ORGANISATIONAL EFFICACY AND QUALITY OF SERVICES: THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN AN ITALIAN CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The «Polisportiva Giovanni Masi» (PGM) has been analyzed for 3 years by our research group since 2010. The club, which boasts more than 7000 members, is located in Casalecchio di Reno, a municipality of 38000 inhabitants near Bologna. The research, based on the case-study approach (Yin, 2009) has been carried out with a special focus on the quality of the services, the level of satisfaction of the members, the organizational processes, questionnaires with members (n=1100), in-depth interviews (n=11), focus groups (n=9), life histories (n=4) and observations have been interpolated. Results show that PGM is recognized as a high quality organization. The main factors of the high degree of the members' satisfaction for the provided services (very good=12,7%, good=77,6% of the respondent) are the relationships with the sports educators/coaches/instructors - 50% of them holding a Physical Education or Sport Sciences degree- (very satisfied=58,9%, satisfied=27,8%) and the assessment of their professional competences (very good=43,4%, good=40,7%). Data collected, which highlight as the success of the organization is, above all, linked to the quality of the didactics, are deeply rooted in the history of PGM. In fact, it has been within the first associations to: propose psychomotricity classes in 1975, as well as baby swimming; invest in high quality training develop and adopt an educational internal code.PGM witnessed a process of professionalization as well as a trend that made communication and decisional procedures more complex. On the light of that, the monitoring carried out during the second and third years of the study, shows that PGM reacted with the rationalization of the internal structure and organizational procedures and with the involvement of a more professionalized workforce.

Key words: sport club, educators, organizational factors of success, multidimensional approach.

INTRODUCTION

In Italy, as in the most western industrialized societies, grassroots sport at local and regional levels is organized and delivered by a vast network of local organizations. This network represents the backbone of the Italian sport system counting approximately 64.000 organisations and a workforce of 850.000 people.

With respect to other European countries, the Italian sports system is significantly different for the dominating role of Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI) and the relations it creates with the other players within the system that can be represented as the combination of two different subsystems. One related to the Olympic Sport Movement in which the main actor is CONI. One related to the realm of the sport for all, inspired by the principles of subsidiarity, adequacy and differentiation. In this regards, Regions and the Entities for the Promotion of Sport for All (EPS) have a crucial role in making the system more dynamic, fostering an often harsh debate between old and new actors, and between the paradigms of competitive and societal sport.

There is a definitive absence of research in Italy attempting to explain and describe the influence of a system and its subsystems on the organisational structure and the performance of an organisation. As a result of this void, the purpose of this study was

1. To develop an in-depth, longitudinal analysis of a representative sport organisation operating at grassroots level, focusing on its organisational structure, strategy, activities and services provided, modalities of members' participation and level of satisfaction;
2. To determine the influence that the system has on the organisational structure and the performance the organisation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The research project "Participation and Change" has been carried out in cooperation with the Consorzio Ferrara Ricerche from July 2010 and it is currently on going. It has focussed on the study of the Polisportiva Giovanni Masi (PGM), a sport club founded in 1964, representing one of the most interesting Italian grassroots sport organisations. Based in Casalecchio di Reno, a town with 35.000 inhabitants bordering on Bologna, PGM counted, in 2010, 7.118 members enrolled (61,8% females) providing a wide range of activities and services, more than 20 sport disciplines, and targeting a large array of social categories such as people with disability, elderly people, migrants, etc. PGM adopts a community-based approach investing a relevant amount in the educational training of the educators. It has been among the first organizations in Italy to propose psychomotricity and baby swimming since the seventies.

Specifically, the main aim of the research study was to analyse PGM by referring to the following lines of inquiry:

1) Levels of members' satisfaction concerning services and activities provided;
2) Modalities of members' participation to activities and new trends in terms of practice;
3) Factors of success and organisational critical issues;
4) Organisational dynamics and performance analysed in combination with the particular structure of the Italian sport system (and the local system) and the impact on the target population;
5) The role of stakeholders and their influence on the PGM.

The research framework has been ideographic and longitudinal in nature. Based on the case-study approach, it adopted a multidimensional system of data collection and data analysis implemented over a period of 3 years. According to Yin's classification (2001) the research was based on an embedded single-case study design: the main unit of analysis, the PGM, was the focus of the study along with several intermediary units (such as individual members, staff employed, programs of activities, etc.).

Within the general framework of the study, different research tools such as questionnaire, in-depth interviews, focus groups, life-histories, documentary analysis, and field observations were adopted. Therefore data were analysed and interpreted against a common set of categories and research questions that were built up from data – inductive approach- as well as from the literature review - deductive or a priori approach.

More in details, to investigate the lines of inquiry n. 1, 2, and 3, a structured questionnaire (n=853, 29.94% of the adult members population; LOC= 95%, CI= 3.83%) was submitted to adults' members (>18 y). Furthermore, data concerning young members (13-17 y) were collected via a different structured questionnaire (n=169, 24,78% of the young member population, LO= 95%, CI= 6,54%). Finally, data concerning members under 12 were collected through a guided interview administered to the parents (n=186).

The analysis of the lines of inquiry 4 and 5 has been carried out through focus-groups (n=9) involving representatives of the members, managers, board, employees, educators and sectors supervisors, This level of analysis was interpolated with a second level

based in-depth interviews (n=7) carried out with internal and external key informants. With this interpolation, data collected stemmed from three different points of view: internal (employees, sectors responsible, board members, managers), intermediate (members and educators), and external (e.g. the Major, the Deputy Major and the main competitor). Finally, within a socio-diachronic approach, in-depth interviews (n=4) with long-term members have been conducted. The several levels of analysis and tools allowed the researchers to obtain a wide and multidimensional look of the organization from a bird's eye perspective to a detailed glance.

The general approach has been typical of the action-research, in which the researcher is getting touched by the investigated context, and refers also to the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) because of the re-definition of the hypothesis of the research during the process. Finally, the possibility to continue the research throughout the years adds a true diachronic dimension given by the monitoring of the processes of change.

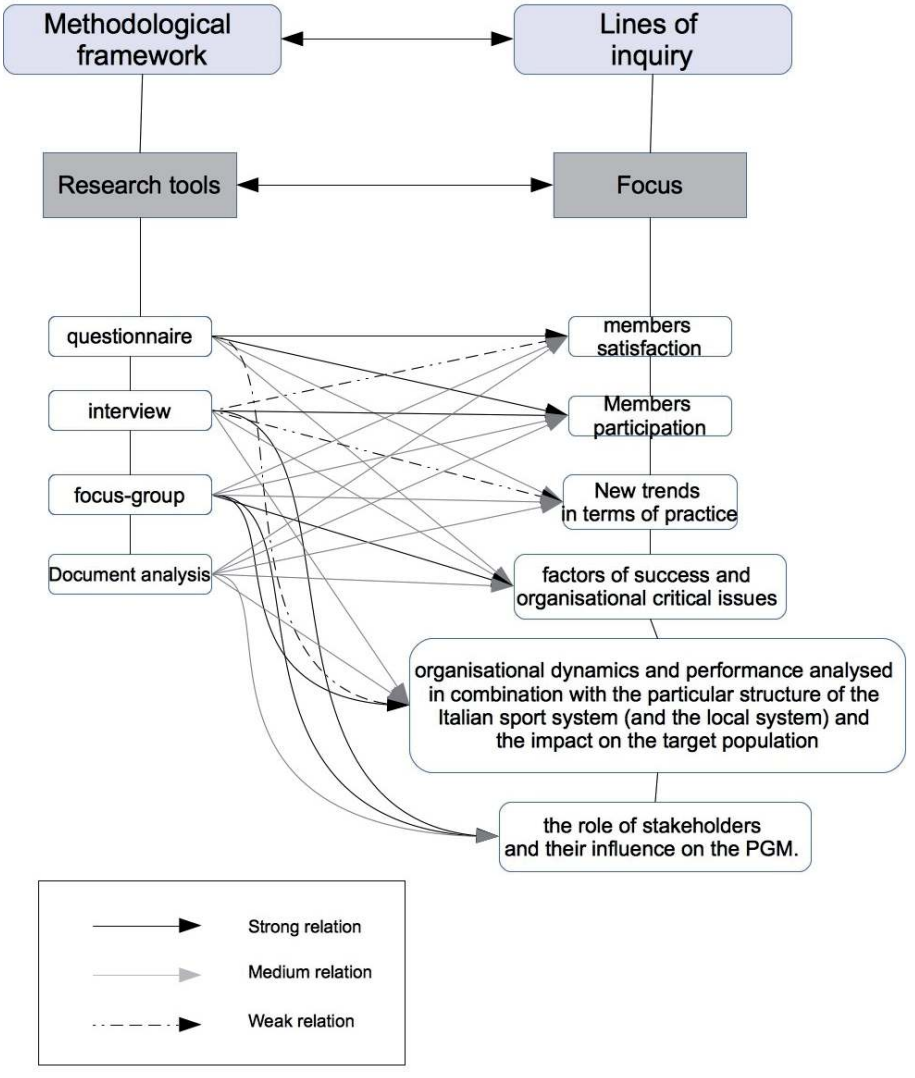

Figure 1
Methodological framework, research tools and lines of inquiry: level of connections

RESULTS

From a general point of view, the three main results inferable by the research are the following: the organization is generally perceived as a successful experience, the services provided are aligned with the personal expectations of the members, the rate of the members declaring to be satisfied with services is astonishing high (97.1% of adults).

The vast SWOT analysis, which included all qualitative and quantitative data, highlighted, among many others considerations, that the PGM strengths lay on the territorial ramification, the extent and the diversity of the services, the economic autonomy and the solidarity among sectors as well as specific aspects concerning the topic of this article like the relationship educator-member, the continuousness of the educators' training. The main weaknesses are the mixed organizational form remaining in between the non-profit and the company structures, the facilities running costs, the lack of turnover and training for managers. The opportunities are traceable in the dearth of competitors, in the high recognisability of the PGM name and "style" in the territory. The threats concern, above all, the shortage of public funds, the not so high availability of new educators trained with competences close to PGM values, the absence of a stakeholders' analysis.

From the specific point of view of this treatise, it is very important to emphasize that the crucial aspect in the perception of PGM as a successful and attractive organization is played by the members' satisfaction for the interaction with the educators (86.6% of adults, 87% of adolescents). These figures are even more encouraging considering that, within the satisfied, the *highly satisfied* are more than those *rather satisfied* (58.9%>27,8% adults, 58%>35% adolescents).

Furthermore, 50% of the educators hold a Physical Education or Sport Sciences degree and the assessment of their professional competences is also very positive (85%; very good=43.4%, good=40.7% of adults).

Finally, the other aspects, related to the quality of the delivering of courses and trainings, are the way activities are provided (85.5% of adults satisfied), the respect of the time schedule (85%), the adequacy of information (73.2%) and the quality of facilities (73.2%).

DISCUSSION

The research, which is beginning the fourth year, financed by the PGM with its own funds, has been a dazing opportunity to focus in depth on the organization and a rare occasion to study the Italian sport system by the grassroots level. Nonetheless, some minor limits could be stressed in the administration and collection of the questionnaires while more important sources of bias could be highlighted in the recruitment of the participants for the focus groups and the interviews.

Further researches should consider the widening of the qualitative research and, above all, the opportunity to carry out comparative studies among similar organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

PGM can be considered an example of the bright side of the Italian sport system. Deeply rooted in the community and linked with its constitutive values, weakly connected with the powerful CONI and with UISP, the leftist sport organization traditionally leading in the PGM area, chose since the beginning not to establish an élite team or branch thus focusing on grassroots level sport, innovative activities, and societal improvement. The research was a consequence of the board's growing perception that the old "hand on the shoulder" recruitment system was not anymore enough to ensure the sustainable development of the organization.

Perhaps the most important trait in the heart-rending process of change of the PGM, pulled between the traditional structure and aims and the new configuration, is the conservation of the original, even amended, values. In this process, the educators manifestly play a key role communicating at very grassroots level the values while ensuring the success of the organization.

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