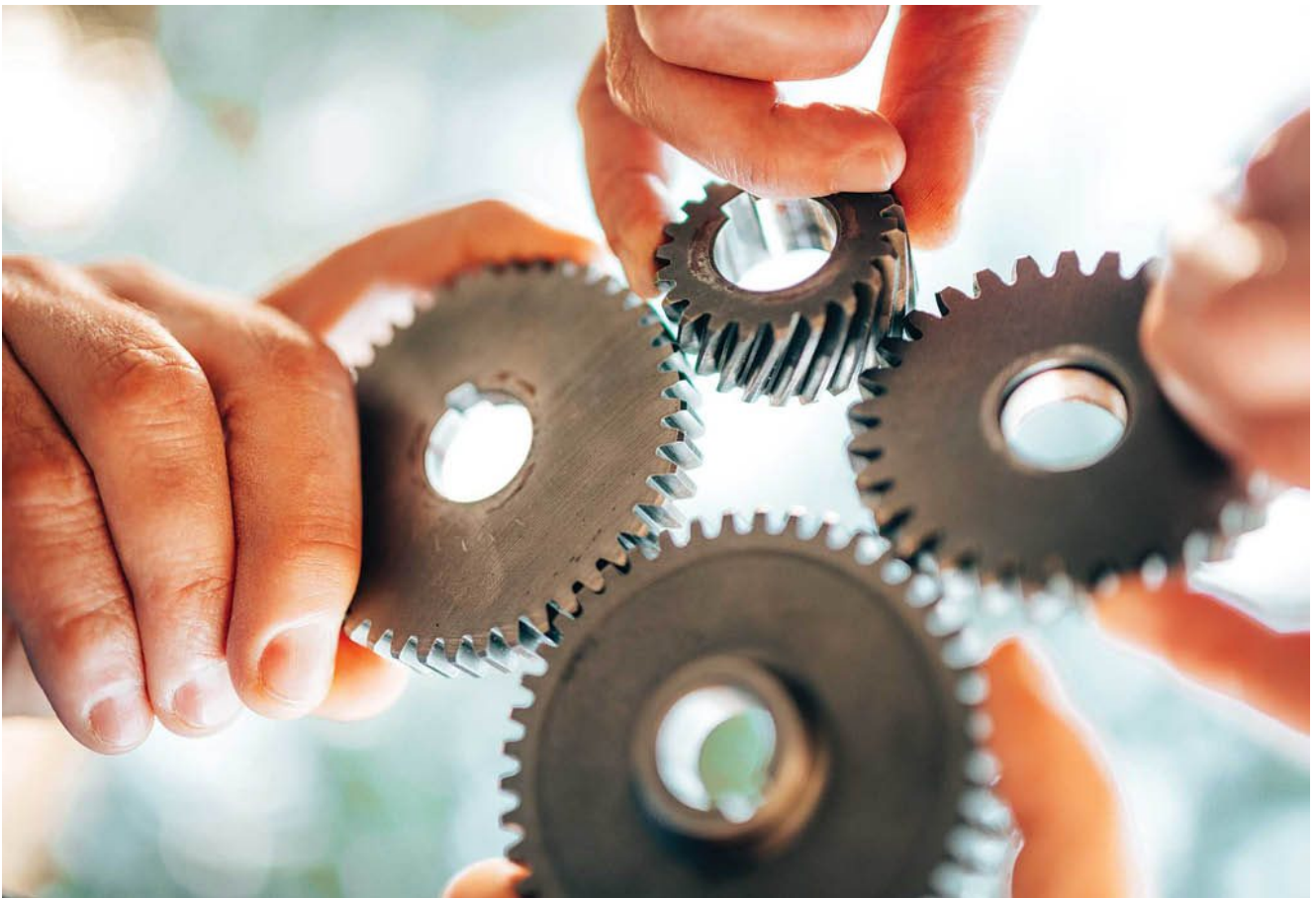


Why alliances in the social economy succeed or fail

Collaborating doesn't always work out. Africa Ariño, an expert in strategic alliances, identifies the secrets to successful third-sector alliances.



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For social economy entities, such as cooperatives and nonprofits, partnerships are a vehicle

for growth: they enable them to develop their social mission without compromising their identity or control.

At times of profound change, the ability to work together can determine these organizations' survival.

The [social economy](#) accounts for around 10% of the economy in countries such as Spain and France. One way the sector promotes itself is through alliances, which offer two fundamental advantages:

- They facilitate access to resources and areas of work that would otherwise be hard to access.
- They can improve performance, recognition and positioning. In short, they allow partners to grow and become more competitive.

This was highlighted in a 2022 report on [how alliances strengthen the social economy](#) by IESE professor [Africa Ariño](#), holder of the [Joaquim Molins Figueras Chair of Strategic Alliances](#). Her findings were based on interviews with leaders of the sector in Spain, as well as with the president of the Spanish Business Confederation of the Social Economy (CEPES).

Identify conflicts in third-sector alliances

Despite the advantages, partners can face difficulties when strategic, organizational, operational and human differences collide.

- **Strategic conflicts.** Alliances work better when partner goals are compatible. If private interests carry more weight for one or both partners, tensions will arise. Conflicts can also arise when partners have different ideas about what each one should contribute. Before entering into an alliance, it's important to define roles in terms of strategic goals, who does what, and shared vision.
- **Organizational conflicts.** These arise from differences in organizational structure, size and culture. What's needed to overcome these differences is an understanding of why the partners act as they do.
- **Operational conflicts.** These arise when the resources committed to the alliance are not fully compatible. Agree on the minimum requirements for working together, and decide which of your procedures may need to be adjusted.
- **Human conflicts.** Lack of trust is a prime source of tension in partnerships. Try to create an environment where partners feel safe sharing information, even when it's

sensitive. Of course, there should be some level of trust from the outset.

Why some strategic alliances succeed and others fail

These ideas were developed further in a 2025 study on [third-sector alliances in Catalonia](#). Ariño and her co-authors analyzed over 50 experiences to identify what distinguishes alliances that thrive from those that fail to achieve their objectives.

The keys to success

Planning and partner selection

- Common goals and strategic alignment
- Mutual trust and similar values

Implementation and management

- Prior trust-based relationship
- Similar working styles

Evaluation and next steps

- Clear assignment of tasks and responsibilities
- Regular and planned coordination

What makes for a failure

Planning and partner selection

- Lack of reflection on common goals
- Inappropriate choice of partners due to a lack of knowledge of organizational or cultural differences

Operational management

- Lack of coordination
- Incompatible working styles

Evaluation of results

- Divergent views on impact, success indicators or sustainability criteria

The authors conclude that alliances should be understood not as a specific response to a specific problem, but rather as a structural commitment to a more collaborative and sustainable third-sector model over the long term.

In short, partnerships offer such entities the chance to influence the social transformations demanded by the current context.

MORE INFO:

[Alianzas y cooperación en entidades del tercer sector social en Cataluña. Un acercamiento a su realidad](#) (October 2025) by Africa Ariño, Jordi Carrillo, Xavier Lopez, Catarina Mota and Maria de Puig

[Cómo las alianzas fortalecen la economía social. Un marco para vencer las reticencias del sector en España](#) (June 2022) by Africa Ariño, Teresa Buxeda, Jordi Carrillo, Xavier Lopez and Esperanza Molins

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