Chapter 5

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research Opportunities

ABSTRACT

There is a wealth of reporting and evidence from research that small third sector social enterprises have a vital role to play not just in relation to service delivery, but also contribute to nurturing positive relationships, supporting vulnerable, disadvantaged groups and building stronger communities (Maher, 2015a; Seanor & Meaton, 2007; Smallbone & Lyon, 2004). Most small third sector social enterprises are set up because they have identified a gap in the market. Often, this has meant that there is either a public-service or private-market failure. In order to help these enterprises grow, policy makers need to tailor policy and support aiming to build capacity of these organisations in terms of the scale and volume of their activities; to enhance their contribution at local, regional and national levels. Organisations should advance their business management and procurement skills to enable the creation of sustainable income. This chapter makes recommendations for both policy and practices to help the development, growth, and sustainability of small third sector social enterprises and concludes by making suggestions for future research opportunities.

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INTRODUCTION

Small third sector social enterprises play a big part in tackling inequalities in our society and encouraging economic growth. They are uniquely suited to nurturing social-capital development, as well as providing products and services, particularly at local level. However, they face various barriers, including measuring value, due to a lack of capacity (in some cases), which affects their ability to evidence their own impact (Maher, 2015a). Commissioning authorities have driven down unit costs, further reducing the ability of small sector organisations to participate in the procurement process and demonstrate added value. Procurement requires internal capacity of small social enterprises to write applications, consult with board of directors and staff and develop the kind of business plans that commissioners need. In many cases, small sector enterprises have cut back on this capacity in order to focus their resources in front line service delivery. Until the sector has greater levels of management capacity, it is unlikely that many small social enterprises will have the capacity to engage fully in the commissioning process.

Small social enterprises need support to become investment-ready. This will require the investment of time, skills and money into these organisations’ business development.

In the current climate, in which private and public funders are increasingly demanding evidence of impact, this implies that small third sector social enterprises will increasingly be left at a disadvantage if they lack the capability and capacity to make the case for their work.

These small social enterprises sometimes find it difficult to articulate the impact of their work because they have limited organisational capacity and resource, such as the skills of using outcome-measuring approaches. Most of these enterprises are willing to address this but are unsure of how to do so or how to go about it. Some organisations struggle to demonstrate the short- and long-term impact of work they do, due to lack of staff time to collect and analyse data.

It takes substantial amounts of staff time to gather and analyse data in order to articulate impact; sometimes the commissioners’ expectations of cost and time required are not matched by allocation of the funds provided (Ellis & Gregory, 2008). Several organisations reported a lack of clarity over which impact-measurement approaches they should use and which are seen as credible by funders or commissioners.
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