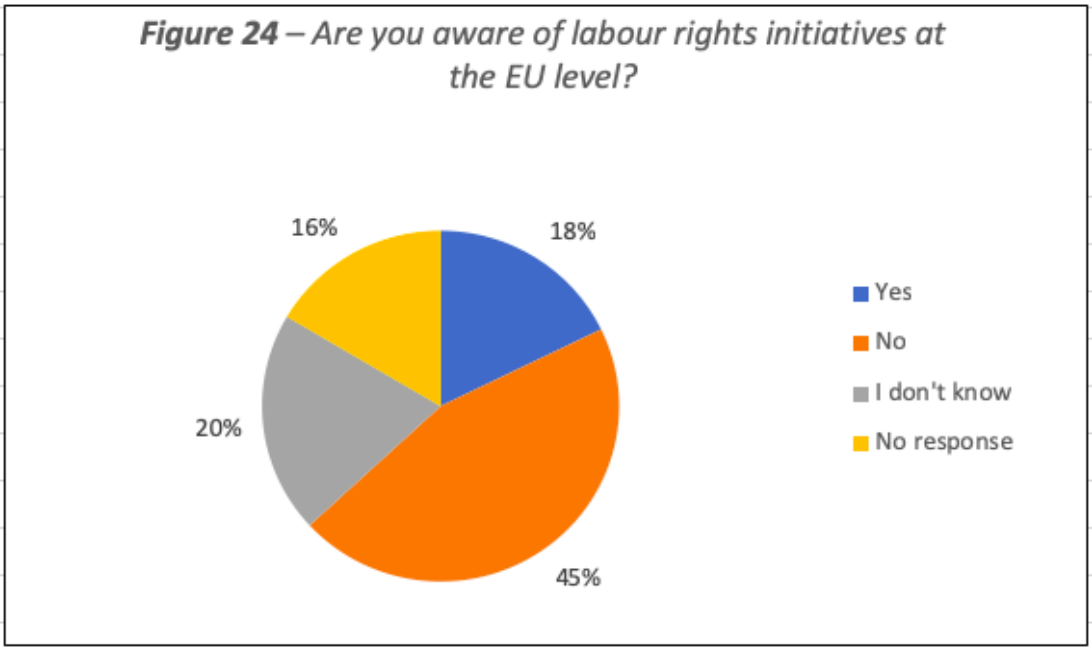


***Figure 24** – Are you aware of labour rights initiatives at the EU level?*

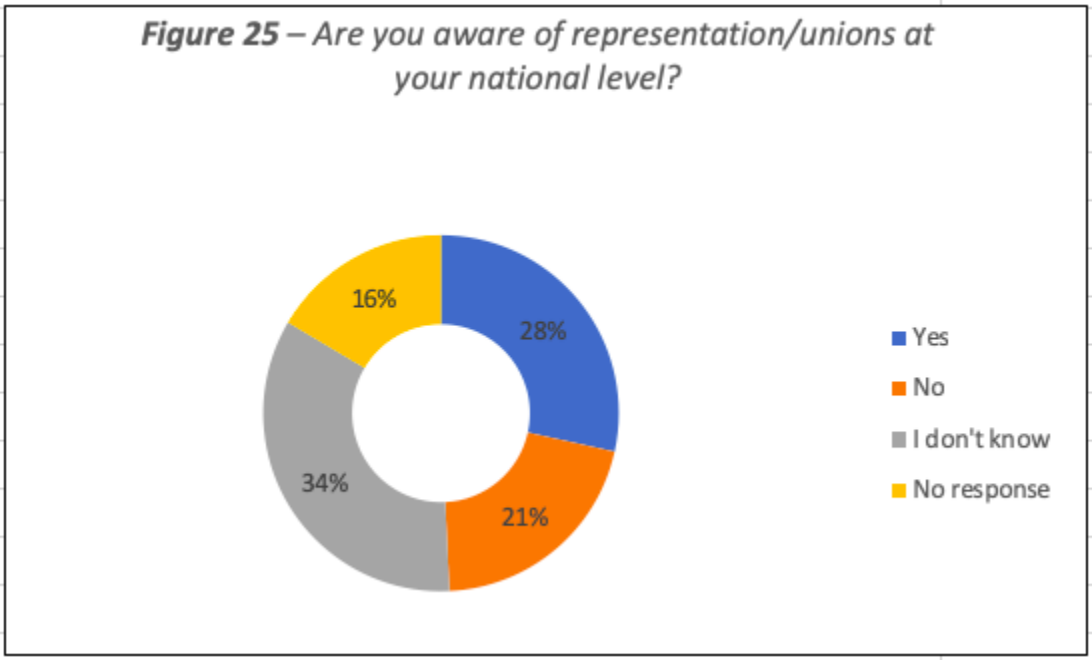
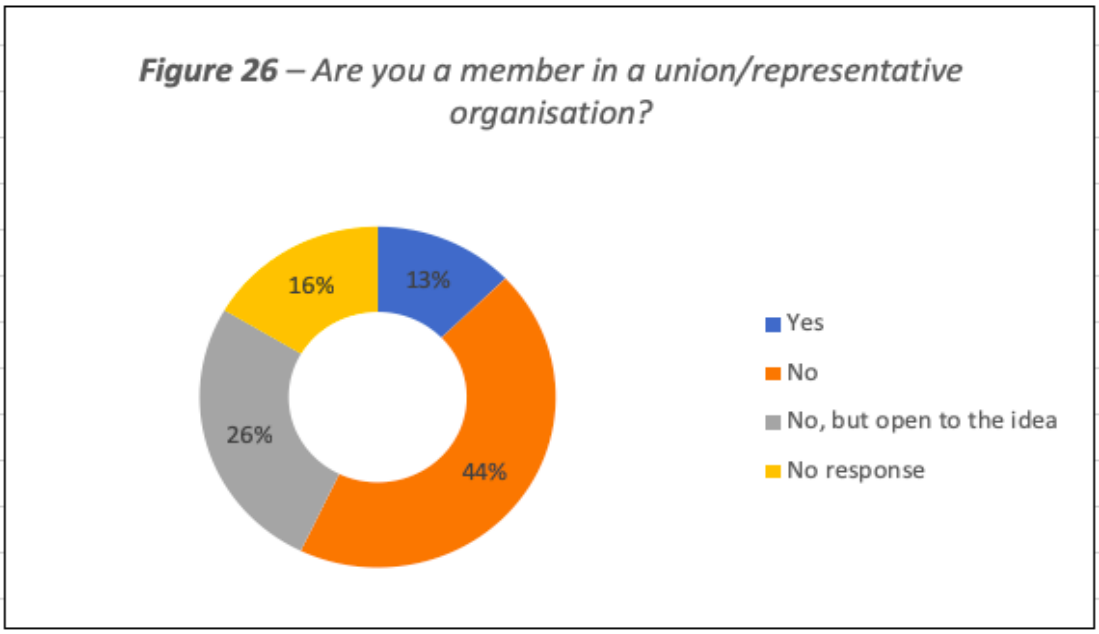
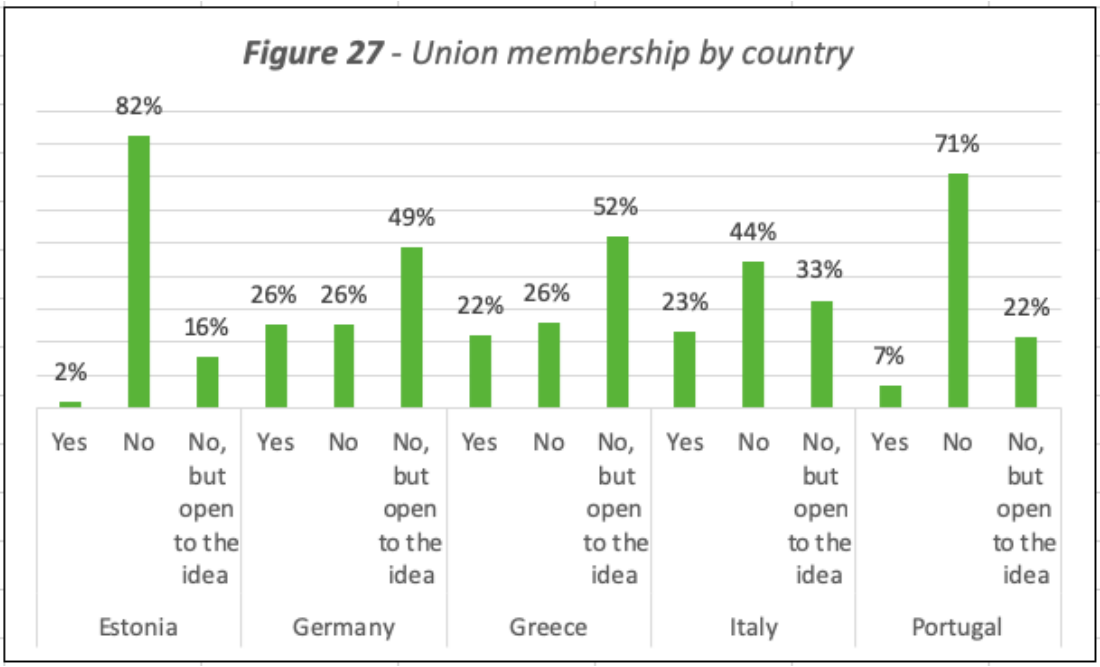


***Figure 25** – Are you aware of representation/unions at your national level?*

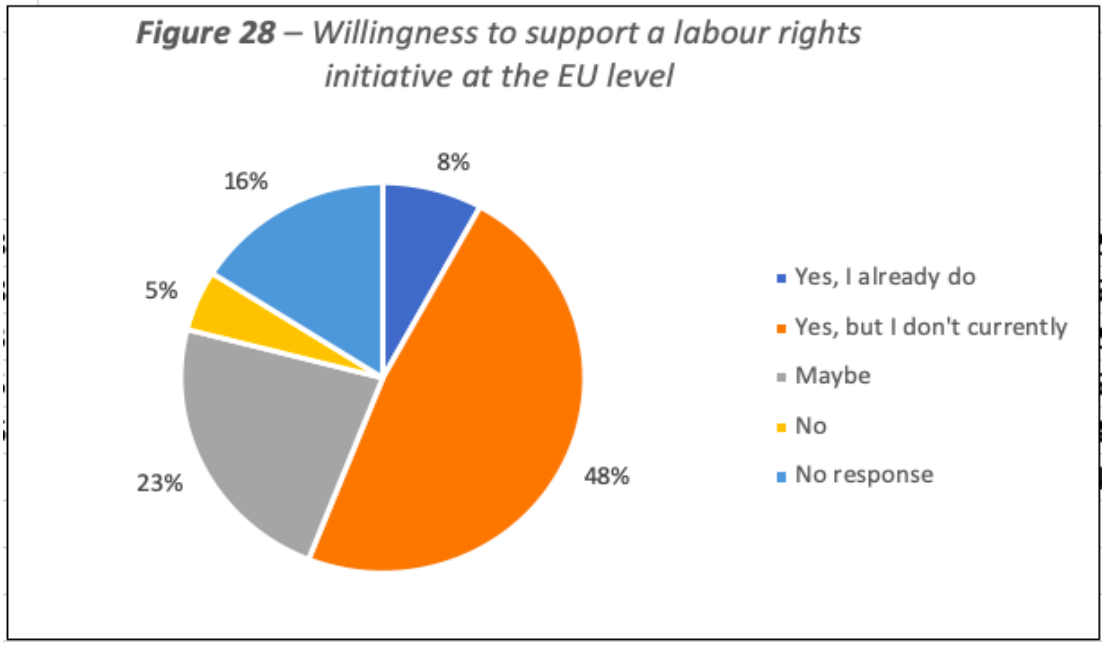
In looking at union membership by country in Figure 27 (only the five most common countries represented), there are several interesting observations. First, only 2% of Estonians reported membership in a union. Of those that report being a member in a union, only 2% are in Estonia. Estonia is also the least likely to say they are open to the idea. Italy has the highest percentage who do belong to a union,

followed closely by Germany and Greece. This data should be interpreted carefully, as it is not representative, but perhaps it indicates cultural or historical tendencies by country.





When asked more explicitly, however, whether they would be willing to support a labour rights initiative at the EU level (Figure 28), 56% say that they are supportive of the idea (8% of which already do). An additional 23% said they might be interested and only 5% responded that they would not be interested in such an effort, indicating that there is reason to believe such an initiative would be well-received.



VIII. Dialogue with public authorities and networks

As Figure 29 shows, 43% of respondents state it is easy for their organisation to be in dialogue with public authorities and that their opinion is considered in public decision-making. 30%, on the other hand, say it is not easy and 12% reported they did not know. This presents an opportunity for future research to identify which types of organisations see themselves as more easily able to influence dialogue with public authorities, and which kinds of public entities (local, regional, national) they are referencing. Comparing the situations in different countries would also give useful insights as to how to promote horizontal exchanges among organisations at the EU level.

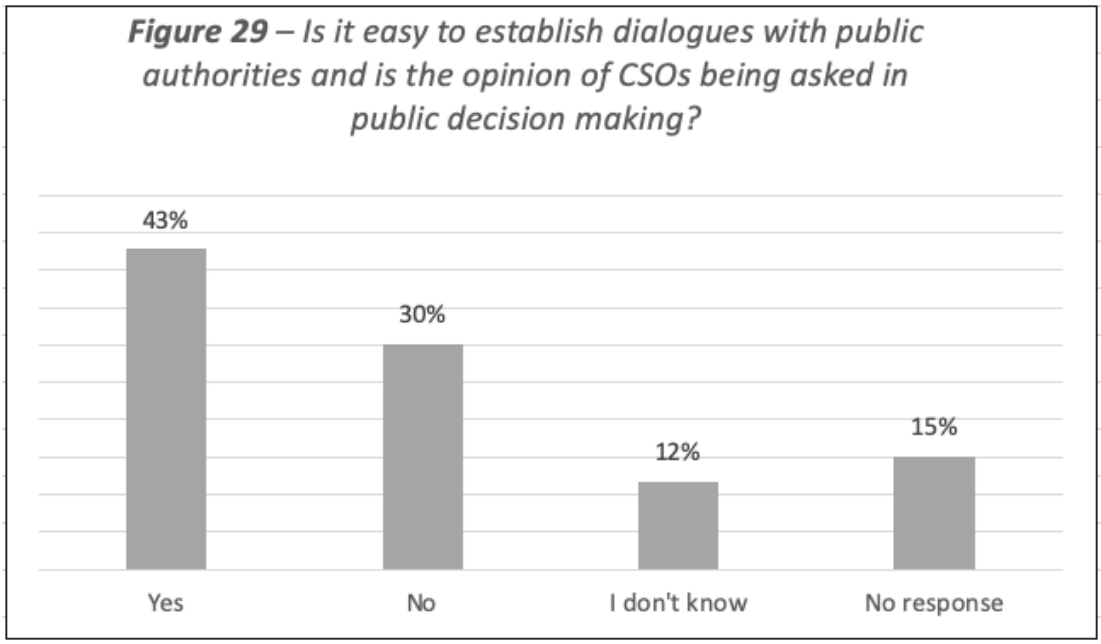


***Figure 29** – Is it easy to establish dialogues with public authorities and is the opinion of CSOs being asked in public decision making?*

A high number of respondents are engaged in some level of networks, whether international, national or both – 61% in total (Figure 30). 23% are engaged in both international and national, 17% in just international networks and 21% in just national. Again, this data may be skewed by the fact that respondents who took part in the survey are likely to be involved in networks through which they heard about the survey. Further research should explore which subcategories of CS sectors have stronger networks at each level, or if there are differences in the prevalence of these kinds of networks based on national context.

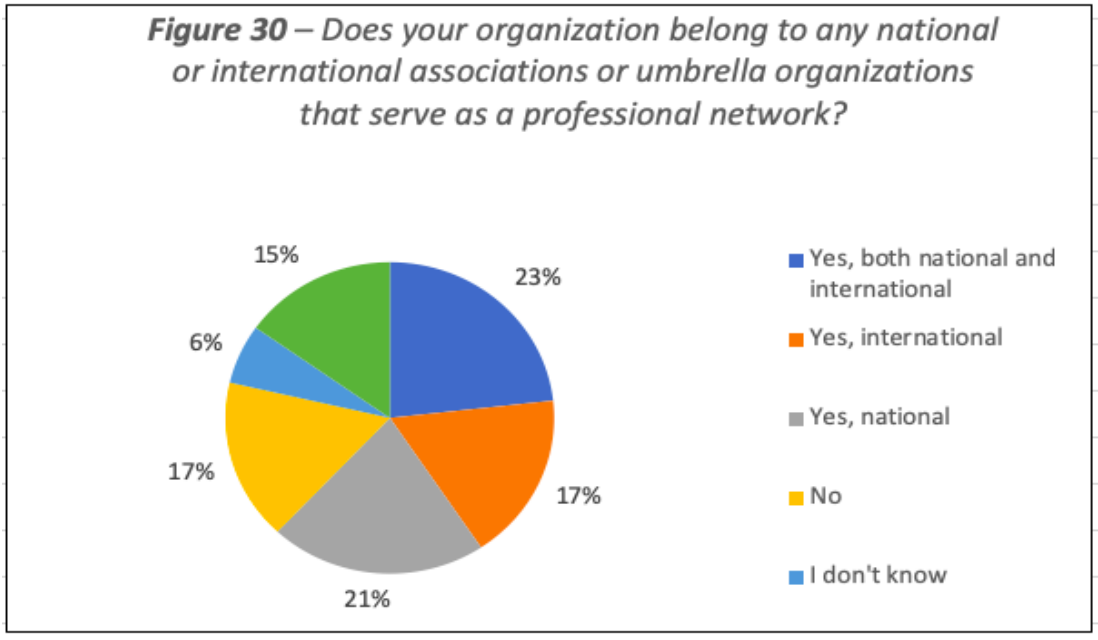


***Figure 30** – Does your organization belong to any national or international associations or umbrella organizations that serve as a professional network?*

IX. Impact of COVID-19

Although the project was developed prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the survey was not finalized until afterwards. As such, it was possible to include a related question. Figure 31 reports the distribution of respondents who reported that the COVID-19 aid packages in their countries included their field of work. As we know, government approaches to the crisis and its financial ramifications varied greatly across Europe. Correspondingly, the impact on civil society organizations and individuals also varied, as confirmed here, where the percentage of people who said 'yes' (33%) is just 1 percentage point higher than those who said 'no' (32%). Although we cannot derive a full picture of the treatment of the civil society sector during the COVID-19 pandemic based on this one question, it gives a small degree of insight into the divergent experiences of individuals, organizations and sectors across Europe and beyond.

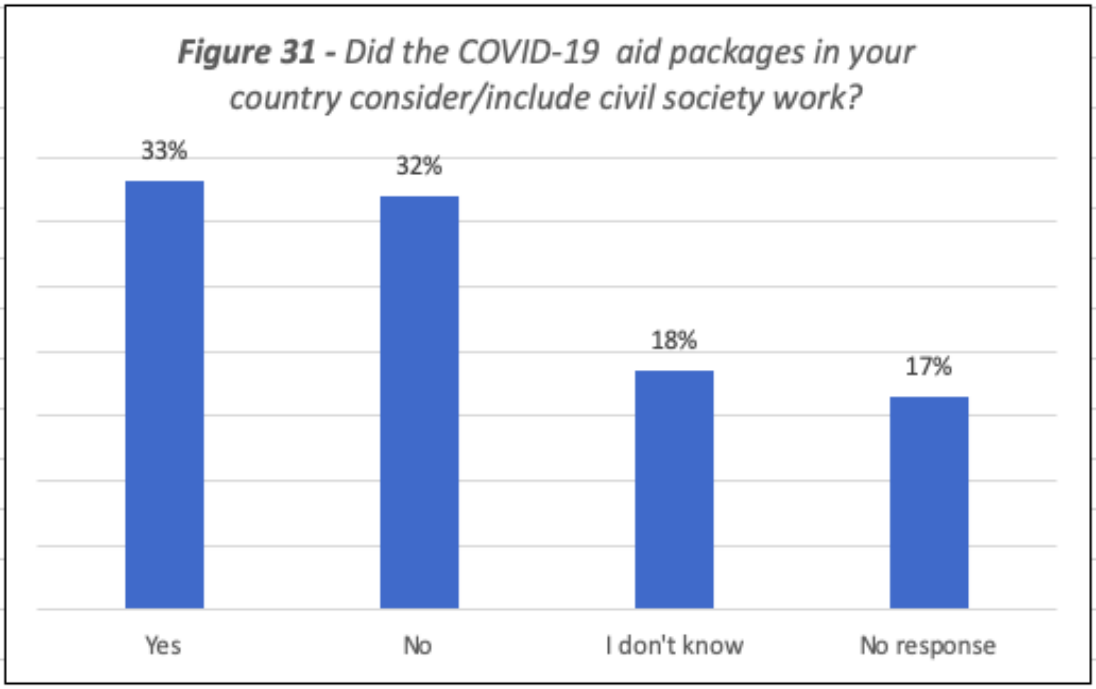
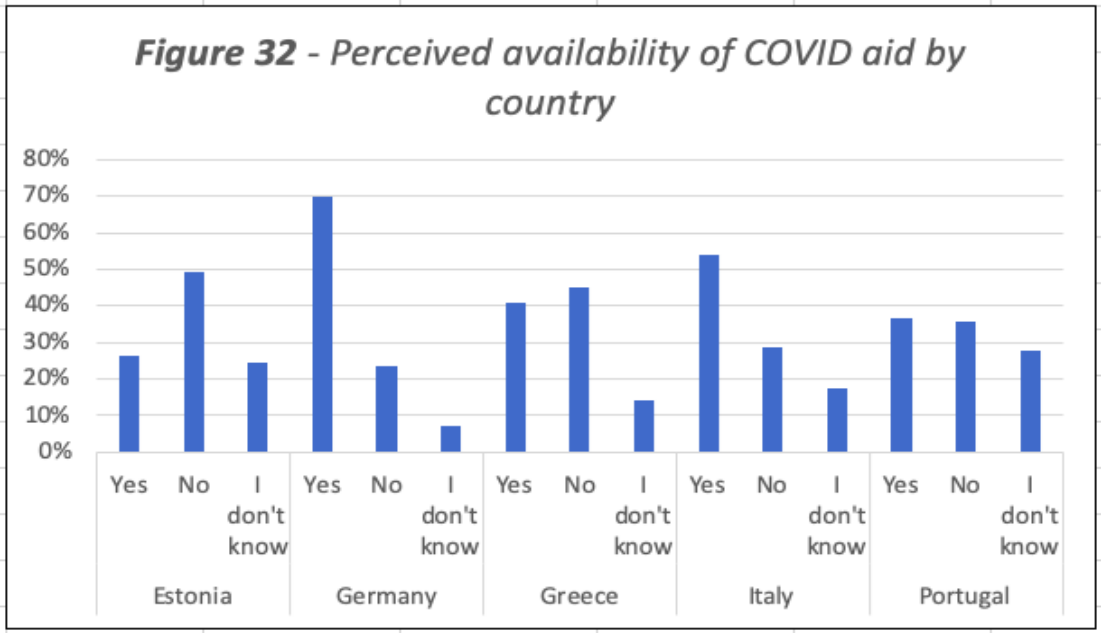


***Figure 31** - Did the COVID-19 aid packages in your country consider/include civil society work?*

Breaking this down by country, as seen in Figure 32, we see that in Germany and Italy, the majority said the aid did cover their sector, whereas in Greece and Estonia, a majority said that it did not cover their sector, either indicating the aid was not as widely available, or only available in certain subsectors, or that respondents were unaware of the status and availability of aid packages. In

Portugal, there seems to be a more mixed perception of the availability of aid, with a similar percentage of respondents answering both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and slightly less responding ‘I don’t know’.



The COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown policies have brought to light some significant elements regarding policies related to the civil society sector and its recognition. On the one hand, CSOs have played an important role in supporting vulnerable groups - or those who have become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic - by providing a timely response to the ongoing emergency. In some cases, they have ensured access to essential goods and services, replacing a void left by public institutions. This role has been recognized primarily in rhetorical form, transforming civil society actors - specifically in the social or health field / level - into "heroes" or “angels", recognizing the value and ethical dimension, however, often without a concrete response in terms of resources. Once again, it seems to be a lack of ability or willingness to recognize what civil society has produced or is producing. The same can be said for those sectors of civil society that have had to slow down, modify or decrease their activities – e.g., organisations in non-formal education and youth work. As mentioned earlier, since a large part of CSOs' funding is based on their activities, this has also resulted in a reduction in their budgets. Not all organizations have been able to sustain themselves through those budget cuts - especially the smaller ones having to reduce the staff employed or even consider closing the organization itself.

Lockdown policies and the massive introduction of remote work have had an important impact on working conditions, which can be considered partly positive - thanks to the streamlining of certain processes, especially for those operating internationally - and partly negatively - linked to the new organization of work and the reconciliation with private life, family organization of children and the lack of space to have a dedicated space for work activities.

Finally, the failure to fully recognize the role of civil society was also seen in the process of building post-emergency policies - recovery and resilience plans - in which CSOs were ignored or included in the discussion only at the margins. Although it has been and is the sector that has the most expertise in rethinking and transforming our communities and societies from a shared care perspective, in most of the countries answering the survey CSOs seem to have not played as crucial a role in thinking about recovery as, for example, the private sector - of industry and services - has. In this direction, therefore, the need to continue the process of advocacy towards public institutions at the national and European levels for a full recognition of the role of civil society for the welfare of society and the recognition of the professionalism and rights of workers operating in this sector is once again underscored.

5. Conclusions

As evidenced by our research within the scope of the Unsung Heroes Dialogues project, the civil society sector in Europe spans a broad number of professions and fields, faces unique and divergent challenges, and is made up of a diverse workforce. There is no one definition of what it means to be a civil society worker, and the professional experiences vary greatly from country to country, organization to organization and individual to individual. This survey of civil society workers and the corresponding qualitative interviews with experts and practitioners in the field seeks to offer some insight into the working experiences of those in this sector, an under-researched and little understood question. Without aiming to be representative, in analyzing the 534 responses from at least 30 countries, we gain some important insights and shore up some common assumptions.

Of course, this analysis is just a first attempt, and much more research must be conducted. Several opportunities for future research have been identified in the course of this analysis related specifically to needs for future data collection:

- First, this survey indicated that those who are in project-based contracts are more likely to feel insecure in their professional positions. This confirms what we may expect about longer-term positions being more conducive to a sense of job security. However, in this survey, a high number of respondents selected “other” in reporting whether their position was project-based or not, so it would be interesting in the future to see what types of positions civil society workers find themselves in in terms of the funding of their positions. Perhaps, for example, we may find that many positions are funded by both longer-term assets and short-term project-based funds.
- Secondly, when asked in this survey about whether respondents’ occupations were officially recognized (Figure 20), 43% affirmed that it was and 16% said they didn’t know. Given that professional recognition of certain occupations varies by country, it would be interesting to investigate this question in combination with data on profession and by country.
- Third, we make the assumption in this survey that participation in professional development opportunities is related to the degree of professionalisation. To confirm this relationship, though, we would need to conduct further research into the types of professional development offered, who is conducting these, whether they are associated with official certifications or licensure, etc. Certainly, this is not the only factor evidencing professionalization of a field, so a more full survey around this specific topic would be of value, including other variables. It would also be useful to understand who has access based on individual and position-based characteristics (e.g., those that have permanent contracts, the level of the contract type, specific profession, etc.).
- Lastly, this survey was open to a very broad audience of workers in the civil society sector. As a result, we understand that it may include responses from those in highly diverse subsectors, i.e., labor and trade unions, schools and universities, advocacy groups, professional associations, religious institutions, cultural institutions, youth workers and non-formal education, etc. Further research should explore these subcategories more specifically, to find out if the results presented here are consistent across sub-sector or if these are unique across. Understanding the unique needs and conditions of each sub-sector is essential for better advocating for worker’s rights on behalf of civil society as a whole.

Of course, this analysis has also raised many more questions, which should be considered in discussions around this topic moving forward, for example:

- Who is the sector comprised of? Does the prevalence of women or young people contribute to a culture of self-exploitation of CSO workers?
- Do managerial and administrative classes exist within NGOs, and do organisations where these classes are separate see worse working conditions?
- Has having most CSOs operating primarily on state funding led to an emphasis on services and de-emphasized advocacy work? How do funding mechanisms infringe on civil society's role as a political actor - in terms of advocating for its mission and for its role as a professionalised sector?
- Does the glorification of volunteering compromise the effectiveness of the sector and create damaging expectations of self-sacrifice? And how do volunteer-run organizations compare in form and function to those run by paid staff? How can civil society bring volunteers and professional staff together in a way that benefits each group and the organizations themselves, in that the unique benefits of each are recognised?
- How connected are Brussels-based and national CSOs to the reality of local CSOs? Is this a barrier to advocacy? What mechanisms may be introduced to lessen this gap?

Bringing these questions to the forefront of future conversations related to the professional rights of civil society organisations and their workers is essential for the wellbeing of individuals working the CS sector and for the sector itself.

Appendix 1

Table 1: Count of countries reported

Row Labels	Count of COUNTRY
Albania	1
Austria	4
Azerbaijan	3
Belarus	1
Belgium	12

Bosnia and Herzegovina	1
Brazil	1
Bulgaria	2
Croatia	7
Cyprus	1
Estonia	57
France	6
Georgia	1
Germany	43
Greece	50
Hungary	1
Italy	52
Latvia	3
Macedonia	1
Moldova	1
Netherlands	1
No response	129
Norway	1
Portugal	101
Romania	38
Senegal	1
Serba	1
Serbia	1
Slovenia	1
Spain	6
Turkey	1
UK	4
(blank)	
Grand Total	533

Appendix 2

Qualitative interviews' scheme

1. It would be helpful to understand your perception of Civil Society both as a work sector and as a part of society with a political vision and perspective.
    - Do you think that it is possible to describe CS as a work sector? How?

- How do you think the political, professional and ethical dimensions intersect in the way we think about and organize CS? At EU level and at the member country level - do you have examples from different national contexts? Can we find a different balance among these three dimensions? Should we identify a common understanding at the EU level? What would that be, in your opinion?

2. Considering the role CS has in our societies/democracies today, what is the value of its voluntary-based characteristic vs. the value of a more professionalised sector?
    - How do these different characteristics/perspectives affect organisations' internal structure, the access to funding, the continuity of work of the organisations and their impacts, the recognition of the value of their impacts in terms of social, cultural, political and economic dimensions?
    - How do these different characteristics/perspectives affect the claims to labour rights and respect?

3. Working conditions in CS
    - From your point of view (at institutional, network, platform or organisational level), can you identify common trends about the labour conditions of CS workers? With specific attention to: job security, income, work-life balance. Is there one that stands out the most in terms of what to work toward improving as a sector?
    - CS is a women-dominated sector. How do you think this affects the recognition of labour rights and the quality of working conditions? Do you think it could be strategic to work on the recognition of women's rights and labour rights in conjunction?

4. Turning to the benefits and drawbacks of increased professionalisation of the CS sector; We understand "professionalism" as the form of recognition of the various professions working in the sector and, as a result, their labour rights. It also means the recognition of the role CSOs play in society and financial recognition of the value of their work.
    - Can we balance the matter of claiming labour rights and recognizing the "political" work of CS, or are they in conflict due to CS' political and economic organisation?
    - What are the primary barriers that stand in the way of civil society better advocating for its own labour rights (through increased professionalisation)?

5. How do you think the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted working realities of civil society workers in Europe as a whole and/or at the member state level?

6. How do you see the role of CS as a work sector and a political lever in the future of our societies and democracies?
- What should be changed? Could the change be promoted at EU level? Or should they be proposed at the national one?

Citations

Ann Goggins Gregory and Don Howard (2009), *The Nonprofit Starvation Cycle*, in Stanford Social Innovation Review, Fall 2009.

Angela M. Eikenberry and Jodie Drapal Kluver (2004), *The Marketization of the Nonprofit Sector: Civil Society at Risk?*, in Public Administration Review, March/April 2004, Vol. 64, No. 2.

EIGE, (2018), Study and work in the EU: set apart by gender. Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States: https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20173992_kina26893enn_pdf.pdf

Van Gyes, Guy, and Lise Szekér. EurWORK, (2013), *Impact of the Crisis on Working Conditions in Europe*, www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/reports/2013/impact-of-the-crisis-on-working-conditions-in-europe.

Federation of European Social Employers (2019), SOCIAL SERVICES WORKFORCE IN EUROPE: STATE OF PLAY AND CHALLENGES, Report prepared in the framework of the PESSIS+ project (VS/2017/0376): http://socialemployers.eu/files/doc/Report%20The%20Social%20Services%20Workforce%20in%20Europe%2011.02.2020.pdf