A review of UEFA's football social responsibility strategy

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Since 1999, UEFA has used revenue from fines imposed by its disciplinary bodies to develop partnerships and make social investments through humanitarian and other types of non-profit organisations working in areas related to football. The underlying premise is that football plays an important, positive role in European society; it is not just big business, but a community activity that is based on and fosters the preservation of social, educational and cultural values. Therefore, having initially adopted a rather cosmetic approach, as illustrated by the typology put forward by Bayle et al. (2011:18), UEFA's social involvement has evolved from more of a charitable/philanthropic concern to an integral strategy characterised by a commitment to eradicating deep-seated social issues in Europe (Gasser, 2009).

UEFA has positioned itself strategically to build on football's role as a positive force in society primarily with the aim of strengthening the health and integrity of both European football and European society as a whole. European society is therefore identified as a key stakeholder. It is necessary for an organisation to arrive at a shared vision of social responsibility, as well as a consensus on the objectives (functional and social), the strategy to adopt and the resources to commit. In his seminal work, Carroll (1991:43) argued that "there is a natural fit between the idea of corporate social responsibility and the organisation's stakeholders". Such an approach is based on the principle that the success of an organisation must be measured according to the satisfaction of the parties involved. Social responsibility is a collective issue; hence, society is best served when an organisation adopts a sustainable development approach.

In line with this ideology, UEFA's approach in the field of social responsibility has also been about balancing the demands of all its key stakeholders, dealing fairly with them and managing all interactions – legal, professional and commercial – with a concern for the impact on all involved. This ethic underlies UEFA's definition as an organisation. By acknowledging the role that each stakeholder plays, UEFA ensures that it cooperates fully with them in an effort to come to a shared consensus on matters of key strategic importance. Through developing partnerships with agencies such as the European Union (EU), for example on issues such as racism, violence, corruption, obesity, xenophobia and homophobia, and by helping its member associations to develop similar partnerships at national level, UEFA reinforces the vision of football as a communal, cultural activity instead of a free-market business. Politicians have long used sport to try to shape society. Recently, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations have also embraced sport as a means to mend rifts in society, foster development and raise awareness of a wide array of problems. More and more programmes aim to harness the power of sport to drive positive change, a trend highlighted by the European Year of Education through Sport supported by the European Commission in 2004, the UN International Year of Sport and Physical Education in 2005 and the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008. In this context, European football faces a rising tide of expectations about its social role.

However, as it will be argued in this paper, the evaluation of social responsibility projects involving football is slightly problematic as, to date, there has been very little research undertaken in this area to collect data and evaluate the impact of social projects of this kind. This problem is two-fold: first, as observed by Smith and Westerbeek (2007:52), "although corporate social responsibility has been thoroughly articulated, the social responsibilities implicit to sport remain under-developed", and hence under-researched generally; second, there is an evident lack of data in football-specific CSR research (Walters and Tacon, 2010). UEFA itself has been quite sporadic in this matter, commissioning external evaluations to be undertaken on some of its social responsibility projects but not following a systematic approach. One justification leading to this outcome was that resource allocation to finance and manage such activities has not been sufficient. In order to sustain and improve this level of involvement in social matters, UEFA needs to consider increasing the budget allocated for this purpose, comply with international standards, which would in turn allow for improved medium-to-longer term planning and allocation of funds to partnership organisations. As UEFA enters a phase of reflection on its current FSR strategy, it is timely to redress some of these issues that will be highlighted in this presentation, which will have implications for the success of the new strategy for social investment over the next four-year period.

References

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