

# TEN FLOWS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY IN FLANDERS AND BRUSSELS

All over the world, citizens are working every day for a better future. They do so in civil society, in a wide range of independent organisations, groups and movements. Sometimes these are loose connections, other times highly organised structures. Examples are spontaneous citizens' actions, neighbourhood committees, action groups fighting for a liveable environment, environmental associations involved in nature management, trade unions advocating better working conditions, associations organising leisure activities for their members and training institutes honing citizens' skills. In that civil society, citizens act freely and independently. They engage and unite voluntarily and on their own initiative. They are driven by interests, values, beliefs and ambitions that they consider important, share among themselves and want to realise together. They are not out for economic gain nor for pure self-interest. In that civil society, they take up social issues, formulate proposals for the organisation of society and stand up for collective interests. This makes civil society an excellent place to participate, a place where citizens actively help shape society.

## 1. Socio-cultural work with adults in Flanders and Brussels<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Back in time

That civil society is constantly evolving. The specific context and social and economic developments bring their own forms of civic agency. In Flanders and Brussels too, these contexts and dynamics influenced the motives and working methods of citizens who take matters into their own hands there today.

As early as the second half of the 19<sup>de</sup> century, 'cultural funds' linked cultural engagement in Flanders to grassroots activities with a strong emancipatory character. Under the heading of 'popular enlightenment', elite groups at the time dedicated themselves to the development and liberation of the Flemish people. Later, in the 20<sup>ste</sup> century, new cultural funds with their own political-ideological colour were added. To this day, those funds are still active in Flanders and Brussels.

In the late 19<sup>de</sup>, early 20<sup>ste</sup> century, the first state organisations for workers and peasants emerged in Flanders. Since then, Catholic, socialist and liberal movements have tied large groups of citizens to themselves. The pillarisation that thus took root gave people opportunities to unite with like-minded people from cradle to grave. Farmers, workers, middle class, elderly, men, women, all had their own associations. Thus, civil society in Flanders was mainly organised and divided around economic, philosophical or religious issues. Even today, many associations still have their origins there, even if they have since taken on new forms.

After the Second World War, folk high schools in Flanders started 'folk development work'. They organised intensive training work to educate and inform citizens. And since the 1960s, new social movements have brought people together around specific themes: feminism, environment, peace, human rights, gender, poverty, animal rights, circular economy ... They introduced a different way of mobilising citizens, setting the political agenda and helping to shape society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Since 1970, Belgium evolved into a federal structure with several government bodies, each with its own competences divided among different territorial units. The competence over Dutch-speaking socio-cultural work belongs to the Flemish Community also over Dutch-speaking socio-cultural work in the bilingual Brussels Capital Region.

Where civil society flourishes, you will find initiating citizens, political involvement, social cohesion and various forms of solidarity. This also makes civil society interesting and relevant for governments. In a well-functioning democracy, the government recognises the independence of civil actors, even if their commitment implies opposition to government policy. A government can even invest in civil society. For instance, as early as March 1967, the Belgian state decided to subsidise activities of national and regional organisations, then still with 'Dutch-speaking popular development' as their goal. With the gradual introduction of a federal structure in Belgium, subsequent associations (1975) and institutions (1978) were given a legal framework for recognition and subsidisation by the Flemish Community. This was the beginning of an ongoing quest by the Flemish government to help enable socio-cultural work with adults in the Dutch-speaking region, including Brussels. That quest is accompanied by successive regulations (decrees of 1995, 2003, 2017 and 2023). In those decrees, the Flemish government considers socio-cultural adult organisations as voluntary and autonomous organisations of citizens who want to shape society together. During 2019, the Flemish government approved 131 subsidy applications for which it allocates 70,589,668.09 euros annually between 2021 and 2025. Together with quite a few other organisations, they are active in civil society in Flanders and Brussels. Here we zoom in specifically on those 131 organisations that submitted a grant application with a favourable outcome and represent ten streams in civil society in Flanders and Brussels. To this end, we make use of an extensive qualitative and quantitative analysis of the 131 grant applications (Jans and Van Gucht, 2022).

## 1.2 The sector of socio-cultural work with adults

The Flemish decree 'socio-cultural work with adults'<sup>2</sup> starts from a civilian perspective, recognising the autonomy of socio-cultural adult organisations that set their own agenda and strategy. They are not facilities designed to implement their own government policy. The Flemish government assumes that socio-cultural adult organisations are intrinsically valuable and play their own role in democratic society. In the sector of socio-cultural work with adults, citizens can make their voices heard autonomously and within the organisational form and operation they prefer, at least as long as they contribute to a democratic, sustainable, inclusive and inclusive society with respect for human rights.

Socio-cultural adult organisations are active in civil society. They turn people's private issues into public affairs, move state or market in the direction they desire, urge citizens to make different choices in their way of life or form communities of people who share something among themselves. With their practices and activities, they establish links between the living environment of their target groups and social institutions and systems. In exchange for subsidies from the Flemish government, they indicate the socially relevant issues they are responding to, the goals they have in mind in response and the logic of action they will follow for a period of five years. They must use the subsidies they can use for this purpose in a result-oriented and responsible way. They must also substantiate this in their grant application.

On 25 September 2020, the Flemish government decided to subsidise 131 organisations. Those organisations will receive funds for the period from 2021 to 2025 in the Dutch-speaking region (whether or not including the bilingual Brussels-Capital) or in a region<sup>3</sup>, to continue or develop a socio-cultural practice for adults. Those 131 approved grant applications contain a wealth of information on socio-cultural work with adults in Flanders and Brussels. In such a dossier, organisations make explicit how they look at society as a civil actor, how they position themselves in

---

<sup>2</sup> Decision of the Flemish Government on the implementation of the Decree of 7 July 2017 on the subsidisation and recognition of socio-cultural work with adults.

<sup>3</sup> A region is a contiguous geographical area with several municipalities from Flanders or the Brussels Capital Region and with its own social, cultural, economic, demographic and institutional character.

that society, what ambitions they have, how they want to realise those ambitions and how they organise themselves to succeed in doing so.

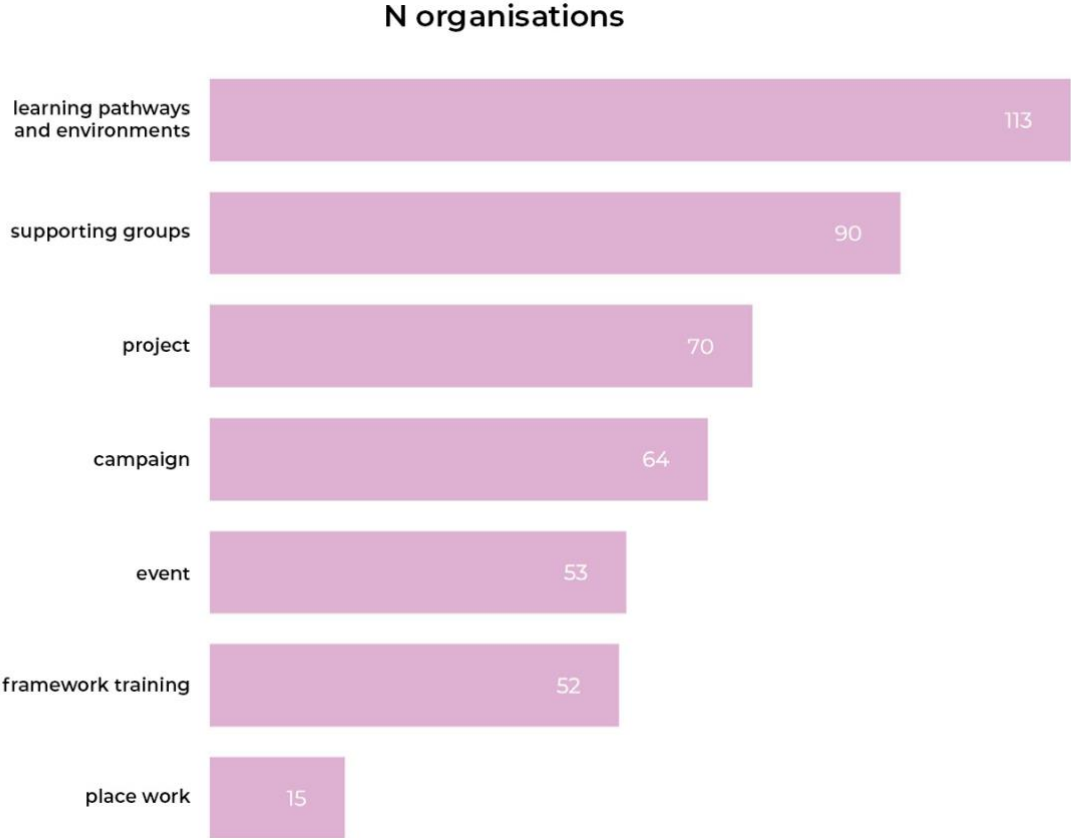
## 2. A diverse range of activities and organisations

In Flanders and Brussels, the sector of socio-cultural with adults had 131 unique organisations at the beginning of 2021. Even though all 131 socio-cultural adult organisations place citizens at the centre of their practice, these civil actors are very diverse in terms of activities, forms, contents and goal orientations. This diversity is a wealth, but at the same time makes it difficult to paint an unambiguous and clear picture of the sector. So what do they all do, how do they position themselves in society, what do they engage in and by what means?

### 2.1 Differentiated activities and practices

Through activities and socio-cultural practices, socio-cultural adult organisations give very concrete form to their civic agency. In the grant applications alone, these organisations report no less than 67 different forms of activities. This multiplicity and diversity of forms typifies their creativity and ingenuity. Stand-alone activities rarely occur. Usually, different activities follow each other in a logical sequence. We then speak of socio-cultural practices. These are purposeful change processes that lead to meaning and development of individuals, groups and communities and contribute to building a democratic, inclusive and sustainable society. But these socio-cultural practices are also very diverse. We discern seven types of practices in the field.

Figure 1: Socio-cultural practices and the number of organisations reporting on them



Learning pathways and environments are a classic practice within socio-cultural work with adults and still very much up to date. In learning pathways and environments, different forms of learning are linked: acquiring knowledge, acquiring skills, developing attitudes, critical reflection, experimentation, ....

A lot of socio-cultural adult organisations also support different types of groups. They strengthen existing local groups, experiment with new groups or support theme and project groups.

70 organisations report on projects in their grant applications. These are often projects to involve disadvantaged groups in their practice or to experiment with new responses to social issues.

With campaigns, they inform or influence a wide audience or a specific target group.

More and more, we also observe events such as networking events, events or festivals. Events take shape through a series of preliminary and preparatory activities and are given an organ point at a specific moment in one or several locations. Such an organ point should exude enthusiasm and energy. The focus is then on a sparkling, recruiting and enjoyable experience for the wider audience or target group. Events receive relatively recent attention in socio-cultural work with adults compared to learning programmes and environments, campaigns and projects. The importance of experience comes across through the cultural and tourism sectors. Today, activities with a certain experiential value attract more attention and reach a wider audience. Some socio-cultural adult organisations themselves warn in their grant applications against a one-sided and exaggerated focus on experience. With framework training, numerous socio-cultural adult organisations support their volunteers. Increasingly, they use trendy terms such as 'volunteer academy' for this purpose. Sometimes the focus is on connecting volunteers to the organisation's mission, vision and strategy. Another time on developing the mission, vision and strategy together with volunteers.

A limited number of organisations emphasise the importance of place in their logic of action. They organise activities through which they set up an 'ideal' place to then organise a variety of activities in that specific place. Perhaps it is too early to talk about place work as an appropriate socio-cultural practice. However, the organisations reporting on it do have a clear logic of action. They use recent concepts from the social domain such as temporary filling, safe places and outreach work.

## 2.2 Ten streams in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults

Where should all these activities and practices lead? In their mission statements, all 131 socio-cultural adult organisations express how they perceive their role and responsibility in civil society and what values they consider important in this regard. Together with their strategic objectives for the period from 2021 to 2025, these missions allow us to trace the uniqueness of each organisation. This gives us an insight into the different social themes and corresponding goals that move these organisations. We can group them into ten streams:

- ***Moving the region and its residents.*** In this stream, we situate 13 regional organisations, called 'Avansas'. They focus on collective formation processes and socio-cultural participation tailored to their own region with its own social, cultural, economic, demographic and institutional characteristics.
- ***Participate and actively taking part:*** organisations whose main purpose is to promote socio-cultural participation. We will return to socio-cultural participation, one of the Flemish government's objectives with the decree on socio-cultural work whiy adults, later in this text.
- ***Living together in solidarity:*** 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 opportunity group and put the social position and structural opportunities of and for that target or opportunity group at the centre.
- ***Sustainable (co)living:*** organisations committed to a transition to a sustainable society.
- ***Sharing (as an alternative to having):*** organisations that develop or build sharing initiatives on the ideas of the commons.

- **Giving meaning and forming identity:** organisations working on religious or cultural meaning and significance.
- **Resilient living:** organisations with a strong commitment to personal development as a lever for various forms of active citizenship.
- **Workable work:** organisations that work with workers and jobseekers towards employment and workable work.
- **International peaceful coexistence:** organisations that relate to conflicts between and within nation states.

The figure below illustrates those 10 streams that together contribute to the decree's goal of "strengthening a sustainable, inclusive, inclusive and democratic society." The thickness of each stream reflects the extent to which that stream occurs in the sector. For eight of the ten streams - again based on the mission and strategic goals - we can add further nuances and indicate even more specific themes and goal orientations.

In all, we distinguish 45 types of socio-cultural adult organisations (two streams plus eight streams with a combined total of 43 side streams). Again, this picture illustrates the great diversity in the sector.

Figure 2: Ten streams in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults in Flanders and Brussels



### 2.3 Focusing on a target group, a social theme or a region

From the content analysis of the mission statements and strategic goals of 118 organisations operating throughout Flanders, possibly including Brussels, we learn that they are mainly focused on a specific target group or on a social theme. The sector of socio-cultural work with adults has about as many target group (57) as theme-based organisations (61).

Target group organisations dedicate themselves to a specific group in society and make this explicit in their mission. Today, the following target groups have their own organisations in Flanders and Brussels: people with a migrant background, the elderly, women, employees, people with mental vulnerability, people in mourning, LGBTQIA+, people with a disability, families, rural inhabitants, people with a disease, people in need of care and their informal carers, people in poverty, refugees and people who express the Flemish identity.

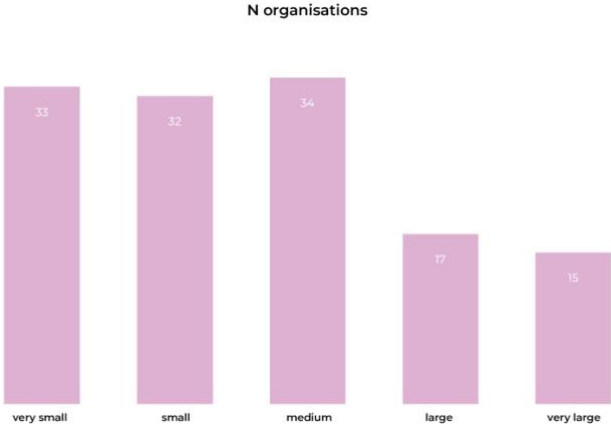
Theme organisations focus on a specific social issue and put it at the centre of their mission. The 61 theme organisations are committed to a diverse spectrum of social issues: mobility, sustainable food, raw materials and sustainability, housing, climate, nature, land use, ecological gardening, vacancy, fair trade, sustainable consumption, silence, human rights, poverty and exclusion, racism, ethnic-cultural diversity, literacy, gender diversity, work, political decision-making, (European) citizenship, crowdfunding, sharing as an alternative to having, alternative currencies, health, resilience, relational violence, medical technology, world peace, religion and worldview, art and culture and leisure. With these themes, they address a wide audience. To increase support for their theme and their influence in the social debate, they sometimes also organise activities aimed at specific target groups.

Of the 131 organisations in the sector, 13 focus on a region demarcated by the government in the Flemish Region and the Brussels Capital Region in accordance with their decree. They engage with the various residents (groups) and are open to the issues on the public agenda of their specific region. The decree on socio-cultural work with adults provides a separate subsidy scheme for these 13 regional organisations. In proportion to the number of inhabitants in their region, they receive funds to respond to the specific social dynamics and developments in their region. In doing so, they must contribute to a sustainable, inclusive, solidary and democratic society. To this end, they work for a broad public and, where necessary, undertake target group-specific initiatives.

### 2.4 Diverse by size

To organise all those activities on all those different themes and aimed at diverse target groups, socio-cultural adult organisations have resources. In this, too, they differ from each other. Based on their average budgeted annual income for the period 2021 to 2025, we count 32 relatively large (large and very large) organisations in the sector. They budget an average annual income (grants and other income) of between €1,400,000 and €22,400,000. About half of the organisations (65) are rather small (very small and small) and count on an annual income of 405,000 to 672,000 euros. In between, we count 34 medium-sized organisations that budget between €672,000 and €1,400,000 per year on average.

Figure 3: Distribution of socio-cultural adult organisations by relative size based on average budgeted annual income 2021 - 2025



This overview shows an uneven distribution by relative size in the sector of socio-cultural work with adults. We count a minority of large organisations (large to very large) and relatively many smaller organisations (small to very small). All these organisations spend most (about 3/4) of their resources on employing people. These are mainly professionals, sometimes also volunteers.

### **3 Active citizens contribute to the development of society**

In 131 very different organisations spread over ten streams, active citizens respond to numerous developments and trends in society. Based on collective arrangements, participation and voluntary commitment, they contribute to a democratic, sustainable, solidary and inclusive society in Flanders and Brussels. To this end, they develop many partnerships and engage in networks.

#### 3.1 The ball is in citizens' court

47 organisations emphasise very explicitly that engaged citizens determine their organisation's ambitions and strategies. For them, citizens are in the driving seat and the organisation and its professionals are supportive. In the other socio-cultural adult organisations, citizen groups and volunteer citizens also play a decisive role.

##### *Collective arrangements*

The grant applications are permeated with the notions of groups, associations, communities and related concepts. The terms 'groups' and 'communities' are among the most frequently used terms from the 131 grant applications. In those applications, we count as many as 7,351 times the word 'groups', 2,672 times 'departments', 4,883 times 'associations' and 3,731 times 'community' and 'communities'. In short, the collective predominates in grant applications. This fits well with earlier observations on the distinction between social work and the more specific socio-cultural work as part of it. In the broad social domain, a lot of social professionals start from individual questions and needs. Where useful, they also have an eye for the collective elements and processes involved. With socio-cultural workers it is rather the other way round. They work with groups and on collective arrangements. In doing so, they also have an eye for individual questions and personal development (Spierts, 2015). Through collective arrangements of citizens, social-cultural adult work presents itself as an actor in society.

##### *Participation trumps*

The concept of participation has traditionally been a trademark of socio-cultural work with adults. Meanwhile, it has become a very loaded term, also in civil society, science and government. Participation has become a catch-all term. Participation is also given different interpretations and meanings in grant applications. Moreover, thinking about and stimulating participation is evolving in a society that is itself constantly changing. Increasing diversity, digitalisation, polarisation, new forms of exclusion, changing relationships between government, market, citizens and civil society ..., all these developments force socio-cultural adult organisations to keep looking for new interpretations and forms of participation.

To pave a way through the multitude of meanings and approaches to participation, the decree on socio-cultural work with adults provides anchor points. Four different forms of socio-cultural participation are distinguished there: social, cultural, civic, political and policy participation. 113 organisations discuss at least one of these four forms of socio-cultural participation in their subsidy application:

- social participation: participating in and belonging to informal networks
- civic participation: participating in and belonging to social institutions
- cultural participation: participating and sharing in arts and culture
- political and policy participation: participating and taking part in politics and policies

Figure 4: Socio-cultural participation in grant applications by number of organisations (N=113)



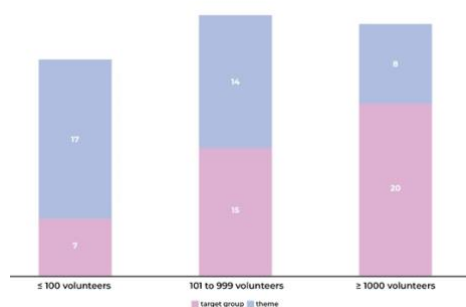
In their grant applications, 79 organisations pay very explicit attention to civic participation. To this end, they use the concepts of emancipation and empowerment. Organisations that emphasise social participation in their grant application refer to inclusion and equal opportunities to interpret their vision. In cultural participation, organisations interpret culture mainly as the arts and to a more limited extent as cultural diversity and religious meaning. Political and policy participation they interpret using the terms deliberative democracy, participative democracy or democratic participation. In doing so, they emphasise their commitment to 'participating' in public debates and political decision-making much more than to 'participating' in elections, characteristic of representative democracy.

### *Voluntary commitment*

In at least 60 organisations, volunteers take on tasks in core organisational processes in addition to support tasks. Think of governing, organising, representing, guiding groups and defining and substantiating positions. This makes the voluntary efforts of committed citizens decisive for socio-cultural work with adults. Volunteers are very important for all 131 organisations, even if these organisations work with relatively fewer volunteers than target group organisations.



Figure 5: Theme (39/61) and target group organisations (42/57) broken down by number of volunteers



Not all socio-cultural adult organisations engage with their volunteers in the same way. 82 organisations we can clearly assign to one of the following three types of volunteer organisations based on their grant application:

- volunteer-driven (22 organisations): organisations where volunteers are the initiators and triggers and professionals support them. Especially in small and recently established organisations, volunteers take charge. They also do so in some larger target group organisations.
- volunteer-supported (22 organisations): organisations where volunteers take on a supportive role and relieve professional staff. In organisations that develop a distinct service and at several small organisations, volunteers take over tasks to support professionals.
- hybrid (38 organisations): organisations with an interaction between volunteers and professionals. Depending on their commitment and engagement, volunteers can both direct and support.

### 3.2 Social developments in focus

All these citizen- and volunteer-driven initiatives respond to developments and trends in their environment. Developments related to diversity, digitalisation and sustainability receive by far the most attention. Not only cultural diversity, but also other differences that play a role in society. Socio-cultural adult organisations themselves look for a good relationship with the diversity in our society. Some organisations go further and want to improve the relationship between different communities. For organisations from the sustainable (living together) stream, sustainability is of strategic importance. For many other organisations, sustainable development plays as a topical and relevant issue, but somewhat more in the background. Digitalisation challenges socio-cultural adult organisations operationally. They see opportunities and challenges to further develop their own operations digitally. To this end, they are increasingly recruiting profiles with expertise in communication and technology.

The changing relationships between civil society, the market, government and citizens also keeps socio-cultural adult organisations busy. Sometimes the focus is on one actor, other times on a force field with multiple actors. A lot of organisations see new opportunities in emerging citizens' initiatives. Furthermore, the sector is very concerned about social inequality and shows concern for well-being, resilience and health. More and more reference is made to loneliness. Ageing does not escape the attention of many organisations either. Individualisation and polarisation are developments that mainly come across as a threat. The way the social debate is conducted today (stereotyping, taboos, disinformation, framing, populism, fake news ...) worries a lot of socio-cultural adult organisations.

### 3.3 Its own 'socio-cultural' contribution to society

Socio-cultural adult organisations make their own civic contribution to society. At least 76 organisations in the sector explicitly attribute to themselves a role in the public sphere. They are actively involved in public debates or draw the attention of policy actors, market players, other

midfield players and citizens to the needs, expectations and wishes of their target group. To this end, they often develop and substantiate their own explicit positions. Sometimes they choose not to develop or adopt an explicit position themselves, but to pursue more quality in the public debate. Then they provide factual and substantiated information and create space for contradiction.

On top of that, 83 organisations make explicit their role in strengthening and connecting citizens, groups and communities. In doing so, some organisations emphasise the importance, significance and current value of association work. In more or less autonomous groups, volunteers, members and participants then contribute to the realisation of the organisation's goals or fellow sufferers find a social network that they help develop themselves.

30 organisations emphasise in their grant applications how they themselves search for new answers to social issues or facilitate citizens, groups and organisations in their search for alternatives. In doing so, they respond to issues such as nutrition, mobility and climate, develop new forms of solidarity or facilitate alternatives for structural bottlenecks in specific social domains such as care, work or housing.

Underlying the 131 grant applications, we find similar assumptions about how socio-cultural adult organisations bring about social change:

- *"no social change without connection"*  
Socio-cultural adult organisations find connection between citizens, groups and communities and connection between citizens and social institutions necessary to bring about change in society.
- *"Change people (more critical, reflexive, aware, resilient, sensitive, competent, responsible ...) and they will change society."*  
Socio-cultural adult organisations draw public attention to their own critical point of view or facilitate open debate. They usually balance between the two approaches. In this way, they enhance the potential of citizens, groups and communities to actively contribute to society.
- *"Small experiments contribute to larger societal changes"*  
A lot of organisations demonstrate with instructive practices on a small scale that things can be done differently. Different is often also with more participation of all involved or of a specific target or opportunity group. Trial and error, experimentation, learning by doing, pioneering and being allowed to fail characterise this first step. In a second step, socio-cultural adult organisations valorise the lessons learned.

### 3.4 Cooperation and networking

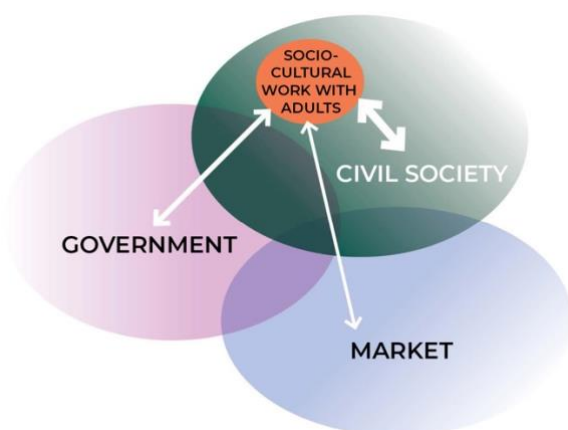
To make their own contribution to society, socio-cultural adult organisations deliberately enter into relationships with other midfield players, with government representatives (both politicians and civil servants) and with market players. Through these relationships, too, they specifically fulfil their role as civil actors.

They cooperate and network with other midfield players and with initiating citizens. Some socio-cultural adult organisations are part of a larger organisation that also takes a lot of initiatives outside the sector in the midfield. Such cooperation can also cross national borders. Some organisations are spin-offs of already existing socio-cultural adult organisations with which they continue to cooperate. There are also numerous more loose and temporary collaborations. In thematic alliances or associations of organisations working with the same target group, several organisations see opportunities to increase their influence on society. Other times, cooperation and networking offers opportunities to optimise one's own approach, for instance to broaden, deepen or renew the audience, to professionalise the organisation's practice or to enable local or regional anchoring. The thirteen regional organisations and quite a few target group organisations are much sought-after partners for this.

Socio-cultural adult organisations also often work with governments. Their relationships with officials and politicians show a mixed picture of partnerships, struggles and dependencies. Sometimes they facilitate change processes in society together. Other times they take a critical stance and aim at change processes in government policy. Financial motives also play a role in the relations of socio-cultural adult organisations with governments. After all, subsidies are an important source of income.

Even though quite a few socio-cultural adult organisations point to a determining role of market players for the change processes they envisage in society, they report to a lesser extent on strategic relationships with those market players in their grant applications. If they do, it is often from a critical stance. This is all the more striking for organisations that we situate in the 'sustainable (living) together' stream. Mostly, they refer to market players in rather general terms. The many references to the media sector and companies in the grant applications are an exception. They are mentioned more than once because of their important role in the public sphere and in public debates.

Figure 6: Socio-cultural adult organisations and their relationships with other actors.



Through all these relationships, groups of citizens, voluntary citizens and their socio-cultural adult organisations contribute to shaping our society in their own socio-cultural way. The thicker the arrow between actors in the figure, the more cooperation and networking they reported in their grant applications.

## Sources

*Decree of the Flemish Government on the implementation of the Decree of 7 July 2017 on the subsidisation and recognition of socio-cultural work with adults.* (2017). Flemish codex. <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/PrintDocument.ashx?id=1028624&datum=&geannoteerd=false&print=false> (accessed 27 March 2023). (in Dutch)

Jans, M. & Van Gucht J. (2022). *Flows in civil society*. Brussels: Socius. (in Dutch)

Spierts, M. (2015). *Social professionals in 2020. A future agenda for Movisie professionalism*. Utrecht: Movisie. (in Dutch)

Suykens, B., Verschuere B. & De Rynck, F. (2018). *Social-cultural work for sale? On the causes and forms of hybridisation towards the market*. Ghent: Ghent University. (in Dutch)

Van den Eeckhaut, G. (2018). Citizenship and civil society. In: F. Dhont. *Gemeen.d.* Brussels: Socius. pp. 93 - 108. (in Dutch)