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Challenges in a social Enterprise from the Case of a Social Enterprise in Slovenia

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Abstract

There are a growing number of studies exploring the capacity building and business aspects of social enterprise in an attempt to increase the understanding of business sustainability and resilience in the social economy. However, little is known about how social enterprises or social entrepreneurs emerging from not-for-profit sectors have faced challenges. In this study, we focus on a hospitality social enterprise founded by NGO workers in Slovenia as a single case study. We investigated challenges that a social entrepreneur and her team faced when pursuing sustainable social business. We uncovered several challenges at different levels, which existing studies have neglected. We found two organisational level challenges, such as managing the dual purpose of a social enterprise and absence of a business strategy, and two HRM level challenges, such as people management and leadership issue. This study can pave a path for future studies to focus on various challenges and even some resolutions.

Introduction

Globally, there are a growing number of social enterprises that meet societal and business values simultaneously [1]. Social entrepreneurship describes the combination of entrepreneurial action (i.e. the pursuit of market opportunities for products and services) and social mission (i.e. creation and enhancement of social value with an emphasis on

social and environmental outcomes that have the primacy over profit maximisation) [2] [3]. By adopting such a social mission with an entrepreneurial mindset, social entrepreneurship has evidenced an important impact on local and regional economic, societal, and environmental development [4].

Social entrepreneurship is gaining momentum and impact also in Slovenia with several social enterprises operating in different industries. Yet, Slovenian social enterprises are faced with challenges common to other social enterprises from around the world. Our research focuses on Skuhna, an innovative restaurant aimed at fostering employment among migrants who live in Slovenia and bringing together people from different cultures. Skuhna has been in operations since 2012 and has overcome many challenges during these rough years. Yet, Skuhna is still faced with issues and paradoxes that hinder its growth and development. These issues include managing the dual purpose of a social enterprise, non-existent business strategy, managing employees and volunteers and entrepreneurial burnout.

This paper aims to evaluate the issues and paradoxes that Skuhna faces and propose ways to deal with them as well as provide future research directions streaming from our findings.

The concept of Social Enterprise

In recent decades social enterprise has increasingly attracted attention as a distinctive sector within the

economy [5] [6], acknowledging it as an essential entrepreneurial dynamic of both social and economic interest [7]. Literature positions social enterprise as a global phenomenon [1], however, in the absence of a universally adopted definition, social enterprise is manifested differently from place to place. This makes it difficult to quantify the size and scope of social enterprise movement. Despite the lack of definition, it is widely acknowledged that social enterprise offers an alternative way of doing business to the accepted capitalist norm. Operating as a hybrid business model where profit and social motivations sit symbiotically, social enterprise creates social impact through blended value approaches [8] pursuing a triple bottom line of social aims, enterprise orientation and social ownership outcomes [9].

According to Amin [10], social enterprise has been presented as a better way of doing business, by balancing “*economic efficiency, ecological sustainability and social equity*” (p.30). It offers a business model that redefines the transactional relationship between business and the community [11] by tackling social issues [12] and stimulating societal [13] or systemic change [14]. In recent years social enterprise has been positioned as a solution to state failure [15] by offering new service solutions to address welfare challenges that the state is unable to solve [1] and provide a vehicle for improved public service delivery [16]. They regenerate communities [12] and provide “a regenerative tonic” for “hard-pressed areas” (p.614) [17]. One way social enterprises achieve this is through the creation of employment [18], as explored in this case study.

Challenges in Social Enterprise

The hybrid nature of social enterprise can create a unique set of challenges for social entrepreneurs in running and developing their businesses. The complexity of hybridity brings tensions around internal business processes [19] such as strategy and Human Resources Management. Challenges are wide-reaching but can typically include:

Conflicting Motivations

Social entrepreneurs strive to address a societal issue, by creating social value [20] and social goals through economic sustainability [21]. Achieving social value is dependent upon a successful balance of social outcomes and commercial returns [22]. The success of this balance lies with the ability of the social entrepreneur to fulfil many roles requiring “skills and

competencies in a number of specialist, functional and process areas” [23] (p. 115).

Achieving this balance can be a challenge. Start-up motivations of social entrepreneurs’ often rest upon an unmet social need in the marketplace, over the identification of a sound commercial opportunity [23]. Motivations are often based on the belief that their business model will enhance the wellbeing and quality of life of marginalised groups, or a desire to change the status quo (see [14], [20], and [24]) in opposed to a belief in the commercial aspects of the model. As pursuing two objectives, social entrepreneurs are expected to achieve the same commitment and determination as a traditional business entrepreneur, as well as a deep passion for the social cause with securing significant financial gains [25].

Imbalanced or Non-existent Business Strategy

Weak, imbalanced and non-existent business strategies can arise for a number of reasons including hybridity, time, capacity and skills. Such a position presents challenges for social entrepreneurs in the day to day operations of their business. Bornstein [14] describes how the strategic intent of the social entrepreneur influences the strategic positioning of the enterprise overall. As discussed above, social entrepreneurs can place their social motivations over the commercial, this in-turn can result in imbalanced or weak business strategies. In such instances, informal strategies are often implemented which can neglect the commercial perspective [24]. Having time to work “on the business”, can be a challenge for social entrepreneurs.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of how to plan or where to seek support can also present a challenge, as demonstrated in Hynes [23] research of social enterprises in Ireland. This research showed that none of the respondents in the research sample had a strategic plan to guide their enterprise, opting for a more informal approach to business growth and development. Despite the lack of formal planning, the need to adopt more formal process was identified with social entrepreneurs suggesting “*that as they were becoming busier with increased customer numbers they felt they would soon need to implement procedures or more formal strategies to guide firm development. However, they were unsure what type of procedures to implement or where to source advice on this topic*” (p.120).

Human Resource Management (HRM): Managing Staff, Volunteers & Leadership

HRM research in the context of social enterprise is sparse calling for more studies to explore how HRM in practice can enhance the success of social enterprises [29]. Exploring the HRM context of recruiting and managing the workforce, highlights some challenges for social entrepreneurs, however, again limited studies focus on this issue [16]. Challenges in recruiting and managing include: recruiting employees with a social enterprise ethos [26], balancing employee and business needs [27], resource scarcity [28] [29], managing people [24] as '*people paradox*' [30] (p. 100), and leadership issues [31]

Methodology and Data Collection

To understand multilevel challenges that social entrepreneurs face, we use exploratory qualitative case study approach as this approach help researchers to get the richness of the focal case [32]. This case study was compiled using informal, semi-structured interviews, notes and broad discussions with a representative social enterprise in Slovenia, Skuhna. Two of the researchers visited Slovenia and met the founder and workers at Skuhna in different periods in 2018. One visited in September 2018 and the other in November 2018. The former author visited Skuhna three times: one for an unstructured interview and observation, another one for observation, and the other one for a semi-structured interview. The latter visited Skuhna four times; twice to support the core team to develop a business canvas model, once for observation and finally a meeting to discuss next steps for research and practical support to the social enterprise as part of the GETM3 project. We asked the founder and CEO, Teja, about the past, present and future of her business. She graciously consented to open her names and the company name for this research. We could identify the key challenges that she and her social business face from our observations and interviews.

As a focal case of our study, Skuhna is a social enterprise that runs a restaurant located in Ljubljana city centre, providing traditional cuisine from Africa, Asia and South America. Its mission is to increase the employability of migrants and refugees through hospitality work and bridge the understanding gap between migrants and locals who reside in Slovenia. The inception of Skuhna was supported by the Institute for Global Learning funded by the European Union and the Slovenia Ministry of Labour which enabled Teja and her husband, Max launched the Skuhna project with caterings and cooking workshops in 2012

and eventually opened the restaurant in 2014. Since the end of 2015, they have joined the Open Kitchen initiative in Ljubljana where locals serve their foods at the central outdoor market on Fridays between March and November. Also, they want to make the restaurant as a platform where migrants and refugees could get an opportunity to tell their own stories via their foods, music, or talks, so locals in Slovenia could hear their voices and integrate with each other. By now, seven migrants have been trained by Skuhna project, and four of them are currently employed on this project with an undetermined or fixed-term full-time contract for at least 18 months. Currently, according to Teja and Max, more than forty migrants have benefitted from the project directly or indirectly.

The Skuhna case is interesting and suitable for our study for three reasons. First, the case can show how social entrepreneur can struggle to change or adapt his/her new career to social entrepreneur. Teja, the founder and CEO of Skuhna used to be a kindergarten teacher and helped refugees and vulnerable migrants as a volunteer with her husband, who was also a migrant. Teja has gone through a drastic change in terms of her career since she started this business as a social entrepreneur. From her story, we can capture some challenges at the individual level. In addition to the individual level, second, the Skuhna case provides various human resource issues as the employees come from various countries and are with different cultures. Since Skuhna has four full-time employees coming from four different countries and they are all playing a role as a chef. Managing employees with different cultures can be an issue. Finally, Skuhna is a successful and financially sustainable social enterprise in Slovenia. This case also can show how they have been dealing with dual missions as a social enterprise.

Findings: The Case of Skuhna

Based on our literature view and data analysis, we found four major challenges that Teja, the founder and CEO of Skuhna, and her team faced.

Organisational level challenge 1: Pursuing dual purposes simultaneously

Just like all social enterprises, which are hybrid organisations pursuing both social and commercial objectives simultaneously, Skuhna aims at achieving those two targets. Teja and Max, the founders of Skuhna, have two clear social objectives: enhancing the employability of migrants and refugees who reside in Ljubljana and bridging migrants and Slovenians. With these social objectives, they want to make

Skuhna a financially sustainable platform for both sides. However, pursuing those two objectives along with the commercial one sometimes creates conflicts and challenges.

From the outset, Teja knew that Skuhna had to be a sustainable business even if this meant favouring the commercial aspects of the business over the social. She admitted that if Skuhna had played only with the 'social' story without focusing on good foods and services, her business would not have survived. Teja said:

"We have to do a very good business thing to survive. We have to achieve our goals, which are not business per se. But if we do our business shitty, there is no point of pursuing our social goals because it's a social 'business.' So that's why we now put a lot of energy in developing the business part."

Teja believed that the more she developed and focused on the business side the more easily Skuhna's social targets could be achieved. However, she emphasised that balancing social and commercial values is important as a social enterprise. She understood that constant and balanced growth, as an enterprise, was essential to keep training and hiring migrants and refugees, which was the social objective of Skuhna. Max also echoed that he also believed that for Skuhna to survive in the long term, having a strong business foundation was imperative. He spoke of the various strands to the business including caterings, Open kitchen and cooking courses as a way to diversify their market reach, while also supporting their social aim of creating jobs, enhancing employees' skills and community integration.

Food and culture are the keystones of the Skuhna model. Max and Teja spoke of activities that seek to bring communities together and integrate migrants, which focused more on the social aspects of Skuhna's objectives. Such activities did not make money and were subsidised by the core. This shows the integral link between the social and the commercial objectives of Skuhna.

Balancing the two objectives has not always been easy. Since Teja and Max did not have business backgrounds, they hired a Slovenian business specialist who was supposed to help them do the marketing of Skuhna. According to Teja, this was one of the worst decisions that she made for Skuhna. The business specialist regarded Skuhna as a regular business and neglected the social aspect of it. She destroyed the business and relationships with other employees by almost taking over the business. According to Teja, at the end of 2015 Skuhna was very close to closing

down because of the business consultant. Hence, Teja believed that she wanted fast and safe financial growth, but she did not want to neglect developing good relationships not only with employees but also with Skuhna's customers. She admitted that that was not easy and a constant issue in her mind.

Organisational level challenge 2: Non-existence of business strategy

As the existing studies indicated, we also found that Teja and her team did not have a clear and long-term business strategy. Teja said, "We don't really make a decision in advance so much, because we don't plan everything. Something just happens." She and her team do things spontaneously and improvise for a particular situation. With no clear business plan to speak of, she relied on what has to be done in her head and adapt the situation from day to day and plan organically along the way. When we had an interview with her in September 2018, she said, "Okay, at least now we know in September that we should start thinking about December." The reason why she had a tentative plan for December was she got orders for Christmas. Thus, even the plans she had were not particularly driven by her 'business strategy,' but more reactive to the business operations. What they were doing were tactics. Surprisingly, her business is financially successful despite such improvisation. She also admitted that they have been "lucky".

What was interesting was that she did not think this was not a challenge or a problem. When Teja explained how things in Skuhna had been improvised, she giggled and considered it to be interesting and fun. She believed that that was a positive and unique organisational culture in Skuhna, which seems to be working for them. These are her words:

"Because every day is something new and it's interesting. And I don't know. I'm this kind of person who likes working with people who really think differently, not everybody in the same way. I think this also brought something unique in Skuhna, because whoever comes up with some sorts of the idea. Then, 'Oh, interesting!' 'Huh, let's try it, right?' and we do it. And if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. But we don't really kill ideas."

She considered this as a learning experience for her and her team. She believed that they learn by doing, not by thinking and planning ahead.

What is more interesting was that she even thought that having a 'business plan' or 'business strategy' could be somewhat negative. This position may be influenced by the negative experiences that Teja and

her team encountered when engaging with professional business support. There were two specific experiences to note; Teja hired a full-time 'business consultant' for her business. This full-time employee was supposed to provide a business plan, but the experience with this employee was a "living hell" according to Teja and the example of the marketing consultant mentioned before. Since then, she has trusted more her own learning curve and experiences.

HRM level challenge 1: Recruiting a new employee and Managing people

As described earlier, recruiting and managing people in a social enterprise is not an easy task. This is especially true when social entrepreneurs deal with people with different mindsets, taking the right person and trusting him or her to share the same ethos of the enterprise. In the case of Skuhna, Teja learned that recruiting new people who are supposed to be business 'specialists' could be a very risky choice. This was due to the recruitment of a business specialist who was supposed to help Teja and Max develop 'business planning' brought a threat to their business. She called her "external consultant" as she hired her outside of the social sector and Skuhna. Since this catastrophe, she has decided to invest in 'internal' people whom she could trust and used her and her team's knowledge only. She clearly said, "Taking somebody from outside and hoping that he will do the best thing is worthless." Thus, she has had a difficult time to hire someone she can fully trust to share her ambitions and ethics.

Skuhna has many volunteers. Interestingly, they are mostly migrants and refugees from asylums and NGOs, many of whom could be employed by Skuhna. However, Skuhna found difficulty in hiring those people, not because Skuhna could not support their employment financially, but because they instead wanted to remain volunteers. According to Teja, some migrants and refugees get some subsidies, but once they move into employment, they lose this grant of money from the Slovenian government. This grant amount can be more than what Skuhna can offer them in employment. Thus, Teja decided to keep them as volunteers, so they could continue training and gain experience. This could be beneficial for those volunteers, but not necessarily for the business, as Skuhna does not get full-time responsible employees that Teja can trust and work with for a long-term.

As indicated in the literature review, working with people facing traditional barriers to employment may cause some challenges in the workplace. Skuhna employs migrants with employment barriers of language and culture. Teja was the only Slovene in Skuhna, and she admitted that her employees' language

level was quite low. Thus, one could expect there would be some cultural clashes and miscommunication due to language barriers. According to Teja, however, there were no cultural conflicts among employees and herself. More importantly, language barriers were not a big issue for her. When Teja was asked whether the language and cultural differences was a problem, she said,

"I would say not much. We had more problems with Slovenes than with foreigners, for sure. We have a guy who does not speak any language, neither Slovene nor English. We had never had a fight like never."

The guy has been taking the language course, but Teja knew that she could not expect him to progress quickly as he had dyslexia. However, she was quite confident in managing him despite the language barrier. For the first few months, the language issue was a challenge, but once the team got used to each other, they slowly adapted the situation with their body language. Teja suggested that this worked because of the supportive environment within Skuhna, especially in the kitchen under the leadership of Om, Skuhna's Head Chef.

However, while the language issue can be defeated in the kitchen, it could be a problem in running the restaurant business like Skuhna as at least some of the employees needed to deal with marketing and guest service. Since Teja was the one who could serve and deal with all communication channels, other employees cannot take initiatives on the management of these functions. This can lead to the last challenge.

HRM level challenge 2: Entrepreneurial burnout at the leadership level

Entrepreneurial burnout is well documented in the field of entrepreneurship as leaders, who are often also founders, take on responsibility for every detail of their business. What is evident in the case of Skuhna is that Teja has been multitasking and taking on all responsibilities of business. As such, she struggled to have time to do everything she needed to do for business but also found it challenging to balance the demands of her personal life and well-being. For instance, while she believed that marketing and promotion were very critical for her business, finding time to deal with the Skuhna's website and social media platforms was challenging. For Teja, the most critical problem she faced was time and admitted that she dealt with too many things at the same time.

“Time is a problem because I am supposed to do more than million things aside. So now somebody has to keep up with our web page. But we don't have really time to focus on that. I'm writing now on a project [funding application] and I don't even sleep. For sure, there is nothing on the webpage published, (nothing about) what's going on now.”

She wished one of her employees could take this role. However, it was also evident that all team members were already multitasking, and she believed that other staff could not perform these tasks better than she could because she could “not be satisfied easily” according to her.

Teja works long days, taking little time for herself. Every day, she starts at 6 in the morning and got involved in every single aspect of the business until it closed from managing staff and volunteers, to serving guests, attending to marketing, ordering and finances. Skuhna intensively occupied her life. Moreover, it was difficult for her to draw a clear line between Skuhna and her personal life as she started this business with her husband and they still run Skuhna together. She confessed that it was not always good to work with her partner as they kept talking about the business even at home.

“If I would write my own future in the past, I would not choose this [working with her husband]. It's harder. You can't stop thinking about it. ... [one day, her husband was talking about Skuhna at home], I told him ‘Look, man, between six in the evening and nine in the morning, we don't talk about Skuhna.’ It was because kids were running everywhere and I was in the middle of cooking dinner. He came up with some topic of whether regarding open kitchen. I was thinking ‘it's impossible.’”

Such heavy workloads burned her out psychologically and physically. She had some health problems and suffered from stress. Thus, she was not even sure whether she could carry on this business next year. She told us that she would stop the business next year if her stress goes too far. That may be another reason why she could not even think about a long-term strategy for her business.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper aimed at uncovering challenges that Skuhna, a Slovenian social enterprise, faces and propose avenues to overcome the identified challenges.

In so doing, we contribute to the vibrant research on challenges of social enterprises [5] [6] [19], since the proposed solutions have wide practical and scholarly implications.

Social enterprises in Slovenia do not differ in regard to challenges faced by their foreign counterparts. Skuhna is exemplary in dealing with some of the challenges, such as setting and achieving its social mission, having a financially viable business and not giving up when facing obstacles of different kinds. On the other hand, Skuhna's biggest problem is having no real and thoughtful strategy, which brings along three other challenges: managing people, delegating and entrepreneurial burnout.

We find that Skuhna brings into the Slovenian environment opportunities for cultural integration and improved tolerance for heterogeneity and diversity. It is known that Slovenian people on average score relatively high on the Hofstede dimension of uncertainty avoidance and are rather intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas [33]. With Skuhna and other social enterprises, NGOs and societies that deal with migrants and marginalised groups, Slovenian business and social environment is getting enriched and tolerance-oriented. Migrants, who work at Skuhna, get easier integrated into the society and get experiences and knowledge needed to seek for other potential jobs. The double social mission of Skuhna is well achieved, but at the same time, it is in collision with the economic mission of this social enterprise.

As reported in scholarly literature [22] [23] scoring high on both, the social and economic mission, is quite challenging. Skuhna is no exception. We see that Skuhna and social enterprises in general frequently do not have a proper, thoughtful strategy [24], which lead to other challenges evidenced in research and also at Skuhna, which are elaborated next.

To achieve the economic mission, along with the social one, social entrepreneurs should prepare a business plan, in which they specify the three core premises of successful business outcomes. According to the design thinking methodology for testing the proposed solutions, entrepreneurs should have the answers to the following three questions: what do people desire (solution's desirability), what is financially viable (solution's viability), and what is technically and organisationally feasible (solution's feasibility) [34]. So, in the first place it is the social entrepreneur who has to understand the underlying unique value proposition of his/her social enterprise [20] [24]. If the social entrepreneur feels s/he lacks some knowledge, competencies and experience it is imperative to widen her/his entrepreneurial team with people of complementary knowledge, competencies and experience. Another possibility is to hire a

business consultant, but as we saw in the Skuhna case, attention is needed not to manage this relationship and understanding of the ethos of the business. Relying too much on people who do not understand the core mission of a social enterprise is risky since business-oriented people might overlook the social mission, which is one of the core unique value propositions of a social enterprise. The literature suggests that social entrepreneurs frequently have the social dimension highly expressed, but they lack business skills and knowledge [23]. For social entrepreneurs, it is necessary to undertake an entrepreneurial approach while maintaining the social mission on the top of their priorities.

We also found that at Skuhna managing people represents a challenge. It is evident that the business leader, Teja, needs help. It is true that her husband Max is an active entrepreneurial and personal partner, but they both should find some other reliable co-workers, such as Om, to delegate the same tasks to. Also, we see a need for upskilling current employees to gain new knowledge, skills and experience to better achieve the social and economic mission of their social enterprise. Attention should also be paid when hiring workers and some probation period before full-time employment is suggested. The same applies to consultants, with whom as Teja explained, they had a really bad experience. In addition, as the literature suggests [30] also at Skuhna they have challenges in managing full-time workers and volunteers as well as employing volunteers who have better financial support from the government than the pay Skuhna could offer them.

Finally, we see that Teja is heading towards an entrepreneurial burnout because of the work overload and no rest time. This is a recurrent issue of social entrepreneurs that also scholarly literature is aware of [25] [31]. Taking on several tasks and roles is usual for entrepreneurs [35], but after the initial phase of the entrepreneurial venture, some roles and tasks must be assigned to proper entrepreneurial team-members, employees and outside partners. Multitasking is inefficient [36] and social entrepreneurs should avoid it. Moreover, relying only on their own abilities and expertise may work in some occasions, but for efficient firm development and growth, entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs should delegate tasks and take some time to organise internal processes in a way that they can, from time to time, be absent, too. Teja should invest in trainings for her employees and trust more her entrepreneurial team members when they are ready to take on some new responsibilities. Last but not least, Teja and other social entrepreneurs should take care of their work-life balance and make clear distinctions of

time spent for work and time spent for their personal lives and pay attention that work does not interfere too much with the personal life and vice versa [37].

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