



# WG2 SE and sports

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## Stakeholder Brief 9

### **Sport as a community builder: social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in sports**

#### **Executive summary**

This Stakeholder Brief is a summary of the debates that emerged in the Research Workshop “Sport as a community builder: Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in sports” of Working Group 2 (“Social enterprise in industries”) of the COST Action “Empowering the next generation of social enterprise scholars” (Empower-SE), held online on 11 December 2020.

Within this new field of research and practice, the workshop succeeded in creating a fruitful discussion forum among over 20 researchers from 9 EU countries who are studying sports and its connections with social entrepreneurship from the perspective of different disciplines. Researchers, practitioners and policymakers shared their ongoing research, case studies and insights and contributed to shedding light on this new “industry”.

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## 1. Introduction: Social entrepreneurship and sports: a new place under the sun

Sport goes much beyond the mere achievement of athletic performances; it also has multiple social dimensions. The social role of sport is related, among others, to the preservation and strengthening of health (including physical and mental development, active ageing, etc.), the enhancement of education (regarding the formation of skills, habits, values - including the promotion of peace, civic culture, etc.), the achievement of social inclusion goals (both in general and with special attention to disadvantaged groups: the elderly, the poor, migrants...), etc. Sport is also amongst the world's largest industries and it affects other industries, including education and tourism, which have an integral focus on social innovation and entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2011).

Sport is multifaceted when it comes to social entrepreneurship and social enterprise (SE). First, sport can in itself help to build community. Secondly, it can serve as an intervention method for solving social/community problems. These dimensions are positively reflected in public-policy documents of institutions of high international relevance: the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations,<sup>1</sup> the European Union,<sup>2</sup> etc. In this context and in relation to the main global problems that human society is facing nowadays, as defined by the UN 2030 Agenda,<sup>3</sup> sport, as a tool to tackle social/community problems, has a huge untamed potential for social interventions. The fusion of sport and social entrepreneurship may represent a means of achieving sport's potential for the creation of democratic and social values (Bjärsholm, 2017).

Despite the development of a certain level of organisational practice and the recognition of its community benefits by public policies, sport has sparked very little reflection in the academic literature in the field of SE. That is also demonstrated in a comprehensive literature review on SE and sport (Bjärsholm, 2017) which concluded that research into sport and social entrepreneurship is still limited, even though the topic generates growing interest.

Some efforts to develop the field have been undertaken. Ratten (2010) recently started looking into parallels between entrepreneurship and sport. Sport entrepreneurship literature (Hayduk III, 2020) currently also suggests to focus on the sustainability and social impact of sport. Research on voluntary sport organisations is a growing field of study, which now requires greater synthesis and comparative research (Byers, 2009) on various aspects, such as the organisations' characteristics and limitations to these organisations' work—which could also be the starting point for some research on SE and sports.

Ratten (2011) was one of the first to introduce the topic of sports entrepreneurship and to discuss the importance of having a social entrepreneurial orientation in sports. According to Ratten (2019), social entrepreneurship often occurs in sport—more easily than in other sectors, due to the links of sports organisations with non-profit and government bodies and to the fact that sport-related social enterprises have developed as a way to connect sports organisations with societal problems. The emerging stream of research on social entrepreneurship in sport has contributed to painting a picture of entrepreneurial discoveries and economic possibilities (Ratten, 2019). Trying to “close the gap” in the literature between sport and social entrepreneurship, Ratten (2019) identifies characteristics of social entrepreneurship in sport (mostly related to the creation and diffusion of social change) and factors affecting sport social entrepreneurship (like the heterogeneity of initiatives, number of sports social enterprises, willingness to engage in sports SE) and policy

1 United Nations (UN) Resolution “Sport as an enabler for sustainable development” (Dec. 2018): <https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/News/2018/12/Sport-as-an-enabler-of-sustainable-development-EN.pdf>

2 White Paper on Sport: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:l35010&from=RO>

3 The Sustainable Development Agenda: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

options for social entrepreneurship in sport. Peterson and Schenker (2018) formulate five theses to frame the concept of social entrepreneurship in a sports policy context; they talk about what a social good is, the role of profit, what the conflictual crossing of boundaries between different sectors in society are and, most importantly, the fact that social entrepreneurship in sport uses sport as a means, not as a goal.

McSweeney (2018) suggest that there is a need for critical, sociological explorations of sport and SE, in particular for scholars working in the field of sport for development and peace. Some other connections between social entrepreneurship and sports were also explored; for example Bjärsholm (2019) studied how networking can manifest itself in a sports organisation characterised by social entrepreneurship. Yet, social entrepreneurship in the area of sport remains a field that is not researched nor acknowledged.

In this context, characterised by the lack of research, this workshop wanted to explore:

- a) Theoretical and epistemological perspectives that are derived from or constitute the foundation for recent and upcoming comparative research on SE in sport.
- b) The role of SE initiatives in national sport systems and their impact on local communities; their evolution, traditions, organisational models and legal types, business models, partnerships, preferred fields of activities, initiators, members and composition in terms of stakeholders.
- c) The governance of social enterprises in sport and the challenges they face, inter alia in terms of funding, and other opportunities for SE initiatives in sport.
- d) Innovative contributions to sport and society at large: potential means of broadening access to SE initiatives in sport, creating service innovation, democratising and diversifying sports initiatives, contributing to gender equality, influencing policy

development and local support mechanisms, furthering promotion and development of the UN SDG, and the role of SE in sports therein (communitarian aspects).

## 2. Development of the field and overview of the workshop

More than 20 participants from nine countries (Australia, Croatia, Georgia, Italy, Norway, Romania, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom) attended the "Sport as a community builder: Social entrepreneurship and social enterprises in sports" workshop. This workshop was organised as a one-day online event; it started with a roundtable about "Sports as a community builder. SE in sports", which was followed by two parallel sessions and a national stakeholders' event titled "SE and sports in Romania".

Below is the overview of the parallel sessions, which give us insights into this field in development.

In the first session, Pompiliu-Nicolae Constantin, Rares Stanescu and Monica Stanescu presented the topic of building a social enterprise through sport ("*Building a social enterprise through sport. Successful case studies in Romania*"). On the basis of successful case studies in Romania, they analysed aspects that lead to success. Each of the cases studied involved three dimensions: a social element, entrepreneurship, and sport. These three dimensions were explored and analysed; contributions show how combining an innovative approach with a deep understanding of community needs can lead to success stories.

In the presentation titled "*Running with the community in mind*", Mihai Lisetchi framed the case study of Alergotura, an association providing opportunities for individuals to begin running with a view to fostering a healthy lifestyle and to socialising and connecting.

The presentation "*Exploring new areas: Sports TSOs in Croatia and social entrepreneurship opportunities*", by Danijel Baturina, reflected on the development

of the third sector in the area of sport. This question was approached through the analysis of the ecosystems for social entrepreneurship in Croatia. The author gave recommendations for creating spaces for the development of social entrepreneurship by third-sector sports organisations, especially in aspects linked to democratising and diversifying sports initiatives.

Maxim Mukhamodeev presented the "*SENTA project - Social Entrepreneurship for Athletes*", which is a course focused on promoting education in and through sport, with a special focus on skills development. The course also supports the implementation of the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes. It provides an open educational resource to guarantee better learning for athletes in topics close to social entrepreneurship.

In the second session, Lars Ueland Kobro, in his presentation titled "*Recovery on the Pitch – social innovation in Norwegian communities*", gave a clear picture of street football as a source for innovative action. Findings highlighted the importance of community and collaborative efforts through radical acts of citizenship. Street football is challenging the conventional praxis in the Norwegian welfare model. The study shows that local communities, policymakers and others need to acknowledge and gain more insight into and understanding of the value that a model built on co-creation and co-production represents.

James Bostock, Mike Bull, Jon Woodward and Jonathan Sibley gave a presentation on "*Football in the community: An investigation into mission alignment/drift in the commodification of Football Sports Community Trusts*". They study how Football Sport Community Trusts (FSCTs) have emerged as a vital component in tackling physical inactivity in Britain's regions. Authors used sport management literature and social enterprise literature to shape a conceptual model that seeks to understand the tensions that these FSCTs face when reconciling social objectives with meeting their increasing thrust for money.

In the presentation titled "*Sustainable value creation? Entrepreneurial orientations in the football industry*", Michael Bull and Geoff Whittam investigated precarious value creation in English football clubs. They examined strategic, economic, cultural and social capital to analyse the orientations of legal owners of football clubs (entrepreneurs) and the implications for moral owners (the fans). They noted that, as entrepreneurial opportunities to exploit a football club's assets become more apparent, the unique relationship between a club and its fans is being strained. The authors observe detachment, disenchantment and protest.

Michael Bull, Geoff Whittam and Rory Ridley-Duff, in the presentation "*The 'icing on the cake'? Social responsibility, voice and supporter engagement at the heart of UK professional football*", evaluated, through a comparative case study approach, the social responsibility of English Football Clubs in terms of their explicit community/social initiatives, ecological initiatives and supporter initiatives across the twenty Clubs in the English Premier League. Research suggests that, aside from Foundation programmes that deliver community outreach services, which have morphed into separate, charitable, business models, football clubs are doing little to engage in corporate social responsibility. Stakeholders' initiatives are treated as a discretionary practice, as an activity separate from the core business and as the "icing on the cake".

As mentioned above, these research presentations were preceded by an icebreaker for the wider academic debate in the form of a roundtable discussion on social entrepreneurship and social enterprise in sports. In order to prepare the roundtable, the participants were asked to answer a couple of questions related to the topic of the event. The conclusions are presented below.

### 3. Debate and moving forward. Main lessons from the roundtable discussions and survey

Sport can influence community cohesion, physical and mental health, social inclusivity, and provide positive role models across society. The emerging stream of research on social entrepreneurship in sport has contributed to painting a picture of entrepreneurial discoveries and economic possibilities (Ratten, 2019). In this respect, it should be noted that the modes of operation of third-sector organisations and their cooperation with the state changed after the global economic recession of 2008 (Pape *et al.*, 2019); some authors also analyse third-sector sports organisations in an era of “super-austerity” (Walker and Hayton, 2018). Now we are facing the COVID-19 crisis, which puts a significant limitation on social and economic life and makes conducting sports activities rather difficult. In that context, innovative contributions from social entrepreneurship can prove particularly important. Yet, most of the participants who took part in the abovementioned survey considered that, despite the development of a certain level of organisational practice and the recognition of its community benefits in public policies, sport has sparked very little reflection in the academic literature in the field of SE.

A literature review on SE and sport (Bjärsholm, 2017) also showed that research in the field is almost exclusively qualitative, often based on case studies. It has been carried out for the most part in scientific disciplines other than sports science and the majority of articles focus on the processes of social entrepreneurial organisations.

Based on the answers of the participants, the main reasons for this situation are related to the fact that there is a lack of awareness, on the part of the general public, of the possible role of sport in social and economic development. In the field of sports, the general focus is rather on the for-profit sector and professional sport (Olympics), and sports and community problems are perceived as two different worlds.

As the academic curriculum on sports focuses more on the didactic and research part concerning sports

and physical education than on getting involved with social initiatives, such involvement rather depends on the values of the common culture.

Concerning the most relevant topics for a future research agenda on SE and sports, some ideas were identified:

- > the ownership of sports provision (who delivers sport within the community?),
- > sport as a value generator in social enterprises,
- > the impact of sports on community development,
- > the role of work with particularly fragile groups (migrants, the disabled, old people) and possible developments in this field,
- > positive aspects of using sports for solving community problems.

Involving vulnerable groups in sports activities is in line with theory development and performance evaluation of the SE. Another interesting topic is related to former athletes and the opportunities for them to start a social enterprise; indeed, many of them come from a social environment with various issues/needs, and they have a very good knowledge of these issues and needs. The question is whether they want to help and how they could use sport to this end.

Ratten (2019) gives examples of potential research projects that would help to fill the gap in knowledge about sport and social entrepreneurship. Such examples include research on the nature of social entrepreneurship in sport, current trends and changes in time, the social impact of sport and related international best practices. Bjärsholm *et al.* (2018) even propose a methodological tool for researching sport and social entrepreneurship. Reid (2017) sees the worth in examining sport social enterprises in different geographical locations and deprived estates.

The connection between grassroots sports projects and academic research and study depends on the national, regional, and local context. Some universities and research institutions are more interested than others in approaching the topic and involving practitioners in their studies.

#### 4. Romanian SE & Sports practice. Current development and ideas emerging from the meeting with stakeholders

As mentioned above, the event included a domestic session with practitioners who presented interesting Romanian case studies on sport as a community builder.

Indeed, in addition to its traditional functions, sport can also be a tool that fosters social and individual transformations. Nevertheless, in Romania, sport is not often perceived as a key tool supporting social and individual change. Hence, sport initiatives pursuing social goals are rarely analysed, supported and promoted. One of the few exceptions is the quantitative research and social network analysis launched by Ashoka Changemakers in collaboration with Decathlon, and which resulted in a “*Map of change makers in sports*”.

The quantitative analysis aimed at:

- > identifying the challenges faced by individuals in the investigated sports fields;
- > providing a factual description of sports changemakers through indicators such as the number of years of experience in the field, the number of years of activity in the organisation/project, the magnitude of the impact achieved and the subdomain of sports in which they are active;
- > understanding the diversity and action-oriented areas of social sports changemakers.

The social network analysis aimed to capture the diversity of the sport domain and to identify the

sport changemakers who have the potential to change society:

- > understanding the relationship between community members;
- > identifying the most important roles within the change makers network from the points of view of connectivity (how connected with their communities the members of the network are) and public image (notoriety).

The network contains 313 sports changemakers, and the analysis shows the great diversity of subdomains and sports in which these changemakers operate, as well as their interconnectivity.

Also within the framework of this “domestic session”, Special Olympics Romania presented a paper titled “*Social integration of people with intellectual disabilities through sport*”. The “Unified Champion Schools” project was presented as an example of a sports initiative dedicated to vulnerable groups. This initiative is dedicated to people with intellectual disabilities (who are referred to as “the Braves”) and is grounded in the concept of Unified Sports: people with and without intellectual disabilities playing together in the same team is a direct and fast path to friendship and social inclusion.

The “Reality Check” association supports programmes and public policies that are deemed to be smart, to have an impact, to be designed for citizens, and to be applied correctly and efficiently. The specific project presented during the workshop operates in the Castelu community (in the Constanța county). This town has 5,000 inhabitants, including a large population of Turkish Roma (Horahai), the majority of whom are living in poverty. Most of the adults do not have any formal education. They collect garbage or beg to support their families. They cannot afford to offer their children a proper home or proper food, their access to social services is strongly limited, and the children are not welcome in school nor

kindergarten. The project titled “*Together through Sports at Castelu*” aims at fighting discrimination through sports and at helping children overcome their vulnerabilities.

The representative of the Stea (Star) Association presented the “*Innovative life skills development through chess*” programme. The aim of this programme is to develop social-inclusion opportunities for vulnerable children in the communities from a specific cross-border area (Romania-Hungary), using chess both as a personal development tool and a means to create positive interaction opportunities with other community members, with a view to sustaining social inclusion and reducing discrimination. The most important results of the Innovative life skills development through chess programme are:

- > preventing school drop-out and increasing school attendance;
- > creating effective educational and development opportunities that enable children from marginalised communities to acquire the knowledge they need to get out of the vicious circle of poverty;
- > improving children's results in cognitive evaluation tests, as well as generating noticeable positive changes in their observed behaviour;
- > creating a guide for innovative programmes aiming at the development of children's life skills through chess.

Academics sometimes study social entrepreneurship in sports only through the lens of theories. Meantime, grassroots associations may consider that only those who work in the field really have a deep knowledge of the matter (in particular when it comes to working with disadvantaged groups). This is why it is necessary that universities and sports organisations (especially grassroots organisations) work together in a more connected way, building up a relationship of mutual respect.

## 5. Event's general conclusions

The presence of both researchers and practitioners from different countries during the event created the opportunity for a rich conversation on the multiple social dimensions of sports. Sport, as a tool to tackle social/community problems, has a huge untamed potential for social interventions. How social enterprises are developing in sports and what their current and potential social impacts are certainly constitute issues that will be explored in the future. This workshop was a galvanising point for SE and sport researchers to continue to explore this field.

The success of the roundtable discussion on social entrepreneurship and social enterprise in sports, the opening part of the workshop, will hopefully generate a wider academic debate over an interesting research field still largely to be explored.

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