

Sport and Social Entrepreneurship in Sweden

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Aim

In Sweden and the other Nordic countries, voluntary sport is deeply anchored in clubs and federations in a tradition emanating from popular movements, where local non-profit organizations are linked together in national sports federations. In recent decades, a number of sport policy transformation processes has challenged several basic premises of the Swedish sports model. Our interest is in examples that swim against the stream in times of social development when sports clubs in Sweden are facing huge challenges in the form of dropping out and declining activity levels in child and youth sport, as well as commercialization and professionalization tendencies and increasing social gaps.

Background and Research Design

Our way of understanding these examples is through the concept of social entrepreneurship. The aim of our research project was to develop a theoretical tool for understanding social projects involving sport activities, and then to use the tool to analyze a number of such projects. In this paper we thus present and discuss a definition of social entrepreneurship in a sport policy context, based on Swedish cases. After publishing a number of articles and an anthology, we like to discuss the definition in an international setting.

In the beginning of the 20th century the already generous economic annually support to the sports movement was accompanied by new forms of support. Even though the target of these forms has varied, these allocations were earmarked and time-limited for the explicit purpose of getting sports associations to reach new groups and develop new activities. The most far-reaching ambitions were the ‘Handshake’ and the ‘Lift for Sport’. Evaluations of the Handshake and the Lift for Sport showed that the projects, by way of routinization, professionalization and normalization, increasingly becomes a part of the ordinary activities of the sport clubs. A large proportion of the economic means went to the clubs within large, boys-dominated team-sports, and addition to clubs in densely populated and socio-economically well of municipalities.

In our work we show how the Swedish version of social entrepreneurship within sport is both a result – and a mirror – of Swedish society and the Swedish sport movement. We provide a broad characterization of the Swedish sports model on societal and political levels: the extent of, as well as the organizing and financing of voluntary sport in the borderland between state, market and civil society. We also argue that the growth of social entrepreneurship in sport forms part of a larger transformation of the relation between sport and the state. A more precise definition is thus needed to make the concept operational. Based on the of cases that we have encountered over the last fifteen years, we have formulated theses relevant for the understanding of social entrepreneurship in a Swedish and Nordic context:

- Thesis 1: What is inherently socially good can be qualified to refer to the normative goals of democratic fostering of the sports movement, which are initially based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Thesis 2: Social entrepreneurship in sport uses sport as a means, not as a goal.

- Thesis 3: Social entrepreneurship in sport uses money (the profit) as a means, not as a goal.
- Thesis 4: Social entrepreneurship in sport is characterized by activities that cross boundaries between the different sectors of society.
- Thesis 5: This crossing of boundaries entails that the analysis of social entrepreneurship in sport is based on a conflict perspective.

We elaborate on and further discuss the ‘social’ aspect of the concept of social entrepreneurship in sport. By the use of democratic conceptions, they explore the extent to which sport and sporting activities with an entrepreneurial character can contribute to citizens’ democratic influence and competence and, in the long run, to the development of democracy. Research is always surrounded by ethical considerations, but our research in social entrepreneurship has brought additional dilemmas to our notice. We also discuss some of these dilemmas.

Finally, we have constructed a methodological tool to analyze social entrepreneurship in a sport policy context, built on a number of steps in relation to our theses. Seven cases have been compared and similarities and differences are analyzed. The cases were identified with the help of networks within the sports movement, and the empirics was collected by means of interviews visits on site, as well as document analysis.

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