Designing for Funding

How Swedish Civil Society Navigates Project-Based Financing

BSc Thesis in Retail Management

Stockholm School of Economics

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Abstract

Project-based funding is an established and common way of financing activities across sectors, requiring applicants to continuously formulate, structure, and justify their work in alignment with external funding criteria and priorities. This study explores what concerns Swedish civil society organisations recognize when developing projects and project applications, and how they are managed. Using a qualitative, exploratory design, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with individuals who have broad experience working with project funding across diverse organisations within Swedish civil society. Through thematic analysis, we identified three recurring perspectives: organisational priorities, funder interests, and societal issues. These three form the foundation of our analytical model, the Project Development Triangle. While project ideas can emerge from a single source, our findings indicate that they more frequently arise through the interplay of organisational needs, funder opportunities and societal issues that begin to intersect early in the process. When these ideas move into the design phase, they are shaped further by organisational capacities, funder criteria and the need to demonstrate societal relevance, making project development an iterative and multidimensional process. We also find that organisations mitigate these concerns by pursuing suitable opportunities, strategically framing their projects and negotiating boundaries to protect their mission and organisational integrity.

Keywords: civil society; non profit; project-based funding; project applications; professionalisation; institutional pressures; Sweden; mission drift; stakeholder alignment:

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1. Introduction

Civil society holds a uniquely strong position in Sweden's social landscape and constitutes a central part of its democratic and social infrastructure. More than six million people engage in it each year, and through thousands of associations based on identity, faith, and shared interests, it helps combat segregation, loneliness, and vulnerability, strengthens democratic participation, and complements the welfare state (Riksrevisionen, 2023). Within this landscape, project funding plays an important role, shaping how organisations of different sizes and purposes initiate, develop, and sustain their activities. A significant amount of money given from the public and private sectors is channelled through time-limited project grants, and many organisations depend on these resources to start new initiatives, reach target groups, and finance their operations. At the same time, project-based funding has become an increasingly complex and closely monitored system, with growing attention to application quality, and organisational capacity. It therefore becomes relevant to examine what concerns civil society organisations recognize when developing a project application.

1.1 Background

This background section introduces the structure and financing of Swedish civil society and describes how project-based funding is a central mechanism for supporting organisational activities.

1.1.1 Civil Society and Funding

Civil society consists of non-profit organisations such as associations, foundations, charities, and advocacy groups, working in areas such as social support, culture, sports, community building, and democratic participation. Civil society is built on trust in organisations' ability to use resources responsibly, which is central to their relationship with both society at large and their funders (Riksrevisionen, 2023). In this thesis, the term "organisations" refers to non-profit actors within Swedish civil society, unless otherwise specified.

Given the broad range of organizational types, missions, and activities within Swedish civil society, financing structures vary considerably. Most organizations charge membership fees, but these are often symbolic and cover only a small share of their activities. To sustain their work, organisations must therefore actively seek additional funding, which may come from a single source or from a mix of public grants, private foundations, corporate or individual donations, and sponsorships. These resources are provided by a broad range of actors, including state agencies, municipalities, and other grant-giving bodies. The degree to which organisations rely on project-based funding, however, varies substantially.

In Sweden, state funding is a cornerstone of non-profit organisations' income. In 2023, non-profit organisations received SEK 40.6 billion from government agencies (Statistics Sweden, 2023), channelled through various authorities such as the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndighen) and the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF). These public funds are typically distributed in three distinct forms of grants: organisational grants, operational or activity grants, and time-limited project grants (Riksrevisionen, 2023).

Alongside public grants, a large number of private foundations provide substantial project funding, for example, the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation, which redistributes lottery revenues as project grants (Postkodlotteriets Stiftelse, n.d - c), and the Erling Persson Family Foundation, which has allocated hundreds of millions of SEK to projects over time (Erling-Perssons Stiftelse, n.d).

Project grants from both public bodies and foundations are therefore one part of the overall funding structure for organisations, and often crucial for starting, testing, and scaling new activities. In the public sector, the project form has also been presented as an alternative to traditional bureaucracy, intended to encourage innovation and greater organisational flexibility (Einarsson, Sjöstrand & Wijkström, 2014). Because each funder sets its own priorities, criteria, and expectations, civil society organisations must navigate a complex and sometimes diversified funding landscape to secure the resources needed for their mission.

1.1.2 Characteristics of Projects

Project grants are usually defined by having a specific time frame and require applicants to define a clear purpose, target group, methods, budget, expected results, and approach to measure the project's outcome (Einarsson et al., 2014). Project grants, therefore, play a central role not only in financing activities but also in shaping how organisations plan, structure, and justify their work.

Project funding is primarily distributed through two main mechanisms: fixed grant calls and open application systems. Grant calls (*utlysningar*) are generally understood as time-limited invitations to apply for project funding within a specified thematic area. A grant call outlines the purpose of the funding, the available budget, eligibility criteria, deadlines, and requires organisations to submit project proposals that align with the stated framework and demands. Although funders may use the term somewhat differently, this overall structure reflects how it is commonly described in Sweden (Tillväxtverket, n.d; Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2023; Postkodlotteriets stiftelse, n.d - b). Open application systems, often referred to as open calls *(öppna utlysningar)* is also used, where organisations may submit applications at any time or broader time frame. These forms of funding are not tied to a specific deadline and are usually framed around broad purposes instead of a specified thematic area. (Allmänna arvsfonden, 2025; Postkodslotteriets stiftelse, n.d - a)

For larger or more established organisations, project grants can be substantial for several reasons. They provide opportunities to develop innovative initiatives, explore new target groups, and test activities that lie outside regular operations. In addition, many public and private forms of funding are structured as project grants, meaning that choosing not to apply could result in missed income opportunities. For smaller or newly established organisations, project grants often play an even more critical role. They could provide the first financial resource needed to start activities or test new ideas. This is especially relevant for many local Civil Society organizations, who depend on project-based funding rather than stable, long-term support (Herz, 2016). Some organisations now regarded as established parts of Swedish civil society, such as BRIS - Children's Rights in Society, originally started as projects funded by the Swedish Inheritance Fund (Allmänna arvsfonden), illustrating how essential project funding can be for bringing lasting welfare innovations to life (Clemenson et al., 2024).

1.1.3 Risks and Accountability in Project Funding

While the broad accessibility of project funding is fundamental to the sector, it also creates risks of misuse. A recent audit by the Swedish National Audit Office (Riksrevisionen, 2023) highlights increasing risks of fraud, incorrect payments, and misuse of funding within government agencies' support to civil society. The audit notes that current control mechanisms at several government agencies have not kept pace with the changing risk landscape, which may undermine confidence in public funding. This creates a tension in which funders aim to mitigate the risk of misuse through stricter control and accountability mechanisms, while organizations seeking funding must adapt to these increasing requirements.

To address this uncertainty, the trade association Giva Sverige has, among other things, developed a checklist for funders to help them gather relevant information, compare organisational documents, and reduce the risk of fraud (Giva Sverige, 2024). Giva Sverige has also noted that grant-making is becoming more conditional and detailed, and therefore, in 2024, produced guidance on good practice for project funding, intended as a common framework that can be used by both organisations and funders.

This could create a shift from more trust-based funding to funders needing to assess the credibility and capacity of applicant organisations to a greater extent than before, which in turn shapes the funding environment and could influence how project ideas are formulated and presented.

1.2 Research Problem and Contributions

Civil society organisations frequently rely on the successful development of project applications to secure funding. In doing so, they must align internal priorities with externally defined funding criteria, a process that may introduce concerns shaping how proposals are formulated. However, there is limited knowledge about how organisations perceive and manage these concerns during the application phase.

This study contributes by examining how Swedish civil society organisations approach developing project applications in practice, offering insights into the factors that influence the process and their strategies for managing them. By capturing the perspective of people in organisations who work directly with project applications, often referred to in this study as project developers, the study provides knowledge that can inform both organisational practices, funders, and future policy discussions.

Empirically, the study offers new insights into the development of a project application. It provides a conceptual contribution through an analytical model illustrating how organisations balance different influences when developing project applications, supporting future research and practice within civil society funding. The insights may also be relevant to other project-dependent fields, such as academia, where actors similarly compete for external funding through structured application processes.

1.3 Research Question

To address the research problem of the study, the following research question has been formulated:

"What concerns do Swedish civil society organizations recognize as shaping their work to develop project applications, and how do they mitigate them?"

1.4 Structural Overview

This thesis is structured into six main chapters, each building on the previous one to deepen the study's understanding. Chapter 1 introduces the thesis by outlining the role and background of Swedish civil society, the project-based funding landscape, and the broader context in which the study is situated, and then presents its overall aim and focus. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework by engaging with previous literature and outlining the analytical lens used in the thesis. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, describing the overall research design, data collection, and analysis, as well as key ethical considerations. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings from eight interviews, structured into themes that illustrate how organisational priorities, funder interests, and societal issues shape project development and project applications in practice. Chapter 5 builds on this analysis with a discussion, offering an integrated interpretation of the study and outlining key theoretical and practical implications. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by summarising the main contributions, reflecting on limitations, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework relevant to the study. It outlines key concepts and literature related to the research question, providing a foundation for the analysis.

2.1 The Role of Civil Society

Civil society is commonly described as the part of society organised outside the state and the market. However, this traditional boundary has become increasingly blurred. Civil society and the government have become interdependent (Billis & Glennerster, 1998; Lipsky & Smith, 1989–1990; all as cited in Arvidson, 2018), and many organisations have adopted more commercial and business-like practices (Wijkström, 2016). According to both Wijkström (2016) and Herz (2016), the role of civil society in Sweden has shifted from primarily advocacy and political representation toward taking greater responsibility for welfare services. As the welfare state withdraws, civil society is increasingly expected to address emerging social needs. These developments place additional demands on civil society organisations and contribute to more complex organisational conditions.

Civil society organisations fulfil several core roles in society. Terzieva, Burkart, Maier, & Meyer (2024) highlight three broad functions: providing services that complement or fill gaps in public welfare, engaging in advocacy to influence policy and represent the interests of specific groups, and fostering community by creating spaces for participation, belonging, and social capital. These roles illustrate the diversity of civil society and its activities, and help explain why organisations develop a wide range of projects, depending on whether their work is service-oriented, advocacy-driven, or focused on community building.

2.2 The Project-Based Funding as an Organisational Logic

Project-based funding plays a key role in shaping the work of civil society organisations. Herz (2016) shows that as organisations increasingly rely on short-term and competitive project grants, their activities must be continuously formulated as projects. This dependence on project cycles influences how organisations plan their work, define social problems and present proposed solutions. Herz also argues that the lack of long-term funding alternatives, together with funders’ demand for constant innovation, restricts organisations’ ability to take sustained responsibility for social well-being and weakens their possibilities for political influence. Moreover, Herz (2016) explains Krause’s (2014) concept of the “production of projects” as shaped by three key dynamics created by project-based funding: competition, packaging, and beneficiary contributions. Meaning that organisations must (1) compete for limited resources, (2) package their projects in ways that fit funders’ expectations and later can be presented as successful, and (3) rely on beneficiaries’ participation, time, and narratives, which become part of what the organisation ‘gives back’ to funders. This suggests that project-based funding may influence how organisations create, and formulate their initiatives.

Zencirci and Herrold (2022) introduce and describe project-think as a "managerial rationality" that can influence organisations in several ways. First, it involves targeting particular needs and groups, which can lead to issue fragmentation, causing organisations to lose sight of the underlying structural causes. Second, it can create a dependence on external funding sources. This can lead to competition for resources between organisations instead of collaboration. At the same time, it can redirect organizational focus from addressing actual societal issues toward securing funding instead. Third, it emphasizes outputs that can be quantified and achieved within short project cycles, which requires extensive administration, where time and energy are spent on project planning, grant writing, and reporting, diverting staff from their core mission, meaning that the hours that should go to actual work instead get consumed by bureaucratic requirements. Lastly, project-think transforms organisations into professional career paths that could attract staff based on employment prospects rather than solely on mission commitment. This perspective helps clarify how the project format shapes organisational priorities and practices.

2.3 Funding Dependence and Institutional Pressures

Resource dependence theory describes that an organization’s survival depends on its ability to secure and maintain critical resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, as cited in Froelich, 1999). Froelich (1999) explains that organizations can reduce dependence on one funder and organizational vulnerability by diversifying their revenue streams. Being dependent on multiple income sources can, however, increase complexity when the organization must handle multiple funder expectations and criteria at the same time.

Related to this dynamic, the article notes that nonprofit organizations devote considerable time and energy to monitoring how foundations' priorities evolve, including changes in their goals, target groups, thematic focus, and geographical preferences, and to adapting their project proposals to align as closely as possible with these shifting criteria. This ongoing adaptation process is intrinsic to project-based financing and reflects the practical realities of foundation funding (Froelich, 1999).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organisations are shaped by institutional pressures that encourage conformity, including coercive pressures from the state and other organisations they depend on, normative pressures arising from professional norms, and mimetic pressures that lead organisations to imitate others when facing uncertainty. Over time, this makes organisations within the same field become more similar to each other. Rather than viewing change as a linear response to external pressures, Arvidson (2018) builds on DiMaggio and Powell (1983) to offer a more nuanced perspective. In her account, organisations do not simply adapt to external demands; they continuously reinterpret and negotiate these pressures within their own structures and practices. She distinguishes between evolving change, which is continuous and arises through everyday practice and ongoing reflection, and episodic change, which takes the form of distinct events that may generate stress but can also open up space for new strategies. In this view, reflection and the handling of tensions become central drivers in how organisational identity and integrity develop over time. This perspective suggests that organisations’ responses to funding requirements are shaped by external pressures, but also by internal interpretation and negotiation.

Moreover, Oliver (1991) conceptualises organisations as strategic actors. She identifies five broad types of strategic responses to institutional demands, ranging along a continuum from conformity to resistance: (1) acquiescence, where organisations adapt through habit, imitation or conscious compliance; (2) compromise, where they balance, pacify or bargain between competing stakeholder demands; (3) avoidance, where they seek to decouple, buffer or even exit situations that threaten core goals; (4) defiance, where they openly reject, challenge or attack institutional requirements; and (5) manipulation, where they attempt to shape the institutional environment itself through co-optation, influence or control. This perspective highlights that civil society organisations do not merely adapt to funders' and policymakers' expectations, but actively negotiate, reinterpret and sometimes resist them.

Power (1999), drawing on cases from higher education, medicine and financial auditing, offers a perspective on how accountability demands shape organisations. He argues that audits do not simply control organisations from the outside. They function by encouraging the development of internal systems, performance measures and documentation practices that make activities measurable and verifiable. In this way, organisations become “auditable.” Power distinguishes between decoupling, where formal compliance structures are created without substantially altering core activities, and colonization, where audit logics begin to reshape organisational practices. These concepts help explain how accountability requirements may influence how organisations structure and present their work.

Together, these perspectives suggest that civil society organisations operate within environments shaped by resource dependence, institutional pressures, and accountability demands. Funding relationships and regulatory expectations can influence organisational structures, practices, and project design, while processes of auditing and measurement encourage the development of systems that render organisations “auditable.” At the same time, organisations are not passive recipients of these pressures, but actively interpret, negotiate, and seek to mitigate their impact through strategic responses. These theoretical frameworks therefore provide tools for analysing how external expectations shape project development and how organisations manage and mitigate the challenges that arise from them.

2.4 Professionalism and Managerial Logics in civil society

Over recent decades, civil society organisations have increasingly adopted managerial and market-oriented practices traditionally associated with the private sector. Wijkström (2016) notes that Swedish civil society has become more professional and business-oriented, with efficiency, accountability, and performance increasingly central to how organisations gain legitimacy. Similarly, Terzieva et al. (2024) argue that civil society organisations are increasingly shaped by managerial logics, adopting business-like practices such as strategic planning, performance measurement, and professional management. These developments can strengthen organisational capacity, coordination, and credibility, but also risk shifting priorities toward quantifiable results and funder-defined objectives.

Previous research shows that many civil society organisations are increasingly run by paid staff rather than volunteers (as cited in Herz, 2016). DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of normative isomorphism helps explain why organisations within the same field tend to develop similar practices and ways of working. Normative isomorphism occurs through processes of professionalisation, where staff share similar educational backgrounds, training, and professional standards, and where these norms circulate as people move between organisations or participate in shared networks. Over time, this produces common understandings of what constitutes credible, appropriate, or "professional" organisational behaviour.

This perspective suggests that the development of project applications is shaped not only by funding pressures but also by professional norms and shared understandings of what constitutes a credible proposal. Such professionalisation can shape how organisations frame, structure, and present their work when applying for project funding.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach used to examine our research question:

What concerns do Swedish civil society organizations recognize as shaping their work to develop project applications, and how do they mitigate them?

3.1 Research Design & Approach

This study uses a qualitative and exploratory research strategy to understand how civil society organisations develop projects and project applications. Previous research shows that civil society organisations operate under multiple external and internal pressures. A qualitative research strategy is therefore necessary as it can recognize the complexity, non-linearity, and sometimes paradoxical nature of causal relationships in social life. It allows for an interpretive analysis that unpacks, reads, and makes sense of diverse social contexts (Alvehus, 2019, p.29). A quantitative approach, in contrast, is more suitable for testing hypotheses and would not capture the varying interpretations of individuals, potentially oversimplifying the complex dynamics that this research question seeks to explore (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2019, p.35).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection. This format allows participants to shape the conversation in ways that reflect their experiences, while giving the researcher flexibility to ask follow-up questions. At the same time, an interview guide ensures that discussions remain aligned with the study's overall focus (Alvehus, 2019, p. 87). This design is well-suited to capturing how project ideas are formed, negotiated, and shaped within organisations.

We used an abductive approach during the research process, which involved going back and forth between theoretical perspectives and engaging with participants as an empirical source (Bell et al., 2019, p.24). Initial readings of previous research on the professionalisation of civil society (Wijkström, 2016 and (Terzieva et al. 2024), project logic (Herz, 2016), resource dependence (Froelich, 1999), and institutional pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) informed the development of the interview guide and shaped the study's initial focus on how external funding structures influence organisational behaviour. Additional literature was incorporated to strengthen the analytical grounding of each perspective. The theoretical framework, therefore, reflects both the initial assumptions identified before the interviews and the insights that emerged during data analysis.

3.2 Sample Selection

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants with specific knowledge and experience relevant to the research question (Bell et al., 2019, p.391). In this case, participants were chosen because they had direct experience in designing and applying for project funding within Swedish civil society organisations. This sampling strategy was appropriate given the study's focus on understanding how project applications are developed in practice. Two purposive logics guided the selection: criterion sampling and maximum variation sampling.

Criterion sampling ensured that all participants met the core criteria, which was having direct experience with designing and applying for project funding within a non-profit organisation in Sweden (Bell et al., 2019, p.390). The participants were selected because they had previous extensive experience of Swedish civil society in general, and in particular, substantial experience of project development.

To capture a broad range of perspectives, maximum variation sampling was also applied (Bell et al., 2019, p.390). Participants were therefore selected from organisations that differed in size, mission, operational characteristics, and funding sources. Across the sample, organisations had experience with a wide range of funders, including government agencies such as MUCF and The National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), large foundations such as Allmänna Arvsfonden and Postkodstiftelsen, and smaller private foundations. This diversity was considered valuable for identifying both shared patterns and unique experiences in how project-based funding shapes project applications across different types of civil society organisations.

In total, eight participants were interviewed. They held roles such as general secretary, president, founder, and project manager. These participants offered informed perspectives on project development and had substantial experience working with project-based funding.

Some participants shared their experience from one organisation, while others drew on project development experience from two different organisations. In the interview sample table (Appendix C), participants who discussed projects from two organisations are listed with both roles. In contrast, those with experience from one organisation are marked with "-" in the second column.

3.3 Data Collection

All interviews were video calls conducted in Swedish via Microsoft Teams and were video- and audio-recorded using the same platform. Conducting the interviews online offered practical advantages, including the possibility of interviewing participants without being in the same physical location, a benefit highlighted in computer-assisted interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 174). At the same time, using video rather than audio alone made it possible to access non-linguistic aspects of communication as gestures and facial expressions, which Kvale and Brinkmann note are key components of face-to-face interviews (2015, p. 174). This combination made it possible to retain the flexibility of online interviewing while still capturing cues that support a more nuanced interpretation of participants' responses. An interview guide ensured that central topics were covered while still allowing participants to describe their experiences freely. The interviews had a duration ranging from approximately 33 to 60 minutes.

Before each interview, participants were asked to reflect on one or two concrete examples of project development in which they had been involved. These examples then served as the main cases during the conversation. Using specific projects in this way served two methodological purposes. First, it improved recall and depth: concrete examples helped participants access detailed memories of how a project actually unfolded, resulting in richer and more nuanced descriptions than abstract discussions often provide. Second, it helped anchor the interview in real practice and create structure: following a specific project made it easier to trace the process from initial idea to project design, and ensured that the conversation remained grounded in what participants had done in practice rather than general opinions. Although participants sometimes moved between the example and more general reflections, beginning with a concrete case ensured that the data captured both personal experiences and broader reasoning.

The interviews were based on an interview guide with nine main questions (see Appendix A). The guide covered three thematic areas: the origin of the project idea, internal factors influencing the project design, and external factors. All main questions were posed to all respondents, but the semi-structured approach meant that the order and formulation were adapted to the respondent's answers and the natural flow of conversation. This enabled in-depth exploration of relevant aspects that emerged during the interviews, while ensuring systematic coverage of all themes. Follow-up questions were used to clarify, concretize, and deepen understanding.

Data collection continued until the interviews no longer generated substantially new information in relation to the research question, which was judged to be the case after eight interviews. Ethical procedures regarding voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality are described in Section 3.5.

3.4 Data Analysis

We followed the six phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching for theme, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes and 6. Producing the report.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it enabled us to organise the material into meaningful themes that reflected both common tendencies and variations across participants, making it well-suited to the complexity of the phenomenon (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The interviews were first transcribed using the built-in transcription function in Microsoft Teams and were then carefully checked against the recording to ensure accuracy. All transcripts were kept in Swedish throughout the analysis to avoid loss of meaning.

The analysis began with several close readings of the transcripts to develop an overall understanding of the material. The video recordings were also revisited to capture relevant non-verbal cues and to clarify any ambiguous passages.

The next step included analyzing passages relating to project initiation, project design, and different types of influences described by participants. The codes were compared across interviews and grouped into broader themes.

To structure our findings, we introduce a framework that groups participants' concerns into three perspectives: organisational priorities, funder interests, and societal issues. The framework illustrates how these perspectives interact and sometimes create tensions that organisations must navigate when developing project applications.

Before presenting the findings, we selected relevant quotations and paraphrases. We use a combination of these forms to enhance readability and support clear interpretation. While direct quotations provide transparency and allow participants' voices to be heard, short quotations alone do not always capture the full context that was available to us as researchers. Paraphrasing parts of the material enables us to integrate this contextual understanding while still staying true to what the respondents expressed.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles for research involving participants were followed throughout, and the study complies with GDPR regulations. We informed participants about the study's purpose and sent a template developed by SSE for this purpose, including information about the voluntary nature of the participation, the participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the research, and how data is being handled by us. The participants provided informed consent before participating in the interview.

To protect confidentiality, names and identifying details about the projects have been removed, and participants are referred to as Interviewee 1-8 throughout the findings. This was particularly important given the relatively small and interconnected nature of the Swedish civil society sector, the use of direct quotations in the findings, and the fact that some participants were recruited through the researchers' existing professional networks. Interview recordings and transcripts have been stored securely and will be deleted upon completion of the research project.

No empirical data, including interview transcripts or identifiable participant information, were entered into any AI-assisting tool at any stage during the work of this thesis, except for quotation excerpts used solely for translation purposes. These excerpts had already been fully anonymised and de-contextualised and could not be traced back to any participant or organisation.

3.6 Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, Confirmability

Since this is a qualitative study, an important criterion for evaluation is trustworthiness, which is commonly assessed through four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bell et al., 2019, p.48).

As the study was conducted within the time frame of a bachelor's thesis, the data collection period was limited. To ensure dependability despite this constraint, participants with substantial and relevant experience were selected, and interviews continued until no new significant insights emerged in relation to the research question.

3.6.1 Credibility

Several steps were taken to strengthen credibility in this study. Both researchers participated actively in all interviews. During the interviews, we checked our understanding in real-time by restating participants' responses and asking clarifying questions to confirm we had interpreted them correctly.

All interviews were analysed in Swedish, the original language of the data, which reduced the risk of misinterpretation and helped preserve nuances that might otherwise be lost in translation. The data analysis and translation of quotes were done with great care. This included rewatching video recordings, re-listening to the original statements, and discussing to ensure both our findings and our translation remained faithful to participants' intended meaning. AI-assisted tools were used to generate translations of Swedish quotations into English, which were then manually reviewed and refined. This reflects Bell, Bryman, and Harley's (2019, p. 450) observation that translation involves interpretation and construction of meaning, which necessitates careful attention to maintain the integrity of participants' original expressions.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability in this study is supported by the inclusion of participants with substantial experience in project development within Swedish civil society, as well as by the use of maximum variation sampling, as explained in 3.2 Sampling Selection. Additionally, the Swedish context is characterised by specific funding structures, government agencies, and an associational tradition that differs from civil society in other countries. These conditions could potentially limit the possibility of transferring the findings to less experienced organisations or to civil society contexts outside Sweden.

3.6.3 Dependability

To ensure dependability, we carefully documented how interviews were conducted, how transcripts were checked, and how themes were developed, enabling others to trace and evaluate the research process. All empirical material was examined and interpreted solely by us, which means that the question of dependability remains important. Given the time constraints of our research, strategic prioritizations were necessary in data collection. To maintain dependability despite this, participants with substantial experience were selected, and interviews continued until no new significant insights emerged. All major methodological steps, such as data collection and analysis, were discussed with our supervisor at SSE to ensure that our approach was well considered.

3.6.4 Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, we maintained reflexivity about our positioning throughout the research process. Both researchers have different connections to Swedish civil society and previous experience with project applications, and some participants were recruited through our professional networks. We addressed this potential bias by actively checking our understanding during interviews through clarifying questions, discussing our interpretations openly with each other, and ensuring that conclusions remained grounded in participants' actual statements through the use of direct quotations and detailed paraphrasing in the findings section.

4. Findings

To structure the presentation of our findings, we introduce the *Project Development Triangle* (see Figure 1), a conceptual framework that categorises the recurring concerns described by participants into three overarching perspectives: organisational priorities, funder interests, and societal issues. It illustrates how these perspectives interact and, at times, pull in different directions, creating tensions that organisations must navigate when developing and designing project applications.

Figure 1 - The Project Development Triangle

The definitions below outline what each perspective includes.

Organisational priorities refer to the internal motivations and considerations that participants described in the interviews, including the organisation's mission, financial situation, financial strategy, available competencies, practical needs, and the integrity it seeks to maintain in its work.

Funder interests refer to the formal requirements, priorities, and expectations that participants in the interviews associated with external financiers, such as grant calls, eligibility criteria, the funder's agenda and focus areas, experienced unwritten norms, and other conditions that shape what kinds of projects can be proposed.

Societal issues refer to the challenges and conditions that participants described as requiring attention. These included both broader developments in society and/or more specific emerging needs identified within particular groups or local contexts.

Having established The Project Development Triangle as our framework, we turn to the three main themes.

4.1 Theme 1: Idea formation

The first theme explores why projects are initiated and what triggers organisations to begin developing a project idea. Across the interviews, participants described a variety of circumstances that sparked their project application work, ranging from urgent organisational needs and strategic planning to external funding calls or observations of unmet needs in society. Our findings showed that while some projects appeared to originate primarily from one of the three perspectives, most projects involved a more complex interplay of influences. In this theme, we present examples of what could trigger a project idea, each idea categorised under one of the three perspectives. While project ideas are often shaped by multiple factors, this analytical structure simplifies complex and overlapping processes to highlight the influence that appeared most prominent in each example. As one participant explained: *"It gets a bit messy when you try to say what came first — the idea or the [need for] money".* (Interviewee 3)

4.1.1 Examples of Organisational Influences

For some organisations, planning and applying for new projects was an ongoing and intentional activity. Interviewee 7 described actively developing projects as part of a long-term organisational strategy *"We have a diversified financing model where project and project funding constitute a fairly large part [of the financing] and have grown in recent years [...] We see it as an integrated part of [the organisation's] existence."* This suggests that, in these cases, the trigger for project ideas lies in internal strategic planning.

Interviewee 5 reflects that project ideas can emerge when organisations seek to experiment with something untested for the organisation, such as reaching a new target group. In this case, the trigger lies in an internal ambition to develop or expand organisational activities.

In another example, from Interviewee 1, the project idea emerged more reactively. When an ongoing big project was about to end and the organisation faced an urgent need for new funding, this situation triggered the development of a new project idea. Interviewee 1 explained: *"We needed to finance our operations, [...] we needed to continue working with [what was] the organisation's purpose. We wanted to continue having staff and we wanted to* *continue doing things for [the organisation's purpose]..."* In this case, the trigger was financial necessity and the need to secure organisational continuity.

Together, these examples illustrate how project ideas can be triggered by both strategic planning processes and immediate organisational needs.

4.1.2 Examples of Funder Influences

Some participants explained that the initial spark for a project came from the funding side, such as when funders announced new funding opportunities. Interviewee 3 described how their organisation developed a project specifically in response to a funder's grant call. In this example, the trigger for project development was the announcement of external funding, illustrating how grant calls can shape the emergence of project ideas.

In another case, the funder decided to reach out directly to the organisation. Interviewee 6 explained this experience: *"[The funder] had listened to the news [and] looked at what different projects exist [...] So we [the organization] got that little idea from them [and thought], what can we do then."* In this case, the initiating factor was outreach from the funder, illustrating how project ideas can also originate through relational interactions.

Together, these examples illustrate how funders' priorities and initiatives shape project idea formation, positioning the origin of the project closer to the funder corner of the triangle.

4.1.3 Examples of Societal Issues

Several participants described how project ideas emerged in response to societal issues. Some organisations identified project ideas through direct contact with their target groups. Interviewee 5 explained: *"We saw a huge need to have free activities [...] How can we be where the children are [...]."* In this case, the initiating factor was the identification of unmet needs among the target group, which sparked the development of a new project.

Other project ideas emerged from broader societal debates. Interviewee 2 described how growing public attention to gang-related violence influenced their idea to develop a project addressing this issue. In this case, the initiating factor was heightened public attention to a societal issue, which prompted the organisation to develop a project in response.

These findings illustrate how project ideas may originate in direct observations of target group needs or in broader societal debates, positioning the societal corner of the triangle as the starting point for project development.

4.2 Theme 2: Translating Ideas into Fundable Projects

While Theme 1 showed that project ideas can be initiated for different reasons and under varying circumstances, this theme focuses on what happens once organisations move from initial ideas into the actual work of designing a project application. During this phase, participants recognized concerns shaping their work with translating ideas into project applications, since they must negotiate between different expectations.

The interviews suggest that while the concerns that organisations had varied widely, all organizations had to take all three perspectives in the Project Development Triangle into account, regardless of where a project was initiated. This creates a push-and-pull dynamic between the different corners of the triangle, resulting in a complex, iterative project design process. This theme explores concerns across all three perspectives, while also highlighting the heterogeneity within them.

4.2.1 Organisational Realities Pulling Projects

Some participants felt the need to balance their organisation's core identity and mission against funder interest and/or potential partnerships. Interviewee 4 expressed concern about the risk of adapting operations to fit a grant call at the expense of the organisation's core purpose: *"If you adapt your operations to fit that call [...] instead of keeping your basic idea and core, it becomes very much adapted for just that project."* Another interviewee emphasised the importance of staying true to the organisation's mission, despite external pressures: *"When talking with many [other] organizations about applying for project funding, it should often be innovative, something that doesn't exist, preferably not regular operations. This makes you feel pressured to take a different direction than what you would most prefer [...]. We have chosen to always try to hold on to our core, and that has meant that we sometimes have not gotten projects [...] or that we have seen that we haven't been able to apply to certain project [grants]." (Interviewee 2)* Taken together, these accounts indicate that alignment with the organisational core was a key consideration during project design.

Concerns about mission drift shaped how participants approached funding opportunities and occasionally led them to refrain from applying.

Another example of the participants' wish to protect the organisational core emerged in collaborative applications. One participant who applied for a project jointly with other organisations described the substantial effort required to find common ground. The interviewee explained: *"We applied as one unit, but in order to come to that, it was a huge amount of work to find what we can agree on [...] Since everyone is different and has different structures and wills, we have had to compromise a lot…".* (Interviewee 5) Together, this illustrates how collaborative applications required negotiation and compromise between organisations with different structures and priorities. In this context, protecting the organisational core entailed navigating competing organisational priorities.

In addition to issues of collaboration and mission alignment, participants also described practical constraints related to time, resources, and staff competence. Project design was portrayed as highly demanding, often involving extensive writing, coordination, and preparation. Several mentioned the sheer scale of the work, such as very long applications or processes that stretched over months or years. As interviewee 1 explained: "*The applications are very elaborate when you apply to [a certain funder]. We're talking about project applications just in an initial phase that can be up to around 70 pages [...]*" Participants also highlighted the importance of staff expertise, noting that previous experience and knowledge of the funding landscape made a substantial difference to how projects developed. One interviewee emphasised*: "As soon as it becomes a larger organisation, you hire a person who works with applications, that's the best investment you can make as an organisation [...] it's a specialised competence to be able to do it in a smart way and to be able to do it quickly and to be able to interpret these [funders requirements]".* (Interviewee 5) Taken together, these examples indicate that some funding applications were described as particularly extensive and resource-intensive. Preparing such applications required organisations to have both the time and the specialised competence needed to navigate complex funding requirements.

Projects can also carry symbolic and strategic value. Interviewee 3 noted that involvement in a project offered symbolic or strategic value beyond financial gain: *"Being involved in that type of project, financed by a government agency that was quite important for us [...] That* *was a form of hygiene factor and quality mark for us as an organisation. But it wasn't important because we needed the money. It cost more than it gave us [in resources]".* This example highlights that reputational considerations functioned as a concern in the development of project applications. Certain projects were perceived as important for maintaining organisational legitimacy and recognition, even when financial benefits were limited.

4.2.2 Funder Requirements Pulling Projects

Based on the interviews, funders can influence the project by outlining the themes in a project grant call. One participant described adapting to a grant call: *"The funder announced a grant call related to [theme], and we chose to develop a project in response to that."* (Interviewee 3). Another participant explained that they search through different funders' project grant calls to find opportunities that align with their organisation's ideas: *"[As an organization], you sit and look at many different calls for grants [...] and then you begin to see what might fit your own [idea]".* (Interviewee 4) Together, these accounts illustrate how funders influenced what types of projects were considered fundable and how applications needed to be formulated to meet specific criteria. Organisations described navigating externally defined funding opportunities, assessing how their ideas could correspond with the themes and expectations outlined in funding calls.

In addition to navigating funding calls, one interviewee described how organisations actively sought to understand what funders were likely to support, and adjusted their ideas accordingly: *"You look at what current challenges funders may be willing to support, and then you adapt to that. You have an underlying idea, but [it can] be adjusted slightly so that it aligns [...]"* (Interviewee 5). This suggests that part of the design work involves aligning organisational ideas with the themes and challenges prioritised by funders.

Two participants explained that the funders encouraged the organisation to cooperate with other organisations. In one case, an organisation had applied for a project and was informed by the funder that two other organisations had submitted similar applications. The funder, therefore, wanted them to collaborate on a joint project. *"We want you to talk to each other and see if you can reach an agreement, because we see [...] that you could find synergies* *here in a partnership... So it was the funder who helped us." (Interviewee 7)* In the other case, as explained by interviewee 5, the same funder established a network of several organisations with similar conditions and missions, with the aim of encouraging them to work together. This led to some of these organizations joining together to submit a project application. In order to submit a project application as a group of organizations, they had to form a new organization together. *"What came from the funder was that you should probably organize yourselves legally if you are going to apply for funding [...]"* (Interviewee 5). This requirement was presented as a condition for funding rather than as an end in itself. This illustrates that funders shaped the organisational structures surrounding project applications by encouraging organisations to collaborate or even reorganise formally in accordance with funder expectations.

Funders also shaped projects through specific reporting and measurement requirements, which the organisation needs to incorporate when they design the project. In one example, Interviewee 6 described how reporting and measurement requirements forced their organisation to be able to demonstrate measurable effects on participants, in order to get the project approved. The interviewee described this as challenging in that type of project. This example shows how funder criteria can directly influence not only what projects aim to achieve, but also how organisations plan to operationalize and document their work.

Moreover, interviewee 8 described how funder interest shaped not only what was written in applications, but also who within the organisation could successfully write them.When a junior project leader, who was part of the target group, wrote an application independently, it was rejected by the funder. The participant explained that while funders expressed appreciation for involving the target group, in practice, they required a level of formal language and structure that made it necessary for more experienced staff to assist with writing applications in order to secure funding. This example highlights how funder requirements extended beyond project content to the professional standards expected in applications.

In several cases where participants described initiating contact in order to get feedback from the funder. One interviewee described presenting two possible ideas to the funder to understand which one fit best: *"We sent two different types of projects that we received feedback on" [...].* (Interviewee 2) This illustrates how organisations took funders' views and feedback into the development of their project ideas.

Overall, funder requirements influenced the design phase by prompting organisations to reshape, expand, or reframe their ideas to meet externally defined expectations.

4.2.3 Societal Needs Pulling Projects

Beyond organisational capacities and funder requirements, participants also emphasised that projects needed to respond to societal needs and challenges. The societal context was described as an important reference point when designing project applications. One interviewee reflected on how the societal climate at the time of application influenced what was possible to propose: *"I think that if we had had today's societal climate, then I would not have written that project application [...]"*. (Interviewee 1). One other participant explained that you need to understand societal challenges for the target group and the area, and what needs the organisation could address when designing the project: *“In the purpose section of a project [application], you describe a challenge in the external environment […] what societal challenges do we believe we can solve with our contribution […]”* (Interviewee 5) Together, these accounts illustrate how both macro-level societal developments and context-specific understanding of local challenges influenced what projects were proposed and how they were framed in applications.

To develop this understanding of societal needs, participants described engaging in dialogue and consultation with relevant actors. Interviewee 2 explained that they had dialogue with other relevant organisations and authorities close to the societal challenge (linked to their project) to better understand the problem, and their established advisory board of researchers and field experts, who provided input and feedback on the application. Some participants also mentioned engaging in direct dialogue with their target groups to understand their needs and preferences, and that these conversations influenced the project. Interviewee 6 explained how they gathered people from the target audience to understand their situation:*“First, [we] did research; [we] gathered some [people from the target audience] and started talking to [them] [...] so we listened to their needs”*. These examples illustrate how organisations grounded their project design in dialogue with relevant actors and target groups in order to ensure responsiveness to identified societal needs.

In addition to understanding societal needs, participants described positioning their projects in relation to other organisations and existing initiatives. Some participants noted that a project should ideally complement other organisations' ongoing projects. Rather than seeing them as competitors, they viewed them as working toward similar societal goals. If another organization was already addressing an issue or target group, it made little sense to duplicate that work. Instead, they searched for gaps where their contribution could add value: *"We think it is extremely important that we are seen as part of the big picture, so it is important for us not to do things that others do and, like, things that already exist and are good […] So instead it is more important to try to see where we can enter the puzzle and add something more that can create value […]".* (Interviewee 6) At the same time, not all participants experienced the funding landscape in the same way. Interviewee 8 shared observations that in today's climate, when certain societal issues gain attention, larger established organisations tend to move quickly to develop projects addressing those issues. From this participant's perspective, financial pressures could make genuine response to societal needs secondary to securing available funding. These accounts illustrate perspectives on the civil society landscape as involving both cooperative and competitive dynamics.

4.3 Theme 3: Relational and Reputational Conditions in Project Development

While Theme 1 examined how project ideas emerge and take form, and Theme 2 explored how these ideas are shaped, structured, and adapted into fundable project designs, Theme 3 highlights the relational and reputational conditions, such as brand and track record, that shape both early idea formation and later project design. In addition to organisational, funder-related, and societal influences, participants emphasised the importance of personal contacts, informal networks, and the organisation's reputation when developing projects. These conditions influenced organisations' capacity to develop projects, affecting their access to dialogue, partnerships, and the framing of applications, highlighting how networks, trust, and brand reputation play a significant role in project development.

4.3.1 Personal Contacts and Networks

Across the interviews, participants described how having contact with specific individuals at funding organisations made a noticeable difference during the project design phase. These contacts were between individuals at the funder and the organisation, and not a formal relationship between the two organisations. These relationships made it easier to ask questions, clarify uncertainties, or seek guidance during the design phase. Interviewee 2 noted that having an established contact person at a funding organisation, particularly someone who had worked with them on previous projects, made the application process more straightforward and reduced uncertainty about what was expected.

Another example mentioned was when someone from the non-profit organisation also held a position within the funding foundation. This overlap provided the organisation with access to information it would not otherwise have had. As one interviewee noted:
"We have, among other things, another board member who sits on their board, which has given us completely different conditions." (Interviewee 1)

4.3.2 Organisational Brand and Reputation

Some interviewees who had worked in both smaller organisations and more well-established ones explained that organisational reputation influenced how project applications were received. In more established organisations, funders already knew who they were, which made it easier to approach funders and reduced the amount of background explanation needed. As one participant described: *"...Nine out of ten know [the organisation]. So we don't need to write that much [...] But if you're unknown, then you really have to work on describing and concretising."* (Interviewee 5).

Participants also highlighted the importance of an organisation's track record and relationship with funders. One participant, referring to a long-standing connection with a funder, explained:

"The funder remembered our [previous] project, so this project call was easy for us to access." (Interviewee 3)

One participant emphasized that track record plays a central role in maintaining credibility: *"We have extremely high deliveries in projects and now we have built that reputation. It has never failed, that's why we get funding [...] It's a matter of priority for us, that we must never fail on credibility"* (Interviewee 8).

These examples illustrate how track record shapes the relational context in which project development takes place, as organisations with demonstrated results may experience different conditions when engaging with funders around new projects.

However, a track record could also work against organizations. Interviewee 7 described how a past project funded by a specific funder that did not turn out well led to a loss of trust, and it took several years to rebuild that relationship.

5. Discussion

The findings show that project development is shaped by three interconnected perspectives, organisational priorities, funder interest, and societal issues. These perspectives influence how project ideas emerge and how they are translated into fundable projects, while relational and reputational conditions further shape the context in which this process unfolds. In this chapter, we draw on previous theory to discuss how and why Swedish civil society organisations navigate and mitigate these shaping influences when developing project applications.

5.1 The Three Pulling Forces in Project Design

This section focuses on explaining the nature of the three perspectives, what they consist of, and how they function conceptually. In section 5.2, we will discuss how organisations can mitigate these in practice.

5.1.1 Factors related to Funder interests

Our findings show that project applications were often described as highly demanding, involving extensive writing, coordination, and administration. Participants noted that funders had high expectations regarding the level of detail, the structuring of applications, and the clarity of the proposed activities, goals, and expected results. These findings resonate with Wijkström's (2016) analysis of the increasing professionalisation of Swedish civil society, where organisations have moved from volunteer-driven models toward more formalised and managerial structures. Terzieva et al. (2024) similarly highlight how civil society organisations are increasingly influenced by managerial logics emphasising planning, documentation, and performance measurement. These requirements influence the project application towards the funding expectations.

This can also be understood in light of Power's (1999) argument that accountability demands encourage the construction of "auditable performance," where activities are articulated in forms that can be measured, verified, and communicated to external audiences. In our findings, the emphasis on clear and quantifiable results in project applications illustrates how reporting-oriented requirements can shape what is presented as credible and assessable within the application format.

Further, a key component of the funder expectation pull is the thematic direction set by funders. Grant call defines priority areas, problem framings, and target groups, and open applications also include a theme, but it is often less specific. In both cases, funders set the parameters for what is imaginable and legitimate to propose. This guides organisations towards certain issues and shapes the project application.

Beyond thematic direction, funders also influence project design through the degree of activity they take in the process, where we've seen examples of funders that actively steer how organisations work, who they work with, and how they should demonstrate results. Feedback from funders varied, but when present, it further directed how organisations interpreted expectations and adjusted their project logic. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how funders exercise power not only through themes but also through the procedural and relational conditions that shape what projects become.

5.1.2 Factors related to Organisational priorities

The need to secure continued employment for staff appeared to be one internal factor driving organisations to apply for new projects. This becomes particularly significant in the Swedish context, where an employee automatically converts into a permanent position after being employed for two years within a five-year period (Fackförbundet ST, 2023). For organisations that rely on project funding to finance some of their staff, this creates a structural tension where project funding provides the means to employ people, yet the legal framework pushes toward permanence.

Retaining staff can be motivated by practical considerations. Recruiting new employees is both time-consuming and costly, and finding the right competence for a specific project or target group can be challenging. Given these realities, it is understandable that organisations prioritise keeping experienced staff whose knowledge, relationships, and skills are already well established. In this sense, staffing stability becomes an organisational priority in its own right, further reinforcing the internal pull towards seeking project funding that can sustain valued personnel. As a result, the timing of applications may be driven by, for example, contract cycles or the risk of losing valued personnel. Similarly, the choice of funding may be guided by which grants allow salary coverage. In this way, the need to retain staff becomes intertwined with project application, subtly directing both the content and the strategic direction of applications. Several participants also highlighted that organisational capacity, such as time, administrative resources, or available staff, shapes which project ideas can realistically be developed.

As civil society becomes more professionalised and business-like practices (Terzieva et al., 2024; Wijkström, 2016), internal routines and professional norms increasingly shape what organisations view as feasible project ideas. This pattern aligns with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) notion of normative isomorphism, where shared educational backgrounds, professional training, and staff mobility create common norms about what a "credible" project should look like. Together, these professional norms narrow the range of what is imagined as realistic or appropriate to propose, guiding project development towards familiar models and standardised ways of working.

Organisations are socially constructed entities, shaped by the people who lead and participate in them and by the contextual conditions that surround them. Because of this, notions of what constitutes legitimate or meaningful work are not fixed but change as internal and external circumstances shift. This became clear in our study, where organisations repeatedly reasoned about their values and carefully considered whether new project ideas were compatible with their mission. Therefore, one factor shaping project applications is the tension between pursuing organisational development and securing funding, and the risk of mission drift, a shift of time, resources, and attention away from the organisation's core mission (Weisbrod, 2004, as cited in Jones, 2007) - something organisations must take into account when evaluating potential projects.

Taken together, these organisational priorities shape the development of project applications, affecting when organisations apply, which ideas they pursue, and how proposals are formulated.

5.1.3 Factors related to Societal Issues

Our findings show that organisations must adapt to current societal issues. This suggests that societal issues, such as challenges and developments, play a key role in shaping the project application. This pattern can be understood in light of the increasing expectation that civil society should respond to emerging social needs and deliver activities in areas where public services are perceived as insufficient, as explained by Herz (2016) and Wijkström (2016). This shapes project developers by staying updated on what issues are arising, but also navigating how these issues could be understood within their organization.

5.1.4 Relational and Reputational Conditions for Project Development

Beyond these three factors related to funder interests, organisational priorities, and social issues, our findings also indicate that relational and reputational dynamics between individuals and organisations shape how project development unfolds. Personal contacts, informal networks, and prior interactions influenced the extent to which organisations could initiate dialogue with funders, clarify expectations, and reduce uncertainty in the application process. This pattern resonates with DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) observations on relational and normative isomorphism, where trust, shared professional norms, and repeated interactions affect organisational behaviour.

Organisational brand and track record also play a significant role. A strong reputation and a history of successful project delivery increased organisations' ability to gain legitimacy, be viewed as trustworthy actors, and receive a more favourable reception from funders. Conversely, a weaker or problematic track record appeared to have the opposite effect, making it harder for organisations to be taken seriously, access funders, or rebuild trust.

Although these relational and reputational dynamics are not part of the Project Development Triangle, they represent important conditions under which the three primary influences are navigated.

5.2 Response to the factors in The Project Development Triangle

In this section, we will discuss how project developers respond to or manage the factors in the Project Development triangle previously discussed in 5.1.

One overall response we observed was, among other things, that a significant strategy for navigating the different factors of the Project Development Triangle was the strategic presentation of projects, meaning the process of adapting how the project is described rather than what it is. Participants described a form of carefully framing in which projects were not altered in substance but were deliberately presented in ways that better aligned with funders' expectations, organisation priorities, and societal issues. This reflects Herz's (2016) interpretation of Krause's (2014) concept of the "production of projects," where one of the core dynamics is the need to package projects. Rather than reshaping their activities, organisations adjusted how they articulated their goals, target groups, or methods to resonate with what they believed funders wanted to see. In this sense, framing becomes a communicative adaptation. The core of the project remains the same, but the narrative around it is strategically tailored.

The following sections dive deeper into each of the three key factors in order to analyze the responses from the interviewees in a more aggregate manner.

5.2.1 Response to factors related to Funder interest

As previously described, the application processes are widely seen as demanding and need practical organisational capacity, such as available time, staff expertise, and experience. The organization responds by developing strategies concerning how they work with project applications. That is to allocate resources for this purpose, such as time, specialised knowledge, and administrative skill. One participant explained hiring employers with great skills in project applications for this aim. Another participant responded to this by letting experienced staff, who knew how to write a project application, support less experienced staff, who were part of the target audience, in the writing process of applications. This raises questions about the democratic implications of the project application system as shown here. If only certain individuals or organisations possess the skills, capacity, or familiarity needed to navigate these demanding processes, then valuable ideas and initiatives may be excluded — not because they lack the ability to implement the project, but because they lack the ability to apply for the project under these conditions.

Participants described three main ways in which organisations responded to funder themes and expectations. First, some engaged in *aligning,* for example, searching for grant calls that already matched their mission, target groups or ongoing activities, ensuring that the project idea naturally fit the funder's priorities. Second, many used *presenting* strategies, keeping the substance of the project intact but articulating it in the language, themes, or problem framings preferred by the funder, which is aligned with Krause's (2014, cited in Herz (2016). Third, when full alignment was not possible, organisations described *negotiating*, emphasising certain aspects of their idea or adjusting the focus to bring it closer to the funder's expectations while still protecting the core intentions. Together, these responses illustrate how organisations navigate funder-defined themes through a combination of matching opportunities, communicative flexibility, and selective negotiation. Finally, participants also described instances of *avoidance*, where organisations chose not to apply for certain calls because the thematic direction was too far from their mission or risked compromising their core. Negotiating and avoidance can be understood from Oliver's (1991) strategic responses.

These patterns also suggest that funders' influence is not absolute. Because organisations can negotiate or even deny grant calls that conflict too strongly with their mission, funders must shape their themes in ways that remain attractive and legitimate to potential applicants. In this sense, organisational responses set practical limits on what funders can demand; the project funding system operates not as a one-way imposition, but as a negotiated space in which both sides adjust to one another.

5.2.2 Response to factors related to Organisational priorities

To avoid ending up in a difficult financial situation or losing staff, several participants emphasised the importance of taking a long-term financing perspective and securing multiple funding sources. This can be connected to Froelich's (1999) argument that diversified revenue streams strengthen organisational stability and reduce vulnerability to shifts in any single funder.

In responding to the pressures of securing funding without compromising their mission, organisations employ a strategy of caution, carefully evaluating which opportunities to pursue. Although we observed limited evidence of actual mission drift among our participants, the strong awareness and vigilance around protecting the organisational core suggest that mission drift is recognised as a considerable risk within the sector. This aligns with Arvidson's (2018) description of organisational change as a continuous and reflective process through which organisations gradually adapt to shifting circumstances. In practice, this means that organisations continually negotiate between development and mission protection, assessing whether potential projects reinforce rather than dilute their core purpose.

Lastly, this emphasis on maintaining the organisation’s core mission while adapting the language and structure of applications can be interpreted through Power’s (1999) concept of decoupling. In this perspective, organisations create formal, auditable structures in response to accountability demands without necessarily transforming their core activities.

5.2.3 Response to factors related to Societal Issues

In response to factors related to societal issues, project developers described the need to remain continuously attentive to which issues are emerging or gaining visibility in public debate and in their organization, so that their projects stay relevant in a constantly changing environment. This reflects the organisational changes that Arvidson (2018) describes, where organisations are part of ongoing change and adapt to shifting circumstances. It involves drawing on their own experiences, looking through their own lens, and navigating a wide range of projects in order to align them with societal issues.

Building on this need for continuous alignment with societal issues. When the project addresses a target group or issue that is already familiar to the organisation, the distance to the societal issue is closer. This is often the case when the organisation has previous experience working with the group, or when the project developer has personal insight into the issue or belongs to the target audience. In these situations, it seems to become easier to understand the problem, articulate the project's relevance, and design suitable activities, because societal needs and organisational knowledge are already closely aligned.

However, when the target group or issue is less familiar, the project developers can respond by using strategies such as consulting advisory boards, engaging focus groups, or initiating dialogue with the intended participants. This can help create a clearer understanding of the societal context and enable project developers to ground their ideas in more informed insights.

5.3 Practical Implications

5.3.1 Recommendations for Civil Society Organisations

Organisations may benefit from strengthening internal capacity for project development, including dedicating time, administrative routines and staff competence to the application process. At the same time, they need to remain cautious about how much resources they invest relative to the potential funding outcome, as excessive application efforts can strain an already limited organisational capacity.

Maintaining clarity around the organisational mission is essential, as it helps avoid mission drift when adapting to funder interests. Strategic framing can also be used to present organisational work in funder-legible terms without compromising core intentions, and project relevance can be improved through continuous dialogue with target groups and collaborating actors.

In addition, organisations may benefit from developing a more deliberate funding strategy, including diversifying funding sources to reduce dependency on single funders and increase resilience. Planning project ideas well in advance can help organisations align opportunities with long-term priorities, and allocating more time to projects with larger or more complex budgets may support higher-quality applications and more sustainable project design.

5.3.2 Recommendations for Funders

Funders can support more accessible and effective project development by clarifying expectations, offering feedback during the process, and designing requirements that balance accountability with feasibility. Simplified application and reporting procedures may reduce administrative burden and lower entry barriers for less-resourced organisations. Funders can also reflect on how thematic calls and collaboration requirements shape the landscape, ensuring that funding practices enable meaningful innovation without unintentionally narrowing who can apply.

5.3.3 Systemic Considerations

At a sector level, the strong reliance on project-based funding raises questions about long-term sustainability, continuity, and inclusivity. As project development becomes increasingly professionalised, smaller organisations risk being disadvantaged. The findings suggest a need for more predictable financing models and coordination between funders to reduce fragmentation and ensure that civil society can address societal needs without being overly driven by short-term funding logic.

The considerations identified may not be unique to civil society organisations. Similar tensions between accountability requirements, professionalisation, and mission integrity can arise in other fields where funding and legitimacy are increasingly tied to formalised evaluation systems. This suggests that the challenges described here may reflect broader organisational patterns in contexts governed by performance and reporting logics.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of findings

The purpose of this study was to examine what concerns Swedish civil society organisations recognize when developing projects and project applications, and how they mitigate them. Based on eight qualitative interviews, we show that project development is shaped by a dynamic and often tense interplay between three primary forces: organisational priorities, funder interest, and societal issues, which we conceptualise as The Project Development Triangle. This illustrates how project developers must continuously negotiate and balance these influences during the process from the initial idea to the final application.

The findings reveal that organisations use a combination of strategic adaptation and protective measures**.** The most prevalent response concluded from our findings is strategic presentation, a form of communicative adaptation where the project's narrative is carefully framed to align with funders' expectations, organisational priorities, and societal issues.

Beyond this overarching strategy, the specific responses to each of the three forces are detailed below:

Response to factors related to funder interest: Organizations respond to the high demands for detail, measurement, and thematic alignment by developing specialized internal capacity and employing strategic maneuvers such as alignment, negotiation, and avoidance. This highlights a structural tension where the demanding application process risks excluding valuable initiatives that lack the necessary administrative resources, raising questions about the democratic implications of the current funding system.

Response to factors related to organisational priorities: Organisations actively protect their core mission and staff stability. Responses include adopting a long-term financing perspective through revenue diversification and maintaining cautiousness to prevent mission drift. The need to retain experienced staff, driven by both practical and legal considerations, subtly influences the timing and content of applications.

Response to factors related to societal issues: Organizations maintain continuous attentiveness to emerging social needs and public discourse. When the societal issue is familiar, the response is grounded in internal knowledge; when less familiar, project developers actively seek input through advisory boards or target group dialogue to ensure the project is relevant and well-grounded.

6.2 Limitations & Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, the qualitative design and small sample size limit generalisability due to the time frame of a bachelor's thesis. Given the diversity of Swedish civil society, a broader interview sample could have been beneficial, even with an aim for depth. Second, the data reflect only the perspectives of one person from the organization; this could be broadened by interviewing several participants who were part of the same project development and project application process, providing a broader picture. Third, we relied on projects that participants selected based on their experiences; the project cases were therefore not strategically selected. We could have chosen projects by funder type or grant size to create a more systematic comparison. Fourth, we did not systematically account for the size of the project grants for which participants applied, so our empirical material includes both small and large grants. As a result, potential differences in how organisations formulate projects when applying for grants of different amounts remain outside the scope of this study.

Further research could apply the Project Development Triangle framework to examine how projects relate to its components during the implementation phase, rather than only during the application stage. Building on this thesis, future studies could adopt longitudinal or multi-phase research designs that follow projects beyond the application phase into implementation, completion, and evaluation. Such designs would make it possible to explore how projects are framed in the application phase and how that relates to the actual activities. By linking the pre-project phase to what happens during and after implementation, future research could both extend our findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of how funding logics shape civil society practice over time.

Further research could also include comparative studies between different types of organisations or across different funders to examine whether the pressures within the Project Development Triangle vary across the sector. In addition, future studies could explore how the size of the grant influences the project development process, as we expect that it could affect the amount of time spent on the project application process.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide in English

1. Can you tell us about your background in civil society?
2. Can you tell us about the project?
3. Where did the idea for the project come from?
4. Why did you apply for project funding?
5. What external factors influenced the project design?
6. What internal factors influenced the project design?
7. Which internal bodies had influence over the project design?
8. How would you describe the connection between the project and your long-term goals or overall vision?
9. Can you think of another project you have been involved in developing? How would you describe the similarities and differences between the two projects?

Appendix B: Interview Guide in Swedish

1. Kan du berätta om din bakgrund inom civilsamhället?
2. Kan du berätta om projektet?
3. Vad kom idén till projektet från?
4. Varför sökte ni projektmedel?
5. Vilka externa faktorer påverkade projektutformningen?
6. Vilka interna faktorer påverkade projektutformningen?
7. Vilka interna organ hade inflytande över processen?
8. Hur skulle du beskriva kopplingen mellan projektet och era långsiktiga mål eller er övergripande vision?
9. Kan du tänka på ett annat projekt du varit med och utformat? Hur skulle du beskriva likheterna och skillnaderna mellan de två projekten?

Appendix C: Interview Sample

Interviewee	Date	Duration	Language	Platform	Role in organization 1	Role in organization 2
Interviewee 1	2025-11-17	56:10	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	General Secretary	General Secretary
Interviewee 2	2025-11-18	51:12	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	Project Manager	-
Interviewee 3	2025-11-18	33:38	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	Impact manager	President
Interviewee 4	2025-11-19	53:47	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	President	-
Interviewee 5	2025-11-20	57:18	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	General secretary	General secretary
Interviewee 6	2025-11-25	1:01:38	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	Site manager	-
Interviewee 7	2025-11-27	52:48	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	Head of Development	-
Interviewee 8	2025-12-08	1:00:50	Swedish	Microsoft Teams	Founder/General Secretary	-

Appendix D: AI Transparency Disclosure

What AI tools have been used and how?	*Claude (Anthropic) and ChatGPT (OpenAI):* Have been used throughout the thesis for Swedish to English translation, language and grammatical refinement while maintaining our own reasoning, text structuring based on our ideas, citation formatting guidance, and to generate key words in the abstract. *Grammarly:* Has been used for spell-checking and language corrections throughout the writing process to ensure grammatical accuracy and linguistic consistency in English. *Microsoft Teams:* Has been used to automatically transcribe all interviews conducted in Swedish via the platform's built-in transcription functionality.
In what ways have these tools contributed to increasing the	The AI tools contributed to thesis quality in several key ways. Primarily, they improved language quality by enabling more precise, academically

quality of the thesis?	appropriate expressions. The tools minimized grammatical errors and increased accuracy by eliminating spelling and punctuation mistakes. Moreover, it enhanced time efficiency by reducing time spent on citations, translation, and language refinement, allowing greater focus on analytical content and the thesis's overall coherence. Additionally, automatic interview transcription improved both data quality and the research process. By eliminating the need for manual note-taking, both researchers could be fully present during interviews, actively listening and interpreting responses together. This enhanced the depth of dialogue and enabled more nuanced follow-up questions.
What potential risks were found using AI and what measures were taken to reduce these risks?	We identified several potential risks in our AI usage. First, AI interpretation and translation might alter the intended meaning. To address this, we continuously checked with each other and carefully reviewed all translations to preserve accuracy and intent. Second, overreliance on AI language refinement could result in generic and basic thoughts and ideas. We therefore used AI as a refinement tool, not for content generation. Third, extended AI conversations sometimes led to loss of context and inaccurate outputs. To prevent this, we started new conversations when needed, keeping interactions focused. Finally, automatic transcription contains errors when interpreting Swedish speech. All transcripts were reviewed against original recordings and corrected where necessary, with human judgment being essential for interpreting nuances, context, and the intuitive understanding that emerges from active presence in conversations.
What are the insights gained from using AI tools in the thesis writing process?	Using AI provided valuable insights into how technology can support academic writing when applied thoughtfully. We discovered how AI can significantly improve academic language quality and help express complex ideas with greater clarity. The ability to quickly test different formulations facilitated an iterative writing process that continuously improved our text. We learned the critical importance of maintaining awareness when reviewing AI suggestions, carefully verifying that outputs reflected our intended meaning. This taught us that while AI substantially increases efficiency, it must work in combination with our own critical thinking to capture value. The technology proved most valuable when used as an extension of our thinking rather than a substitute, serving as a supportive tool that enhances capabilities while preserving our analytical reasoning and judgment.