

Complementing the State: NGOs and the Challenge of Providing Inclusive Public Services in Slovenia

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Abstract

The article examines the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in addressing regional inequalities for ensuring access to public services in Slovenia. Drawing on recent mixed methods research and theoretical frameworks, we analysed the capacity and impact of Slovenian NGOs in improving access to public services. The data show regional differences in the availability of these services. Areas poorly covered by public social services are identified, and the possibilities of NGOs increasing users’ overall access to public services are explored. Results of the study show that NGOs have an important role in advocating for marginalised populations, promoting inclusion, and assuring that services are distributed equitably. We propose practical strategies to more effectively address the deficiencies regarding services. Key recommendations include improving NGOs’ infrastructure, professionalisation, and collaboration with different professional groups to ensure that isolated and vulnerable populations have access to programmes. The results also stress the need for policy support to strengthen NGOs (often users’ closest allies), and to promote their role in complementing public sector initiatives. By leveraging the strengths of NGOs in community involvement and flexible service delivery, Slovenia can move towards more inclusive and accessible public services. The presented system-level analysis, combined with community insights reported by NGOs, contributes to the ongoing discourse on social inclusion and provides valuable insights and actionable strategies for policymakers and other stakeholders to make social welfare more accessible for all.

Keywords

accessibility; inclusion; non-governmental organisations; professionalisation; social welfare

1. Introduction

Slovenia's location in Central Europe and historical context have impacted the way non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have developed there (Rakar & Deželan, 2023). The characteristics of NGOs in former socialist countries are distinct from their counterparts elsewhere (Vandor et al., 2017; Zimmer et al., 2004). These differences arise from the socialist welfare system in place in those societies for almost 50 years. The provision of services in that system was primarily a state responsibility, which limited the role of NGOs as important service providers (Rakar & Kolarič, 2020). Still, NGOs had an essential role in fostering informal social networks to support their members' care and well-being. In Slovenia, there is a centralised legislature, and no administrative or political regions. The 212 municipalities, including 11 urban ones, regulate local affairs autonomously. Despite there being no regional administration and politics, regional imbalances continue. Slovenia is divided into two cohesion regions when allocating EU funds, while, for analytical purposes, statistical regions without any governance functions are used. These classifications exist solely for data analysis and financial distribution, not for policy implementation.

The dimensions of accessibility, availability, coverage, and production are interdependent, yet, as a whole, determine whether public services effectively reach the intended beneficiaries in Slovenia. Accessibility refers to the spatial, temporal, and organisational alignment of users and services (Bittencourt & Giannotti, 2023; Penchansky & Thomas, 1981). In Slovenia, this alignment is uneven: In small villages and sparsely populated areas, access to services and other amenities is more limited than in densely populated regions. Mobility challenges contribute to the social exclusion of rural villages (Huber et al., 2020). Nonetheless, even access is not enough if no services are available. Availability pertains to the adequacy of resources such as staff, equipment, appointments, or bandwidth at the place where they are needed (Penchansky & Thomas, 1981). NGOs often serve as flexible "surge capacity," extending service hours or providing mobile outreach to address the mentioned shortfalls (Cheng, 2019). Even when services are accessible and available, gaps in coverage remain. Coverage is defined as the share of the eligible population receiving an adequate service package without financial hardship (World Health Organization, 2024).

In Slovenia, research on the accessibility, availability, and coverage of public services is notably lacking. One of the rare studies in the field of health, for example, shows that even though the Slovenian health insurance system is formally based on the principle of universal accessibility, this aspect is increasingly questionable for various social changes, especially relating to citizenship status, employment, and the economic security of the population (Huber et al., 2020). This makes public services vital mechanisms for implementing policies and assuring societal well-being (Shittu, 2020). Such services are provided by public institutions, NGOs, and civil society actors, and cover different social needs (Rakar & Kolarič, 2020). Over time, the balance between state and private sector involvement in this domain has shifted globally (Besley & Ghatak, 2017). Further, the production of services, i.e., the way they are designed and delivered, impacts their accessibility, availability, and coverage. The public management literature emphasises co-production whereby users and providers co-create value throughout the service cycle (Brandsen et al., 2018; Osborne et al., 2016). Research shows that NGOs play an important role in the co-production of innovation in public services, particularly to improve the user experience (Brandsen et al., 2018; Gesierich et al., 2024). The introduction of similar co-production models in Slovenia could enable NGOs to better tailor services to the local context, improve cultural accessibility, and extend outreach to underserved groups (Gesierich et al., 2024). Strengthening co-production between the state and NGOs is accordingly a practical strategy for

closing the gaps in services in Slovenia. This article aims to analyse the capacity and influence of Slovenian NGOs in improving access to public services. We examine the way NGOs can assist with including users by making their services more (geographically and temporally) accessible, available when needed, and responsive to perceived needs. Two research questions are considered:

1. What is the role of NGOs in ensuring access to public services in Slovenia? What types of services are NGOs currently providing?
2. Where are the gaps in the provision of public services in Slovenia, and to what extent do NGOs possess the potential and capacity to address these unmet needs?

We begin by outlining the characteristics of public services and NGOs in Slovenia. The research methods are introduced prior to the presentation of findings related to the capacity and impact of Slovenian NGOs in reducing disparities in access to public services. These findings are grounded in empirical data collected during research activities conducted in 2022 and 2023. The first research question is addressed in Section 4.1, which explores the role of NGOs in facilitating access to public services. Section 4.2 identifies additional service needs as reported by NGOs and highlights regional disparities in service provision and demand across statistical regions. The subsequent subsections address the second research question. Section 4.3 identifies service areas that remain insufficiently covered and evaluates the potential of NGOs to fill these gaps. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 focus on the challenges and barriers faced by NGOs, as well as the changes and types of support they deem necessary to enhance their role in public service provision. The paper concludes with a summary of the key findings and discusses their implications for inclusive public service delivery in Slovenia.

2. Public Services and the Role of NGOs

Spicker (2009) describes public services as policy instruments that serve the public, redistribute resources, and operate according to trust rather than profit motives. He divides them into government functions, public utilities, and social services. Some, like healthcare and energy supply, can also be market-driven. Shittu (2020) categorises public services by their operational focus: provision of social services (e.g., healthcare, education, transport), policy formulation and implementation, and continuity of government via a stable public service. Even though public services are often associated with the public sector, it is difficult to limit certain public services just to the public sector since they can also be part of the private sector. The public sector is just one of the actors that can provide public services. The scope of public services not exclusively linked to the public sector is defined by legal frameworks. While the European Union has introduced policy measures to link public services to the public sector, this mainly reflects the fact that the public sector is responsible for them. The Public Services Directive (Council of the European Union, 1992) focuses on contracts, not on the definition of public services per se. Public services are not denoted by being provided by the state or its representatives, but by being provided to the public (the people), irrespective of who supplies them.

Countries around the world take different approaches to financing, regulating, and implementing public services. Although public services generally aim to ensure the public good, they are not always aimed at meeting people's needs directly but rather at fulfilling public policy—essentially, whatever policymakers deem important. Despite being referred to as “public services,” they are not limited to services and might also include other activities like communications and infrastructure. A key feature of public services lies in

their non-commercial nature, which entails redistribution—those paying for the service do not necessarily use it themselves. Broadly speaking, three main characteristics of public services can be distinguished, each crucial for their consideration and definition (Rakar et al., 2023): (a) the type and domain of public services; (b) the provider and legal-financial framework of service provision; and (c) the accessibility of public services and involvement of users in providing services.

When Slovenia was still part of Yugoslavia, there was no market to support welfare, and the fact that citizens' self-organisation was generally discouraged meant NGOs were very limited. Along with the state, families were primarily responsible for the provision of social services (Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2017). Following Slovenia's independence, the market took on a role of providing social benefits and services, especially in areas like insurance, long-term care, and healthcare. In addition, NGOs began to make important contributions in the area of social protection (Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2017). Unlike some other post-socialist countries, Slovenia has not faced a growing "welfare gap" in need of being filled by NGOs (Ferge, 2001; Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2017, 2020; Kolarič et al., 2009; Kuitto, 2016; Stambolieva, 2016). A relationship of complementarity (not subsidiarity) was established in the country between the public/state and NGO sectors. Slovenia offers a wide range of public services, including healthcare, education, social welfare, public safety, justice, infrastructure, environmental protection, and cultural services. Most of these services are financed with public budget funds collected through taxes (Rakar et al., 2023).

The role of NGOs in societies today is closely linked to the development of the welfare state and broader welfare system (Anheier, 2005; Anheier et al., 2010; Greve, 2015; Salamon et al., 2017). Based on their formally recognised non-profit status, NGOs in Slovenia can be divided into two groups (Rakar et al., 2023): (a) those holding a formal status and working in the public interest and (b) those working in the collective interest of their members. Among organisations operating in the public interest, the most common formal legal types are associations, private institutes, foundations, and religious organisations (whose main activity is not religious). In contrast, among organisations operating principally in their members' collective interest, the most common organisational forms are associations (notably in sports and culture).

Despite NGOs being an important segment of the public service system in the country, their role remains insufficiently recognised. They face numerous challenges like unstable funding and, above all, the need for improved cooperation and coordination with other actors in the public service system (Rakar & Deželan, 2023; Rakar & Kolarič, 2020). Most public social services in Slovenia are provided by the public sector (Filipovič Hrast & Rakar, 2020). The state–non-governmental sector relationship should be based on partnership and complementarity, with the state as financier and the non-governmental sector as contractor, especially in areas holding great potential for the non-governmental sector's future development (Rakar et al., 2023).

3. Method

The results presented below are from a study (Rakar et al., 2023) that used a mixed-methods approach. In the following sections, we describe the data sources, data collection, and data processing in three important thematic areas and for the statistical regions of Slovenia. Slovenia is divided into two cohesion regions, which are mainly used for EU regional policy and funding. Each cohesion region is made up of several statistical regions. Eastern Slovenia comprises the statistical regions of Mura, Drava, Carinthia, Savinja, Central Sava, Lower Sava, Southeast Slovenia, and Littoral–Inner Carniola. Western Slovenia contains the statistical regions

of Central Slovenia, Upper Carniola, Gorizia, and Coastal Karst. Two statistical regions (Central Slovenia and Drava) are larger than the others.

3.1. Secondary Data

In the first phase of the analysis, several data from the following agencies were collected and analysed:

- Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Public Legal Records and Related Services (AJPES)—annual revenues, expenditures, and the number of employees in NGOs for the years 2017 to 2021 were analysed.
- Finance Directorate of the Ministry of Finance, as available in the Slovenian Public Sector Financial Transparency Database (ERAR)—more detailed insight into NGO financing from public funds.
- Data on NGO financing from public tenders between 2017 and 2021, published by ministries and 58 municipalities with administrative units, was analysed according to the NGOs' field of activities.
- Content analysis of 12 regional development programmes for the period 2017–2021 and the European cohesion policy programme for 2021–2027 in Slovenia was performed to identify development priorities, measures, and concrete projects relevant and available to NGOs. Analysis of the collected data made it possible to identify potential areas where the greatest need for NGO services arises.
- Analysis of publicly available data of the Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (IRSSV) on social welfare programmes obtained as part of annual monitoring of implementation of social welfare programmes between 2017 and 2021 (IRSSV, 2017–2021) to identify possible gaps in the availability of public services in the social protection field.

3.2. Qualitative Data

We conducted a qualitative study using the focus group (FG) method (Klemenčič & Hlebec, 2007) in 12 statistical regions of Slovenia. We collected primary data from a non-random quota sample of key public service stakeholder representatives organised by statistical region. Each FG was composed of various stakeholders, including representatives of municipal social welfare departments, NGOs, social work centres (SWCs), regional development agencies, and regional NGO centres, so that both small and large communities and urban, suburban, and rural areas were represented. A total of 111 individuals participated in 14 FGs. The FGs were conducted using a set of prepared discussion guidelines. The data were analysed with qualitative methods, employing both deductive and inductive coding (Neuman, 2011). Conducted and analysed between January 2023 and September 2023, the FGs were held online via the Zoom platform and specialised software for qualitative analysis (MAXQDA) was used for the data analysis.

3.3. Quantitative Data

To determine the scope and demand for community-based public services provided by NGOs across statistical regions, a quantitative online survey was conducted using a stratified probability sample (Kalton & Vehovar, 2001) of NGOs with an annual turnover above €5,000, representing 40% of all NGOs (AJPES). We identified 11,469 of such organisations: 9,479 associations, 1,882 institutes, 84 foundations, and 6 religious communities. NGOs were selected, their contact details gathered, and a representative was

invited via phone and email (12–22 June 2023). Data were collected between 17 April and 28 June 2023, and analysed using SPSS (Field, 2018). The questionnaire was partly based on previous research—Competitiveness of Slovenia 2001–2006 and CIVICUS Civil Society Index (2008–2010; see Rakar et al., 2011, 2023), and expanded with new modules and pre-tested among NGOs. The small number of units per region means that inferential statistics on the regional and organisational level are not statistically meaningful. We therefore calculated frequencies, contingency tables, and deviations from the mean. The survey included 482 NGOs from across Slovenia, with a distribution slightly differing from AJPES. Most respondents came from Central Slovenia and the fewest were from Central Sava. As with the total NGO population, sports and recreation dominated (23%), followed by social welfare (16%), and arts and culture (15%). No surveyed NGOs were primarily active in law and advocacy, housing, or research.

4. Findings

4.1. NGOs and Their Role in the Provision of Public Services

The current role of NGOs in providing public services—together with regional disparities across Slovenia's statistical regions—is examined by analysing their numbers, funding structures and employment levels, as well as the extent to which they meet demand for public services.

Even though the number of NGOs is rising yearly, official databases lack precise classification since they rely on broad activity categories. Most associations operate in sports and recreation, then culture and arts, and those assisting individuals, with stable category proportions between 2017 and 2021. According to Črnak-Meglič and Rakar (2009, pp. 242–248), in 2009, half of all NGOs were in culture and sports, and Slovenia had below-average development in NGO service activities—a trend largely unchanged by 2021. ERAR data on the ministry's allocations to NGOs (disbursed through public tenders for proposals and direct contracts, classified by the International Classification of Non-Profit Organisations [ICNPO]) and data on local authority allocation show a similar pattern: between 2017 and 2021, the largest share of funds (almost 37% of all allocations) went to culture and sport, followed by social welfare (20% which also includes firefighting and civil protection). Other areas remain insignificant or receive little to no funding on the local level (see Figure 1 for the domains of public services as identified in the research). In the survey, we asked respondents about the coverage of public services. On the national level, they gave fire safety and civil protection the highest average rating: 4.1 on a scale of 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*very good*). Sport and recreation and childcare followed closely behind, while housing attracted the lowest average score, which—together with mental health and public transport—averaged below 3.

Moreover, the FG analysis also indicates that fire protection and civil protection are well covered. However, other areas are already classified as less well covered, meaning that demand exceeds the current capacity. This is notable in the area of social care, especially services for old people, mental health, youth, and childcare. In each approach—the FG and the survey—the housing sector was also identified as not sufficiently covered. Another aim was to assess the demand for public services in different regions of Slovenia and collect data to help identify unmet social needs in local communities. To some extent, the demand for public services can be indirectly derived from existing data sources. AJPES data on total NGO expenditure can serve as an indicator of demand. Analysis of NGO spending for the period 2017–2021 established that the biggest increase was in associations helping individuals—a sector that also employs the most people—where spending rose by 39.3%.

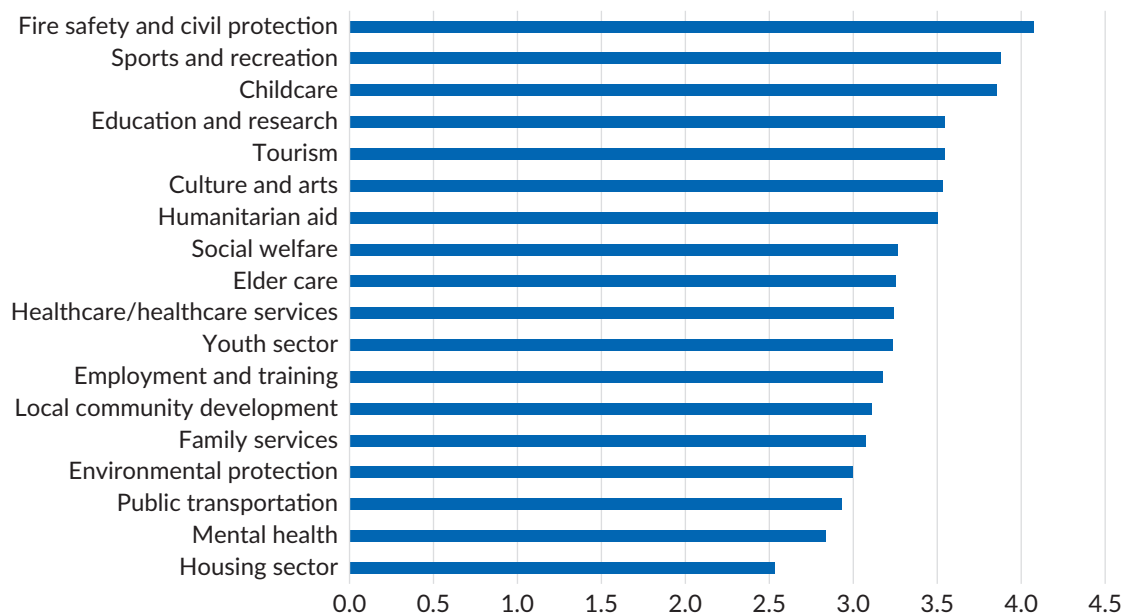


Figure 1. Average coverage of public services in Slovenia.

In contrast, sports and recreation clubs and cultural associations saw the biggest drop in spending in 2020, which is understandable given these organisations operate on a large scale and their activities were strongly hit by the Covid-19 restrictions. This indicates that the demand for public services can fluctuate annually, depending on general social circumstances. ERAR data (regarding public spending on NGOs) shows that total public spending by municipalities on NGOs grew by around 10% between 2017 and 2021—significantly less than on the national level. This may indicate that local needs have not been sufficiently met. The data also show that public spending on the municipal level fluctuates far less from year to year than on the national level.

Given the prominence of social issues, we also examined data from the IRSSV. Between 2017 and 2021, public social assistance providers consistently emphasized the need to expand services—particularly for homeless families and minors, children facing complex challenges, enhanced psychosocial support for families, treatment programs for youth involved in peer violence, and general psychosocial support services. This is particularly important given employment data, which show that a significant share of NGO staff is already engaged in the provision of similar services, indicating both the existing contribution of the sector and the persistent unmet demand for such services. Associations supporting individuals employ the most staff, reflecting their service-oriented focus and reliance on public funding. This is followed by sports and recreation associations, while other types of NGOs employ relatively few staff. The AJPES data also shows that NGO revenue increased by 25% between 2017 and 2021, with significant differences depending on the legal form. While the income of associations grew in proportion to their numbers, the income of private institutes rose by two-thirds. Overall, NGO income of NGOs accounted for 2.10% of Slovenia’s GDP during this period.

4.2. Differences Across Statistical Regions

According to the survey, on the regional level, the biggest rise in NGO employment between 2017 and 2021 was seen in Carinthia (index 3.61), followed by the Mura (3.34), Littoral–Inner Carniola (1.99), and Lower

Sava regions (1.94). In contrast, the number of employees in NGOs in the Central Sava region (1.08) remained largely unchanged. Notwithstanding this employment growth, the AJPES data show that most NGOs have no employees. This apparent discrepancy in the results could be because the quantitative part of our study focused only on NGOs with higher revenues, whereas the AJPES data include all NGOs regardless of their revenue. The Slovenian NGO sector is still characterised by a low level of professionalisation and mainly consists of volunteer-based organisations. The contribution of volunteers thus remains significant (Rakar & Kolarič, 2025). Among NGOs participating in the survey, the national average number of volunteers per organisation is 145. The Central Slovenia (356 volunteers) and Lower Sava regions (267 volunteers) feature the highest numbers. In half the regions, the average number of volunteers per organisation is below 50, with the lowest average recorded in the Carinthia region (20 volunteers). The average number of volunteer hours per organisation per month is 944, with the Central Slovenia region again prominent with a monthly average of 2,566 hours of volunteer work. The second-highest figure is in the Gorizia region (averaging 702 hours per month). In all other regions, the average number of hours is below 390, with the lowest monthly figure reported in the Mura region (76 hours). As concerns the average number of volunteers, average hours of volunteering, average number of paid employees, and average number of paid hours, the Central Slovenia region well exceeds the national average. Approximately half the regions surveyed reported that the number of volunteers has remained stable in the last five years, while the other half reported an increase in that period. Interestingly, the FG participants highlighted the opposite perspective, discussing the decline in NGO participation and motivation for volunteering, and the overall decrease in social capital within communities.

The level of professionalisation in the non-governmental sector is chiefly determined by the scale and structure of NGO funding sources. Analysis of NGO revenue by region reveals that, in some regions, nominal revenue remained largely the same from 2017 to 2021. The highest revenue growth was recorded in the Mura region (2021–2017, index: 1.85), followed by the Littoral–Inner Carniola region (2021–2017, index: 1.36). Revenue did not fall in any region. An examination of associations by revenue category shows that sports associations and associations providing assistance to individuals generate the highest revenue. Although the number of cultural associations is nearly equal to the number of associations providing assistance to individuals, they are clearly behind in terms of income. The income structure of the associations is very balanced. Public funding accounts for just over one-third of their income (rising from 35% in 2017 to 42% in 2021), while another third comes from market-based income (falling slightly from 36% to 32.5% in the same period). The remaining third consists of donations, membership fees, and other income sources.

Overall, FG participants from the Mura and Lower Sava regions described the provision of public services as good or satisfactory, whereas participants from the Upper Carniola region, Drava region, and Southeast Slovenia described it as poor. In the other regions, depending on the area of public services, opinions on the general coverage were mixed and described as good, satisfactory, or poor. Good coverage was rarely reported in the data. Nevertheless, in almost half the regions (Mura, Littoral–Inner Carniola, Coastal–Karst, Gorizia, Savinja), no “very high need” was identified in the FG discussions. As regards the extent of need (relative to areas of NGO activity), social care emerged as a particularly important area that was frequently discussed and often linked to other sectors. Analysis of areas of NGO activity by region and level of need shows that while social welfare was strongly represented in the FGs, it was the least mentioned in the Coastal–Karst and Savinja regions. Further, social welfare was not a dominant theme in just two FGs: in the Central Sava region, where NGOs mostly focus on sport, and in Carinthia, where cultural activities predominate among NGOs. According

to our survey, the participating organisations varied considerably among the regions in their primary areas of activity. Still, the distribution of areas of activity by region largely mirrored that of Slovenia as a whole. In most regions (9 out of 12), the highest percentage of respondents (17%–54%) stated their main focus was on sport and recreation. The Central Slovenia region was also the only region where respondents reported all 18 areas listed as their main area of activity. In contrast, the number of areas covered in other regions ranged from 5 (in Carinthia and the Central Sava region) to 13 (Savinja region). In some regions, the level of public service provision in most areas was rated slightly higher than the national average (e.g., Mura, Upper Carniola, Littoral–Inner Carniola, Carinthia). In other regions (Drava, Central Sava, Coastal Karst), however, coverage was below the Slovenian average in most areas. A comparison of the regions shows that, like for Slovenia as a whole, NGOs are primarily service providers in the field of humanitarian aid. Yet, in Carinthia, Central Sava, and Lower Sava, NGOs do not provide services in seven to nine different areas. The results of the two research components (FG and survey) on the regional coverage of public services are not fully consistent. While both sources indicate good coverage in the Mura region and poor coverage in the Drava region, the reliability of these results is limited by the FGs' composition and the relatively small number of organisations surveyed in certain regions. Therefore, it cannot be conclusively stated that all public services in these regions are either well or poorly covered.

As concerns regional differences in unmet needs, AJPES data for 2017–2021 reveal a notable divergence in spending trends in the Upper Carniola region, namely, the only region where spending did not rise between 2019 and 2020. ERAR data show that municipal expenditure increased the most in the Mura region (with an index of 1.25 for 2021–2017), while the Southeast Slovenia, Coastal Karst, Drava, and Lower Sava regions have a similar upward trend (1.2 for 2021–2017). However, a direct comparison of public disbursement amounts between regions is practically impossible given the significant differences in population size, geographical area, and economic capacity. Analysis of the extent of the needs based on the FG discussions in the different regions shows that, as expected (because two FGs were conducted in the two largest regions and one in each of the other regions), the needs were mentioned most frequently in the Central Slovenia and Drava regions. In addition, Southeast Slovenia stands out with a relatively high number of statements referring to a very high or high need. Coding for “good care” was rare in the data. Still, in almost half the regions (Mura, Littoral–Inner Carniola, Coastal–Karst, Gorizia, Savinja) no cases of “very high need” were identified in the FG discussions. While analysing the needs based on the survey responses, regional differences were also found. In one-third of the public service areas, a significant lack of services was identified in at least one region, indicating a corresponding need for those services. The most frequently mentioned need—in line with national trends—was care for the elderly, particularly in South-East Slovenia, Savinja, Central Sava, Central Slovenia, Upper Carniola, Gorizia, and the Coastal Karst region. This was followed by environmental protection (highlighted in the Carinthia, Lower Sava, and Littoral–Inner Carniola regions) and services for families (identified in the Mura, Littoral–Inner Carniola, and Coastal–Karst regions). Psychosocial services were also identified as the most important need in more than one region, notably in Mura and Savinja.

4.3. Areas Insufficiently Covered by Public Services and an Assessment of the Potential and Capacity of NGOs

Created through a participatory process with municipalities, businesses, and NGOs, regional development programmes highlight key needs where NGOs serve as providers. These include social development

(intergenerational cooperation, youth and elderly support, long-term care, education, migrant integration, cultural programmes), environmental initiatives (complementing infrastructure projects), and needs in digitalisation, mobility, and smart specialisation. The assessment of a need is also based on results of the survey where respondents were asked to name the service areas in their region for which they perceive a lack of provision. On the national level, respondents most often (60%) mentioned *elderly care* as an underserved area. Over 50% of respondents also mentioned mental health services, family services, housing, and social assistance as underserved. Yet, this does not mean that there are no needs in other areas. Certain areas may be especially pronounced in certain regions. The FG participants noted three public service areas of high or very high need: social assistance, services for old people, and mental health. An examination of the extent of these needs based on the FG discussions in each region shows that Southeast Slovenia stands out with relatively high needs in these areas.

Between 2017 and 2021, based on reports from the IRSSV, we conducted a targeted analysis of the coverage of various groups of social assistance programmes in the regions served by the respective regional SWC. The least covered programmes include maternity homes for domestic violence, rehabilitation for eating disorders and digital addiction, mental health advocacy, eviction prevention for homelessness, and, since 2019, dementia-specific services for older adults. Gaps remain in the coverage of these areas, particularly in the service areas of the regional SWCs. The FG participants indicated public service coverage in Slovenia is weak in these areas: (a) elderly care and social welfare; (b) childcare, youth care, mental health, and housing; and (c) other (culture/arts, sports/recreation, employment of vulnerable groups, humanitarian aid, environmental protection, etc.). Fire protection proved to be a public service that is relatively well covered in all regions. SWCs where certain programme groups are not funded are generally located in rural areas (e.g., Central Sava, Carinthia, Lower Sava, Mura, Littoral–Inner Carniola) or in Central Slovenia, except for Ljubljana, which has the most comprehensive programme coverage and is also likely to meet the needs of individuals from other SWC areas in Central Slovenia. In terms of areas holding development potential for the NGO sector, the NGOs surveyed most frequently (over 60% on the national level) identified youth services, care for the elderly, and environmental protection. Further, around 50% of respondents saw potential in nine other areas, with the lowest potential (28%) being seen for public transport. The surveyed NGOs held different views on NGOs' role in providing public services (whether as a primary, substitute, complementary, or non-existent actor). Particular sectors—such as humanitarian aid, sport and recreation, and culture and the arts—were viewed as more appropriate for NGO involvement (as either a primary or substitute provider). In most sectors (15 of 18), over 50% of respondents felt that a complementary role was most appropriate for NGOs in Slovenia. However, the public transport and housing sectors stand out. Around one-third of respondents believed that NGOs should play no role at all in these areas.

On the national level, 50% or more of surveyed NGOs believed that NGOs could provide services in the areas of elderly care and family services. Environmental protection was the second-most mentioned area, with NGOs seen as vital promoters of sustainable practices. When asked if their own NGO could provide the missing services (as defined by the ICNPO of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Study; see Salamon et al., 2017) in their region (see Figure 2), less than one-third of them agreed their organisation could provide services in areas where they detect a gap. The survey results align with the FG findings, stressing NGOs' valuable role in social welfare. Beyond service provision, they hold strong potential in prevention efforts and addressing unmet community needs.

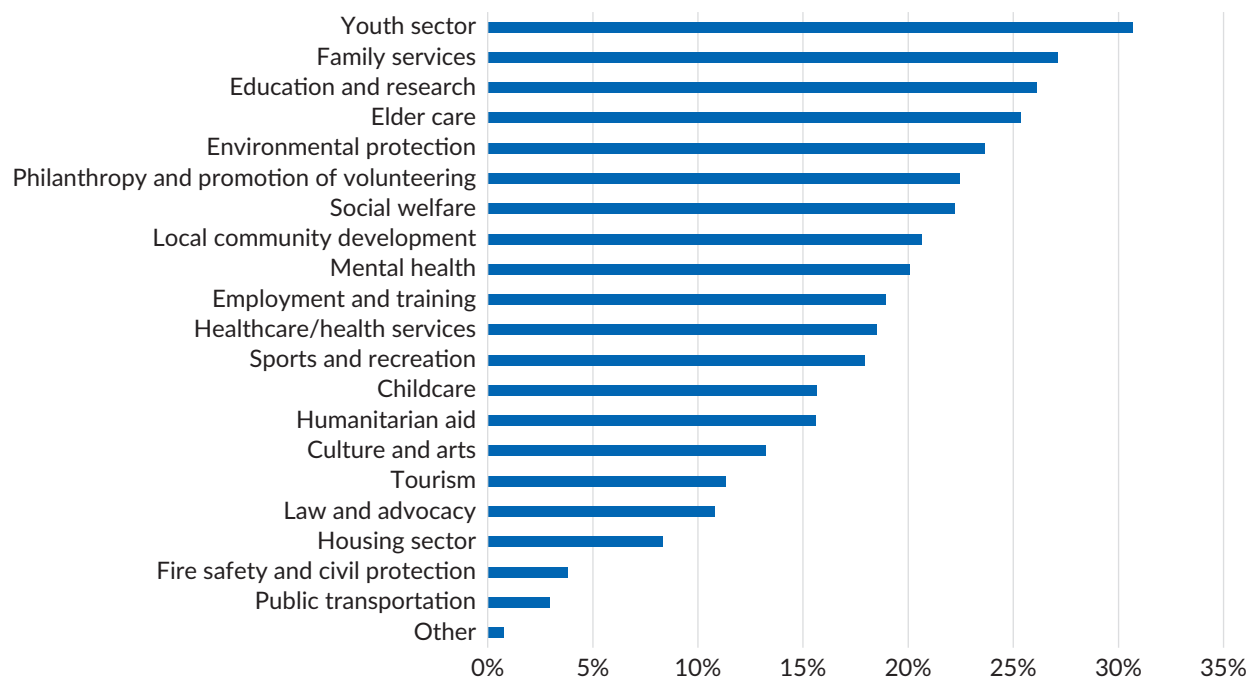


Figure 2. Which domains of NGO activity could their NGOs expand or add?

The FG participants pointed to youth services as a key area for NGOs, particularly in addressing precarious employment, mental health, digital addiction, and sexual health. NGOs were also viewed as crucial in promoting civic education and democracy. While elderly care was mentioned less, participants recognised NGOs’ potential in deinstitutionalisation and strengthening community ties for old people. In the area of sport and recreation, participants mentioned the expertise and specialised training of NGOs as major advantages. More broadly, they saw NGOs as important intermediaries between the public and decision-makers. In terms of social care, the results suggest that SWCs serving certain rural areas (e.g., Carinthia, Lower Sava, the Central Sava, Mura, and Litoral–Inner Carniola regions) and areas in Central Slovenia (except for Ljubljana) tend not to carry out one or more groups of programmes. In these specific areas, it is very important to carefully consider whether the lack of programmes is due to a lack of demand or the insufficient availability of adequately trained service providers in rural areas.

4.4. NGOs: Challenges and Barriers

Across sectors, NGO funding was the greatest concern, especially on the local level. Critical issues included inadequate local strategies, weak systemic support, and short-term projects lacking continuity, hindering NGOs’ effectiveness in addressing community needs. The second key issue was NGO employment, stressing structural challenges like staff shortages and recruitment difficulties. Participants also noted inadequate facilities and limited access to rent-free urban spaces, especially in culture and social affairs. The lack of infrastructure for cultural activities and the uncertain future of amateur cultural organisations were major concerns.

The survey data show that Slovenian NGOs primarily cite external factors as the main obstacles, with “other factors” in first place, followed by government policy and financial constraints. The most pressing financial

challenges include insufficient and unstable public funding, while moderate problems include low donation income and high dependence on public sources. Funding problems at the local level are more acute than at the national level and often lead to short-term, unsustainable projects. Internally, NGOs struggle with time-consuming funding procedures, difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, staff shortages, and low salaries. Employment-related problems were one of the most frequently mentioned, while the recruitment of volunteers and other internal problems were considered less important. Complex and bureaucratic public funding procedures, strict eligibility criteria, and a lack of social recognition of the role of NGOs were cited as important policy barriers. In addition, the lack of a national NGO strategy, unfavourable tax policies, and inadequate legal frameworks hinder the development of the sector. Civil dialogue was rated as a moderate obstacle due to the limited institutional mechanisms for NGO advocacy. While 84% of respondents reported municipal support, only 69% saw support from the national government, with regional differences.

Under “other factors,” NGOs cited low public awareness of their role and a lack of donor incentives as the biggest obstacles. Moderate challenges included limited visibility of NGO activities, sectoral fragmentation, and weak collective advocacy. Support from network organisations and regional NGO centres was rated as a low to medium problem. Spatial constraints were a major problem, particularly in the cultural and social sectors, where access to adequate, rent-free facilities is limited. Respondents emphasised the need to integrate NGOs into public service networks while maintaining their independent role, particularly in social welfare and elderly care. One of the main priorities is the introduction of long-term care services and the enforcement of the Long-Term Care Act. However, concerns remain about the future of the sector in a shrinking welfare state and the risk of its not-for-profit nature being jeopardised. The IRSSV reports (2017–2021) highlight the need to expand and renew programmes to meet unmet needs. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed systemic weaknesses that were difficult to address with the existing programmes.

4.5. From Potential to Practice: Supporting NGO Engagement in Public Services

A separate section of the survey dealt with the needs of NGOs. Among the financial and other incentives listed, respondents most often referred to the need for support on the local level. The need for municipal public tenders for proposals and, in particular, the co-financing of NGO activities was mentioned most frequently. Free use of facilities, co-financing of the use of facilities, and support in applying for funding were also highly desired. The survey also asked respondents which systemic changes or incentives would have an impact on overcoming the perceived barriers and, in particular, on increasing NGOs’ involvement in public service delivery. Respondents rated the proposed changes and incentives on a five-point scale (1 = *no impact* to 5 = *a very high impact*), with average scores (see Figure 3) ranging from 4.0 for the most impactful changes/incentives to 3.5 for the least impactful. On average, respondents mentioned long-term subsidies for the employment of skilled workers in NGOs as the most effective incentive (4.0). Given the shortage of skilled workers due to the lack of funding security, respondents also stressed the need for financial incentives for investment in equipment (3.8). They further highlighted the need for easier access to investment funds and funding for research and development, which received an average rating of 3.7.

The FG analysis shows that NGO’s greatest potential lies in strong volunteer networks and community support. They also acknowledged NGOs’ potential as professional service providers while stressing the need for greater government and local support to maximise their impact. NGOs’ flexibility and innovation enable them to bypass bureaucratic constraints, experiment with new services, and offer more personalised

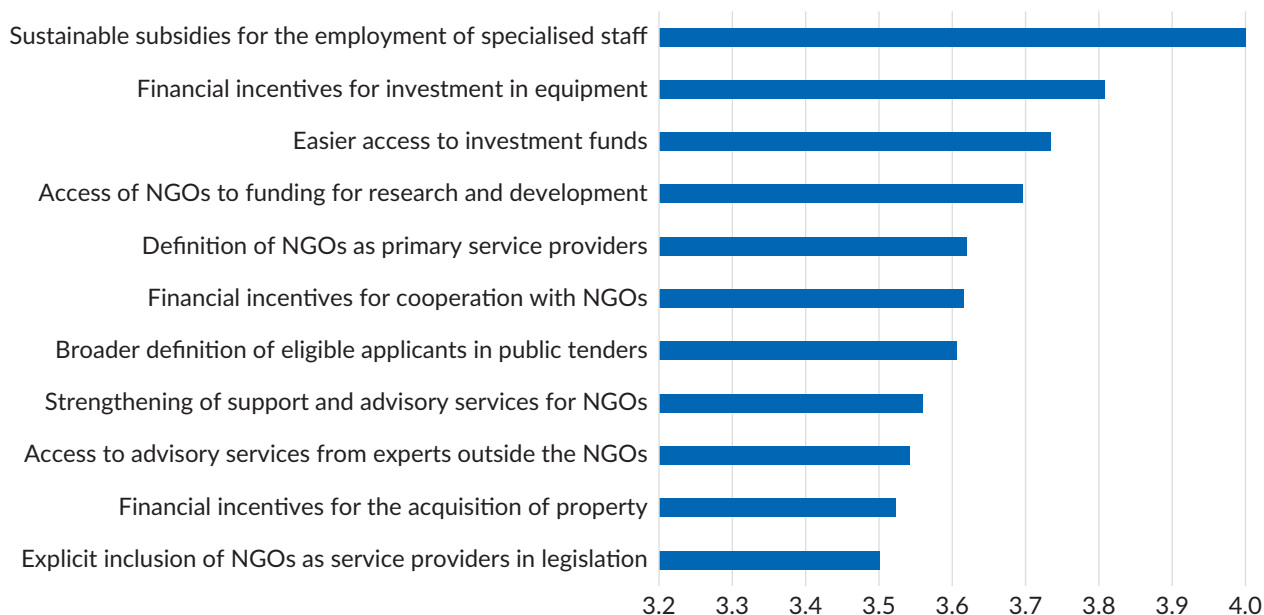


Figure 3. Assessing the appropriateness of initiatives and opportunities for greater NGO involvement in public service delivery.

support. Their adaptable approach enhances service delivery for individuals and families in need. They are also highly responsive, with deep insights into target groups, often employing former service users. In social care, their strong networks and collaboration provide a broad understanding of community needs, allowing for swift responses to emerging issues and crises. Participants stressed the need to integrate NGOs into public services while preserving their unique role. Major priorities include implementing long-term care and enforcing the Long-Term Care Act. Yet, concerns remain about NGOs' uncertain role in a shrinking welfare state and the risk of undermining their non-profit nature. In elderly care, NGOs play a vital role in promoting mental health through social activities. In environmental protection, their wide geographical presence allows better monitoring than government agencies. In sport and recreation, their expertise and professional training were viewed as major strengths. NGOs serve as key intermediaries between the public and policymakers, facilitating communication and advocating for community needs. Interestingly, the discussions on NGO challenges and needs focused less on social services, despite being the most frequently mentioned sector.

5. Conclusion

The article underlines the important role NGOs play in mitigating regional inequalities in access to public services in Slovenia. As Anheier (2005) argues, NGOs are not only service providers but also important intermediaries that promote social innovation and integration, and, as noted by Baggetta et al. (2022), can additionally be sites for creating and strengthening social ties among various participants. The broader definition of greater social inclusion stated in Walker and Thunus (2020, p. 221) acknowledges several dimensions, including access to services available within a community, but also experiences of social involvement as full-fledged members of society. Consistent with the findings of Lewis and Kanji (2009), our results show that NGOs can effectively complement public sector initiatives by filling service gaps—particularly in regions where traditional welfare institutions are lacking. On the potential of NGOs, Rakar

et al. (2023) emphasise the notion that, despite limited resources, these organisations are in a unique position to reach marginalised communities through flexible services and outreach programmes. This ability to respond to local needs aligns with Smith and Lipsky's (1993) argument that the welfare state's development depends increasingly on collaborative partnerships with non-profit actors. Moreover, Salamon's (2012) comprehensive analysis of the non-profit sector reveals that a robust and well-supported NGO landscape can lead to improved service delivery and greater social inclusion—a need also relevant in the Slovenian context. In the Resolution on the National Programme for Social Welfare 2022–2030 (Resolucija o nacionalnem programu socialnega varstva za obdobje 2022–2030, 2022), NGOs are recognised as crucial actors, particularly in: (a) service delivery, i.e., supporting independent living, community engagement, and deinstitutionalisation, and (b) social assistance programmes, including public, developmental, experimental, and complementary ones. Between 2017 and 2021, public social assistance providers stressed the need for expanded services, notably for homeless families and minors, children with complex challenges, strengthened psychosocial family support, treatment programmes for youth who have engaged in peer violence, and general psychosocial support. The FG discussions identified social assistance, elderly care, and mental health as the highest-need areas, followed by moderate-need sectors like housing and youth services. Other areas, including childcare, culture, sports, employment for vulnerable groups, humanitarian aid, and environmental protection, were noted as well. Social welfare emerged as the most critical sector, often interconnected with other areas.

Our study shows that integrated efforts in Slovenia could pave the way for more sustainable improvements in accessibility and overall social well-being. This means that strengthening NGO infrastructures, professionalisation, and cross-sector collaboration is, therefore, not only essential for addressing current gaps, but also for building resilient service networks and sustainable collaboration (Anvik & Holmen Waldahl, 2018) to support the target groups. Regarding the funding structure of NGOs, Slovenia belongs to the group of countries in which public funding is the most important income source for NGOs. A major concern was the lack of local strategies for developing the NGO sector and the lack of a comprehensive policy and systematic support for NGOs. As an outcome, many projects are short-term and lack continuity, which affects the work of NGOs and their ability to effectively meet community needs. As regards the coverage of public services, the results from all three study phases indicate that even though the largest share of NGOs (especially associations) is active in the areas of sports and recreation, culture and arts, and assistance to individuals (social assistance) according to data from AJPES—and these associations receive the highest funding in these areas through public tenders and direct contracts from both ministries and local authorities—this does not necessarily mean these public services are comprehensively covered. Analysis of the FG and survey data shows that the areas of fire protection and civil protection are well covered. Still, other areas have already been identified as less well covered, meaning that demand exceeds the current capacity. This is pronounced in social care, notably in services for old people, mental health (reported similarly by Urek, 2021), youth, and childcare. Both methods of primary data collection also revealed that the housing sector is insufficiently covered.

In terms of public service providers, FG participants from across Slovenia most often mentioned NGOs as service providers (alongside public institutions and for-profit companies) in the areas of social care, culture and arts, mental health, and environmental protection. NGOs were mentioned somewhat less frequently in the areas of youth welfare and elderly care. In all these areas, public bodies were mentioned as service providers to about the same extent as NGOs, except for care for the elderly, where participants spoke more

often about public bodies. Companies or for-profit organisations were mentioned less frequently as providers of public services in participants' comments, most often in elderly care (as concession holders) and social assistance. Our mixed-methods research, therefore, reveals that regional differences exist in the availability of public services in Slovenia, creating gaps that NGOs are uniquely placed to fill. This observation is in line with the findings of Rakar and Kolarič (2020, 2025) who find a discrepancy between the growth and development of civil society organisations in Slovenia, showing that despite the significant increase in the number of NGOs in the period of the last three decades, indicating an extensive growth of the sector, the two most important indicators for the development of the sector (employment and revenue) show that the position held by the NGOs in Slovenia remains relatively weak. Further, improving accessibility is crucial for the sustainable development of rural areas, as Ricci et al. (2016) state. This underlines the importance of community engagement in improving the accessibility of services, especially in rural areas where traditional public sector mechanisms are often ineffective. In regard to necessary (new) public policies, the main study findings point to the following areas for systemic change: (a) systemic recognition of the importance of the non-governmental sector and its role in the future development of public services; (b) funding of NGOs, which should ensure the long-term sustainability and professionalism of the sector; and (c) effective and intensive collaboration and coordination between the non-governmental, public and private (business) sectors, based on regular dialogue and consultation on the national and local levels.

In summary, the evidence presented here supports a policy agenda that bolsters the capacity of NGOs to act as vital partners in the delivery of public services. By investing in the structural and professional development of NGOs and fostering stronger partnerships with state agencies, Slovenia can move towards a more inclusive public service landscape—one that is better able to support isolated and vulnerable populations. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of such collaborations, contributing to a deeper understanding of how NGO–state partnerships can promote sustainable social inclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the project report: Rakar, T., Rihter, L., Rape Žiberna, T., Stanimirovič, T., Boljka, U., Divjak, T., Hlebec, V., Černe, G., & Hurtado Monarres, M. (2023). *CRP–Potencial nevladnih organizacij v Sloveniji za naslavljanje potreb lokalnih skupnosti*. Ministry of Public Administration of the Republic of Slovenia. <https://www.gov.si/assets/ministrstva/MJU/SNVO/novi-strategiji/Koncno-porocilo-Potencial-NVO-v-Sloveniji.pdf>

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