

Chapter 8

Assessing Social Entrepreneurs' Personal Network for Resource Acquisition: A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurial activity is characterized by the innovative search for resource acquisition, combination, and management to pursue opportunities aiming at fulfilling the organization's mission. The network approach to entrepreneurship assumes that entrepreneurs use their personal network to acquire resources and manage the assets of the organization. This chapter intends to analyze whether social entrepreneurs use their personal network to acquire different resources. The investigation uses a quantitative approach, based on an online survey of individuals involved in the management of Portuguese social organizations. The results attained reveal that social entrepreneurs are usually involved in strong and diversified networks. Their personal networks shape the way human, financial, and informational resources are obtained and managed. The major influence is made by social entrepreneurs' indirect contacts (weak ties) and the benefits they perceive these networks are able to provide.

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INTRODUCTION

The perpetuation of many of the most pressing social problems led the civil society to develop new approaches to the social area. Social entrepreneurship is a new field in the entrepreneurship domain, since it blends an entrepreneurial behaviour with a social mission that is at the heart of these initiatives. The main purpose is to leverage the organization's ability to produce value for the society and to improve the viability of the social entrepreneurs' activities.

A selection of some of the most prominent definitions of social entrepreneur emphasises the role of acquiring resources and the outcomes generated to the society as a main entrepreneurial task. A popular concept defines social entrepreneurs as people who play the role of change agents in the social sector by: i) adopting a mission to create and sustain social value; ii) recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission; iii) engaging in the process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning; iv) acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand; and v) exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created (Dees, 2001; Cho, 2006). Further, the entrepreneur possesses entrepreneurial skills, ambition, and capacity to communicate the mission and inspire the staff, users and partners (Leadbeater, 1997). Schuyler (1998, p. 1) adds to the term "a vision for social change", "financial resources", "skills" and "a powerful desire to social change".

Another definition stresses the efficiency in the management of resources (people, facilities, equipment), the mission (satisfy unmet social needs), and the innovation in the way of delivering welfare services (Leadbeater, 1997). According to Thompson, Alvy and Lees (2000), social entrepreneurs are people who realize where there is an opportunity to satisfy some unmet needs that the state's welfare system will not or cannot meet, and they gather the necessary resources (generally people, often volunteers, money and premises) and use them to make a difference. One of the key features of the definitions of social entrepreneurship stated above lies in the search for resource acquisition to pursue opportunities to fulfil the organisation's mission and/or practices that yield and sustain social value (Mair & Noboa, 2006).

The intervention of social entrepreneurs at the community level is most closely associated with restricted access to resources, and emerged as a response to social problems in those communities (Obschonka, Silbereisen & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2010; Paulsen & McDonald, 2010; Seelos, Mair, Battilana & Dacin, 2011; Constanzo, Vurro, Foster, Servato & Perrini, 2014; Gordon, 2014; Lan, Zhu, Ness, Xing & Schneider, 2014). The challenge of procuring resources for the venture can become so all-consuming for the social entrepreneur that it can become a primary focus of the organisation's activities (Urban, 2010). Also, resource limitations push the social entrepreneur into finding innovative ways of obtaining new resources to

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