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Traveller Employment: The use of a social enterprise model as part of a strategy to create employment for Traveller men in West Cork

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to investigate if a social enterprise model can be used as part of a strategy to create employment for Traveller men in West Cork? This work was carried out with the cooperation of the West Cork Traveller Centre, a focus group of young men from West Cork and two key informants with expertise in the area of social enterprise. For the purpose of inclusion in this journal the original piece of work has been edited and condensed. In an attempt to address the question this piece of research has been broken into a number of different sections. The first section deals with the methodology, detailing how the work was carried out, with whom it was conducted and an overview of the ethical considerations and the participatory process which was central to the work. The next section then looks at the findings derived from the interviews with the key informants and the focus group with the young men and puts forward some ideas for discussion. This discussion examines how the men understand social enterprise, employment generally and their interest and ability in pursuing social enterprise as a means of employment. Finally some recommendations are made in an attempt to offer practical pointers to the West Cork Traveller Centre and the young men as they attempt to develop a social enterprise model of employment.

Keywords: Social Enterprise, Travellers, Employment

Introduction and setting the context

The early to mid 2000s saw unparalleled growth in the Irish economy. Prior to the economic recession of the later part of the decade and early part of this, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ roared through the streets of most Irish cities, towns and villages providing what was regarded as full employment in the state. However while this may have been the case for the population at large one group in particular missed the party. Research demonstrates that Travellers and in particular Traveller men were far removed from the perceived benefits of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ and experienced very few of the opportunities for employment presented to men in wider society.[Third System Approaches, 2003; Trotman, 2010; PaveePoint, 2006] With the current economic realities of high unemployment and drastically reduced levels of public spending capturing the attention of society at large the plight of the unemployed/unemployable Traveller man seems to be going relatively unnoticed. The West Cork Travellers Centre, located in Clonakilty, works with Travellers in the greater West Cork area and provides a wide range of services from advocacy to Primary Healthcare training. However engagement of Traveller men in any programme activities has been limited. This has become a particular area of concern for the WCTC as it recognises that Traveller men’s needs are not being met in West Cork. It is in this context that this piece of research is based.

Research question

The aim of the research is to investigate if a social enterprise model can be used as part of a strategy to create employment for Traveller men in West Cork? In order to explore this it is necessary to examine the following questions.

- Are Traveller men in West Cork in a position to take up employment?
- What areas would Traveller men like to find employment in?
- How do Traveller men understand the social enterprise model of employment?
- Are Traveller men interested in the social enterprise model as a means for gaining employment?
- What might be the main barriers to establishing a social enterprise in West Cork?
- What types of supports and expertise are needed to bring a social enterprise model of employment forward?

- What benefits can employment bring to the Traveller community and the community at large?

Methodology

In this section a detailed look was taken at the nature of participatory research and why this approach was employed. The research methods used as well as the approach to analysing the data were also examined. However to begin it is important to examine the ethical considerations associated with the research as these encompass the underlying reasons why the participatory process is used in the first place.

Ethical considerations

In the last decade numerous pieces of research have been conducted on, with and by Travellers particularly around the area of employment [Murphy, 2001; Third Systems Approaches, 2003; Trotman, 2010]. Since October 2009 I have personally been involved in facilitating three separate pieces of research ranging from current issues facing Traveller men in West Cork to the perceptions of young Travellers on facilities and services in their area. Although many, namely the authors, would argue that these pieces of research are for the benefit of the Traveller community it could be argued that for all the research around, Traveller services and supports are becoming more and more restricted and the overall picture for the Traveller community is not really improving. In fact some would argue that with the removal of services such as the Visiting Teacher for Travellers and the phasing out of Senior Traveller Training Centres by June 2012 for instance that the picture is steadily getting worse and marginalisation is becoming more and more severe.

Therefore in planning for this piece of research I was faced with a very real dilemma. I wanted to create a piece of work that would assist Traveller men and the West Cork Traveller Centre to create a strategy that would help secure future employment but I did not want to be a part of what I saw as this constant barrage of research with little tangible result. I concluded my internal debate with a commitment to conduct the research in as careful a manner as possible adhering to the principals set out below for participatory research and using good practice procedures as outlined in Ethical Guidelines Sociological Association of Ireland (Sociological Association of Ireland, 2011) at all times. Key considerations based on these guidelines were, voluntary

participation whereby all participants engaged with the process of their own free will, informed consent whereby all participants were carefully briefed about the overall purpose of the work, the main features of its design, possible risks and benefits of taking part, confidentiality, respect for dignity and human rights and freedom from harm. My sincere hope is that the people involved in creating this work do not see themselves as objects or subjects of research but as real contributors.

Participatory Research

For the purposes of this piece of work it must be clarified that participatory research involved the researcher working with a community sector organisation, namely the West Cork Traveller Centre and a core group of five young Traveller men in developing a research topic of relevance to these parties. At all stages during the process, from initial idea generation to question and topic design and onto the write up of the research, constructive consultation regularly took place. The process began with preliminary discussions with the WCTC and the men on the subject of employment. This was followed on July 11th 2010 with an exploratory visit by myself and the core group of five Traveller men to First Class Insulation¹ (a home insulation company contracted under the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland's Warmer Home Scheme).

In this particular case research was carried out with guidance from the West Cork Traveller Centre and encompassed a topic of great interest to them, namely the employment of Traveller men. In reference to the principles underpinning the participatory process Sarri identified seven key principles of research which are

¹ In July 2006, Galway Traveller Movement (GTM) began to examine a strategy to develop the Traveller economy in the Galway City area. The focus was on identifying opportunities for Travellers to gain employment and form enterprises in the areas of waste management and the environment. As part of the work to examine this idea GTM looked for external advice on how best to pursue the strategy. As a result they commissioned Third Sector Advisors consultancy group to act as consultants in developing an economic development structure that would possess the necessary expertise and resources to develop the Traveller economy in the area. Out of this work First Class Insulation was established.

extremely important and give an indication as to whether or not the process is truly participatory.

- (1) It is participatory.
- (2) It is empowering to participants.
- (3) It is experiential.
- (4) It develops co learning between researcher and community.
- (5) It is creative in finding solutions.
- (6) It is collaborative.
- (7) It is politically active (Sarri, 1992, pp. 92-122)

At all times during the research process attempts have been made to live up to these principles. However, while these principles tend to be a solid guide in the pursuit of a truly participatory piece of research it is important to at least acknowledge my own belief that these principles are almost aspirational and most certainly dependent on the scope and depth of the research work being carried out. As stated above the research attempted to embrace these principles in so far as possible during the process and in so doing has produced a piece of work that has both academic and hands on practical implications.

Research Methods

Rationale for adopting Qualitative research methods.

While planning for this piece of research it was agreed that qualitative research methods would be employed. On examination a number of key considerations influenced this decision. According to (Ragin, 2011)

because of its emphasis on in-depth knowledge and on the refinement and elaboration of images and concepts, qualitative research is especially appropriate for several of the goals of social research. These include giving voice (and) interpreting culturally or historically significant phenomena

This notion of giving voice as he puts it is central to what this piece of research was trying to achieve and is very much in keeping with the concept of participatory research. Guided by the research questions a number of key actions, central to the research process were identified.

1. Conduct a review of relevant literature
2. Identify a core group of Traveller men in West Cork and identify likely research participants

3. Form a focus group comprised of Traveller men to examine key issues
4. Identify key informants - people who possessed specific knowledge or expertise in social enterprise, people who had previous experience of Traveller specific social enterprise models and people involved in the delivery of the work with Travellers in West Cork
5. Conduct structured interviews with key informants
6. Analyse data
7. Develop recommendations and create a strategic plan for the employment of Traveller men in West Cork

In the early stages of the dissertation process I was unsure as to how I could best capture the various views on the issues being examined. Following consultation it was clear that semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate method for capturing the views of key informants and focus groups would be used to capture the views of the young men.

Key informants were identified based on specific knowledge of the subject matter and included; Margaret Allen the manager of the West Cork Traveller Centre, Gerard Doyle of Third Sector Advisors a consultancy group which assisted the Galway Traveller Movement in setting up First Class Insulation and Dr. Mary O Shaughnessy who has written extensively of the topic of Social enterprise.

The focus group was comprised of 4 young Traveller men from West Cork ranging in age between 17 and 25 years. The young men involved in the process were identified based on their regular engagement with the Traveller Centre and their interest in the topic. The age range of the young men was based on two clear criteria;

1. As the research was primarily based around employment and potential employment of the young men it took account of the Protection of Young Persons (Employment) Act 1996. Under this act employers cannot employ children under the age of 16 in regular full-time jobs. With this in mind it was felt that the scope of the research should only include participants over the age of 16 years.
2. The age range of the youth project (Foróige, That's My Goal Youth Project²) through which the young men first became involved with the Traveller Center only worked with young people up to the age of 25 years.

² The Foróige That's My Goal youth project was set up to work with young people from the Traveller community aged between 10 and 25 years in the West Cork areas of Clonakilty, Macroom and Bandon. The TMG Youth Project is funded by the Department of Justice, Equality

Findings and Discussion

Having conducted the interviews and focus group and reviewed the relevant literature the next step was to explore any findings which could be gleaned from these. Initially a number of questions were identified as being relevant to this exploration and grouped accordingly into the following sections. The following are just some points taken from the overall piece.

Section 1

Are Traveller men in West Cork in a position to take up employment?

What areas would Traveller men like to find employment in?

It was clear from the conversations with the men that some of them like the idea of work and want to be employed. For example, in a view that was reflective of the mood within the group, one young man explained that;

I love working, like. You're not sitting around all day constantly doing something, your day passes away, gets you out of the bed, brings in money. If you don't work you can't live, like.

Although the focus group participants were generally committed to finding work in the future, they also agree that individually they may not currently be job ready. In addition to this some of the responses indicated that in at least the case of two young

and Law Reform through Pobal and County Cork VEC and is managed by Foróige in partnership with a steering committee which included the West Cork Traveller Centre. The core group of young men involved in the research first met in this project.

men there is very little understanding of the realities of regular work because, outside of what the literature terms the Traveller Economy or the Grey Economy, they have never been employed in any capacity. This alone highlights a very significant barrier which cannot be overlooked in building any type of enterprise around these young men. This issue of 'job readiness' also emerges in the interviews with the key informants.

Section 2.

Ambivalent understandings of and barriers to the development of social enterprise model of employment

What types of supports and expertise are needed to bring a social enterprise model of employment forward?

The discussion highlighted that for the young men who participated in this research, engagement with the social enterprise model should mean being able to negotiate and take ownership of its concepts and ideas. Given their lack of real exposure to the labour market, this would be a big step which could require some level of pre-development work. On this subject of pre-development the key informants were very clear in their assertions of its importance. It was also clear that aside from the skills and abilities of those who are being targeted for participation in social enterprise, the success or failure of particular projects will also be influenced by the capabilities and capacities of the lead organisation that is promoting it.

In the research barriers such as education, skills or lack of consultation were identified as limiting the employment options of these young men. If social enterprise is to be considered as an alternative model of employment another barrier must be acknowledged: i.e. the lack of a consistent, shared understanding of social enterprise. Views expressed within the focus group suggest that despite their visit to the Galway social enterprise project and having had some information on the background to social enterprise, the men did not seem to easily connect the potential for wider social benefits to the concept of employment within a social enterprise. While they clearly wanted to be employed, apart from feeling that they would benefit from supported or mentored employment they really did not seem too concerned about the form that this employment would take.

In addition the key informants, supported by relevant literature also highlighted that securing finance has the potential to be a major barrier for any social enterprise particularly as the current cycle of austerity seems to be far from complete.

Section 3

Are Traveller men interested in the social enterprise model as a means for gaining employment?

What benefits can employment bring to the Traveller community and the community at large?

While most people would recognise the immediate and direct benefits of employment, such as income, personal satisfaction, pension entitlements and so on, it is certainly worth asking if employment within a social enterprise can bring wider benefits to the Traveller community and whether the men who participated in this research identify with these broader aspirations.

Looking at some of the young men's responses it is clear that they do believe that their successful accessing of employment could have real benefits for their own direct community and the wider Traveller community. When one young man spoke about being engaged in an enterprise he talked about doing,

stuff around the group like that you could have for the future to show the rest of the travellers

Likewise, another participant talks about how their community could benefit directly from employment stating that,

Its kind like what you get out of working together to communicate better, cause you have to communicate to work together like. I think yea it could bring people together better.

This suggests an underlying desire to do more for their families and communities; an expression of solidarity that could serve as the basis for and be extended through a well planned and properly consultative social enterprise. However a few words of caution are included in this discussion. As noted in the literature review, there may be a tendency on the part of social enterprise promoters to over sell their potential social impacts.

Conclusions

It is clear that the men in West Cork want to work. They want to find a way to support themselves and their families and improve their quality of life. The interviews with key informants highlight important considerations and potential pitfalls, if the West Cork Traveller Centre is to pursue a social enterprise model in helping the young men achieve their desires. The combination of a literature review and interviews included in this study, helped to clarify some 'do's and don'ts' that would facilitate such a venture. With this in mind it would be easy to sit here and write a paper simply espousing the virtues of this particular system as it feeds into a growing body of literature, including Irish state policy documents, which claims that social enterprises work. However anyone embarking on the practical journey of social enterprise creation should do so with caution. Clearly a lot of time and effort must be invested in consultation and predevelopment work with all the various stakeholders. There are no shortcuts here and there is no sense that these types of initiatives will be able to address all of the social or employment needs of any young Traveller men.

With reference to logistical issues, this research suggests that finance is difficult to source and there is a growing expectation that any such ventures must prove that they are making real social impacts. This research suggests that from the very outset social enterprise creation needs good collective and consultative forms of leadership. It also needs a considerable investment of time. Between the stages of initial consultation to getting their business off the ground the Galway Traveller Movement and the men concerned were engaged for several years. The depth of this commitment was not lost on the young men in the focus group. As one of the men stated following the meeting with the Galway group,

It took them a lot of years like and they said that you'd get bored at the start cause you'd think its never going to happen but you take time, and you have to keep at it

Nothing more clearly states the reality of social enterprise than this.

Recommendations

Although certainly not a definitive list a number of ideas have emerged that require further attention. With the process of developing a social enterprise it is clear that it must begin with analysing the needs, interests, abilities and knowledge of the group in question.

Therefore the first recommendation for establishing a social enterprise is to conduct detailed reviews with the constituent group. Take time to establish their levels of understanding around the key concepts of employment, ability, skills and interests. Establish if there are any ideas which the group has that could form the basis for establishing a business. Generate a profile of the group in question, their qualifications if any, work experience including anything they have done to generate an income for themselves, hobbies and interests, as these may be an area from which ideas for a business could be developed. This type of analysis will give a clear picture of what types of pre-development work needs to be done and at what level it needs to begin. In conjunction with this a detailed review of the representative organisation's interests in social enterprise needs to be conducted. As with the target group this should encompass the levels of knowledge around social enterprise, skills and abilities within the organisation relevant to the establishment of a business model, mission of the organisation and willingness to commit the time and resources required.

The second recommendation would be to review the checklist identified by the key informants for this piece of work. This could form the basis for the establishment of a business plan.

- A good business plan including a feasibility study with market research and business viability check
- Statement of the social enterprise objectives and predevelopment work to build understanding of these
- Good management structure with expertise from the third sector and the commercial sector
- Clear governance structures and a democratically controlled board of management with effective participation from a broad spectrum of the community, local services and business mentors
- There should be a real need for the product or service the enterprise is engaged in
- A review of successful and unsuccessful examples already operating
- A balance between the needs of the business and the profile and needs of the workers taking the form of both business auditing and social auditing

- Consultation with the community and the target workers

Clearly this is just a brief starting point. All of these ideas need to be broken down and a plan for how they could be achieved should be designed.

The third recommendation would be to set up some information meetings with different funding organisations. Begin by establishing what supports the State can provide in the initial stages, such as training supports through existing ALMPs and the newly established training boards which have replaced FAS. Meet with as many social finance organisations as is possible to establish criteria for funding and establish whether mentoring of similar business link ups could be established with their support. As pointed out above business viability is crucial and adequate funding is a large part of this.

The fourth recommendation would be to establish learning links with a trading social enterprise, preferably one which is working in a similar business area. A formalised learning link or business mentor relationship would be beneficial. This could open the door to new ways of thinking and opportunities to reflect on past mistakes, new avenues of funding and governance structures. There is no point reinventing the wheel here. If there is a model that works which could offer support along the way then it would be vital to make this link.

The final recommendation would be to invest in learning about social auditing, social return on investment and social impact analysis. This is a relatively new way of thinking here in Ireland and one which an existing model of social enterprise might be aware of. This area seems to be becoming more relevant, whether in terms of ensuring an organisation is working to its social goals, preventing a drift away from the underlying mission, marketing the business to socially conscious bodies or even generating finance. Being able to conclusively show that the social enterprise is actually having a real tangible social impact is invaluable and something which cannot be overstated.

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