Teaching how to fish: Strategic Practices and Social Entrepreneurship, a Brazilian Experience

Alexandra Esperança Meira, Victor Meyer Jr., Lucilaine Pascucci

Pontifical Catholic University of Parana, Curitiba, Parana, Brazil

At the beginning of this century Western society reveals strong economic and social disparities as a result of a market system that displaces extensive segments of population. Social entrepreneurship has been one of the several tools used by the third sector on behalf of these segments. Social entrepreneurship is understood as risk-taking people or organizations that are able to create new businesses and opportunities that adopt creative and proactive practices.

Social entrepreneurship focuses on social transformation. Entrepreneurs are agents who interpret, innovate, feel and define practices to be adopted in each specific case.

In Brazil Non Governmental Organizations – NGOs, has successfully developed income generation projects. This study evaluates the experience of an NGO that deals with projects of promotion and support to community entrepreneurship, enabling low-income entrepreneurs to have access to knowledge, information, credit, infrastructure and commercialization. The central ideas of this innovative experience is to train and offer access to low income people with entrepreneurial characteristics so they can develop their abilities and business and contribute to the increase of income and other benefits that come from that.

There are many challenges faced by NGOs in the execution of projects focused on income generation. The adoption of strict models has proven to be one of these obstacles, making the adaptation to different realities harder. These models also normally have one focused attention, not addressing all other needs of knowledge and development of a community enterprise. Another barrier identified is an open policy followed by many organizations without clear criteria for the end of the support to community enterprises. Projects such as the one addressed in this study do not fit this description. Its main characteristic is to promote autonomy, technical capacity and transformation of the environment to create and maintain its own business addressing the many needs of an enterprise.

This study examines the strategic practices adopted by a Brazilian NGO in the execution of projects that stimulate community entrepreneurship. The work is based in the concept of strategy as practice proposed by Whittington (1996) and Jarzabkowski (2008). A second theoretical basis is based on the assumption that the real strategists are the agents responsible for the development of the activities and represented by a set of micro-strategies (Rouleau, 2005).

This study is based on the experience of an NGO that has relevant actions in four Brazilian States. It aims to answer to the following research question: What are the strategic practices that contribute for the efficacy of the projects of stimulus to community entrepreneurship? The research is qualitative and based on a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989). The data collection methods were non participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 15 agents directly responsible in the execution of projects.

The concept of “loosely coupled” (Weick, 1976; Weick & Orton, 1990) composes the theoretical basis. The agents, in the execution of projects, share common elements and have
strong action autonomy. These professionals are capable of noticing the different realities and adapt the methodology used by the NGO. In their practices, the agents combine elements as experience, tacit knowledge, interpretation, interactions and insights for the execution of the adequate strategies that make the projects viable (Mintzberg, 2003; Whittington, 1996, Jarzabkowski, 2008).

In the methodology`s replication model adopted by the NGO, the agents “observe through the eyes of the other” and the language used is adapted and taken towards the entrepreneurs’ issues of interest, which are fundamental for the success of their enterprises. This practice is based in Andragogic Principles proposed by Malcolm Knowles (1970) for adult education, which are also applied by Paulo Freire (2007) in educational projects related to literacy in Brazil.

Preliminary results indicate that the model developed by the Brazilian NGO has produced positive results. As practices adopted inside the community group, the identification and development of personal talents, creativity and building of management tools are noticeable. The accesses to knowledge, credit and commercialization are offered simultaneously and support the growth and strengthening of the enterprise in all needed areas. In an external analysis, the interaction capacity developed by the organization and its agents amongst entrepreneurs and community has been fundamental for an average growth of 56% in the entrepreneurs’ income in the first year, and more than 300% from the second year of support.

References


