

Networking As A Cornerstone Within The Practice Of Social Entrepreneurship In Sport

Bjärsholm, Daniel

Malmö University, Sweden

E-mail: daniel.bjarsholm@mah.se

Aim of the research

During the last decades, society has changed and become increasingly market driven. As a result, organizations within all sectors of society, and particularly those within the nonprofit/voluntary sector, have been encouraged, and in many cases forced, to compete for funding from a diminishing governmental budget while simultaneously minimizing their excessive governmental dependence. Consequentially, traditional sector boundaries have eroded. However, neither the state nor the free market have managed to provide universal social welfare/security or respond to some of our major societal challenges (e.g., mass migration and inequality; Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). A possible answer to these challenges might be social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurs are found within the blurred sectors of society. Social entrepreneurs in sports consist of organizations that prioritize social values ahead of both sporting results and financial profits (Schenker & Peterson, 2017), differing from CSR in terms of the organizations' primary goals and handling of profits (Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). Research has however shown that organizations engaged in social entrepreneurship have difficulties in creating sustainable businesses (e.g., Austin, Stevenson & Wei-Skillern, 2006). One possibility often highlighted in research to successfully maintain and develop such businesses is the use of networks. Despite this, Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan and James (2015) show that (a) social entrepreneurs struggle to identify and develop relevant networks, and (b) research needs to be more empirical (qualitative) regarding which roles the actors within the organizations might have for social entrepreneurs.

The aim of this study is to better understand and discuss how social entrepreneurship and networking can be manifested in a sports organization. Hence, this study fills a knowledge gap in research on social entrepreneurship in general, and in sport in particular.

Theoretical background

Social entrepreneurs do not operate in a vacuum, but in a social context in which they navigate to find resources. By synthesizing the welfare triangle, with its theoretical description of society's organization (Pestoff, 1998), with different types of networks (Lechner, Dowling & Welppe, 2006), it is possible to illustrate, understand and discuss the transboundary work and networking of social entrepreneurs within the blurred sectors of society.

Methodology

This study is based on an explorative case study of a sports organization within the voluntary sector, situated on a small island in Sweden. The sports organization can, based on Schenker and Peterson's (2017) theoretical development of the concept of sport and social entrepreneurship, be compared to a social entrepreneurial sports organization. The data includes documents (e.g., annual reports) and semi-structured interviews with six respondents from the sports organization as well as its partners, who were chosen based on the theoretical framework.

The data underwent a qualitative content analysis. Data containing the organization's business and network was first organized based on the theoretical framework. All identified partners were then categorized with respect to the welfare triangle. Lastly, the different collaborations were analysed and discussed in a concept-driven manner.

Results

The sports organization in question has a multifaceted business, which can be seen as a result of their stated social goal. An example of their social responsibility is that they incorporate youths from a juvenile detention centre into their activities, thereby contributing to the youths' rehabilitation.

The study shows that the organization relies on and uses various types of networks within different sectors of society. Most collaborations are with other actors in the voluntary sector. This finding implies that organizations most easily collaborate with actors with similar sectorial affiliations, probably because these organizations "play" by the same rules (Pestoff, 1998). Also, due to the organizational form, the organization has access to several institutional networks (e.g., with the municipality). Some of these are strengthened by the organization's use of various reputational networks (e.g., by contact with universities), which increase

their legitimacy. However, the organization is not dependent on institutional networks and grants. It generates approximately 55 percent of its revenue by arranging income-generating activities of their own and through the use of different networks (e.g., a commercial local hotel & conference center). Several of these networks are furthermore characterized by both an interdependence and a drive for win-win situations, rather than the unilateral dependence otherwise apparent in research.

The present study fills a research gap (Phillips et al., 2015) and contributes to an understanding of the importance of various types of networks. Additionally, although entrepreneurs exist within a certain social context, this study contributes to inspiration for practitioners.

References

- Huybrechts, B. & Nicholls, A. (2012). Social entrepreneurship: Definitions, drivers and challenges. In C. K. Volkmann, K. O. Tokarski, & K. Ernst (Eds.), *Social entrepreneurship and social business: An introduction and discussion with case studies* (pp. 31–48). Wiesbaden: Springer-Gabler.
- Lechner, C., Dowling, M. & Welp, I. (2006). Firm networks and firm development: The role of the relational mix. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 21, 514–540.
- Pestoff, V. A. (1998). *Beyond the market and the state: Social enterprises and civil democracy in a welfare society*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Peterson, T. & Schenker, K. (2017). Sport and social entrepreneurship in the Swedish context. *Sport in Society: Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*. Advance online publication. 1–16.
- Phillips, W., Lee, H., Ghobadian, A., O'Regan, N. & James, P. (2015). Social innovation and social entrepreneurship: A systematic review. *Group and Organization Management*, 40, 428–461.