

3rd sector sports clubs as social agents – the case of Danish sports projects for marginalized children

Denmark is a kingdom of voluntary organisations. 1/3 of the population is engaged in voluntary work. (SFI.6:19 41) It is regarded not only as a democratic right to establish organisations (Ibsen 2006 (SFI 6:18), but it is also regarded as a source of democracy, the so-called *associative democracy*. (Kaspersen and Ottesen: 2001). The key aspect is the democratic structure and function of the associations. (Kaspersen and Ottesen p 128: 2001).

Associative democracy is a model of governance, also called the real third way indicating that the state and the 3rd sector are not entirely separated, but on the contrary closely intertwined. (Kaspersen and Ottesen: p.105) 2001). It is seen as both the historical roots of our current organisational framework and as *“strengthening the democratic aspect in education, social and cultural life and other welfare areas”*. (Kaspersen and Ottesen p 105: 2001).

Sports clubs in Denmark make part of this associative democracy, making up more than 25% of all organisations in Denmark. It is by far the largest group within the 3rd sector organisations in Denmark followed by the next largest of 18% covering leisure and hobby-organisations, all non-sport. Sports clubs are primarily managed by volunteers.

The Danish 3rd sector has in recent years to a greater extent been drawn into the solving of social problems arising in the Danish welfare state. Sports clubs have not always been involved in welfare state problems, but lately even this branch of the third sector has come to be regarded as being capable of dealing with social welfare problems. More and more often this involvement is designed as a public-private partnership intertwining the state and the 3rd sector.

Whether the local sports clubs thrive with this new challenge is a question which raises much debate among sports researchers in Denmark. (Ibsen 2006, Persson, 2008) But the Danish state's use of the sector is growing (Persson, 2008). The solving of so called *lifestyle problems* through programs in sports clubs, has most certainly come to stay on the social policy agenda of the Danish government. (Ibsen 2006)

On the basis of the confidence in the clubs' capability within this field, the Danish Ministry of Culture has funded 42 projects for overweight and obese children throughout the country through the program “Sports Projects for marginalised Children”. The total funding of the program adds up to 40 mill Danish kroner and the

first projects took off in August 2006. The program targets 5 different marginalised groups: over weight children, ethnic children, disabled children, children in public custody and children from poor families.

This program targeting marginalised children through sports clubs is the most well funded program ever and the aim is to make the children permanent members of the clubs. Thus, the Danish state has for some years seen the sports sector as having a potential for including marginalized citizens. By looking into the baseline of the Danish state's expectations, this article will examine and discuss the capability of the Danish sports clubs to successfully engage in this program for marginalized children. Successfully in the sense, that social inclusion takes place as a direct result of the project.

General information on the organisation of the sports club

Sport in Denmark is primarily organised by volunteers and sport alone organizes 11% of the populations' volunteers (SFI 6:19:46). 81 % of these volunteers are also members of the clubs that they volunteer for. (SFI 6:19:51). The active volunteers are mainly recruited from the ranks of the 30 – 49 year old full time working parents. (SFI: 6.19:55 and 59).

Legally the sports club are constituted through a set of articles of association and managed by a board elected by the club members at an annual meeting. The board organises the activities of the club, is economically responsible to the state and board members work generally without being paid. The coaches and instructors work on a very small pay or on a voluntary basis as well.

Danish volunteers spend in average 17 hours a month doing volunteer work. That goes for the volunteers in the sport clubs as well. Even if there are problems recruiting the age group between 14 and 18 years (Ibsen, 2006) these problems do not rule out the fact that given the above mentioned figures sports clubs are engaging many family members. Thus the work in the sports clubs is connecting many Danish families throughout the country.

General information on the empirical data

Within that organisational frame 42 projects for overweight and obese children have been launched during summer and autumn 2006. The target group is labelled "disadvantaged children and their families". The projects have been chosen according to an application, a so called project document, made by the club it self. The application has had to reflect certain guidelines for the content of the project. These guidelines are created by the Ministry of Culture. Now it would have been likely in a program for overweight and obese children, to put an emphasis on health.

However the emphasis is on the creation of permanent memberships, of friendships among the participants and on new or different modes of physical activity. This aim is reflected in the guidelines from the Ministry.¹

Some of the projects have ended by now (Autumn 2008), some are still running. In the project documents the Ministry of Culture outlines an expectation on behalf of the clubs of being capable of enrolling the members from the projects as members of the ordinary teams in the club by the end of the project period. With respect to these targets only those clubs can be labelled successful, that have been able to hold on to (a high percentage of) the marginalized children.

Social capital

The *connection of people* in volunteer sports organisations is the underlying focus of this article. Social agency as well as social inclusion is all about connectedness. My use of the sociological concept of connection is based on the concept of social capital and especially the definition of 3 underlying aspects of ties that all make part of the concept of social capital.

The reason for choosing social capital as a tool lies in the importance of networks seen as the fundament of the sports clubs. Many programs targeting overweight focus on the individual and individual behaviour, but behaviour is based on social relations and behaviour in regards to sports clubs is based on connectedness (or disconnectedness) and thus on strategies that involve belonging to a network and the norms within networks – or outside networks!

Social capital is therefore the focus of my evaluation. It is also the most important concept in the analysis of which organisational perspectives of the clubs that sustain the permanent enrolment of the children: what does it take for a club to transform inactive overweight children into active, less overweight, "ordinary" members of the club?

This question has many answers and they are to be sought in a multitude of different areas of the discipline of sociology. The answer is complex and therefore multi causal because it involves both the perspective of the children, their families, the clubs and their organisation as well as the communities. I look for the answer on the micro level of the organisation of the clubs and the recurring find is that of the prevalence of social capital.

Social capital according to Robert Putnam “(...) refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norm of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them”. (Putnam p.19, 2000). He distinguishes between the social capital

with a private face and a public face. The individuals that form connections that benefit their own interest are the private face of social capital. This is though not the only form of capital that is relevant here, even if the private face of social capital make part of the connections used in programs in the sports clubs. In this case the social capital that has a public face is also relevant, because it is *“social capital that has externalities that affect the wider community so that not all the costs and benefits of social organisations accrue to the person making the contact”*. As I shall demonstrate through my data: *“Social capital can thus be simultaneously a “private good” and “a public good”*. (Putnam p.20, 2000).

Social capital can be used as an analytical tool in my case projects because it is seen as both creating organisations – *a public good* - and further connecting people through activities – accruing benefits – social inclusion - to the persons connected in this case the overweight children and their families – *a private good*.

James Coleman states: *“Social capital (...) signals that something of value has been produced for those actors who have this resource available and that the value depends on social organisation”*. (Coleman 1988 S.101)

As I will show later specific features of the organisation of the Danish sports clubs and their ability to connect people within an organisational frame is at the heart of my findings.

Coleman continues on the aim of reciprocity: *“There are however forms of social capital which are the direct result of investment by actors, who have the aim of receiving a return on their investment”* (Coleman 1990 s.313). This is the case of the Danish state’s funding of the sports club’s programs for overweight children: the state expects a return in the form of capable citizens, the clubs expect new members and the participants expect to become members of a sports club (considered cool by the children I interviewed).

Weak ties – a certain form of organisational connectedness.

I focus on 3 forms of connectedness to distinguish between the different modes of connectedness in my data. These forms are all forms of weak connectedness.

The first concept of connectedness is trust in the understanding of Putnam as trustworthiness and reciprocity, and here with an emphasis on thin trust: *“a thinner trust in “the generalized other” (...) also rests on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity”* And further: *“Thin trust is even more useful than thick trust because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally”* (Putnam 2000: 134). In this case thin trust

presupposes the means of interaction based on the organisations ability to create trust in its activities. That relates to the barrier for the overweight families to make contact with the sporting world at all. The sports clubs may or may not have a potential in creating that trust, but my data suggest that they do.

The second concept of connectedness is the concept of ties. As the focus in this article is connectedness between sports clubs and marginalised groups the emphasis is on group interaction, thereby linking micro and macro levels of interaction. Granovetter states that this can be “(...)illustrated by elaboration of the macro implications of one aspect of small-scale interaction: *The strength of dyadic ties*”. (Granovetter: 1973:1360).

He continues: “*A tie is a small scale interaction with as few as 2 people interacting*”. (Granovetter: 1973:1360). Granovetter distinguishes between different “strengths” of ties: “*The strength of a tie is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie*”. (Granovetter: 1973:1361)

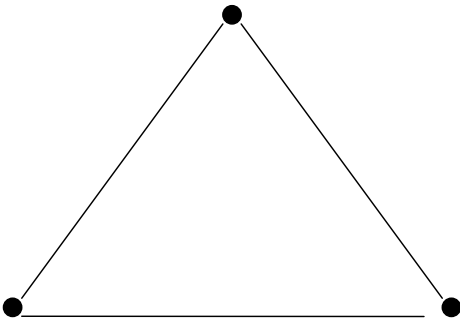
Granovetter describes the strength of weak ties: “*Weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups, than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups*”. (Granovetter 1973:1376).

My sports clubs represent groups of people interacting with what become groups of children and families once they attend the activities in the sports club, so my first concept covers group connectedness. Granovetter continues: “*Emphasis on weak ties lends itself to discussion of relations between groups and to analysis of segments of social structure not easily defined in terms of primary groups*”.

Francis Fukuyama puts it this way referring to Granovetter: “*Weak ties are relations between heterodox individuals at the periphery of the society’s various social networks who are able to move between groups and thereby become bearers of new ideas and information*”.(Fukuyama 1999). Meaning that individuals in organisations (networks) can make ideas and information spread between groups especially if as in this case government funded programs produce the incentive for connections.

Thin trust and weak ties are closely connected as thin trust presupposes weak ties. And thin trust as well as weak ties characterises the relations between the overweight children, their families and the sports clubs as these relations extend trust beyond people whom we know personally.

The third concept is that of closures in the understanding of Coleman: *“There exists a high degree of closure among peers, who see each other daily, have expectations toward each other, and develop norms about each others behaviour”*. (Coleman, 1988 p.S106) For the volunteers in the clubs this may very well be the description of their relationship considering that volunteers in the sports clubs spend in average 17 hours a week doing voluntary work. (SFI.6:19 s.49) It seems therefore plausible to anticipate that instructors and project coordinators bring on the norms of the club to the children in the projects – provided the instructors are recruited from within the clubs’ own ranks.



He states that nodes represent persons, lines connecting persons represent relations; the human capital is in the nodes whereas social capital is found in the lines between them representing relations and connecting people as well as representing means of control of interest. (Coleman, 1990 s.313) The placement of trust depends on the social capital of the involved parties and that decides their investment of trust in each other. The closure determines the degree of the relations and therefore the balance between expectations and obligations in a community i.e. that of the members of a sports club (Coleman 1990 s.314). The more closure, the more balance between expectations and obligations. The more closure, the more realistic is the expectation of reciprocity and production of social capital.

My cases are organisations and the production of social capital in organisations. Fukuyama says about the production of social capital in institutions that: *“Trust, networks, civil society and the like which have been associated with social capital are all epiphenomenal, arising as a result of social capital, but not constituting social capital itself”*. (Fukuyama 1999 Social Capital and Civil Society p.1) meaning that the sports club it self is an epiphenomenon of social capital – not the reverse. The relations come before the organisation.

Coleman says further that social capital can also be a by-product: “*A major use of the concept of social capital depends on its being a by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes*”. (Coleman, 1990 s.312) These activities are arising as a result of social capital but they are not the constitution of social capital itself. This means that social capital is at hand in the sports clubs and constitutes an important potential in the creation of relations with external “generalized others”.

Empirical data

I claim that the organisation of the sports projects is vital for the inclusion of the children. The extent of networks, of the creation of weak ties and of trust among these weak ties and thereby connecting heterodox people is crucial for the outcome of the projects.

I focus on 4 projects² (managed by 4 sports clubs) comparable to their organisational and demographical features and yet distinguishable with respect to their social capital. I link my findings regarding their production of social capital with certain features of organisation. The clubs are far apart geographically, but have similar demographical profiles and conditions. They are all well connected to the local community.

All 4 clubs are sport for all clubs. 3 out of 4 clubs are situated in marginalised areas with few sports activities for children, high prevalence of overweight, unemployment and a generally low level of education³. The regions have few big cities and scarce public transportation. Especially explicit are the almost non existing activities for overweight children. Once overweight, chances are few that the overweight child will be able to participate in the local sports club. The 4th project is relatively close to Copenhagen but covers several small provincial towns and have a high prevalence of ethnic minorities.

All 4 projects focus on 5-9 year old children. The children are completely dependent on parental backup in order to participate as they all have to be accompanied to the training by an adult. All 4 projects run for 3 years, meaning that the projects are still running as I am writing.

Organisational differences between the management of the clubs.

Project 1 and 2 are characterised by close cooperation between villages, schools, community and after school care. They cooperate across community institutions, across communities and clubs as well as across activities. They use local instructors, and there are two examples of convergence between trainers and preschool teachers from the local school

Leila Ottesen 10/12/08 4:06 AM

Comment: Det er vel denne struktur du bør følge i dine cases, hvor det kan vises tydeligere og hvor det kan uddybes

Trying out different activities is the focus of the project and the idea is that the children “taste” different types of sports activities. In one of the projects some of the children swim once a week and visit different sports clubs to try out different branches of sports once a week. This connects the families with a wide range of local sports clubs. The theme of overweight and health is downplayed in both projects and the theme of fun and social intercourse is emphasised.

In project 1 and 2 the instructors are volunteers as well as members of the sports club. They are deeply involved in the club’s work and organisational reality. They act not only as instructors or managers but take active part in the club life as well as in the life in the local community. They live in the community where the children come from.

Project 3 and 4 have a distinct emphasis on health and weight loss. Project 3 is characterized by the employment of health professionals on a part time basis. The health professionals are 1 nurse and 1 physiotherapist. They accomplish dietary counselling followed by weighing the children regularly and individual dietary consultations with the families following up the weighing of the child. They are not members of the club and do not live in the village, but are recruited in the city 30 km away. The children can normally only participate for 6 months, but have been known to continue for altogether 12 months. The families are invited to healthy cooking sessions 4 times over 6 months and participate in great numbers.

Project 4 is also characterized by the employment of a health professional on a part time basis. The health professional is a dietician with no specific knowledge of physical education. Both project 3 and 4 offer healthy cooking events 4 times a year, but these are poorly attended. Project 4 has had to find a new instructor after the 1st year as the previous instructor found another job. This was a major set back for the project as the clubs lost the network gained through the previous instructor and was unable to find new children.

In project 3 and 4 the key point of interest regarding connectedness is that the instructors are not connected to the club, not being members, purely employed part time and not connected to the projects by other means than through an employment relation.

Discussion

The point of departure for my discussion is the connection of people and the related production of social capital. According to the aim of the Ministry of Culture the

children should ideally become ordinary members of the sports club of the project (or other sports clubs) by the end of the project period.⁴

I claim that the organisation of the sports projects is vital for the inclusion of the children. The extent of networks, of the creation of weak ties and of trust among these weak ties and thereby connecting heterodox people is crucial for the outcome of the projects.

Sports clubs that are rooted in the local community can be expected to build on sustainable networks. According to Fukuyama the clubs are: "(...) *epiphenomenal, arising as a result of social capital, but not constituting social capital itself*". (Fukuyama 1999:1)

That means that I anticipate that there are networks already existing in the clubs and that these networks play a significant role in including the children by connecting heterodox people and creating closures between members.

As we have seen above this doesn't guarantee that the project is rooted in the club and has access to the social capital of the club. The case of project 3 shows that managing the project by paid employees recruited from outside the ranks of the club does not create weak ties for the inclusion of the children.

By focusing on the degree of connectedness of the clubs to the local community it is possible to clarify whether this has an influence on the sustainability – the inclusion of the children - of the projects. The degree of connectedness reflects the degree of connectedness necessary for the inclusion to take place.

My findings all point to the fact that the core persons are the instructor – the person who meets the children, and the project manager are vital to the production of social capital and the connection of people. If and when the organisation of the projects are deeply rooted in the sports club and well connected with other members of the club other sports clubs and the local community, this allows for the production of social capital in the sense that Granovetter describes: "*Weak ties are more likely to link members of different small groups, than are strong ones, which tend to be concentrated within particular groups*". (Granovetter 1973:1376).

The precondition for connecting is the linking of members of small groups through weak ties. In this case it is the overweight children and their families that are being linked to the clubs through the connections to the instructor. By participating the weak ties are created through the relations between heterodox individuals at the periphery of the society's various social networks. The individuals – families in the

projects as well as instructors and project managers become able to move between groups and thereby become bearers of new ideas and information".(Fukyama, 1999, Granovetter, 1973)

Once instructors are recruited from *outside* the club this relation is gone and the network advantage disappears. This is illustrated in Coleman's concept about closure: employing a stranger to the club results in creating a network that is open and formal, resulting in the lack of ties: "*The closure determines the degree of the relations and therefore the balance between expectations and obligations in a community i.e. that of the members of a sports club*" (Coleman 1990:314). The more closure, the more balance between expectations and obligations. The more closure the more realistic is the expectation of reciprocity and production of social capital.

In the case of both project 3 and 4 the use of employees had already weakened the outcome of the projects as well as the problem in project 4 with the management of the project. In the projects of project 1 and 2 this had not happened not because of but predominantly as an outcome of the fact that the projects were deeply rooted in the networks of the clubs.

Conclusion

In order to include the children the projects have to be network based, creating weak ties and connecting people. Also closure is crucial, because closure is about expectations, and expectations are only withheld in a relationship of reciprocity and production of social capital. This closure is based on trust, in the organisational cases (as in contrast to closures between friends and family) on thin trust.

This is why the projects 3 and 4 will eventually fail in connecting the children and their families to the club. The children and their families may have an fantastic experience with the project, may eventually learn about health and may eventually be connected to physical activities, but they will not be connected to the club and thereby get access to its production of social capital.

Whereas the organisation of the projects 1 and 2 is ensuring "that the placement of trust" - in the clubs - "is based on the social capital of the involved parties and that decides their investment of trust in each other". Ie. it is based on the clubs' connections of trust and both weak and strong ties between people created by social capital - and this organisation of the clubs make them ideal in including the marginalized, "sport remote" children. The value of this outcome is as Coleman states: "*Social capital (...) signals that something of value has been produced for those actors who have this resource available and that the value depends on social organisation*". (Coleman 1988: S.101)

Because what is sport remoteness all about? It is all about the lack of connectedness with sports networks.

This helps me draw another conclusion: that in this case, the funding of the state helps people connect – creating weak ties and producing social capital. Not that the funding produced social capital itself – it was building on already existing social networks in the local sports clubs – but it helped creating new activities that again resulted in connecting heterodox individuals: *“Thin trust is even more useful than thick trust because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally”* (Putnam 2000:134).

The base of the volunteers in the sports clubs being families leads me to conclude that the projects helped connecting families by playing on already existing weak ties. As Putnam puts it: *“a thinner trust in “the generalized other” (...) also rests on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity”*. (Putnam 2000:134).

There’s another interesting observation in the data: The observation that those projects emphasizing the health perspective are not being very successful. This may lead to a reflection upon whether activities that focus on health fail because their aim isn’t related to the core activity of the sports clubs. Handled by outsiders to the clubs, considered as being too difficult for the clubs, the program becomes implemented by health professionals, that are outsiders of the club network. But the clubs managing or interpreting the task from the ministry in societal terms comes closer to the core activity in the sports clubs, namely the fun and the social intercourse and therefore succeeding. This leads to the conclusion that the solving of health problems lies not in the hands of the sports clubs, but can be achieved as a secondary effect through an understanding of these problems as social problems: firstly members, secondly healthy members.

Another important outcome is that the cooperation between the institutions in the local community helped building stronger communities. As in the example of project 1 the cooperation between small villages becomes part of the community’s survival strategy – schools are closing down if they do not connect with other institutions making themselves valuable in the sense of community building. Hence social capital is not only community-building but also – as often before - a survival strategy.

¹ Ministry of Culture 2006: The program: Sport for disadvantaged Children: Criteria for that part of the program targeting overweight and obese children's access to sport. Applications from sports clubs are welcome. (**Puljen Idræt for vanskeligt stillede børn: Kriterier for den del af puljen, der vedrører overvægtige og svært overvægtige børns adgang til idræt Puljen kan søges af idrætsforeninger.**)

² Project 1: Nyvest Idrætsforening: "Nye Strabasser på Bornholm", Project 2: IF KVIK: "Idræt for Sjøv", Project 3: Tangsø Forenede Sportsklubber: "Fitness Club Junior", Project 4: Nivå Gymnastikforening: "Tumlere og Tonsere"

³ Compared to a national average

⁴ See note 1

Litterature:

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