

Corporate social responsibility and social partnerships in professional football

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Abstract

Within the professional football industry one of the most prominent ways to address corporate social responsibility is through a social partnership involving a range of organisations such as a Community Sports Trust (CST), a professional football club, business organisations, and local authorities. These partnerships are responsible for the delivery of community initiatives around a range of social issues. This article seeks to understand the managerial aspects of this type of social partnership, and in particular the objectives and motivations for partnering, by drawing on three analytical platforms that take into account how differences between sectors affect social partnerships. Based on a series of interviews, it is shown that organisations get involved in social partnerships for different reasons and perceive the partnerships in different ways; that from an individual organisational perspective it is difficult to perceive a social partnership entirely in the context of one of the theoretical platforms; and that despite what would appear to be a strong sense of homogenization of organisational form across the sector there are significant differences between social partnerships. The article concludes by arguing that further research is needed to better understand the differences between social partnerships.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; social partnerships; professional football; community sport trusts.

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been a prominent management trend since the 1990s with business organisations under pressure to address not only economic imperatives but also to consider the social and environmental impact of business operations. The ubiquitous nature of CSR suggests that it can be considered as a taken-for-granted concept within western society¹. As Brammer et al., argue, “CSR itself has become a strongly institutionalized feature of the contemporary landscape in advanced industrialized economies”². One of the key ways in which organisations address the issue of CSR is through the formation of a social partnership³. A social partnership is where two or more organisations from different economic sectors collaborate to address a social issue and where there is a shared understanding of responsibilities and a commitment of resources⁴. These partnerships form in part because addressing social issues can be overly challenging for an individual organisation and requires collaboration with multiple actors that bring different skills to the partnership⁵. There are four types of social partnership: business and non-profit partnerships; non-profit and government partnerships; business and government partnerships; and tripartite partnerships between all three sectors⁶. These reflect a change in the roles and responsibilities between government, business and the civil sector⁷.

Within the professional football industry (and the professional sport sector more broadly) one of the more prominent ways in which CSR is addressed is through a social partnership involving a range of partner organisations including a Community

Sports Trust (CST), a professional football club, business organisations, local authorities, and other organisations. In this type of social partnership the CST is a charitable organisation that acts as the delivery vehicle for a range of community programmes that address social issues such as inclusion, education, health, and crime reduction, and draws on funding and other support from the partners. This type of social partnership originally emerged in the 1980s through the Football in the Community (FiTC) schemes partly to counteract some of the more negative aspects associated with the industry, such as hooliganism and a lack of community engagement⁸. However at this point in time the FiTC departments were internal to a football club; more recently there has been a separation between the clubs and the schemes with the vast majority now constituted as independent charitable organisations. This can be explained in part by institutional pressures; the perceived success of the conversion to this model by early adopters encouraged imitation across the sector, whilst more recently coercive pressures exist due to the fact that this form of organisational structure is required in order to receive central funding from the Premier League or the Football League⁹. At present, almost all professional football clubs in the Premier League and Football League partner with a CST operating under the names of community trusts, foundations, and community education and sporting trusts (89 out of 92 clubs).

This article seeks to explore the managerial aspects of this type of social partnership¹⁰ and in particular the objectives and motivations for partnering. Research has shown that managing partnerships is complex and inadequately understood¹¹. At the same time the concept of shared responsibilities and a commitment of resources

underpinning social partnerships raise questions about the motivations underpinning social partnerships¹². Whilst there has been a growing body of literature that looks at the CST model in the UK only recently has the nature of the social partnership been the subject of focus¹³. For example, it has been shown that the partnership between a football club and CST can be close, with the CST often drawing on resources (both financial and in-kind) that the football club provides and having football club representation on the board of trustees¹⁴. However Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury found there to be a “dysfunctional affiliation” between football clubs and CST managers¹⁵. What this demonstrates is that despite the development of a social partnership, there can be differences in the way that the social partnership is perceived, the motivations and objectives, and therefore potential implications on the success and longevity of the partnership.

This article builds on previous research by seeking to understand social partnerships in professional football through three analytical platforms that take into account how differences between sectors affect social partnerships; an area that Selsky and Parker¹⁶ argue is an emerging area of research within organisation studies. These platforms – social issues; societal sector; and resource dependence – are argued to exist independently. This article uses these platforms as a model or framework with which to study the social partnerships in professional football although it looks primarily at the perspective of those involved in CSTs as they are the key partner in these social partnerships. The article begins by briefly reviewing literature on social partnerships and setting out the three partnership platforms and five characteristics/dimensions underpinning each identified that form the framework for

this article. It then details the methods used for this study, presents the findings and discussion, before a brief conclusion is made.

CSR, social partnerships, and three underlying analytic platforms

Social partnerships have become increasingly prominent and it has been argued that they offer an interesting area for research on CSR¹⁷. Indeed, Seitanidi and Ryan¹⁸ argued that partnerships are “one of the most exciting and challenging ways that organisations have been implementing CSR in recent years”. A key question surrounding the emergence of social partnerships to address CSR-related issues relates to the underlying reasons for their development and therefore their underpinning motivations. For this reason it is useful to draw on the work of Selsky and Parker¹⁹ who identify three theoretical platforms that underpin social partnerships; these platforms are termed social issues, societal-sector, and resource dependence platforms. They contend that the three social partnership platforms take into account differences in the underlying cognitive frames held by those involved in managing these partnerships and are essentially “sensemaking devices that managers use to envision a partnership project, frame it, and make it meaningful and sensible”²⁰. In this sense, depending on how an individual perceives a particular social partnership will play a role in determining what they expect to achieve and their motivations and objectives for the partnership.

Table 1 from Selksy and Parker²¹ illustrates the three social issues platforms and defines them in relation to five dimensions. The first platform is termed the social

issues platform in which a social partnership exists primarily to address a particular social concern²². In this type of partnership it is the *issue* that assumes the prominent reason for organisational collaboration. In this type of partnership a normative imperative is the prevailing justification for the development of the partnership. The organisations involved in the partnership are therefore motivated by the desire to address a particular social concern in recognition of the obligation to be a good citizen and adhere to ethical values. The partnership can be seen as a responsive approach to CSR²³ in which the partnership is seen as a source of social progress whereby stakeholders are seen as an end in themselves rather than simply a means to an end²⁴. This aligns with Donaldson and Preston's²⁵ argument that behaviour towards stakeholders is considered as pure philanthropic behavior which benefits the recipient only and demonstrates the donor's social conscience (i.e. that it is normatively motivated). Selsky and Parker²⁶ note that social issues evolve over time citing the example of environmentalism and how addressing it has become an institutionalised feature within organisations. This demonstrates the importance of cognitive frames and sense-making by those involved in the partnerships and how this can impact upon the nature of the social issue.

Table 1: Social Partnership Platforms²⁷

Dimension	Platform		
	Social Issues	Societal Sector	Resource Dependence
Primary interest	Mandated or designed around a social problem	Mixed self- and social interest	Voluntary, based largely on self-interest with secondary interest in the social issue
Contextual factors	Pressure for CSR	Pressure for adaptation to complexity, turbulence	Pressure for mission related performance
Source of problem definition	Externally defined by existing interest groups	Envisioned or emergent	Each organization brings its definition to

	and public issues	public issues; constructed over time	the partnership
Dependencies	Manage/segment interdependencies	Integrate interdependencies	Retain autonomy
Time-frame	Finite or indefinite depending on the social need/issue	Long term and open ended to enhance learning	Finite, delimited to meet organizational needs

The societal sector platform is the second analytical platform and this is based on the notion that the lines between government, business and civil society have become blurred due to a variety of factors such as the rise in governmental and non-governmental organisations; a reduction in government funding meaning more competition for resources; privatisation and the increasing reliance on business and the third sector to deliver services; and the increasing concern for business organisations to be more accountable and to contribute to addressing societal problems²⁸. In the UK the value of contracts to the third sector between 1982 and 1992 rose from £1.85 billion to £42 billion²⁹, facilitating the development of the sector (and consequently social partnerships) as a legitimate sector that was able to address market and state failures. More recently social partnerships were central to New Labour policy in the UK with the continued recognition of the voluntary sector and collaboration across sectors to address welfare and social inclusion issues³⁰. This leads organisations naturally to seek to collaborate across sectors to address social issues, although the nature of the issues within each sector can impact upon the development of partnerships between sectors. CSR is one such example; instances of corporate misbehaviour may lead business organisations to partner with trusted non-profit organisations in order to gain legitimacy³¹.

In partnerships between businesses and non-profit organisations the issues that are often selected are chosen for strategic benefit. In such circumstances the partnership can be viewed through the resource dependence platform. The underlying principle of this third platform is that organisations partner firstly for self-interest and secondly to address a social concern. As Selsky and Parker³² state, “social partnerships here are conceived in a narrow, instrumental, and short-term way; they are viewed as a way to address organizational needs with the added benefit of addressing a social need”. Viewed through a resource dependence lens, a social partnership can be a way to enhance reputation, to gain legitimacy, to improve corporate image and competitive advantage, and to manage reputational risk³³. The partnership may be a way to develop constructive stakeholder relationships that may benefit an organisation in a particular way, for example by contributing towards the “reservoir of goodwill”³⁴.

The resource dependence approach has been discussed in other work on CSR: for example Graafland and van de Ven³⁵ set out the positive strategic view of CSR, in which it is seen that CSR leads to financial success, as opposed to the positive moral view in which CSR is seen as a moral duty of the firm. Similarly, Scherer and Palazzo³⁶ consider that the majority of research and understanding of CSR takes a positivist, instrumental approach that aligns with an economic theory of the firm, rather than what they term post-positivist CSR in which it is justified on normative grounds. This third type of partnership therefore is reflective of the move towards CSR implementation based on an instrumental, performance-oriented motivation³⁷. However this perspective overlooks concerns surrounding the supposed compatibility

of CSR and the market logic³⁸. For example, Brammer et al³⁹ argue that the market logic adopts a limited view of the corporation as simply profit-driven and the idea that CSR is a strategic tool neglects a focus on more societal aspects. Much of the academic research that looks at how CSR is perceived supports and reinforces this market logic and the business case for CSR dominates; the potential effect of this is that it reduces social and environmental elements to *supporting* financial performance, ensures that stakeholders are treated as a means to an end, and fails to ensure that businesses are more accountable and responsible to society⁴⁰.

Methods

This research sought to explore and better understand the social partnerships within the football industry by using the theoretical framework set out by Selsky and Parker⁴¹ and with a particular focus on the perspective of CSTs. The main tool of data collection used in this research was the semi-structured interview. The first set of interviews was undertaken in 2006 (see table 2). At this point in time there were approximately 40 CSTs associated with professional football clubs. Although the charitable trust model had been in place since 1997, the majority of these CSTs had converted from FITC schemes between 2003 and 2006. So, whilst the model was not widespread, in 2006 it was becoming more prominent. Six interviews were conducted with individuals working in the sector. A further six interviews were undertaken in 2011. The fact that there was a significant time difference between the first and second set of interviews allowed for an understanding of the changes that had taken place over the five year period within the sector. This helped to provide further

understanding of why the partnership model had become widespread as by 2011 the football club-CST partnership was dominant within the sector. Two key limitations with this approach were firstly, that the interviews were mainly drawn from individuals involved in CSTs and to a lesser extent, football clubs. While these interviews were appropriate in that all interviewees had knowledge of the partnerships between CSTs, football clubs and other organisations by virtue of their senior position within each of the organisations, it would also have been interesting to speak to a wider range of partners. However it can be argued that the CSTs as the delivery agency are the key organisation in these social partnerships. The second limitation is that the interviews are not a representative sample. Nevertheless, the aim of this research is to try to understand the partnerships in more detail and not to make any generalised conclusions. For example, one of the findings of this research demonstrated the diversity surrounding social partnerships in this particular sector.

Table 2: List of interviews

Interviewee	Date	Position and Organisation
A	27 th April 2006	Chief Community Officer, Football in the Community
B	14 th September 2006	Chief Executive, Premier League football club
C	19 th September 2006	Community Scheme Manager, Community Sports Trust (associated with a Premier League football club)
D	29 th November 2006	Chief Executive, Community Sports Trust (associated with a League One football club)
E	4 th December 2006	Vice-Chairman, League One football club
F	12 th December 2006	Chief Executive, Community Sports Trust (associated with a Premier league football club)
G	21 st June 2011	Project Co-ordinator, Community Sports Trust (associated with a Premier League football club)
H	29 th June 2011	Director, Community Sports Trust (associated with a League One football club)
J	9 th July 2011	Head of Community Sports Trust, (associated with a Premier League football club)
K	13 th July 2011	Director, Social Enterprise that monitors and evaluates programmes run by community sports trusts
L	28 th July 2011	Community Scheme Manager (directly employed by a

		Premier League football club)
M	30 th August 2011	Chief Executive, Community Sports Trust (associated with a League One football club)

Each interview lasted between 50 and 90 minutes and was carried out on the basis that all responses would be reported anonymously. The interviews relied on an interview guide that helped to structure the direction of questioning. As this article is part of a larger research project focused on organisational structures and governance within the CST sector in the professional football industry, there were a variety of themes that were used to structure the interviews. In regards to the specific focus of this article, the questions centred on the nature of the partnership, the relations between partners, resource-related issues, and the motivations underpinning the different partner organisations. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the authors. Transcripts of the interviews were sent to all of the interviewees to check for any errors or omissions. This process was helpful for fact-checking and also elicited further information in a number of instances. The interview transcriptions were read in full which enabled a general understanding of the responses⁴². Thereafter the interviews were analysed using the five dimensions set out in figure 1 from Selsky and Parker⁴³ as the broad coding scheme with the characteristics of each of the three theoretical platforms providing further themes to frame the analysis of the interviews. The five dimensions are used to structure the findings.

Findings and Discussion

This article focuses on the social partnership between CSTs, football clubs and other organisations. Although a partnership approach is clearly in evidence, the importance of this particular approach to working was strongly emphasised in the interviews. For example, taking a historical perspective, partnerships were important in relation to the FiTC model, even when the community departments were integral to the club. The conversion to the CST model, and the increasing self-reliance of the schemes, further emphasised the fundamental role that partnerships played. As one interviewee stated:

“Our whole strap line is participation through partnership, I will give you a card and it is on there, but really our strategy has been to work in partnership with people. We couldn’t have achieved what we’ve achieved without doing that, and we haven’t gone into partnerships or relationships without really thinking about why we wanted to do in the first place and that is probably what has made them strong and sustainable. That is at the whole heart of our strategy” (Interviewee D)

Primary interest

Selsky and Parker⁴⁴ set out the differences between the three partnership platforms in relation to the primary interest for collaborating. It was clear from the interviews that there were differences in particular between the football clubs and the CSTs. For example, the CSTs clearly emphasised that they perceived the partnership

as a way to address a social need, with social issues underpinning and framing their work. As two interviewees pointed out:

“All our projects are very much needs-led. From there we put in a claim, well a bid, to the Football Foundation of the Premier League. From there we got match-funding from the council, because we were already working with them”
(Interviewee G)

“It started a few years ago where we jointly employed a community liaison officer who would do all that other stuff so that we could concentrate on our more youth work, tackling some real social issues in the community, which is what our raison d’être is really and what we enjoy doing” (Interviewee M)

There was an emphasis by some CST interviewees as perceiving the partnership as ‘strategic’. However the strategic element was not one that translates into organisational self-interest, rather it was focused on how the social partnership is a tool for the CST to address a social issue in such a way that the ultimate beneficiaries are the recipients of the initiatives. As one interviewee stated:

“If, by using (the football club), we can help pupils improve their maths; if by using the attraction of (the football club) we can have youngsters on an estate and join us for football sessions and be safe and have a good time together; if by the attraction of (the football club) we can help youngsters with any other

school subjects we would be foolish not to” (Interviewee L, football club anonymised)

This was different from the way that the football clubs perceived the partnership. The interviews revealed that there is both self-interest and social interest associated with the social partnerships. For example, one of the club respondents clearly emphasised the business case but also the fact that ‘it crosses both’; a direct reference to self-interest and a social interest:

“However, where it links is my point that the more communities you touch and the more people that see the (football club) brand name, because the trust activity is all carried out under the (football club) brand name, the more they become the future supporters of the club so that’s the business case, that’s why it crosses both” (Interviewee B, football club anonymised)

However it was also found that self-interest, with a secondary interest in the social issue, underpins some social partnerships. This related to the formation of the CST (from the previous internal FiTC model) where the interviews revealed that in some cases the decision to convert to the charitable model was driven by the needs of the football club, for example as a way to reduce costs in an area that was not considered fundamental to the business model of the clubs:

“So ours [the trust] came out of a very unique position here with the owner of the club at that point not wanting to fund any work and so we took the decision

to do it ourselves. And some other club's community schemes did that at the same time". (Interviewee M)

Another key example that was discussed in the interviews where football clubs view the partnerships in a self-interested way related to the idea that they are able to build relationships with key stakeholders. One type of relationship is that between a football club and a local authority, particularly around the issue of planning applications relating to stadiums.

"..... and that's half the reason why clubs have these community schemes, because they want to show their CSR side of things..... Because it gives them advantages over other planning consents. The reason why they do it is because they want to diminish the Section 106 commitments" (Interviewee M)

"Most would say that one of the major reasons why they got planning permission was the community work that the club do. I don't think that anyone would doubt that. It's agreed really. One of the overriding factors as to why we got planning permission was the community work" (Interviewee H)

These quotes from interviews in 2011 align with previous research that supported the idea that football clubs are aware of the "degree of leverage" that the role of a CST can provide when it comes to planning consent⁴⁵. More recently we have seen this with the reduced section 106 commitment required by Haringey Council connected to Tottenham Hotspur's new stadium development. Arguably the

community programmes run by the Tottenham Hotspur Foundation played an important role in this, demonstrating the strategic CSR role that community programmes play in obtaining planning permission. One of the interviews also showed that the relationship with the local authority extended beyond planning permission and actually resulted in financial support for a football club:

“There is no way the Council would have given us that money unless they thought that we were good partners delivering good community programmes, so the partnership actually translated there into some hard cash which helped the football club to survive” (Interviewee E)

For the football club therefore the self-interest motive underpins involvement in a social partnership. Research on CSR in sport has demonstrated similar conclusions: for example Hamil and Morrow⁴⁶ found instrumental reasons underpinning the CSR activities of Scottish Premier League clubs where the community work was part of the business model of the football club. Nonetheless, each partnership is different and therefore understanding the primary interest for partnering will differ across partners.

Contextual factors

Contextual factors set out the underlying pressures on organisations to engage in a social partnership. There are clear links with the societal sector platform and the pressure for adaptation to complexity and turbulence in regards to the formation of a

CST. During the 1990s the internal FiTC departments at professional football clubs were primarily responsible for delivering coaching activities in the geographical communities around football clubs. However by the 2000s there was increasing calls for a new approach, emphasised by the report by Brown et al⁴⁷, in which it was argued that the notion of ‘the community’ was complicated; that there was confusion surrounding club-community responsibilities; that football clubs did not really understand what is meant by the concept of community; and that a cohesive central government strategy was lacking. It was during this period that there was a shift in the institutional logic within the field. No longer were FiTC schemes predominantly seen as mechanisms to deliver coaching programmes but they were identified by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport as a way to target key policy objectives: initiatives launched and funded by the government alongside other partners included *Positive Futures* and *Playing for Success* that were designed to tackle social inclusion, youth crime and raise educational standards. At the same time, the point mentioned above about football clubs becoming less willing to fund FiTC schemes led to an increasingly turbulent and complex environment. Many working within the FiTC departments recognised this, and as a result the move to the CST model and the development of social partnerships was seen as a way for the FiTC departments to become more self-reliant:

“That’s why the community programmes in the late 80s and 90s have built up their own networks, their own connections, their own links and they had their relationships, their own funding partners and in some cases the funding

partners were more important than the club in some instances, because that was the nature of it to keep it all going” (Interviewee M)

For a football club however it was clear that a social partnership can be understood as a result of increasing pressure on football clubs to address CSR (the social issues platform). This has also been seen in the broader sporting context. For example Babiak and Wolfe⁴⁸ demonstrated external pressures on sport organisations to engage in CSR from a range of stakeholders, including supporters, employees, and corporate partners. The growing commercialisation within the professional football industry has led to pressures for football clubs to be seen as good neighbours and to be ‘doing the right thing’ (see Brown et al⁴⁹). In particular, football clubs were seen by the former Labour government as a means to deliver the ‘third way’ agenda and to demonstrate a commitment to socially responsible activities⁵⁰. The social partnership with the CST is one way of doing this. However when one considers the context underpinning the social partnership it was clear that the resource dependence platform and the pressure for ‘mission-related performance’ was highly relevant for a football club⁵¹. For example, the football club interviewees perceived that the social partnership with the CST had the potential to benefit a football club financially through commercial sponsorship deals in which the work of the CST is a key element in attracting commercial sponsors to a football club. Similarly, an additional financial benefit as a result of the social partnership was the potential to increase the supporter base. This was recognised by both the clubs and the CSTs that were interviewed, for example:

“We want people to feel that it’s not that they just come here on a Saturday but that they actually are imputing into something, but there is a business case and this is where is often gets lost. If I have got 250 coaches out there working with 350 thousand people a year and they are giving out literature about matches and making them all membership..... things like that, a proportion of those will then become fans of the club” (Interviewee B, football club reference is kept anonymous)

This was mentioned previously in the section on primary interest, demonstrating that there is a strong sense of synergy between context and primary interest. This is understandable: contextual factors are likely to influence the primary interest for engaging in a social partnership.

An additional aspect that was mentioned that relates to the mission of the football club was that the social partnership has the potential to identify players for the football club. At two of the CST schemes interviewed the football coaching courses linked to the academies that the football clubs ran. There were a number of children within these academies that had been identified through the community programmes with a very small number even making it to the first team squad at one of the football clubs. Although this was not stated explicitly by the football club, one of the interviewees at a CST mentioned this:

“It’s taken a while for us to demonstrate how much an asset the community scheme can be on all strands. It was important to show that quality players

were coming through and we were giving the club very good players they are seeing those stats” (Interviewee C)

These are clear examples where mission related performance (the resource dependence platform) is an influential contextual factor underpinning the way that the football club and the CSTs frame their understanding of the social partnership. However it was suggested that clubs were not solely pressured to engage in the social partnership for this reason. As two interviewees stated, there is the expectation that football clubs must also give back to society; in other words the clubs believe that community programmes offer a win-win situation:

“You either get your source of [financial] support from a sugar-daddy or you get it from the broader community, and if you want to get it from the broader community you have got to offer the community something back, which is where the social enterprise fits. So you have got to offer the social bottom line as well as the financial bottom line” (Interviewee E)

“Football clubs who are locally engaged and delivering real local benefit, whether it is their motivation or not and whether they are fan owned or not, find that they have better relations with a range of local stakeholders” (Interviewee K)

In this sense you can argue that there is overlap between the social issues platform and the resource dependency platform; this is what Porter and Kramer⁵²

contend is the interdependency between business and society. Whilst the need to be a ‘good neighbour’ was stressed by virtually all of the interviewees, it was clear that football clubs also felt pressure to ensure that the social partnership is tied to the mission of the club, in this case generating revenues to be able to improve on-pitch performance. The context in which an individual perceives the social partnership between a football club and a CST therefore determines the way the partnership is perceived.

Source of problem definition

The source of problem definition relates to who defines the issues that a social partnership is engaged in. One of the earlier interviews suggested that it is the CSTs that are the source of problem definition in that they respond to the needs of their local communities:

“I think what you’ll find is that every scheme needs to look at what their opportunities are and what communities initially surround them and how they relate to those as well”. (Interviewee D)

This aligns with the social issues perspective in the sense that it is local communities that are the source of the problem definition. This also concurs with the view stressed earlier that the programmes were ‘needs-led’ and supports the idea that it is the CSTs that are able to determine what programmes to develop based on a bottom-up approach in response to needs within the local communities. Whilst there

was an acknowledgement of the need to align with government strategy in the early interviews it was evident that over time the issues that the social partnerships address appear to be driven more by external agents than by the CST. For example, there was overwhelming acceptance that community sport trusts, during the period in which the Labour government was in power, have benefitted from the receipt of government funding, both centrally administered and from local government. It is clear that the community sport trusts interviewed had aligned themselves with government, as mention was made about how this had been an explicit strategy of the community sport trust:

“We’ve started to more strategically align ourselves with the priorities of the council, things like that. We are starting to pay a bit more attention to that, rightly so. When we do that, we always find that what we are doing does fit in” (Interviewee G)

Where this is the case, it can be argued that government agendas act as a subtle coercive pressure that ultimately influences the type of activity that community sport trust deliver. This concurs with previous research that has identified that CSTs, as charitable organisations, are dependent upon sources of funding⁵³, as the following demonstrates:

“We would shape where we’re going according to where the funding is and sometimes you have to change that: if there’s no more funding in that

particular area then you have to stop. But by that time you'd have moved on to do other things. Sustainability is the key really" (Interviewee H)

The last point on sustainability is important. It is clear that underpinning the alignment with government agendas is that it can provide a certain level of financial sustainability. This demonstrates that government funding acts as an influence or a source of problem definition that can influence the activities of the social partnership. It was also found that the Football League Trust and the Premier League were also able to influence the types of community initiative. For example, the Premier League has the 'Creating Chances' brand that oversees community initiatives in five broad areas: community cohesion; education; health; sports participation; and international. The Football League Trust also has four similar overarching themes: education; health; sport; and inclusion. Both the Premier League and Football League provide funding for projects in these areas (although significantly more in the case of the Premier League), demonstrating that they set the community agenda centrally and community sport trusts deliver the programmes, for example:

"The Premier League provides 50% of our funding, so recently there is a big project, I am very proud of our new mental health project. We are one of the clubs working on that. So the Premier League knows what's needed" (Interviewee G)

"So they [the Football League Trust] try and be our watchdog, they try to be our governance scrutinisers, that's one role. It's a bit like the BBC Trust, it's

a bit complicated, because they are our advocates, but they are also our police at the same time. So they police us in terms that we're all doing what we say we're doing". (Interviewee M)

This demonstrates that the source of the problem definition is often based on emerging public issues that are constructed over time, for example government agendas that demonstrate the relevance of the societal sector platform. However it is also clear that the source of problem definition is externally defined by existing interest groups and public issues, for example by the Premier league and Football League, or by football clubs (social issues platform).

Dependencies

The resource dependence platform is underpinned by the idea that the organisations involved in a social partnership want to ensure the boundaries between the organisations are clear and that in doing so they are able to retain their autonomy. From a social issues platform, there is a focus on managing and segmenting interdependencies, whilst the societal sector platform focuses on integrating interdependencies. It was these latter two perspectives that came out in the interviews. For a CST there was a clear perception that the charitable model allows a certain level of autonomy, for example in relation to applying for grants and taking certain strategic decisions. This sense of autonomy between partners is reflected formally through the Football League criteria for receiving centralised funding:

“They’ve [the Football League] had this bronze, silver, gold accreditation and they’ve just revised bronze again and bronze is all about governance, forecasting, management, delivery, development, all the elements that make up a functional, independent business is what they are looking at. They want to see finances separate to the club. They want to see audited accounts. They want to see independent boards of trustees” (Interviewee M)

Whilst this would suggest that there is a clear sense of the need to retain autonomy within the context of the social partnerships, at the same time the fact that the CSTs enter into a contractual service-level agreement with the clubs indicates a certain level of interdependence. For example, when asked about the relationship between the club and the CST, two interviewees responded as follows:

“We have to be in agreement with the club in terms of the way we use the club’s logo, etc. And why would we want to do anything they didn’t want us to do. But the other thing is that you have to maintain your own independence in some areas” (Interviewee H)

“There’s a very close working relationship with senior people at the club here to understand what the strategy is and how the club and the scheme can work together. More recently we have worked together on things like the (football club) deal where the scheme played a prominent role in that agreement. (Interviewee C, sponsorship deal anonymised)”

This balance suggests that managing and segmenting social partnerships are important therefore aligning with the social issues platform. However there was also evidence to suggest integration, particularly in the context of local authorities. With many local authorities providing funding for CSTs to deliver initiatives it was clear that a strong sense of integration was needed in order to obtain funding. This also relates to the previous section on the source of the problem definition. For example, if a CST is dependent upon a particular partner for funding, then it is likely that this partner will also be able to influence the nature of the programmes or initiatives (i.e. the source of the problem definition) that are delivered.

Time-frame

The time-frame dimension reflects the longevity of the social partnership. From a social issues platform, a partnership can be seen as finite or infinite depending on the social need or issue. The key factor underpinning the time-frame element of the social partnerships in this research was funding and from the perspective of the CSTs interviewed, this was dependent upon other partners:

“As much as we can be involved in social inclusion, and probably 60 per cent of our work at least is that, we still need to balance up everything because all you need is a change in government policy or a change in government possibly and half the rug could be pulled from you and you could then suddenly find that you completely shrink down again and you have got a problem”
(Interviewee D)

“My particular project, you cannot get refunded. The Premier league does not refund projects. Obviously, with the current climate the council has less money now. So in it’s current form it will not go forward” (Interviewee G)

Whilst the social partnerships demonstrate a sense of longevity and in most cases are infinite in the sense that there have only been a very small number of social partnerships that have ceased to exist (due to the CST having been financially unable to continue), the nature of the work and the initiatives that are delivered therefore are determined by the social issues and the aspects that the partner organisations are prepared to fund. In this sense there is a strong level of stability in the social partnership. Where there is less stability is in regard to particular social issues. When one becomes less important or government prioritise other issues then it can lead to a particular initiative ceasing to receive any funding. This has led to CSTs effectively becoming more professional (due to the need to demonstrate they are a suitable organisation to fund) but at the same time they have increasingly taken on the role of a service deliverer in the social partnership and therefore are less able to determine the types of projects that it gets involved in as these are driven by funding bodies. This is potentially problematic where a community sport trust is heavily reliant on funding from local or central government given the public sector budget cuts in the UK, or where it leads CSTs to deliver projects that they feel no longer demonstrate a commitment to address social issues:

“I mean the other thing is about taking risks, because in the old days we would do projects that interested us and we would take a financial hit on it and a risk because we thought it would lead to something else. In the current climate there’s not so much of that, because the flip-side of all this is that you are creating a monster that you have to keep feeding. It gets bigger and bigger. On one side the XXXX scenario with what he said about staff, but also you become funding led and you’re just a service deliverer based on contracts. The local authority in particular. You just spend your time doing stuff for them and you don’t do any stuff that actually interests you. But you’re doing it because you need to survive. This isn’t all roses at all. (Interviewee M, reference to another individual anonymised)

Conclusion

This article has drawn on three theoretical platforms and five dimensions set out by Selsky and Parker⁵⁴ in order to better understand the social partnerships between CSTs, football clubs and other organisations. There are three key conclusions. First, this research has shown that organisations get involved in social partnerships for different reasons and perceive the partnerships in different ways. In the case of the social partnership between a CST, a professional football club, and other agencies such as local authorities, there are differing perspectives on the social partnership. This is particularly the case in regard to a football club as they align more with a resource dependence platform and view the social partnership firstly in regard to self-interest and secondly as a way to address a social concern. This is understandable

given that the chief responsibility of a football club and for those running the club is to drive commercial revenues to be able to compete on the field of play. In contrast, a CST (the delivery agent of the social partnership) conceives of the partnership as a way for them to address social issues first and foremost. This is not a novel finding in and of itself: others have shown this to be the case in regards to business organisations (self-interested goals) and non-profit organisations (social goals) that engage in a social partnership⁵⁵. However in the context of the sport industry there is little research that has shown the underpinning motivations for social partnerships although Sheth and Babiak⁵⁶ indicated that whilst sport executives focussed on philanthropic activities and ethical behaviours, they also viewed CSR as a strategic tool for their business.

The question that this raises is whether this is a problem if two of the key partners involved in the social partnership have differing perceptions of the partnership? Previous research has shown the “dysfunctional affiliation”⁵⁷ between football clubs and CST managers: if this dysfunction expands more broadly across the partners within a social partnership then this may be problematic as it may lead to a disconnect between a football club and CST. From the interviews that were conducted it was clear that there was a strong relationship between those involved in the social partnerships (despite differing perceptions of the partnerships) while the reflective position of the interviewees’ demonstrated the complex, but sometimes close relationships, between football clubs and the CSTs. The interviews also provided evidence about how those working in CSTs come to understand the more strategic motivations of the football clubs. However it was suggested that across the sector a

strong relationship between a football club and CST is not always in evidence although this is not necessarily problematic if the two organisations can continue to work together in a social partnership and achieve their objectives.

A second, related point focuses on the theories, or platforms underpinning social partnerships. It has been shown that there are strong synergies between the five dimensions. So, for example, contextual factors clearly have an influence on the primary interest of a partner, whilst in the context of a social partnership, dependencies, the source of the problem definition, and time-frame elements are also closely related. However whilst Selsky and Parker⁵⁸ contend that the three theoretical platforms exist on their own and set out clear characteristics (or dimensions) that underpin the platforms, this research has shown that it is difficult to perceive a social partnership from the perspective of one partner entirely in the context of one of the platforms. So, as mentioned above, it is clear that different organisations involved in a social partnership may get involved for different reasons. It was also argued that the platform that best describes the way that a professional football club perceives the partnership is the resource dependence platform in contrast to the social issues platform that underpins a CST. However what this research has also shown is that the involvement in a social partnership may be underpinned by different theoretical platforms in relation to the five dimensions in this research. This was the case in relation to the primary interest of a football club to engage in a social partnership. This was more aligned with the resource dependence perspective yet at the same time when it comes to the source of the problem definition the social issues or societal sector platform is a better framework for understanding the partnership. What this

demonstrates is that it is difficult to perceive a social partnership entirely in the context of one of the platforms.

The third conclusion from this research is that despite there appearing to have been a strong degree of homogenization within the organizational field over the past decade whereby internal FiTC schemes at professional football clubs have converted to the CST form of organisation, this research has found that there are differences amongst social partnerships. For example one of the themes that came out of the interviews was that social partnerships vary; some work well and address a range of social issues while others simply deliver football and coaching courses with little engagement in the social partnership. Therefore to attempt to generalise across the sector would not necessarily portray an accurate picture of what is happening. Nevertheless, how can we explain the rapid adoption of the charitable structure over the past decade? One possible reason is that it provides a sense of legitimacy amongst the key actors involved in the social partnership. For a CST it provides a sense of separation from a football club, thereby giving more confidence and ability to apply for grants. For a football club, the separation allows them to focus on their primary area of interest and leave the community side to the CST yet at the same time they draw on the social partnership as a source of legitimacy and create a socially constructed story about the community activities that the football club is involved in that can be used to create a social definition of the organisation⁵⁹. Scott⁶⁰ discussed institutionalization as a “process of creating reality” and in part this can be seen in the way that football clubs draw on the work of the social partnerships to generate positive publicity, to help build a community brand, and to position themselves as a

key organisation within a community. However, there is a danger that in seeking legitimacy through the same organisational form, such arrangements will not be right for every social partnership. Perhaps now, with almost all professional football clubs having an association with a community sport trust, we may start to see critical reflection on whether this model is the most appropriate form for the future and whether alternative models will develop. Further research is therefore needed to be able to take into account a wider range of perspectives on social partnerships in the professional football industry, but also to focus specifically on the differences between social partnerships to better understand whether the charitable model is appropriate for all schemes and why some are able to grow and develop better than others. .

Notes

¹ Bondy et al., 'An Institution of Corporate Social Responsibility'

² Brammer et al., 'Corporate Social Responsibility and institutional theory'

³ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Seitanidi and Crane, *Social Partnerships and Responsible Business*

⁴ Waddock, 'Building successful partnerships'; Warhurst, 'Corporate citizenship and corporate social investment'; Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Seitanidi and Crane, *Social Partnerships and Responsible Business*

⁵ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'

⁶ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Seitanidi and Lindgreen, 'Editorial: Cross-Sector Social Interactions'

⁷ Husted, 'Governance choices for corporate social responsibility'; Albareda et al., 'The changing role of governments in corporate social responsibility'

⁸ Watson, *Football in the Community*; Walters and Chadwick, 'Corporate citizenship in football'

⁹ Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 'Implementing corporate social responsibility in English football'

¹⁰ Seitanidi, *The Politics of Partnerships*, six strands of partnership literature are outlined in regards to business-non-profit partnerships – the nature of the partnership; the managerial aspects; strategic use; legal and ethical considerations; partnership measurements; and societal implications

¹¹ Googins & Rochlin, 'Creating the partnership society'; Bryson et al., 'The design and implementation of cross-sector collaborations'

¹² Waddock, 'Building successful partnerships'

¹³ Bingham and Walters; 'Financial sustainability within UK charities'; Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 'Implementing corporate social responsibility in English football'

¹⁴ Bingham and Walters; 'Financial sustainability within UK charities'

¹⁵ Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 'Implementing corporate social responsibility in English football', 278

¹⁶ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'

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- ¹⁷ Waddock and Smith, 'Relationships'; Berger et al., 'Social alliances'; Seitanidi and Crane, 'Implementing CSR through partnerships'
- ¹⁸ Seitanidi and Ryan, 'A critical review of forms of corporate community involvement', 413
- ¹⁹ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ²⁰ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues', 21
- ²¹ This table is taken from Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships', 30.
- ²² Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'
- ²³ Porter and Kramer, 'Strategy and society'
- ²⁴ Graafland and van de Ven, 'Strategic and Moral Motivation for Corporate Social Responsibility'
- ²⁵ Donaldson and Preston, 'The stakeholder theory of the corporation'
- ²⁶ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ²⁷ This table is taken from Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships', 30
- ²⁸ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'
- ²⁹ Bennett, 'Marketing of Voluntary Organizations as Contract Providers of National and Local Government Welfare Services in the UK'
- ³⁰ Kendall, *The Voluntary Sector*; Lusted and O'Gorman, 'The impact of New Labour's modernisation agenda on the English grass-roots football workforce'
- ³¹ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ³² Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues', 852
- ³³ Fombrun et al., 'Opportunity Platforms and Safety Nets'; Sagawa and Segal, *Common Interest, Common Good*; Porter and Kramer, 'Strategy and society'; Jamali and Keshishian, 'Uneasy alliances'
- ³⁴ Mahon and Wartick, 'Dealing with Stakeholders', 19
- ³⁵ Graafland and van de Ven, 'Strategic and Moral Motivation for Corporate Social Responsibility'
- ³⁶ Scherer and Palazzo, 'Toward a Political Conception of Corporate Responsibility'
- ³⁷ Lindgreen and Swaen, 'Corporate social responsibility'; Kotler and Lee, *Corporate social responsibility*
- ³⁸ Bondy et al., 'An Institution of Corporate Social Responsibility'; Brammer et al., 'Corporate Social Responsibility and institutional theory'
- ³⁹ Brammer et al., 'Corporate Social Responsibility and institutional theory'
- ⁴⁰ Bondy et al., 'An Institution of Corporate Social Responsibility'
- ⁴¹ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁴² Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*
- ⁴³ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁴⁴ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁴⁵ Walters and Chadwick, 'Corporate citizenship in football', 60
- ⁴⁶ Hamil and Morrow, 'Corporate Social Responsibility in the Scottish Premier League'
- ⁴⁷ Brown et al., *Football and its communities*
- ⁴⁸ Babiak and Wolfe, 'Determinants of Corporate Social Responsibility in professional sport'
- ⁴⁹ Brown et al., *Football and its communities*
- ⁵⁰ Mellor, 'The 'Janus-faced sport''
- ⁵¹ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁵² Porter and Kramer, 'Strategy and society'
- ⁵³ Bingham and Walters; 'Financial sustainability within UK charities'
- ⁵⁴ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'; Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁵⁵ Selsky and Parker, 'Cross-sector partnerships to address social issues'
- ⁵⁶ Sheth and Babiak, 'Beyond the game'
- ⁵⁷ Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 'Implementing corporate social responsibility in English football', 278
- ⁵⁸ Selsky and Parker, 'Platforms for Cross-Sector Social Partnerships'
- ⁵⁹ Mizruchi and Fein, 'The Social Construction of Organizational Knowledge'
- ⁶⁰ Scott, 'The adolescence of institutional theory', 495

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