Supportive Measures for Scaling Swedish Social Organizations Abroad: Intermediaries’ Perception of Initiatives Needed

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ABSTRACT

This study is investigating if stakeholders in the Swedish ecosystem of entrepreneurship perceive that there is a need for initiatives supporting social organizations’ internationalization and if so – what support should be implemented to provide maximum value. Nine semi-structured interviews with stakeholders representing academic institutions, public agencies and support organizations were conducted. The result shows that the majority of social entrepreneurs currently operating in Sweden are not looking into scaling internationally and those who do often have a clear technology focus and target the Nordic countries. The stakeholders perceived that there was a need for support initiatives related to internationalization, mainly with regards to strengthening business-mindedness. In the final discussion, the results are mapped into a scalability framework and the strategy for social organizations developed by the Swedish government, to identify potential overlaps and place the findings in a theoretical context. As the field entails a wide variety of organizations, suggestions for future research includes identifying support initiatives targeting niches within social entrepreneurship, and assessing how public organizations can support further growth.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Social organizations; Intermediary organizations; Internationalization; Entrepreneurial ecosystem

ACM CLASSIFICATION KEYWORDS

K.4.m. Computers and society: Miscellaneous
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INTRODUCTION
Swedish entrepreneurship and its innovation capacity is receiving plenty of positive recognition internationally [1]. In 2018, Sweden scored top rankings in two indexes comparing and ranking countries national innovation systems – The European Innovation Scoreboard and the INSEAD Global Innovation Index [1]. Sweden was also recognized in 2018 for its efforts in working with sustainability, scoring first place in the Sustainable Development Goals Index and in the Climate Change Performance Index [1]. The Swedish Institute recognize that Sweden has a “disproportionate amount of influence on global innovation”, taking in consideration that Swedes only account for 0.13 per cent of the global population [1]. Stockholm is breeding unicorns, companies with a billion-dollar valuation, at a staggering rate, and is only succumbed by Silicon Valley when it comes to number of unicorns per capita [2]. People are trying to understand Sweden’s success, referring to contributing factors ranging from the social stability and access to governmental support, to the high degree of equality and the long-term focus on education and research Sweden has fostered [3]. Other factors include a culture of sharing, openness to new ideas and the small size of the Swedish market, which encourage startups to think globally from the onset [2].

Measures to Support and Promote Social Organizations in Sweden
The European Union highlights that Sweden is a country that has initiated a “broad variety of policies, measures and schemes specifically addressing and providing support to social enterprises” [4, p. 67]. The Swedish government acknowledge that social entrepreneurship and innovation has potential to quickly drive positive change, and in 2018 a strategy was introduced that outlines five focus areas going forward with the aim of creating better conditions for social organizations to grow and contribute to solving societal issues [7]. These five areas include: i) supply and demand (focus on clients), ii) strengthen business advisory services (focus on competence), iii) financing (focus on capital), iv) clarify and measure impact and v) develop knowledge and meeting places. The government also recognizes that there is a gap between the demand for support services aimed towards social entrepreneurs and the initiatives currently available [5]. The Ratio Institute, on the other hand, are critical towards targeted financial support and similar activities and put forward that increased system thinking with focus on providing competence and institutions working with promoting innovation and entrepreneurship are actions that would yield greater impact [6].

Social entrepreneurship as a scientific inquiry is still at the stage of infancy, but the general interest for social innovation in Sweden among policy makers, opinion leaders and researchers has grown during the past decade [7][8]. The need for contributions in both theory and practice are pressing [9]. Berglund and Johannisson stress that the field is especially dependent on qualitative research in general and most studies in the field are retrospective explorations where case studies are employed as main research method [10]. Researching the ecosystem in which social entrepreneurs are operating, and understanding the role of intermediaries such as the government and other support actors, has also been highlighted as an important prospective area of research [11].

The aim of this study is to understand what view stakeholders in the ecosystem have; if they perceive that there is a need for targeted support for internationalization of social organizations, and if that is the case, what initiatives would provide maximum value. The study will look at the topic on a national level, and no international stakeholders will partake. The results can be utilized when evaluating the need for internationalization support going forward, but also to
get a greater understanding of how Swedish social organizations reason with regards to scaling.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The term "social economy" was introduced in Sweden when it joined the European Union in 1995 [12]. Björk et al. define social innovation as "new approaches and solutions to social needs or common problems that are implemented in, and impact, society. Social innovations are inclusive and create new social relations or collaborations" [8, p. 15]. Tidd and Bessant also emphasize that there are many definitions of social innovation and entrepreneurship, but that most include two elements; the aim to create social change/value and that business, public and third-sector organizations often are involved in achieving that [13]. Björk et al. also highlight that they do not perceive it as neither important or desirable to come up with an all-encompassing definition of social innovation, while at the same time acknowledging the fact that the lack of a clear definition could pose a risk in turning social innovation into "everything and nothing at once" [8, p. 15]. The Swedish government further highlights that the social enterprise can have a variety of legal forms [14], that their results are being measured in relation to how well the organization meet the defined goals of societal importance, and that the financial surplus is reinvested into the organization or in another project with a social mission [5].

Difference Between Traditional and Social Entrepreneurship

The Swedish government also identifies that social entrepreneurship can be difficult to distinguish from other forms of entrepreneurship, but highlights that there are differences in the support needed [5]. Tidd and Bessant recognize that social entrepreneurs differ from traditional entrepreneurs in three major respects; their focus on social means and ends rather than independence and wealth, their focus on long-term change and enduring heritage rather than short-term growth, and the greater reliance on a network of stakeholders and resources rather than on the firm and management team [13]. They also highlight two potential barriers to social entrepreneurship; access to and support of "local networks of social and community-based organizations" and "government and political infrastructure" [13, p.599].

Sandström et al. identifies that the triple helix model is a manifestation of the school of thought called "systems of innovation" that focuses on system thinking and highlights that innovation is an interactive and iterative process, that occur between many different actors with shifting roles [6][15]. The model (see Figure 1) identifies three actors deemed as central for the collective strength of the ecosystem: universities, the public and private sector. To identify stakeholders active in the ecosystem, the triple helix approach was utilized when classifying the involved intermediaries.

![Figure 1: Triple Helix Framework](image)

Scaling Social Organizations

Scaling refers to social organizations’ efforts to increase the social impact yielded from the business. The measurable increase in impact is based on the spread of the idea, but growth might not always be the best strategy to achieve the organization’s goal. Research highlights the importance of having a long-term growth strategy to ensure that the right resources are in place, and making sure that the organization has capacity to scale [16]. Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern argue that a social organization may "launch into growth and expansion before sufficient thought or planning has been put into it", simply because they perceive their organization to be superior compared to other organizations [9, p. 374]. This notion emphasizes that social entrepreneurs might need additional support from intermediaries when it comes to scaling. Weber et al. further puts forward that scaling a social organization differs from scaling a commercial enterprise, since there are differences in both the organizational, but also the
contextual conditions [17]. To facilitate scaling, Weber et al. have developed the scalability framework, building upon 88 articles that have been integrated into seven key components, each critical for scaling social organizations. These are: i) commitment of the individuals driving the scaling process, ii) management competence, iii) entire or partial replicability of the operational model, iv) ability to meet social demands, v) ability to obtain necessary resources, vi) potential effectiveness of scaling social impact with others and vii) adaptability. The seven key components of the scalability framework and the strategy developed by the Swedish government, will be used in the discussion to frame the results of the study in a theoretical context.

Research Question
Do stakeholders in the ecosystem perceive that there is a need for initiatives supporting social organizations’ internationalization and if so – what measures should be implemented to provide maximum value for the organizations looking to scale?

METHOD
The study employed an exploratory research approach as it aimed to create greater understanding for a phenomenon and providing insights into an area lacking a clear definition [18]. Qualitative primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, with the aim of collecting data difficult to access using other methods such as surveying. Collecting deep insights building upon intrinsic industry expertise and empirical knowledge which the interviewees possess is essential to answer the research question [19].

A mapping of stakeholders was carried out. This was built upon the triple helix model and based on the results of another mapping conducted by Björk et al. that identifies Swedish actors in the ecosystem of social entrepreneurship [5]. The results were cross-checked with three specialists in the field to minimize selection bias. Three different intermediary groups emerged from the mapping and three interviews were carried out with representatives from each group:

- Academic institutions working with supporting social organizations in various ways
- Public agencies working to strengthen the ecosystem in various ways
- Support organizations (companies) such as incubators and accelerators

It was crucial to identify the right person within each organization to partake in the study. The interviewees were selected carefully to make sure that they had worked actively with promoting social innovation and carried in-depth knowledge about the topic. Purposeful sampling was used, where participants were selected based on certain characteristics and the purpose of the study, with the aim of finding interviewees that represent the group’s typical perception of the topic [20]. These characteristics include roles, diversity related to gender, age and geographical location, estimated influence on the field as such as well as if respondents were highlighting the actor in their interviews. Neuman and Robson also emphasize that this sampling method is especially suitable for exploratory research [21].

A pre-study was conducted which included a literature review to gather secondary data to situate the empirical findings in an academic context. Test interviews were carried out with other students to refine the interview questions. The guide was used to ensure that important aspects were not overseen, while at the same time allowing the interviewees to elaborate on issues they considered significant. All interviews except one were recorded using a mobile aid with the verbal consent of the participants, and the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a simplified version of the grounded theory approach. The method is used to develop a theory which is inductively derived by seeing events on a micro-level as explanation on a wider, societal level [21]. The content analysis method was used to extract and conceptualize key points and recurrent themes from the transcripts [22]. This method minimizes the possibility of inducing bias when analyzing the data because it does not look for evidence of any preconceived hypothesis [23]. The extracted key points were compared and grouped into categories that emerged from the data through several rounds of iteration.

RESULTS

Academic Institutions
Three interviews with stakeholders affiliated to universities were conducted. Two of the participants had roles that actively involved working with commercialization of research and the third participant’s
role involved working with knowledge-spreading activities aimed toward stakeholders in the ecosystem. The participants had worked in the ecosystem for an average of eight years. Two were actively advising approximately 20 companies on a yearly basis, and the companies that had social missions accounted for between 60 to 100% of the companies that they advised. The third participant did not have an advising role in a traditional sense, but rather redirected companies to other actors.

Scaling Internationally: Domestic Traction First

All respondents had encountered occasional cases of social organizations looking to scale internationally, however, the majority of the companies they are in touch with were not looking into scaling globally. Two of the respondents highlighted the long time frames involved to get traction on the Swedish market, one mentioning a range of four to five years and the other mentioning 10 years as a benchmark for how long it can take.

“The barriers to entry are extremely high – it can take up to 10 years before they succeed in securing a county council as client.” – Respondent A

Respondent A and B highlighted that they found the lack of a clear definition for social innovation to be tricky, which make the field more difficult to navigate. Respondent B and C also highlighted how they rarely use the term scaling in their context, but preferred to describe it as spreading the positive impact instead.

Identified Obstacles

There are two reasons in particular that were brought up as to why not more organizations were looking to scale; the ideas often being centered around services rather than products, and having public organizations as their main clients which often involves long lead-times because of their rigidity and size. One respondent said that many of the entrepreneurs that they encountered focused on solving a problem at grass-root level in the immediate surroundings, and when that problem was solved, the entrepreneurs had completed their mission. Two of the participants also highlighted that there is a problem with short-mindedness with regards to projects and initiatives aimed towards the ecosystem. One of the interviewees mentioned how they had come across cases where municipalities had started competing with social enterprises, which resulted in the efforts ceasing to exist as a direct result.

Two participants described the complex role of researchers taking on roles as social entrepreneurs. They said that researchers they encountered were hesitant on taking the leap into a new role, and preferred sticking to what they perceived being their call: research. One of the respondents also mentioned the risk of being perceived as commercial and diluting their personal brand as a researcher – losing status and position in the academic world. This risk was especially great with regards to establishing a limited company, compared to other legal forms. They also saw this as something that distinguish the worlds of traditional and social entrepreneurship. Operating in the private sector, one can be more open about wanting to grow, whereas there is more stigma involved when researchers take on roles as entrepreneurs, and they carefully have to balance remaining objective as they are operating in the academic world, while at the same time managing their idea.

“Before considering scaling, they first have to see themselves as someone leading an organization besides being a researcher.” – Respondent B

Need for Activities

During the interviews, the most recurring theme of support initiatives needed was to increase the business-mindedness among the social entrepreneurs that they encountered. This theme was highlighted in all three interviews. Removing intellectual property rights for academic staff, which today gives them ownership of their research, was also put forward as an activity that would make commercializing researchers’ ideas easier as per respondent A. Another suggestion that emerged from respondent A was the need for a dedicated task force with experts helping to commercialize ideas arising from research at the institutions.

The Future

One of the respondents said that they perceived social innovation to be a buzzword, and believed that the next trend in line is a more dedicated focus on innovation to promote the environment. S/he were also critical towards the current activities conducted by other actors
in the ecosystem: “There is no action, only talk”. The two other respondents had a more optimistic view of the future outlook for the field. Respondent C believed that social entrepreneurship will be mainstream in the future, simply because companies will fail to be profitable if they do not attract people and societies and highlighted how large corporations are also facilitating this shift by taking greater responsibility regarding globalization, digitization and the sharing economy. “Everything is moving, and it is moving pretty fast.” – Respondent C

**Public Agencies**

Three interviews with stakeholders affiliated to public agencies were conducted. Two of the participants had roles working with implementing state initiatives and the third participant had an advising role. They had worked in the ecosystem for an average of 14 years, of which one to two years were focused on supporting social entrepreneurship. On a yearly basis, the respondents met with 25-30, 50-80 and 175 social organizations respectively. The latter highlighted that the majority were service-producing companies having IT as their main driving force for the business.

**Scaling Internationally: An Idealistic Perception**

Respondent D put forward that “everyone says that they are looking to scale”, referring to the small size of both the Swedish and the Nordic market, but s/he had realized that it is carried out in a moderate fashion through organic growth. Respondent E also shared this notion, and identified the Nordic region as the easiest of the international markets to penetrate, and shared the perception that organizations with business ideas in the digital spectrum have greater potential of scaling abroad. Two respondents also suggested that companies in the “with” rather than “for” impact field, that is targeting private, rather than public investments, have greater interest in scaling internationally compared to other organizations in the spectrum. Respondent E also shared the opinion that some organizations have hopes of scaling abroad, but underestimate the challenges of gaining traction on the national market first, and possess an idealistic outlook on the topic.

Respondents D stated that all the companies s/he is actively advising is considering scaling internationally, and highlighted the importance of having someone in the team that knows the market that they are looking to scale to. This notion was not shared by the other two respondents, who said that they only saw few cases of social organizations looking to scale internationally. Instead they put forward that they most often encounter organizations looking to share their models and/or processes with other actors. The same two respondents also stressed franchising models as a means of spreading the impact.

“It can be enough with one other actor taking the model and distributing the solution, rather than seeing the organization as such grow.” – Respondent E

One of the respondents highlighted that using the term social entrepreneurship is provocative, that people perceive the term to be “too fuzzy”, and that it can be seen as negative being a social entrepreneur. Respondent F highlighted that the stakeholder’s organization has to answer a lot of questions regarding the definition of the field, and that actors they are engaging with are unsure about what the definition actually entails. Furthermore, the interviewee shared the government’s approach – that a narrower limitation would exclude actors – and had also chosen to proceed using the more open definition in their line of work. Two of the respondents also brought up how they preferred using the word “spreading” rather than “scaling”, since the ultimate goal of the companies they encounter is not scaling financially, but rather reach more people and spread positive impact.

**The Obstacles**

Two of the respondents in this group emphasized the high thresholds of securing public contracts. One of the respondents said that the current support offered is too fragmented and consumes a lot of time for the social entrepreneurs, which can result in the companies losing speed.

“I can provide them with a nautical chart, but they have to navigate themselves.” – Respondent D

One of the respondents mentioned that the mindset can be an obstacle, and said that the social entrepreneurs might be too close to the daily operation of their business which has negative impact on strategic planning efforts.
All three participants highlighted that support initiatives to a high extent should focus on building business-mindedness among social organizations. One of the respondents more specifically put forward the need for building knowledge related to the sales process, whereas the other two respondents highlighted the need for developing business models. When asked about the need for more specialized support initiatives, respondent E recognized that there is a need, but that they were unsure about the size of the group looking to internationalize and believed it to be moderately sized. Respondent D suggested implementing tax reliefs aimed towards social organizations at a certain size. Respondent E described that the public sector needs to become better at interpreting rules for public procurement, and that stronger support is needed to help municipalities navigate through this field so that the flexibility within the current framework can be utilized to a higher extent. One of the respondents also mentioned that they hope that the public sector develops skills, and become used to cooperating with social organizations. Respondent F highlighted that s/he recognize a need for including the stakeholders that they target with their public initiatives in the process of developing these efforts, so that the activities are developed taking the end-users needs into account from the get-go.

The Future
Two of the respondents stressed the importance of large corporations driving the shift from traditional to social entrepreneurship. Respondent D highlighted how large companies are leveraging on small players to profile themselves and respondent E asserted that large players are currently operating in the field to a much higher extent than previously seen.

One of the respondents also highlighted how companies without a social focus will fail to be financially sustainable in a long-term perspective, since they lack credibility and social license to operate. Respondent E highlighted how the public spirit has changed during the past 10–15 years, and that creating entrepreneurial impact is more natural today compared to three to four years ago.

Support Organizations
Three interviews with stakeholders affiliated to companies managing accelerators or incubators for entrepreneurs were conducted. All three participants had roles which included working with business development and/or coordinating efforts for their respective organization. They had worked in the ecosystem for an average of two years. The participants have contact with 40, 50 and 70 social organizations respectively on a yearly basis. Two of the respondents highlighted that the majority of social organization they encounter are interested in scaling nationally. The number of social organizations they encounter that are looking to internationalize right now spans between 5 and 25 organizations.

Scaling Internationally: Technical Solutions
All three participants highlighted how they perceive that there is a correlation between social entrepreneurs that scale globally and having a solution focused on a technology. Respondent G highlighted that success factors include having a scalable mentality, working globally from the start and having an international team to execute from the very beginning. Respondent H put forward that there is a technological boom within social entrepreneurship, and that there might be overconfidence in the possibilities technologies bring in creating social good. Respondent H also stressed that the threshold to scale internationally is higher for companies selling products. They perceived that scaling of product-oriented companies where carried out in a more conservative manner, with a focus on markets within geographical proximity and cultural similarities to Sweden.

“Organizations that develop software do not see any limitations in their reach, their customer groups are everywhere. The technical solution is what enables scaling.” – Respondent G

Respondent H underlined that actors with more traditional offerings should not be forgotten, since the technological initiatives are more attractive in generating financial backing and despite the wider geographical scope, there also needs to be support available for other actors as well. Respondent I recognized that since numerous actors have difficulties in attracting private financing, there is a surplus of actors chasing the same government funds and grant money.
This ultimately leads to more administrative work, both for the entrepreneurs and the financiers.

Two of the respondents highlighted that the countries that are most common to scale to are Nordic ones, whilst the third respondent talked more broadly about developed markets as first in line for the majority of organizations encountered. There was also a sense that some of these markets lag behind, specifically in terms of how developed the ecosystem and the field of social entrepreneurship are.

The Obstacles
All three respondents described that securing funding is one of the main obstacles, and that it is closely connected to the companies’ ability to scale. Two of the respondents highlighted that there is a close connection between receiving funding and securing the right competences, which was also deemed as essential for scaling successfully. Three of the respondents stressed that they also encounter social entrepreneurs that are still in the process of building proof of concept, are yet too early-stage to start considering international scaling efforts or have no plans in the future of doing so. Finding the right network and partners were also considered important by the three interviewees.

“If you get money you can attract talent. Internationalization and capital goes hand in hand.” – Respondent G

Respondent I highlighted that many projects only manage to secure short term funding, which results in short-minded efforts. The respondent mentioned that this potentially can lead to the target group losing trust in social entrepreneurs as a result. One of the respondents highlighted the lack of international mindset among some social entrepreneurs.

“The operational barriers increase when you have two value-chains – a social and an economical. You operate in a more complex field, so there is a need for targeted support.” – Respondent H

Need for Activities
All the participants brought up the need for more strategic networks to meet with actors in the ecosystem. One respondent highlighted the need for active involvement in developing content for these meetings and another described that these meetings can take place both physically and digitally. Below are some ideas that were recognized as having positive impact by the interviewees:

- Increased willingness from banks to grant loans to social initiatives
- Increased interest from the private sector to see how they can contribute to the field
- Increased business-mindedness among social entrepreneurs outside the technology scene

“It can be challenging to focus on aspects related to money that can be perceived as capitalist, when the organization was created with a burning motivation to create positive impact.” – Respondent H

The Future
All of the interviewees had a positive future outlook. One respondent put forward that it will be increasingly common to combine doing good with doing business. One interviewee explained that all companies will have to consider their “why” in five years’ time, meaning the reason why they exist, and that it will become increasingly important for the business model as such. The respondent also believed that having a strong why will enable entrepreneurs to charge premium prices for their offerings in the future.

Summarized Results
The results have been summarized in Table 1 to provide an overview of the main findings.
Even though the field social innovation was introduced in Sweden close to 25 years ago, it is not until recently that the scene has seen an upswing in awareness among the general public, which could be explained by recent governmental and branding initiatives in the area, as well as an increased interest from investors. As such, it is to be considered a field that is still emerging in Sweden. Tidd and Bessant highlight that social entrepreneurs focus on long-term change rather than short-term growth, which is in line with the notion that scaling is a lengthy process [13]. The study provides no justification for the claim that social organizations launch into growth before sufficient planning has been put into it, as suggested by Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern [9].

### The Scalability Framework

Going back to the framework developed by Weber et al [17] we can see that several themes were highlighted. The first theme, commitment of the individuals driving the scaling process, was mentioned with regards to the lack of a growth mindset among the social entrepreneurs. This was specifically evident when discussing researchers taking on roles as social entrepreneurs. As per the previous research, scaling a social organization should go hand in hand with spreading the social impact, however, some social entrepreneurs seem to have a mindset that scaling removes the idea from its roots, which is perceived as something negative.

The second theme, management competence, refers to the ability to “act in a business-like manner” [p. 5]. This was one of the themes which was most frequently brought up by the stakeholders as an area where support was needed. This area was also highlighted in the strategy developed by the Swedish government, as they recognize a need to strengthen business advisory services [7].

The third theme, entire or partial replicability of the operational model, was also brought up in the interviews. The results show that the majority of organizations in the sphere are either focusing on solving a problem on a local market, and hence, has no interest in scaling as such. Rather, they are more interested in sharing their ideas or models as best practice with other national actors in the ecosystem. A number of companies are also working with products, which according to the stakeholders makes scaling the operational model increasingly

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Table 1. Summarized Results.

**DISCUSSION**

The research shows that the respondents perceive that the majority of social entrepreneurs currently operating in Sweden are not looking at scaling internationally. This is due to several reasons. Some entrepreneurs were looking into solving local issues, some lack the will, some have products difficult to scale to other markets and some struggle with getting traction on the domestic market. However, the stakeholders in the ecosystem perceived that there was a need for supporting initiatives related to internationalization. This was specifically the case when scaling organizations operating in the technology sphere.

Several respondents highlighted how social entrepreneurs in Sweden struggle with securing public organizations as clients. Being successful on the local market often constitutes the base-line to international expansion. Given that the majority of social entrepreneurs are not looking into internationalization, support measures at a local level could, in the long-run, create conditions required to scale internationally. If the stakeholders had been asked to rate or compare the importance of domestic or international growth support initiatives, it is possible that internationalization efforts had been ranked as less important.
complex. The research can conclude that the social organizations interested in scaling internationally to a high-extent are to be found in the technology sector, which goes hand in hand with having a replicable operational model.

The fourth theme, *ability to meet social demands*, refers to distinguishing where and how scaling would yield the greatest positive impact. Here, a recurring theme included how securing public clients are lengthy processes, and a number of stakeholders put forward that more flexibility from public actors is needed when it comes to requisitioning offerings from social entrepreneurs. This theme can further be connected to the strategy developed by the Swedish government, which identified a need for clarifying and measuring impact as well as a need for assessing supply and demand [7]. The strategy highlights how difficulties in measuring impact makes it difficult for social entrepreneurs to attract external investors and successfully establish their organizations.

The fifth theme, *ability to obtain necessary resources*, was highlighted in all interviews in one way or another. Having the right financial means and the right competences to grow was deemed as one of the most important factors by the stakeholders. The financing theme was also featured in the strategy [7]. The sixth theme, *potential effectiveness of scaling social impact with others*, refers to “bringing in other organizations, corporations, and/or institutions to help spread the social impact” [p. 5]. When discussing the need for more strategic networks, some stakeholders perceived that there were enough ongoing initiatives, whereas some perceived that there was a lack of relevant meeting places. This can also be connected to the theme of developing knowledge and meeting places, which was put forward in the strategy as an area of importance [7]. Tidd and Bessant also emphasize that social entrepreneurs are more reliant on a network of stakeholders than traditional entrepreneurs are [13].

The seventh, and last theme is *adaptability*, which refers to adapting the organization to the new market. When discussing where scaling usually takes place among the entrepreneurs the stakeholders encounter, the Nordic markets were highlighted more frequently than other markets. However, it seemed that the rationale behind the tactic was more based on cultural similarities and the proximity rather than on a strategic basis on where the greatest social impact was to be generated. The rationale could be that the social entrepreneurs were looking for markets that were already fit for the existing operational model, and avoided markets where more adjustments would have been needed.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The research field of social entrepreneurship is, as previously stated, underdeveloped and there is a need for further contributions [9]. Choosing an exploratory research method is in line with the notion of getting additional insights and establish priorities for future research. As the field continues to develop, a need for more descriptive research might emerge. This can include collating quantitative data which can be used as a complement when assessing the needs for support measures aimed towards social entrepreneurs. Future studies should consider the wide array of organizations operating within the field of social entrepreneurship in Sweden. When designing support initiatives, entrepreneurs operating in the field should be involved in the process, and research to assess if the needs vary depending on where on the spectrum they operate and which stage they are in should be conducted. This would contribute in guiding which initiatives that should be prioritized.

Several of the respondents, discuss how the lack of a clear definition makes the field difficult to distinguish. The lack of a clear definition also contributes in making it difficult to conduct reliable research on the topic, because the respondents’ perception of what social entrepreneurship entails might differ. Further potential areas of research include understanding what initiatives that should be undertaken for the public sector to strengthen ways of working with actors in the sector, especially with regards to requisitioning offerings from social entrepreneurs. Assessing what support are currently available for municipalities, regions and agencies would be a productive starting point.

The sampling method used could be subject to critique. Even though measures were taken to mitigate researcher bias induced by sampling, it is possible that by choosing other respondents, the study would yield a different result. Since the respondents are anonymous, there is no way of evaluating the reliability of the experts. Given that the size of the pool of potential interviewees is limited, only nine interviews were conducted. The
grounded theory approach implies that saturation of data has been achieved when enough data has been collected to answer the research question. Interviewing more stakeholders would nevertheless increase the reliability of the study.

**CONCLUSION**

This study is investigating if stakeholders in the ecosystem of social entrepreneurship perceive that there is a need for initiatives supporting social companies’ internationalization and what supportive measures that would yield the maximum value for organizations looking to scale. The results show that the majority of social organizations operating in Sweden are not looking to scale internationally. Those that have international ambitions, operate mainly in the technology sphere, and have a focus on the Nordic countries. The actors perceived that there was a need for more targeted support. The key theme that was highlighted included strengthening the business-mindedness among the social entrepreneurs. Other themes that emerged included help to get traction on the domestic market first, a need for more financial backing and strategic networks. As the field includes a wide variety of organizations, suggestions for future research includes identifying support initiatives targeting niches within social entrepreneurship, and assessing how public organizations can support further growth by increasing their ability to requisition offerings from social entrepreneurs in accordance with existing regulations and legal frameworks. The respondents further had a positive outlook regarding the future of the field.

As social entrepreneurs work with finding new approaches and solutions to social needs or common problems, the field has great potential to create positive societal impact. It is evident from this study that some stakeholders encounter entrepreneurs that are hesitant towards the notion of scaling, and perceive it as something that is not in line with their core ethos. The technology sector does not seem to be limited by this approach to the same extent, which could be explained by having an operational model that is easier to replicate and ambitions to scale from early on.

Society is facing pressing issues and in order to overcome these, social entrepreneurs play an important role. Sweden has a track-record of nurturing companies that succeed on the global market, and have a solid reputation in working with questions related to the Sustainable Development Goals. This puts Sweden in an excellent position of taking a leading role in supporting social entrepreneurs on their quest to create a better society. This needs to be furthered examined through both research, dialogue and collaboration between different actors in society – and by involving the entrepreneurs that are currently undertaking this journey.
REFERENCES


