



Shared services and performing arts co-operatives

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Abstract

As many cultural activities, performing arts are built on collaboration. This collaborative work is essential in a context of economic crisis. Collective financing, government subsidy and mutual assistance allow the theater companies to continue to realize their artistic and cultural projects. In the performing arts, many organizations act as co-operatives without legal recognition (ie: without registering as a co-op (UK) nor adopting co-operative status (France & Italy)). We thus define co-operatives in reference to the way business is conducted rather than the legal constitution, in reference to Cooperative UK's classification proposal.

Within a comparative pan-European (UK, France, Italy) case study analysis, we examine the three following research questions:

What form does co-operation take in performing arts organisations?

What are the ex post, in and ex ante perceived advantages and disadvantages of being a co-op in this sector?

In particular, does being a co-operative help with regards to the effects of the current economic crisis?

Introduction

Performing arts are built on collaboration. Many performing arts organisations are driven by the missions of producing art and building a better world through the self-fulfilment of the artists but also through the benefit of art for the wider community. So the co-operative ideal should sit well with performing arts organisations and yet there are very few registered co-operatives in performing arts in the UK, and only slightly more in France. Our research investigates this paradox.

Culture and arts in general, requiring collective financing, tend to receive government subsidy to a greater or lesser extent. They are particularly at risk in the current economic crisis. Within the cultural sector, performing arts companies are particularly fragile (Urrutiaguer and Henry, 2011). The performing arts are essential to society, not only for the artistic value created, but also in economic terms (Nicolas, 2010). Many performing arts organisations are hybrids; they earn much of their income from trade but also receive government subsidy. In this the sector could be likened to agriculture or any other sector which enjoys government support. They are closely linked to regional economic development. They play an important role in a country's economic and social development. They are also business entities: they are employers, producers, consumers and partners in the marketing and promotion of their cities, regions and countries. Their sustainability is thus not just a sector specific question.

Most European governments are cutting their budgets for cultural activities. In the UK the Arts Council budget was cut by 30% in 2010 to take effect over four years.²⁹ This has had a large impact on the independent (non-commercial) performing arts sector in the UK. In France, where the cultural sector is historically heavily supported by public funding, the culture budget has remained stable in 2011. But this situation is clearly precarious, French political will and capacity to maintain such public financing being highly questionable.

²⁹ Arts Council UK