

Social Entrepreneurship and Network Configurations

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Introduction and Background

The term 'social entrepreneurship' is used across various academic fields including economics, sociology, entrepreneurship, business strategy, accounting, community development, volunteerism etc. (Weerawardena and Sullivan Mort 2006). It is defined differently depending on the field of study and the academic literature in this field is still evolving.

Social entrepreneurship is about identifying a social problem and organizing resources to find an innovative solution to it. It is an effort by an individual, or a group or an organization to address social problems and bring about long term sustainable change. Social entrepreneurs maximize the social well-being of their targeted 'under-served, neglected or highly disadvantaged population' (Martin and Osberg 2007), where the governments or market systems may not be able to reach. Social enterprises also differ in their organizational forms and legal structures; they include not-for-profit enterprises, for-profit social ventures, charitable trusts, societies and also co-operatives.

The research reported here elaborates the case of a social enterprise in India that works in the education sector. According to India's Ministry of Education (2020), India's literacy rate is 64.7% in rural areas and 79.5% in the urban areas. The education sector overall and especially the primary and secondary schools in the rural areas face problems like unqualified teachers, poor teacher attendance, lack of school facilities like libraries, ineffective and un-operational parent–teacher committees, complete breakdown of the school inspection system, overall low quality of education resulting in excessive dependence on external coaching etc. (Sen, Sen, and Kanjilal 2015). One other problem and the main cause addressed by the social enterprise studied in this research is that of the language gaps in education delivery. India is a country of multiple languages including hundreds of tribal languages. The Constitution of India recognizes only 22 languages as medium of instruction in schools (Joshi, 2019) and public-school education is not provided in any of the tribal languages.

The Government of India passed the 'Right to Education Act' (RTE) in 2009 which guarantees every child's fundamental right to education until the age of 14 which helped in improving school enrollments.

However, the learning outcomes of students have not shown improvements as will be explained in this report.

Research Objectives

This research studies the social network configuration of a social enterprise. Similar to business enterprises, social enterprises also strive to develop their social network to include connections that would enable them to achieve their objectives and create social value.

The objective of this research is to:

1. Study the evolution of the social network of a social enterprise and the roles played by actors.
2. Study how a social enterprise leverages local resources and what are the potential challenges in this strategy.

Brief literature review

A social network is a set of relations that apply to a set of actors, as well as any additional information on those actors and relations (Prell, 2012). Entrepreneurs rely on networks to gain additional resources for business development, information, experience, advice, problem solving, with some network contacts providing multiple resources (Adler and Kwon 2002; Hansen 1995). The kind of network that an entrepreneur has also affects their reputation in their field. Regarding the nature of network structure, there have been contrasting arguments in literature about what type of networks are beneficial; a dense closely connected network, where every actor knows every actor and relations are more trust based (Coleman, 1988; Walker, Kogut, and Shan, 1997) or a loose network based on weak ties that provides the benefit of new information from unknown sources (Burt 1992, 2001, 2005, Granovetter 1973).

Although the field of social network analysis is fairly well developed, research about its applicability to social entrepreneurship is fairly limited and mainly focuses on developed economies (Littlewood and Khan, 2018). By studying the network development process of a social enterprise in a developing country, this research addresses a gap in the field of social entrepreneurship and social networks.

Research Method

This research explores the case of a social enterprise in India called Unnati ISEC (Unnati Institute for Social and Educational Change). The study uses primary data collected through field visits, interviews and focus group discussions with the founder, staff and volunteers of Unnati ISEC, the public-school teachers, children and other members of the village community. The founder, staff and volunteers of Unnati ISEC were asked to state the names of all actors including individuals and organizations that the enterprise was connected to and how these actors had contributed to the enterprise over the last 5 years.

These were verified by all other actors and a data sheet comprising of a symmetric matrix with one to one mapping of the actors was prepared. Thereafter using Gephi software social network maps were generated that showed the ties between all actors at Unnati ISEC and gradual evolution of the social network of Unnati ISEC over a five-year period.

Findings and Discussion

Unnati ISEC is a not-for-profit company established in 2013 that works in a remote and mostly tribal part of West-central India. Primary level public school education in these tribal villages is imparted in the state's official language called "Marathi" while the children from these villages speak a language called "Korku" which is different from Marathi in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Korku is a tribal language that has never been scripted before. The school teachers cannot speak Korku as they are public servants who are transferred to different districts every couple of years. The curriculum contents have no connection with the students' socio-economic environment and students have no exposure to Marathi language outside of their classroom. As a result, students do not understand what is taught in class, they find education uninteresting and tend to drop out.

Each of these schools depends on a single teacher and students of grade 1st to 4th are put together in a single class. These schools do not have any library. Given the socio-economic conditions, it is difficult to expect any parental participation in the students' education. A survey conducted by the social enterprise in 2015 revealed that out of 1614 parents surveyed, about 49% were uneducated. Most of these students are first generation learners.

Unnati ISEC's goal is to bridge this language gap between Korku and Marathi for these students so that they can actually understand the curriculum taught at school and not lose interest in education. It conducts Playgroup style classes for these students where it uses art, craft, folksongs to teach the students Marathi, without distancing them from their mother tongue. Due to language gaps the educational achievements of these students are extremely poor. Another survey conducted by the enterprise in 2014 showed that out of 1186 school going children surveyed, only 6.84% of the 3rd graders could read a paragraph in Marathi.

The students seem to enjoy these playgroup classes as seen during the field visits. These classes are conducted by trained staff and volunteers of Unnati ISEC with technical and pedagogical support from some educationists. These are not an alternative to the school classes, but complement the school curriculum.

Besides, the social enterprise also tries to make the community more aware in matters related to education. Unnati ISEC's staff members also conduct regular meetings with the village community to

inform them about the various government policies related to education and their rights as parents so that they can be more involved in their children's schooling. Parents pointed out how they had started paying more attention to the school activities and teachers' attendance etc.

The following paragraphs explain the evolution of Unnati ISEC's social network over a period of 5 years.

The first network connection seen at Unnati ISEC was between the founder and her former colleagues who joined the enterprise as associates. These nodes in the network were connected due to their previous work experience and interest in improving the education conditions in these tribal villages. This is in line with what has been found by previous literature that effective ties usually start with existing human, social and financial assets (Haugh 2007; Wheeler et al. 2005). The first dyadic ties are illustrated in Figure 1. The next few connections in Unnati ISEC's network were local influential people including village heads, local health workers, important people from the community, local police etc. These connections gave the enterprise local level recognition and helped them access local facilities. The enterprise however found it difficult to embed itself in the village in terms of getting the support of the villagers/ parents. Due to this difficulty, the enterprise began to connect especially with the local youth in the village, using the connections they had already created. Thus, a group of local volunteers was brought into the network. Their main role was to conduct the Playgroup classes. These local youth were not trained teachers but they were bilingual and they could well understand the problems faced by the students. They were called 'kirans' by the enterprise (meaning 'rays' in Marathi). These kirans were socio-economically and culturally close to the children, and they developed a good rapport with the students. Children began to take an interest in Unnati ISEC's classes. Kirans helped in bridging the barriers that Unnati ISEC faced in being accepted by the parents and local community. The same parents

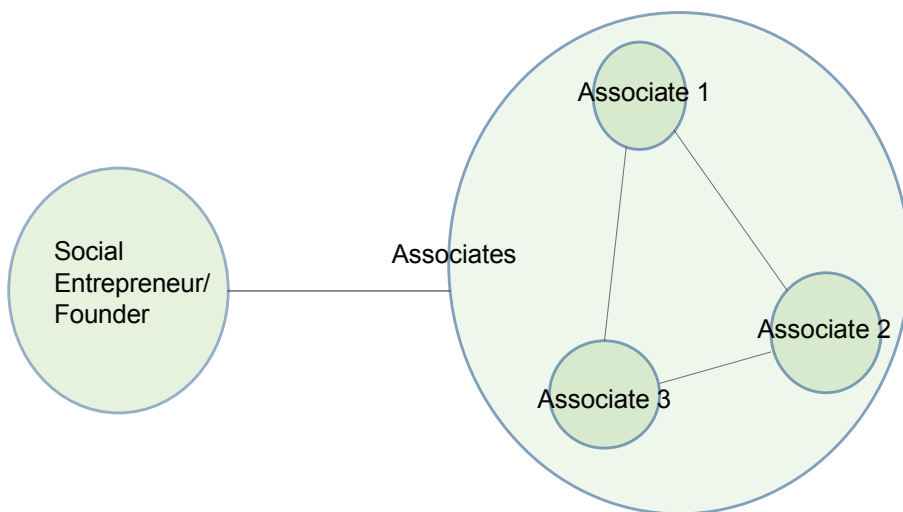


Figure 1: The first dyad: Social entrepreneur (Hemangi) and Associates

who had been skeptical about Unnati, later admitted that it was because of the kirans that children found schooling interesting and were actually learning at school.

Some of these volunteers however, later moved to take up other positions at Unnati ISEC or some even quit the enterprise to take up jobs in the cities, and new volunteers joined in. This indicates significant mobility or dynamism in this particular resource.

Besides the above local connections, Unnati ISEC also has in its network, several external actors including language experts, folklorists, NGOs that provided training to Unnati’s volunteers, funding partners and academicians who provide advisory support. The founder attends seminars and events related to ‘Right to Education’ matters where she can connect with these external actors.

Figure 2 shows the expansion of Unnati’s network after a period of about 5 years, with new actors including volunteers, staff, local bodies, external actors including funding partners, NGOs etc. It can be seen that the ties between some actors are denser than the others and some actors have emerged to be more important ones in the network. This can be seen by the darker color of their nodes. These consist of the founder, staff member 1, board member 3, Kiran 1 and volunteer 8. In order to crosscheck these

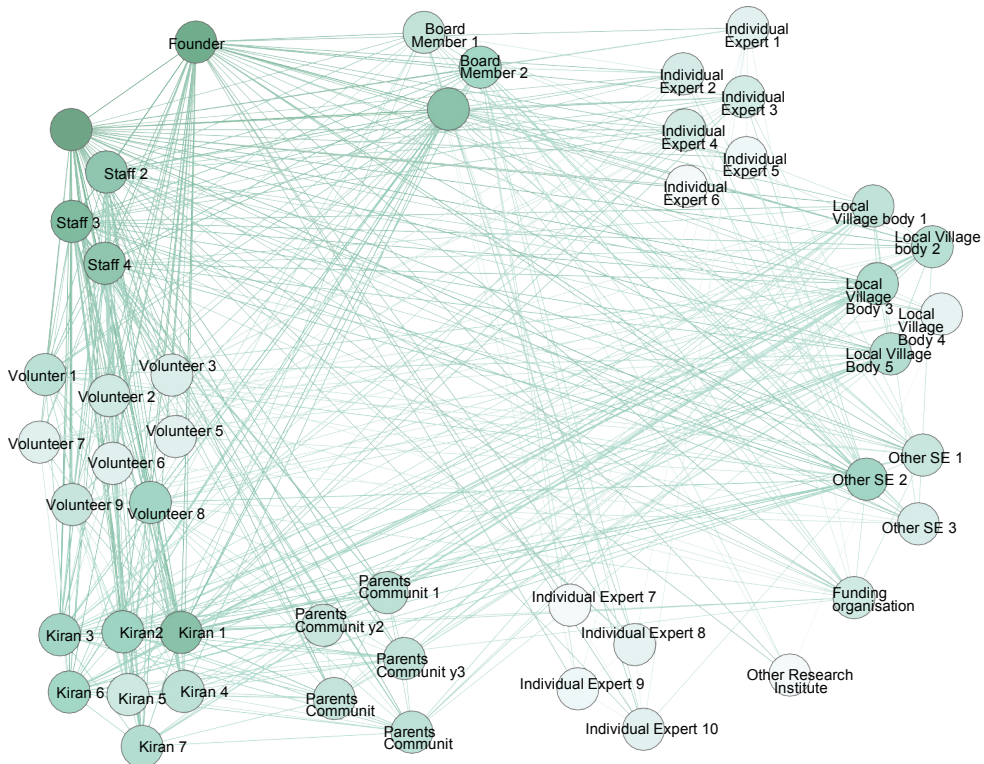


Figure 2: Unnati ISEC’s social network

findings, centrality measures of these actors were calculated. Results showed that these actors had the highest closeness centrality in the network meaning that they were the most independent actors in the network.

Research has shown that the process of creating a network is mainly driven by the entrepreneur (Larson and Starr 1993). In case of Unnati ISEC, we find that these changes are driven not just by the founder, but by a team of local actors who are geographically, socio-economically closer to the beneficiaries. These local actors help in embedding and anchoring the enterprise in the community. Through the field visits and interviews it was observed that there are regular meetings between the founder, staff members, volunteers including Playgroup teachers where the founder shares information about new external connections, funding partners, training sessions with the local actors. The local resources share their experiences in running classes, children's overall response, other challenges they face, local issues in the village etc. There is two-way information flow and any decisions regarding the enterprise are made jointly by the founder and the entire local team.

Connecting with these local resources and retaining them could be a challenge for any enterprise. As mentioned above these local resources tend to take up opportunities to move on in their career. But the enterprise reduces this challenge by channelizing the new information it receives from external actors, passing it on to the local actors and through their resource mobility, this information then circulates among the actors in the network through these dynamic local resources.

Conclusion and Limitations

This study highlights the significance of developing a social network structure that enables a social enterprise to start and sustain its activities in rural areas, and especially in developing countries. The paper asserts that local resources who are more proximate to the final beneficiaries in several aspects, are also central to a social enterprise's network along with the social entrepreneur. The study can provide lessons to enterprises in rural areas in identifying local resources and placing them suitably in the network.

However, the research has limitations in terms of applying findings from a single case study. Also, the study explores only basic and preliminary aspects of social network analysis. The comments received during the forum presentation including the significance of measuring the strength of ties, will be very valuable for future research.

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