

Networking as a cornerstone within the practice of social entrepreneurship in sport

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ABSTRACT

Research question: The aim of this study is to understand and discuss how networking can be manifested in a sport organisation characterised by social entrepreneurship.

Research methods: The qualitative data on which this study rests consists of seven semi-structured interviews (totally, ca. 600 minutes). Some interviewees were members of the organisation in question, while others represent various partner organisations. Supplementary data was added in the form of various written sources (e.g. annual reports).

Results and Findings: The social entrepreneurial sports organisation's networks encompass many actors from all societal sectors, and the networks themselves may assume many forms (e.g. social, institutional and reputational), as may the character of the cooperation involved. The study shows that several of the networks are characterised not only by a common desire to attain a win-win situation but also by mutual dependency. Through its use of networks, the organisation has reduced its dependence on financial support, a dependency which otherwise tends to burden social entrepreneurial organisations. Thus, the networks enable the organisation to continuously develop its social ambition to improve people's social values through participation in a wide range of sporting and outdoor activities.

Implications: This study contributes to a broader understanding of the significance of networks. The results indicate that it is necessary to consider other network types than solely social networks. Besides this, practitioners can transfer a number of the networks described to their own organisations. Consequently, the study constitutes a potential source of inspiration for sports organisations.

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Research has shown that organisations engaged in social entrepreneurship encounter difficulties in creating sustainable businesses. Among the reasons for this difficulty is the organisational form (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006; Yitshaki, Lerner, & Sharir, 2008), the choice of which can be decisive for an organisation's access to loans, donations, support and contracts (Hines, 2005). An additional problem is that the

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social objectives of these organisations may be questioned due to their economic activities (Moizer & Tracey, 2010). Other problems include that investments in social entrepreneurial organisations are often short-termed (Austin et al., 2006), uncertain (Weerawardena & Sullivan Mort, 2006), and that few organisations generate significant incomes through the sale of goods and services instead of relying on grants and donations (Bacq, Hartog, & Hoogendoorn, 2013; Foster & Bradach, 2005).

Research argues, however, that networks are an important contributory factor in the successful establishment and further development of social entrepreneurial organisations (Austin et al., 2006; Sharir & Lerner, 2006; Spear, 2006; Weber & Kratzer, 2013; Yitshaki et al., 2008). The focus has, in particular, lain on social networks and capital (Sharir & Lerner, 2006; Spear, 2006; Yitshaki et al., 2008; Westlund & Gawell, 2012). Although research (Weber & Kratzer, 2013) has highlighted networks and networking as something of a prerequisite for organisational survival and success, Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, and James (2015) show in their research review that social entrepreneurs have difficulties identifying and developing relevant networks. The same review also suggests that research into networks and networking must become more empirical (with a qualitative focus) in terms of the roles which actors in a network can play for these entrepreneurs (see also Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Jack, 2010; Nicholls, 2006).

In this paper, the concept of social entrepreneurship is understood differently from that of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in terms of the organisations' primary goals and handling of profits (Huybrechts & Nicholls, 2012). In corporations – or sports organisations – conducting CSR, the social mission is subordinated to either financial profit or sporting results (Peterson & Schenker, 2018a). Additionally, the concept also differs from that of a traditional voluntary organisation in the way it operates and finances its business (Trivedi & Stokols, 2011). Social entrepreneurial sports organisations can, for example, be organised in sectors other than the voluntary sector (Austin et al., 2006; Peterson & Schenker, 2018b). The traditional non-profit voluntary sports organisation tends to primarily focus on a specific sport and on sporting success (Peterson & Schenker, 2018a; Skille, 2011; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016) rather than on being either innovative or striving to bring about social change. Thus, compared to a CSR initiative or a voluntary sports organisation, a social entrepreneurial organisation deals exclusively with social responsibility.

Against this background, Visingsö AIS, a Swedish club, represents an interesting case of a sports organisation that has managed to develop a sustainable form of social entrepreneurship. The goals of the continuously developing organisation are primarily social, which can be seen in both its practice and policies. The club offers, for instance, a wide range of non-competitive sporting activities for everybody, including youths from a local detention centre, while simultaneously constructing a new clubhouse that will work as a social meeting place. To achieve this, Visingsö AIS arranges income-generating activities in cooperation with a number of different partners. The aim of the present study is to use the case of Visingsö AIS to understand and discuss how networking can be manifested in a sports organisation characterised by social entrepreneurship. By empirically focusing on this state of affairs, it is possible to learn from the way and with whom a social entrepreneurial sports organisation can network in order to overcome the difficulties that exist in creating sustainable businesses. This study thus contributes to the somewhat spartan body of research that exists into social entrepreneurship and networking in general (e.g. Nicholls, 2006; Phillips et al., 2015) and to the progressing field of social entrepreneurship in sport in particular (Bjärsholm, 2017).

Initially, the theoretical framework and methods used in this study will be presented, followed by the results obtained. A concluding discussion elaborates upon the study's contribution to the field of research along with its limitations and opportunities for further research.

Theoretical framework

Social entrepreneurs exist in a blurred organisational realm between the state, the market and civil society (Austin et al., 2006; Dees & Anderson, 2003). From within this realm, the entrepreneurs form relations with numerous actors (e.g. voluntary organisations, governmental authorities and commercial companies). The exact nature of this established interaction is both context-specific for each entrepreneur (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003) and of considerable importance, since organisations are considered to be 'constrained by their relational capability, i.e. the capability to establish, maintain and develop relationships' (Lechner & Leyronas, 2009, p. 658). It is necessary to pay attention not only to encompassing structures but also to the entrepreneurs' inner perspectives to fully comprehend the often complex networks in which organisations participate (Jack, 2010).

Although an extensive network is often viewed as a key to an organisation's success (Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Weber & Kratzer, 2013; Zhao & Aram, 1995), there are also studies which have shown that network type pluralism is of consequence (Lechner & Dowling, 2003; Lechner, Dowling, & Welpe, 2006). Lechner and Dowling (2003) and Lechner et al. (2006), for example, have indicated that commercial organisations utilise network types other than solely financial networks to achieve their goals. These differing types of networks form what the authors refer to as 'the relational mix'. Inspired by Lechner and Dowling (2003) and Lechner et al. (2006), this study will use the following types of network to understand and discuss those surrounding the sport organisation in question, namely, social, reputational, co-opetition, marketing information and institutional networks. The last-mentioned network type has been added to the original 'relational mix' in view of the notable, and critical, significance of institutional actors for social entrepreneurial organisations (Phillips et al., 2015).

Social networks, according to Lechner et al. (2006), can be defined as 'strong and active relationships with other individuals that existed before the creation of the firm' (p. 520). Typical relations within the social network category are those between an entrepreneur and family members, friends and previous work colleagues. Given that social networks comprise those relationships which entrepreneurs have formed prior to the creation of the firm, relations formed after this point belong to networks of another character.

The enhanced reputation obtained via cooperation with established and well-reputed partners can benefit an organisation in various ways. A *reputational network* is formed when an organisation, through cooperation, gains legitimacy and sparks interest, which can then be used for marketing purposes or for gaining entry into a specific market. The reputation attained can therefore generate measures of both economic and social trustworthiness (Austin et al., 2006; Lechner et al., 2006). In return for this reputational boost, the organisations must offer something in exchange, albeit the exact nature of this exchange may vary widely (Lechner & Dowling, 2003).

A *co-opetition network* is one where an organisation cooperates with a competitor. Although the nature of this cooperation may vary (e.g. Bengtsson & Kock, 2000), it is

common that an organisation hands over projects to competitors at peak times, only to take back those projects at a later date (Lechner & Dowling, 2003; Lechner et al., 2006).

The acquisition of superior information concerning existing and/or future markets through relationships with others can also be of importance for organisational development. *Marketing information networks* develop over time, since it is only after 'the relevant others' have formed some kind of relationship to the organisation that they can make suggestions to improve the organisation or product (Lechner & Dowling, 2003; Lechner et al., 2006).

The term *institutional networks* implies formal institutional actors (e.g. government agencies) with which organisations have some form of relationship. Institutional networks can be said to represent 'relationships that can exist between a firm and publicly funded, open-access institutions (...) One of the aims of institutional networks is to provide support functions and (...) improve business success' (Oparaocha, 2015, p. 863). Forms of support lent to organisations from institutional actors are often free of charge, since the institutions themselves are state-funded. The rationale here is that organisations which receive support reinforce certain values such as social and public health, which are looked upon by the state as beneficial.

Method

The case selection – Visingsö AIS

An explorative case study design was used in this study to mitigate the impact of lack of qualitative empirical research into social entrepreneurship and networks (e.g. Bjärsholm, 2017; Phillips et al., 2015). Basing research on a single case enables a close analysis of the organisation in question, including its network and context (Jack, 2010; Yin, 2014). This case study deals with Visingsö AIS (VAIS), an organisation that was encountered during a larger research project on sport and social entrepreneurship in Sweden. VAIS is a non-profit voluntary sports organisation situated on Visingsö, an island (ca. 25 km²) in one of Sweden's largest lakes. VAIS, which was formed in 1935, has since its inception played a significant role for the majority of the 730 islanders, as is evidenced by the fact that the organisation currently comprises around 420 members, most of whom live on the island. Around 60 of the members (i.e. 15%) have some form of additional responsibilities within the organisation, for example as committee members (Visingsö AIS, 2015). These characteristics are quite typical of the historically strong Swedish sport movement. In Sweden, a great many citizens do sport on a regular basis in sports organisations within the voluntary sector. These voluntary sports organisations are part of the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) and receive substantial public support from various institutional actors on welfare policy grounds (the benefit of sport for promoting public health, social integration and democracy) (Norberg, 2018). Public funding, for example, accounts for about a third of all Swedish sport clubs' revenues (Stenling & Fahlén, 2016).

At the same time, some features distinguish VAIS from other organisations. VAIS can be categorised as a social entrepreneurial sporting organisation on the basis of three criteria. First, VAIS can be differentiated from typical traditional sports organisations in that the organisation and its members do not regard (a specific) sport as a goal in itself (see Skille, 2011; Stenling & Fahlén, 2016) but rather as a means to achieving its

self-proclaimed social goals and creating a social meeting point for the islanders (see Peterson & Schenker, 2018a). In terms of sporting activities, VAIS has throughout its history demonstrated its multifaceted character by including featured sports like tug-of-war and gymnastics (Visingsö AIS, 2005). The sports and activities have changed in line with the organisation's aptitude to change in relation to voluntary sports organisations in general (Stenling & Fahlén, 2016). VAIS currently offers activities such as yoga, spinning, football and floorball. Among the sports, football is the only sport played in a competitive league context for both men and women. Other sports activities are non-competitive and open to members of all ages (Visingsö AIS, 2015), including the youths incarcerated at the local youth detention centre. The goal of this multitude of sporting activities is to provide a suitable sport for all members. In addition, VAIS aims to fulfil its social goal of 'working to improve social and physical values and cultivating sportsmanship through participation in sporting and outdoor activities' (Visingsö AIS, 2013, §1). Another example of the organisation's goals, apart from those in the sporting arena, can be seen in the construction of the new clubhouse, which includes a lounge room and a new gym and exercise room, which will act as a meeting place and a youth club (Visingsö, 2016a). One illustration of social values are given priority before sporting success is the chairperson's statement that, although VAIS has the financial resources to invest in new players in order to advance in the leagues, 'the most important thing is not to win, but that the kiosk is going well'. This approach indicates that sporting success is secondary to generating an income, which brings us to the second criterion.

Apart from a broad range of sporting activities, VAIS also has a tradition of developing and arranging diverse income-generating events (e.g. camps). Additionally, the organisation has frequently cooperated with a number of different actors in various ways, both on the island and on the mainland (e.g. the municipality, the island's hotel and conference centre, and the youth detention centre) (Visingsö AIS, 2005). However, while sporting success may be secondary to income, financial success is in turn secondary to the social goals of VAIS. Part of the reason is that it is a non-profit organisation and therefore should not, as prescribed by the Swedish Tax Agency (2015), seek to further the economic interests of its members. If VAIS makes a profit, this should be reinvested in the organisation, a state of affairs applying to social entrepreneurship (Peterson & Schenker, 2018a). Moreover, in accordance with its ideology, VAIS relies on volunteering and strives to avoid being an organisation that, in the chairperson's words, treats its members as customers and its activities as commodities to be sold. As a result, the membership fees have been kept low (€30). In sum, the fact that VAIS neither prioritises financial profit nor sporting success also constitutes an important distinction between social entrepreneurship and CSR in sport (see Peterson & Schenker, 2018a).

The third criterion, on which the article will focus, is the manner in which VAIS, together with its networking partners, operates in the realm between societal sectors in search of financial support to enable and develop its organisation and operations.

Data collection

The empirical data consists of interviews and written sources (e.g. annual reports, grant applications and newspaper articles). Seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants from both the organisation itself and from various partner organisations.

These interviews form the majority of the study's empirical data, while the written sources serve as a complementary data source. The participants were chosen after contacting the chairperson of VAIS, and an initial interview was conducted. Following this indicative interview, further contacts were made with some of the major partners with whom VAIS had some form of cooperation. In addition, given social entrepreneurs' activity within the organisational realm between the state, the market and civil society, a selection of participants from a variety of societal sectors was deemed desirable. This variety lent credibility to the study by enabling a triangulation of statements, as a counterbalance to the statements made by VAIS itself (Tracy, 2010).

The interviewees selected from the partner organisations were those responsible for the cooperation with VAIS. In accordance with the purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2014), two of the seven interviews were conducted with representatives from the commercial sector (one sports entrepreneur and one manager of a hotel and conference centre), three with representatives from the public sector (two serving within different departments of the municipality and one representative from the youth detention centre), and the remaining two interviews with the chairperson of VAIS (representing the voluntary sector). However, among the interviewees, both the sports entrepreneur and the hotel and conference centre manager occupied two chairs, as it were. One participant, in addition to being a sports entrepreneur, was active as a voluntary leader in VAIS. Similarly, the manager of the hotel and conference centre also represented the local non-profit folk high school, as the hotel and conference centre is a wholly owned commercial subsidiary of the folk high school.

All interviews were carried out in person during the spring of 2016 and lasted between 53 and 153 minutes, totalling 595 minutes. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. All interviews were based on open-ended questions, as prescribed by Bryman (2016), concerning the participants' work with and relation to VAIS, with particular focus on the cooperation between VAIS and the interviewee's organisation. The interviews consisted of three parts. First, the interviewees were asked to describe themselves and the organisation they represented. Secondly, they provided their view and perception of VAIS. Thirdly, they accounted for their network/relationship with VAIS, especially regarding the content of the network and its perceived outcomes. The third step was left out of the interviews with the chairperson. The first interview with the chairperson aimed at gaining an understanding of the organisation, activities and network of VAIS, while the second focused on the experiences of its various collaborations. This enabled both parties to give their view of their cooperation.

With regard to the accumulation of written sources, the empirical data consisted of annual reports from the previous two years, a grant application, the statutes of the organisation, several documents describing the structure of VAIS, and 5 articles published in local or national media. All the documents (e.g. annual reports) created by VAIS in the last two years as well as published anniversary books were collected to gain a deeper understanding of VAIS (see Yin, 2014). The articles were acquired via searches in the Swedish digital news archive [Mediearkivet] using Visingsö AIS and VAIS as keywords. The searches yielded 69 articles, only 5 of which were deemed relevant. The remainder of the results comprised articles which, among other topics, dealt with various anniversaries or match reports.

Data analysis

The analysis process was inspired by Schreier's (2012) suggested steps for a qualitative content analysis. The transcripts and written sources were initially read several times in order to gain a thorough overview of the empirical data. The material was subsequently divided into smaller units (Schreier, 2012). First, given the social entrepreneurs boundary-crossing nature within an organisational realm between the sectors of society (Dees & Anderson, 2003), the welfare triangle, as suggested by Pestoff (1998), was used from the beginning to bring structure to the analysis and to obtain a picture of the entire network of VAIS. The welfare triangle relates all societal activity to the three spheres of the state, the market and civil society. All spheres have specific characteristics which differentiate them from each other (public vs. private, non-profit vs. profit and formal vs. informal). As demonstrated by Figure 1, the three spheres together comprise four societal sectors (public, voluntary, commercial and informal), which are in themselves characterised by differing preconditions. For example, companies and organisations in the commercial sector are governed by a quest for generating profit and legislation, something that does not apply to governmental bodies (public sector) or non-profit organisations (voluntary sector) (Pestoff, 1998). The organisations with which VAIS had some form of cooperation were thus located within the triangle, and the sector to which an organisation belonged was dictated by its beneficial ownership or form of association. Secondly, and most importantly, all units of data dealing with some aspects of the VAIS cooperation were identified. After these steps of reducing the data, the material was coded deductively, by a concept-driven approach (see Schreier, 2012, pp. 84–86) in which the network types previously described functioned as a priori theoretical codes. For example, the part in which the chairperson discussed the benefits of being part of this study in terms of its strengthened legitimacy was coded as a reputational network, while the metaphorical statement from the hotel and conference centre's manager about the cooperation with VAIS generating 'a ripple effect' was coded as a market informational network, since this implies that the organisations benefit from each other's network to gain access to larger market. Using such a deductive strategy drawing upon theory and prior research

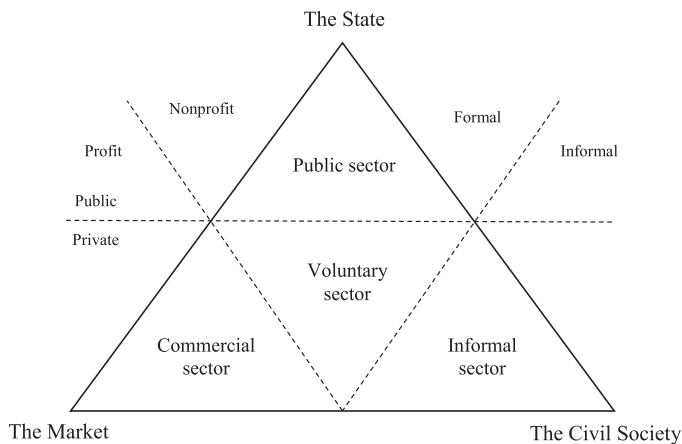


Figure 1. The structure and organisation of society (Pestoff, 1998).

is advantageous for a researcher who is already acquainted with the research object and has a tenuous idea of the results, as was the case in the present study.

Results

The findings from the case study of Visingsö AIS will be presented in two parts. In the first part, the networks established by VAIS will be described and discussed on an aggregated level. The latter section will be presented on the basis of the four sectors of society and will detail the boundary-crossing work of VAIS. The discussion within this second part makes reference to the various network types hitherto presented.

VAIS and its networks

The entire network of VAIS can be illustrated by using the welfare triangle; see [Figure 2](#). In this figure, the various partners included in the VAIS network can be discerned. The figure also allows two conclusions to be drawn. First, the figure shows the societal sector within which each partner is active. Secondly, the figure demonstrates the sectoral mobility of VAIS. Most of the unique collaborations (i.e. non-standardised sponsorship deals) take place between VAIS and other non-profit organisations, while the least collaboration takes place with the informal sector. This state of affairs might be explained contextually or by the circumstance that voluntary organisations play by the same set of legal rules (Pestoff, 1998). The fact that VAIS cooperates with a number of public sector actors can to a certain extent be explained by the many financial grants which can be sought by social entrepreneurs whose organisations operate in the non-profit sector, via for example institutional actors (Oparaocha, 2015).

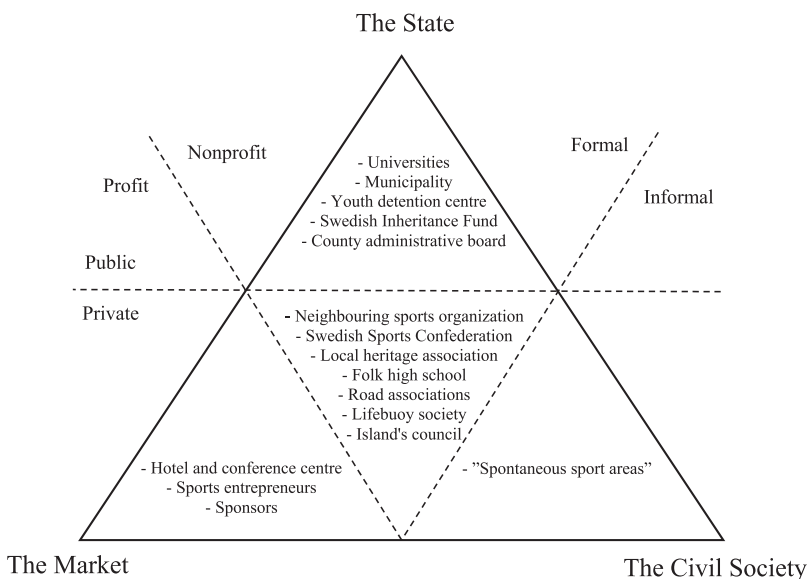


Figure 2. A schematic view of VAIS' networks divided by sectors of society.

An analysis of the economic situation of VAIS shows that a substantial share (85%) of the organisation's annual revenue (ca. €67,000) is generated by diverse forms of cooperation and proprietary income-generating activities (Visingsö AIS, 2016b). Even if grants and donations from institutional actors are excluded, more than half of the annual revenues (60%) are generated by other means. Hence, VAIS is an example of a social entrepreneurial organisation that has succeeded in overcoming the high dependency on grants and donations which otherwise appears in research (e.g. Bacq et al., 2013).

A qualitative analysis of each network is thus required to illustrate empirically how social entrepreneurs operate within various societal sectors in their drive for financing to achieve sustainability.

The networks between VAIS and the voluntary sector

Like the vast majority of the other sports organisations in Sweden, VAIS is also via its membership in various national sports federations a member of the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC). The SSC is a voluntary organisation, partly financed by the Swedish state, forming one of the largest institutional actors in the Swedish voluntary sector (SSC, 2012). As a result of its SSC membership, VAIS is able to seek financial support in accordance with the SSC statutes. One such example is the grant for furthering youth sports activities in Sweden, a grant which VAIS has repeatedly applied for and obtained via the SSC. Such support has also entailed organisational development and pedagogical training for VAIS leaders. The institutional network which exists between them is based on statutes and policy documents which constitute rules for all member organisations. Any organisation which fulfils and observes the directives of the SSC may obtain various forms of support. SSC is available for all member bodies but asks nothing in return, according to Oparaocha's (2015) definition of institutional network. The possibility for VAIS to apply for and obtain support from institutional actors rests on its being part of the voluntary sector and simultaneously a member of the SSC, while other actors, for example those within the commercial sector, may not be similarly entitled.

As VAIS offers no competitive activities for the youths on the island it creates a kind of vacuum for those who wish to embark upon a career in sport. To rectify this, there is cooperation with a neighbouring sports organisation on the mainland which, according to the chairperson, 'is built on personal relationships'. If a 12-year-old wishes to do competitive sport, the parents often take matters into their own hands. Both organisations are open to this state of affairs. The islanders are, according to the chairperson, 'always welcome. They [the neighbouring organisation] accept them with open arms'. Furthermore, a few years ago, the women football sections of the two organisations were merged to make it possible to continue pursuing women football at a competitive level. Today, however, VAIS is managing this activity on its own. The cooperation is thus social in the sense that it builds on personal relationships and on co-opetition in the sense that VAIS works with a competitor (i.e. another sports club) (Lechner & Dowling, 2003; Lechner et al., 2006). Handing over those youths who seek a higher level of competition to a neighbouring club is regarded as a natural act. The circumstance that these youths also attend secondary school on the mainland explains the success of the cooperation, according to the sporting entrepreneur who also acts as a voluntary leader in VAIS. This cooperation can therefore be regarded as solution-oriented rather than profit-seeking. The only financial part of this cooperation is that the neighbouring sport

organisation is able to apply for grants via the SSC for an increasing number of participants. Otherwise, no actor gains financially from the cooperation; instead the organisations make it possible, via their flexible and unpretentious approach, for all members to partake in their preferred sport.

An example of a form of cooperation which has neither sporting nor any direct economic consequences for VAIS is that which involves the island's council. VAIS has representatives in a non-party-political joint committee whose task is to promote the interests of the islanders in the face of other administrative units (e.g. the municipality). Topics discussed during meetings include urban and rural development, such as the recurring subject of ferry traffic to and from the island. This participation enables VAIS to present its views on the island's development, receive information concerning events on the island and also to establish contacts which may lead to new forms of cooperation. An example of how this network can work is the successful campaign to save and continue running the island's only public swimming pool, which was earlier threatened with closure (e.g. Visingsörådet, 2013). The solution was for VAIS to take over the maintenance of the area around the swimming pool against payment from the municipality. This event also illustrates that VAIS does not solely look out for its own interests but instead adopts an attitude of social responsibility towards the island as a whole.

Apart from VAIS' own income-generating events (e.g. endurance runs), an annual mid-summer celebration is organised in partnership with the Lifebuoy Society and the local heritage association. This event brings in around €700 for each organisation (Visingsö AIS, 2015). Another significant economic venture, according to the chairperson, is the collaboration with the island's various road associations, which generates €1,450 for VAIS in return for the occasional cleaning of roads.

Another actor in the voluntary sector with which VAIS cooperates closely is the island's folk high school. The cooperation is characterised by a drive to achieve win-win situations, although its exact nature takes several forms. The folk high school collaborates with VAIS in order to offer its students access to the sports organisation's activities. The chairperson believes that 'in this way, the students are offered an attractive study environment since there's not much else to do on the island in October'. VAIS collects a group training fee in return. Apart from the benefit of increasing its income, this also ensures a growing number of participants; additionally, its members form contacts with new people, a goal that is considered desirable by the organisation. The manager of the hotel and conference centre provides another example of cooperation between VAIS and the folk high school. VAIS maintains a football pitch situated on the grounds of the school and in return receives income from camps arranged by the island's hotel and conference centre, a commercial subsidiary to the folk high school.

The networks between VAIS and the commercial sector

Together with a number of collaborative partners, VAIS crosses boundaries between the voluntary and commercial sectors. A palpable example of this development can be seen in the well-established cooperation with the island's hotel and conference centre. This centre has been in operation since 1998 as a wholly owned commercial subsidiary of the folk high school (which itself operates in the non-profit sector) and was started, according to its manager, as a way for the then closure-threatened school to increase its revenue. Originally, VAIS was responsible for the majority of the administrative and

practical tasks surrounding the football camps. Now, the hotel and conference centre has taken over all administration and in turn pays a standardised fee per camp attendee to VAIS. The sports organisation is then responsible for maintaining the facilities, a task which would be necessary in any case in order to continue its day-to-day operations. The hotel and conference centre takes care of all other aspects of the camps (e.g. transport, accommodation and food). This area of business generates approximately €11,000 per year for VAIS, whereas the hotel and conference centre earns around €98,500 from this arrangement, according to its manager.

Such cooperation is financially beneficial for both VAIS and the hotel and conference centre. Both actors use the other organisation's market informational network (see Lechner et al., 2006) to gain access to other actors and a larger market. The hotel and conference centre is dependent on the VAIS network of contacts within the sporting world to attract guests; it also needs access to the organisation's facilities. The manager describes that, metaphorically, the cooperation can be compared to generating

a ripple effect. For example, as the regional football association has a camp here every Easter, we have learned to send out a parental deal that we offer accommodation for parents in cooperation with the football association. This brings us increased revenue.

This revenue, according to the manager, 'was worth its weight in gold' during a tough economic period some years ago. VAIS is in turn dependent on an external actor running its football camps, which is a difficult task for a voluntary organisation, according to the chairperson.

VAIS also has various forms of cooperation with two smaller commercial actors (sports entrepreneurs) running wellness and health activities. One aspect of this cooperation is the hiring of the organisation's facilities by the sports entrepreneurs under conditions similar to that of the hotel and conference centre. Additionally, the sports entrepreneurs have run a joint campaign with VAIS to attract customers and visitors to the island. The results of this cooperation have, according to the sports entrepreneur, 'been beneficial for both parties'. The success of this co-opetition network can in part be attributed to both parties' common view of their respective customer base. VAIS exists to fulfil the needs of the islanders, while the sports entrepreneurs have a distinct customer base consisting of companies and conference guests from the mainland. According to the chairperson, VAIS can therefore 'grow with sports tourism' as a result. The rental income per participant is, nevertheless, purposely low (approximately €3). Part of the organisation's rationale is that this helps a small business from the island but also that more paying sports tourists are attracted to the island, which in turn will lead to increased profits for those selling goods and services. The chairperson also states that VAIS would have supported these entrepreneurs even if the organisation had not been directly involved in the business transactions, since 'it is good for the island. If we all help out in this little island ecosystem we'll all be winners'. A reason for the accord between VAIS and the sports entrepreneurs is probably that the latter are also active as voluntary leaders in the sports organisation.

VAIS also receives traditional sponsorship from a number of commercial companies and individuals, primarily local ones. This sponsorship amounts to around €8,800 per year (Visingsö AIS, 2015). Companies and individuals that sponsor the organisation benefit financially from a certain amount of public exposure. Relationships with sponsors, according to the chairperson, are part of the social network of VAIS. The organisation has

existed on the island since 1935 and, since half of the islanders are members, many of those who run their own businesses have both grown up with and are active in VAIS.

The networks between VAIS and the public sector

Several of the networks between VAIS and various public sector actors are of an institutional and relatively one-way nature in that various forms of support are received free of charge (Oparaocha, 2015). VAIS repeatedly applies for or has received financial support. Some networks with public sector actors are more long-lasting than others; the network with the municipality is, for example, more longitudinal than those with the Swedish Inheritance Fund and the County Administrative Board.

The status of VAIS as a recipient of financial support can be explained in two ways. First, VAIS actively seeks out and applies for funding to organisations known for distributing financial support. Examples of this are the Swedish Inheritance Fund and the County Administrative Board. According to the chairperson, these organisations contributed a sum of around €350,000 for the construction of a new clubhouse with a view to further developing the organisation. However, in order to fully implement the original plans, VAIS had to add around €40,000 of its own resources to this sum (Visingsö AIS, 2016a). Secondly, the organisation is able to account for its social work to representatives from public sector aid-giving organisations. According to a municipal spokesperson, VAIS differs in this respect from many other sports organisations within the municipality, since it 'understands the importance of inviting the municipal executive board and showing them what VAIS does'. The two interviewees representing the municipality agree that VAIS is about more than simply sport. The organisation engages in wider community issues including aspects of the island's infrastructure (e.g. ferry traffic) and the establishment of socially open meeting areas for the island's residents and tourists. One of the municipal representatives was keen to point out that the multifaceted organisation of VAIS and its wide-ranging areas of social responsibility were major factors in the decision to award it financial support. Those forms of financial support received from municipal sources entail community action grants for its work with children and young adults, grants to help maintaining municipal areas (i.e. running tracks and green areas) plus investment grants for the construction of matters like a clubhouse, a beach pitch and an outdoor gym. As a number of these grants amounted to only 30% of the total costs involved, VAIS had to cover the remaining cost. However, one municipal representative pointed out that the municipality itself does not discriminate between organisations; instead, success in obtaining grants is contingent upon applications, and VAIS is deemed 'good at finding different sources of income'.

The geographical location of VAIS, as well as its wide range of activities, also makes it eligible for financial support for rural development from the municipality. This, according to one of the municipal spokespersons, distinguishes it from most other organisations in the municipality. Had VAIS not been situated on an island, or had it focused solely on competitive sport, it would not have been eligible for these grants. The rationale behind this is that grants for rural development must be in the public interest and open to all, which are requirements VAIS fulfils in various ways; see the informal sector section. One of the representatives from the municipality emphasises this by stating that 'if it was just about football it wouldn't be especially interesting from the rural development perspective, it's all the other things they do which makes it interesting'.

Most of the previously mentioned financial support from the institutional networks is only available because VAIS is a non-profit organisation. Had VAIS had another organisational structure in another societal sector (e.g. the commercial one) it would not have been eligible for the same, or indeed any, forms of financial support. Again, this fact emphasises the importance of organisational form (e.g. Hines, 2005).

The manner in which VAIS cooperates with the island's youth detention centre is unique in a Swedish context. The detention centre was founded a little less than 60 years ago as a secure facility for youths with a history of psychosocial problems, criminality and substance abuse. This cooperation was initially based on social relationships, as is demonstrated by the fact that the detention centre's manager at the time was a member of the sports organisation's board; moreover, many of the VAIS members are or have been employed at the centre, which is itself one of the island's largest employers. In recent years, this cooperation has, however, been reinforced and institutionalised, resulting in a lesser significance for social relations. Currently, the cooperation between the two organisations gives the residents at the centre the opportunity to train their social skills through participation in VAIS activities. The representative from the centre remarked that 'VAIS and the islanders are part of the rehabilitation. They gladly help out'. In return, the youth detention centre pays a fixed collective training fee to VAIS. In a similar vein, VAIS hires the detention centre's gym hall, the cost of which varies depending on whether the detention centre's youths participate in the activities. The fact that VAIS is a participant in, and in a certain sense responsible for, activities which are normally state-run further illustrates the commitment VAIS has to social work.

The act of helping incarcerated youths through sport is also seen as commendable by both national (Börjesson, 2015; Östlund, 2015) and local media (Abrahamsson, 2015; Bard, 2015; Broman, 2015). Being the subject of positive articles in the media adds weight to the legitimacy of both VAIS and the detention centre. A representative from the centre points out that it has received an extraordinarily positive response as a result of its cooperation with VAIS:

All our previous press was negative, until we started our football training. We had articles in the middle pages of *Expressen* and *DN* [two of the largest newspapers in Sweden] about this project. So that's positive. SiS [the authority responsible for centres such as this] has never gotten as much positive attention in the media.

As a result of this unique cooperation and its positive attention in media, other similar centres have, according to the representative, visited the youth detention centre to learn more about its cooperation with VAIS and to see if they can create similar collaborations with sport organisations in their respective contexts.

In the course of the interviews, the chairperson of VAIS pointed out that this cooperation with the detention centre could also be of use in negotiations with the municipality or in applications for financial support (e.g. Visingsö AIS, 2016a). This reputational network leads to a win-win situation characterised by mutual dependency. Without cooperation, the opportunity to reinforce the legitimacy of each organisation would be lost.

VAIS uses reputational networks in dialogue with other actors to gain attention and legitimacy; for instance, VAIS has been the subject of numerous scientific studies conducted at various Swedish universities which generates goodwill and legitimacy on their part. The chairperson believes, for example, that 'when the representatives of the

municipality tell their colleagues that you have contacted us and for what reason, then it's just beneficial for us'.

The network between VAIS and the informal sector

Since the informal sector lacks formalised organisations (Pestoff, 1998), it may appear odd to find a sports organisation networking with the informal sector. However, the picture becomes clearer if one considers the requirements which must be fulfilled to successfully obtain financial support for rural development. VAIS has established public open-air exercise areas (e.g. an outdoors gym) with the aid of financial contributions from the municipal institutional network. These areas are open to everybody and are accessible round the clock. After they were established, VAIS was, and still is, responsible for their continued upkeep. Therefore, it might be said that the sports organisation networks with the general public within the informal sector. Throughout the interview process, all participants agreed that VAIS was an important actor for the island; this would seem to be confirmed by their construction and upkeep of these public open-air exercise areas.

Conclusions and implications

This study contributes to an increased body of knowledge in a field previously identified as lacking (Bjärsholm, 2017; Nicholls, 2006; Phillips et al., 2015). This was accomplished through the depiction of VAIS, a sporting organisation whose spectrum of activities is characterised by social entrepreneurship and a subsequent discussion regarding its networks. The focus has lain on understanding and discussing the various types of networks of which social entrepreneurial sporting organisations can be part, and how these are utilised in order to overcome the obstacles which research has shown to exist to achieve sustainability (e.g. Austin et al., 2006; Bacq et al., 2013; Weerawardena & Sullivan Mort, 2006). The various networks of VAIS were identified and reflected upon through the use of the welfare triangle, which allowed categorisation and a deeper understanding of the organisational realm in which social entrepreneurs act (Dees & Anderson, 2003). The networks were then discussed, in contrast to many other studies with a social network focus (e.g. Sharir & Lerner, 2006; Spear, 2006), from the point of view of several types of networks, in order to analytically illustrate the differences between networks but also to empirically exemplify the types of networks that are of benefit to social entrepreneurs.

This study supports the notion that networks are of considerable importance to social entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. Austin et al., 2006; Yitshaki et al., 2008). Networks allow VAIS to conduct a broad scope of activities in an organisation which is in constant flux and under continual development. The organisation can therefore be said, by way of the relationships it maintains, to demonstrate a high level of relational capability, a quality which tends to facilitate the organisation's activities (Lechner & Leyronas, 2009).

However, a simple correlation between organisational success and the number of networks (e.g. Brüderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Weber & Kratzer, 2013) would diminish this particular study's contribution to the area of research. Rather, a more holistic approach has been taken to the study of networks, in accordance with Jack (2010), since networks are often more complex and interwoven than might appear from a purely size-based analysis. The case study shows that VAIS makes use of several different network types over societal sectors.

From the perspective of the welfare triangle, most cases of unique cooperation occur together with other voluntary organisations. This may be an indication that voluntary organisations, as a result of common preconditions (Pestoff, 1998), find it easiest to cooperate within the framework of their own sector. In turn, this means that the prevalent preconditions can to some degree limit the possibilities of cooperation over sector boundaries (Pestoff, 1998). For example, in addition to their cooperation with other voluntary organisations as regards different events, VAIS has a number of other value-added networks within its own sector, including a co-opetition network with a neighbouring sports organisation.

The fact that VAIS is a non-profit organisation in the voluntary sector is decisive for its prospects (Hines, 2005). The Swedish government looks favourably upon the societal benefits generated by the voluntary sector (Norberg, 2018), which in turn leads to the acquisition of financial support (Oparaocha, 2015). VAIS, like other social entrepreneurial organisations (Bacq et al., 2013), views these institutional networks as a method of financing its activities and furthering organisational development. However, VAIS has significantly reduced the dependence on financial support, which is otherwise common in social entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. Bacq et al., 2013). Instead, through its well-established cooperation with the hotel and conference centre and sports entrepreneurs, it generates income in ways that do not lead to an increased workload for the organisation.

In order to strengthen its institutional networks and more easily obtain financial support, VAIS also makes use of the reputation obtained through its networks with the youth detention centre and several universities. The effect of these forms of cooperation is two-fold: they generate attention in various media, which may also be used for marketing purposes, but also a legitimacy and trustworthiness upon which entrepreneurial organisations often rely (e.g. Austin et al., 2006; Lechner et al., 2006).

The case study also indicates that several of the networks stem from a drive to achieve win-win situations and mutual dependency. VAIS is in some cases 'equally' dependent on its cooperative partners as they (e.g. the hotel and conference centre) are on VAIS. This dependency indicates that these organisations belong together, albeit metaphorically. Consequently, VAIS' networks are not solely a factor in the success of VAIS itself, but also in the success of its partners. This relationship suggests that the emphasis on unilateral dependence that is otherwise apparent in research concerning the significance of networks, and social networks in particular, for the success of social entrepreneurial organisations (e.g. Sharir & Lerner, 2006; Spear, 2006; Yitshaki et al., 2008) should be challenged, or at least be more nuanced. Because, as empirically shown, these organisations can play a vital role not only socially but also economically for their environment and partners.

The statistical-probabilistic generalisability of a case study such as this is always limited (Smith, 2018). Nonetheless, a single organisation may serve as an example and thus be of practical use, even though it cannot be said to be wholly representative. Case studies like this one can offer the type of generalisability that Smith (2018) denominates transferability, which can be achieved by offering rich and accessible descriptions. This case study describes, from the viewpoint of network theories and societal sectors, a sports organisation characterised by social entrepreneurship and the way this organisation frequently crosses societal sectors with the aid of various network types to achieve sustainability. Those interested in practical matters, both within and outside of a sporting context, can

therefore draw inspiration from this empirical study and transfer a number of the networks described here to their organisations and unique contexts. By doing so, they can develop their own network and network strategy, which will help them to create a sustainable organisation. One such network strategy could be to incorporate the work consciously performed by VAIS with its social accounting (e.g. inviting politicians to enhance its legitimacy), which has proven useful when applying for grants. Another strategy is to strive for having different income generating activities (e.g. camps and renting out facilities) with various partners (e.g. hotel and conference centre and sports entrepreneurs). In economic terms, it might be said that such networking helps to spread risk (i.e. risk diversification).

Given the limitations of a case study, further studies about networks and social entrepreneurial sports organisations are needed to generalise the findings. Since the possible networks vary both between countries for cultural, historical and political reasons as well as between the organisational forms of the participating organisations (see Hines, 2005), an important direction for future research would be to quantitatively test the conclusions drawn in other contexts. As a result, one could further challenge the beliefs expressed in previous research that social entrepreneurial organisations exhibit a unilateral dependency on their partners. In addition, since this study contributes to a broader understanding of the significance of networks, it can also be used to problematise the common usage of 'social network' in research (e.g. Sharir & Lerner, 2006; Spear, 2006; Yitshaki et al., 2008). By basing future studies on a similar approach to the one used in this study, researchers could further highlight the necessity of considering other network types than solely social ones. After all, what network, between people or organisations, is not social per se?

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