

What's in it for us?

A Case Study on the Role of Interorganizational Relationships and Networks in Nonprofit Sport Clubs' Capacity Building

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Abstract: The capacity building processes within nonprofit sport clubs (NPSCs) have gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. However, limited research has examined these processes in relation to interorganizational relationships and networks, despite their recognized importance for NPSCs' survival and growth. To address this gap, this study explores *how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes*, by building on Millar and Doherty's (2016) model and incorporating Social Exchange Theory and Social Network Analysis. The study adopts a single case study approach, examining a Swedish track and field club and its network relationships through 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with internal club representatives and external actors. The findings show that capacity building is not solely an internal process, but is co-constructed through ongoing exchange relationships with network actors. In particular, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes by showing how such relationships influence all stages of these processes, while also highlighting the importance of network structure and actor positions, the alignment of perceived rewards, and multiple continuous social exchange processes. Practically, it underscores the importance for NPSCs to actively develop, align, and maintain relationships to strengthen their capacity, alongside clearly communicating the value these relationships provide.

Keywords: Nonprofit Sport Clubs, Organizational Performance, Organizational Capacity Building Processes, Networks, Interorganizational Relationships, Social Exchange Theory

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Acknowledgement

During the writing of this thesis, we have been struck by the people who put their heart and soul into strengthening track and field clubs in Sweden. It has been truly inspiring to observe the great efforts that are taken to improve clubs both for members and larger societal purposes.

In particular, we would like to express a special thanks to the interview participants, both from Club X and the external actors, for generously sharing their time, experience, and insights with us. We would also like to express our gratitude to our supervisor Filip Wijkström for his valuable guidance and constructive feedback throughout the writing process, and to the Center for Sport and Business at SSE for facilitating access to interview participants. Furthermore, we would like to thank friends, family, and significant others who have been a great support throughout the work.

Last but not least, this thesis marks the end of five years of study for us at the Stockholm School of Economics. We are definitely not the same people exiting the oak doors as we were when we first entered them. During our time at SSE we have learned to find our own path and tackle new challenges along it. We are both extremely grateful to the faculty and fellow students who have been a key part of this journey, as we now run on to the next stage of our lives.

Alice & Smilla

Stockholm, May 18th, 2026

Definitions

Terms	Abbreviations (when applicable)	Definitions in this study
Nonprofit Organizations	NPOs	NPOs are organized, private, nonprofit distributing, self-governing, and voluntary organizations (Hodgkinson, 1999).
Nonprofit Sport Clubs	NPSCs	NPSCs are voluntary member-based organizations whose goal is to provide opportunities for active sport participation rather than generating profit (Rossi et al., 2020).
Organizational performance		The combination of effectiveness and efficiency within the organization, referring to its ability to manage human, financial, and physical resources to achieve organizational goals (Madella et al., 2006; Mouzas, 2006).
Organizational capacity		An organization's ability to fulfill its goals and objectives by serving the needs and interests of its members (Swierzy et al., 2018).
Capacity building/capacity building process		The process of implementing planned changes within an organization in response to evolving circumstances (Millar & Doherty, 2016).
Interorganizational relationships		Defined as “ <i>voluntary, close, long-term, planned strategic action between two or more organizations with the objective of serving mutually beneficial purposes in a problem domain</i> ” (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, p. 282).
Social Exchange Theory	SET	Theory suggesting that engagements between actors are driven by the aim to achieve results they could not accomplish independently. There are four characteristics required for a social exchange (Czekanski et al., 2021).
The four characteristics of SET		

1) Dyadic	Involves actors who want to sustain a significant relationship (Czekanski et al., 2021).
2) Interdependent	The exchange actors depend on one another to achieve distinct outcomes (Czekanski et al., 2021).
3) Bidirectional	The exchange actors must both receive and provide something of value to the other party (Czekanski et al., 2021).
4) Intrinsic and/or extrinsic reward	The value exchanged can be any extrinsic and/or intrinsic reward (Czekanski et al., 2021).
Social Network Analysis SNA	Methodological approach used to understand an entity's structural position within its network based on existing ties to other organizations (Spindel, 2024).

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

“Why do we struggle to form relationships with some external actors?” – I1

This question, posed by a representative of the nonprofit sport club, Club X, served as the starting point for this study. Throughout the research process, a recurring response from external actors has been, *“What’s in it for us?”* – E8. Together, these dynamics capture a central challenge facing nonprofit sport clubs (NPSCs), which increasingly depend on interorganizational relationships and networks to strengthen their capacity (Hambrick et al., 2018) while navigating a complex economic environment marked by weakening stakeholder engagement (Wicker & Breuer, 2013; 2015). However, despite the recognized importance of interorganizational relationships and networks for NPSCs’ capacity building (e.g., Crick & Crick, 2020; Rossi et al., 2024), the mechanisms through which they shape capacity building processes remain underexplored (e.g., Czekanski et al., 2021; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025).

Nonetheless, before turning to interorganizational relationships and networks within the NPSC environment, it is essential to clarify what defines a nonprofit organization (NPO). Typically characterized by mission-driven goals and the pursuit of social value rather than financial gain, NPOs operate in various sectors, including education, sport, and health, in turn, constituting a central component of civil society (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016). Nevertheless, within the broader group of NPOs, NPSCs represent a distinct category. Across national contexts, NPSCs constitute a core element of the sport ecosystem by providing the foundation for sport participation, community, and competition. By possessing certain characteristics including limited diversified income streams (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020), significant reliance of volunteers (Schlesinger et al., 2015), and a unique combination of sport performance and community-focused outcomes (Winand et al., 2014) they face distinct circumstances from commercial for-profit sports organizations. These conditions, combined with a complex environment (Rossi et al., 2024), require NPSCs to manage substantial demands while remaining rooted in their nonprofit and voluntary foundations.

Furthermore, despite the central role of NPSCs within the sport ecosystem and their distinct conditions and challenges, existing research reveals gaps regarding the understanding of organizational performance, organizational capacity, and how capacity building enables NPSCs to cope with the structural constraints and demands outlined above. That said, an interlinked research gap can be observed highlighting a need for more qualitative studies examining NPSCs' organizational performance (e.g., O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; García-Fernández et al., 2025), especially regarding how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Czekanski et al., 2021; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025).

In aggregate, the evolving dynamics within the nonprofit environment, the specific challenges faced by NPSCs, and the identified interlinked gap spurred the authors interest in developing a deeper understanding of NPSCs' capacity building processes and ultimately their performance.

1.2. Purpose & Contribution

The purpose of this study is to explore how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes, within a context characterized by limited resources (Wicker & Breuer, 2011) and restricted revenue streams beyond membership fees (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020). The aim is to generate in-depth insights that advance the understanding within the academic field, which consequently may support NPSCs in strengthening their capacity building.

Theoretically, this study seeks to respond to calls for more research into NPSCs' capacity building processes by extending Millar and Doherty's (2016) process model of capacity building. This study expands their framework by examining how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity processes, through a case study of a NPSC (referred to as Club X) and its network actors.

This in-depth exploration may generate practical implications for managers and individuals working within NPSCs by helping them to make more informed strategic decisions, identify areas for improvement, and better manage limited resources.

1.3. Research Question

Given the importance of capacity building to address the challenges facing NPSCs, alongside calls to better understand how NPSCs build capacity and the role of interorganizational relationships and networks, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

How do interorganizational relationships and networks shape the capacity building processes of nonprofit sport clubs?

1.4. Delimitation

This study is delimited to a single case-study examining capacity building processes within Club X, a Swedish nonprofit track and field club. Accordingly, the primary focus is the organizational level of a nonprofit sport club, rather than national federations, professional sport organizations, or individual athlete performance. While the findings to some extent are case-specific, given Club X's organizational conditions and regional setting, the in-depth exploration may generate rich qualitative insights relevant to the broader nonprofit sport club sector.

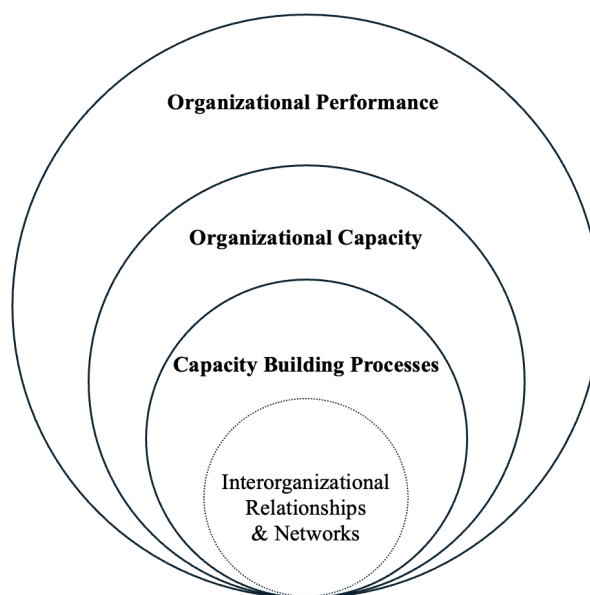
2. Literature Review & Theory

This chapter begins with an examination of the relevant literature (2.1.), followed by a synthesis identifying an interlinked research gap (2.2.). It then presents the extended theoretical framework (2.3.), which provides the foundation for the empirical analysis.

2.1. Literature Review

The literature review adopts a funneling approach (see Figure 1), moving from broad definitions of NPOs and NPSCs (2.1.1.) to NPSCs' organizational performance (2.1.2.). The subsequent sections (2.1.3.-2.1.5.) further narrow the focus to NPSCs' organizational capacity and capacity building processes.

Figure 1. *Literature Review Funnel on Nonprofit Sport Clubs (NPSCs)*



2.1.1. Nonprofit Organizations & Nonprofit Sport Clubs

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are commonly defined as organized, private, self-governing entities that do not distribute profits and depend, at least in part, on voluntary participation (Hodgkinson, 1999). Typically characterized by mission-driven goals and social value rather than financial return, NPOs represent an essential component of civil society and play an important role in addressing societal needs across a range of sectors, including health, education, and sport (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016).

Within this broader NPO landscape, nonprofit sport clubs (NPSCs) represent an important segment, particularly within the sport ecosystem. Distinct from commercial for-profit sport clubs, NPSCs are often characterized by constraints related to limited access to alternative revenue streams beyond membership fees (Doherty & Cuskelly, 2020), high reliance on volunteers (Schlesinger et al., 2015), and not least an aim to combine sporting performance with broader societal and community objectives (Winand et al., 2014). As a result, these organizations often operate under significant resource constraints while simultaneously pursuing multiple objectives, raising important questions about how NPSCs maintain effective organizational performance over time while balancing sporting, social, and organizational goals.

2.1.2. Organizational Performance in Nonprofit Sport Clubs

The distinct characteristics and constraints of NPSCs have prompted growing attention to their organizational performance (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024). Many quantitative studies have identified factors strengthening NPSCs’ organizational performance, such as innovative behavior, adaptability to environmental changes (García-Fernández et al., 2025), and decision-making processes (Lachance & Kerwin, 2025). These factors, however, do not operate independently, but are embedded in complex, non-linear relationships involving elements such as external knowledge, trust, age, and the length of club representatives’ engagement (Yang et al., 2025).

That said, existing research has largely concentrated on specific performance indicators, while few studies have examined NPSCs’ organizational performance through a more qualitative lens. Several scholars have highlighted this limitation and called for a broader exploration of performance, as well as deeper qualitative investigation into how these factors interact within NPSCs (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; García-Fernández et al., 2025). To address this, a growing research stream highlights the importance of better understanding organizational capacity within NPSCs to strengthen their organizational performance (Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Di Minin et al., 2014; Nordin et al., 2022; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025).

2.1.3. Organizational Capacity in Nonprofit Sport Clubs

Organizational capacity has emerged as an important lens for understanding how NPSCs operate and achieve their objectives within existing resource constraints and network structure. More specifically, organizational capacity refers to NPSCs' ability to fulfill their goals and objectives by serving the needs and interests of their members by, for example, providing opportunities to participate in sports, offering competitive pathways, and fostering sociability within the community (Swierzy et al., 2018).

Existing research has largely explored the extent or dimensions of NPSCs' organizational capacity, with many studies adapting, testing, and extending Hall et al.'s (2003) organizational capacity model to sport settings (Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Balduck et al., 2014; Swierzy et al., 2018). This model identifies five capacity types: (1) human resources; (2) financial; (3) relationships and networks; (4) infrastructure and process; and (5) planning and development (Hall et al., 2003). In particular, within this framework, a large research stream in the sport context has focused on human resource capacity, given NPSCs' strong reliance on volunteers to operate. NPSCs are often constrained by scarce human and infrastructure resources, which places pressure on their internal capacity (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). While voluntary engagement can partly address this constraint (Swierzy et al., 2018), it is often insufficient to meet organizational requirements. As a result, NPSCs increasingly turn to external resources, positioning network relationships as a key mechanism for accessing resources beyond clubs' internal capacity (Wicker & Breuer, 2011).

2.1.4. Capacity Building Processes in Nonprofit Sport Clubs

Previous research has thus primarily focused on identifying and assessing organizational capacity dimensions, while more recent studies have begun to examine how such capacity develops over time within NPSCs (Millar & Doherty, 2016; Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025). In this regard, capacity building processes can be understood as pathways through which NPSCs introduce planned changes in response to new or changing internal and external conditions, which is seen as essential to manage challenges, build relationships, and improve performance (Rossi et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, despite growing research in the field, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding how NPSCs build organizational capacity effectively (Millar & Doherty, 2016). To

begin to address this issue, Millar and Doherty (2016) introduced a process model of capacity building to provide a theoretical foundation for how organizational capacity can be built successfully within NPSCs. Following the introduction of the original model, several studies, including those by the original authors, have used and provided refinements in various contexts (Millar & Doherty, 2018; Hanlon et al., 2022; Wegner et al., 2022; Rossi et al., 2024). Millar and Doherty (2018) showed that the effectiveness of capacity building efforts depended on the comprehensiveness of needs assessment, the selection of suitable strategies, and readiness to build capacity. Furthermore, existing capacity, particularly with regards to human resources, is emphasized to both enable and constrain capacity building processes in NPSCs focused on social development (Wegner et al., 2022). For instance, this is evident in relation to passion for the cause, which can drive capacity building processes forward but also limit them by shifting attention away from the organization's long-term survival (ibid.).

2.1.5. Interorganizational Relationships & Networks

NPSCs are embedded in networks of nonprofit, public, and commercial actors, within which value co-creation and interorganizational relationships are essential for their long-term survival and growth (Crick & Crick, 2020; Brand et al., 2023). Through collaboration with external actors, NPSCs have the possibility to gain access to additional resources, knowledge, and competencies, which may strengthen their organizational capacity and performance outcomes (Crick & Crick, 2020; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020). For example, Hambrick et al. (2018) illustrate how NPSCs, focused on social development, engage in multiple forms of network collaborations and resource exchanges which strengthen their capacity. Notably, by holding a central position within their networks, they can obtain access to more resources, thereby improving the value provided to their members and mitigating constraints related to limited time and resources (ibid).

In addition, Jones et al. (2017) outline how NPSCs often operate in fragmented networks characterized by uneven power relationships and the likely value to be gained by stronger and more formalized relationships between NPSCs. In particular, there is a potential benefit of integrating brokers, "*the third who unites*" (Jones et al., 2017, p. 157), as such actors can help bridge structural holes, facilitate access to network-wide information, and support negotiations with external actors (Jones et al., 2017).

Overall, this underscores the importance for NPSCs to foster interorganizational relationships to access resources and build capacity, a dimension that Rossi et al. (2024) argue is not fully captured in Millar and Doherty's (2016) model. Furthermore, although scholars have examined networks and interorganizational relationships and arrived at its importance in capacity building within the sports industry, empirical evidence remains limited and context-specific (Jones et al., 2017; Hambrick et al., 2018; Czekanski et al., 2021). This highlights the significance and need for further empirical insights to better understand the role of interorganizational relationships and networks for its capacity building processes.

2.2. Synthesis & Research Gap

Following an in-depth examination of the literature, research on NPSCs exhibits varying levels of maturity. While organizational performance from a quantitative perspective is well-established, capacity building is less developed, and its links to interorganizational relationships and networks remain nascent. Table 1 summarizes the identified interlinked research gap.

Table 1. *Overview of Research Gap*

Research Gap Dimensions	Amongst Others Highlighted by the Following Articles
1) Qualitative research on organizational performance in NPSCs	Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; Lachance & Kerwin, 2025; García-Fernández et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025.
2) Capacity building in NPSCs, particularly the role of interorganizational relationships and networks	Millar & Doherty, 2016; Hambrick et al., 2018; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020; Crick & Crick, 2020; Hanlon et al., 2022; Wegner et al., 2022; Czekanski et al., 2021; Brand et al., 2023; Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025.

Firstly, given NPSCs' distinct characteristics, such as their high dependence on volunteers (Schlesinger et al., 2015) and dual focus on sporting performance and community objectives (Winand et al., 2014), increasing attention has been devoted to NPSCs' organizational performance. Although, this focus has resulted in several quantitative studies examining factors contributing to NPSCs' organizational performance, broader conceptualization of it has been deemed necessary (e.g., Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; García-Fernández et al., 2025). Most notably, scholars emphasize the importance of a more qualitative lens to understand how organizational performance is managed and sustained within NPSCs (Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024), as well as more comprehensive investigation of how different performance factors interact within NPSCs (Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; García-Fernández et al., 2025).

Secondly, NPSCs operate under substantial resource constraints while managing competing goals, implying that organizational capacity and capacity building is of critical importance. Prior academic research have devoted attention to NPSCs' capacity dimensions (Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Swierzy et al., 2018), as well as their capacity building processes (Millar & Doherty, 2016; Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025). Nonetheless, notable gaps remain concerning how NPSCs build capacity, highlighting the need to refine and extend Millar and Doherty's (2016) model. In particular, several scholars emphasize the importance of interorganizational relationships and networks for NPSCs survival and growth (Crick & Crick, 2020; Brand et al., 2023; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025). However, its effect on NPSCs' capacity building processes remains relatively limited and context-specific (Hambrick et al., 2018; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020; Czekanski et al., 2021) highlighting a research gap.

To conclude, the literature review reveals an interlinked research gap consisting of the (1) need for more qualitative research on NPSCs' organizational performance and (2) deeper exploration of NPSCs' capacity building processes, particularly the role of interorganizational relationships and networks.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

To support this study, a theoretical framework, rooted in Millar and Doherty's (2016) process model of capacity building, has been developed. Their model adopts a process-based perspective to explain how NPSCs strengthen their organizational capacity over time in

response to internal and external stimuli. Specifically, it highlights six key concepts involved in a capacity building process and illustrates the relationships between them.

First, it describes how an (1) *internal or external capacity building stimulus* (e.g., declining memberships or new funding policies) makes a NPSC assess its (2) *organizational capacity needs*. If these needs are met, the NPSC moves directly to (6) *program and service delivery*. If not, it evaluates its (3) *readiness for capacity building* and then selects and implements (4) *alternative strategies* to address identified needs. The resulting (5) *capacity building outcomes*, depend on how successful these strategies are implemented, which, in turn, is influenced by factors such as organizational readiness, alignment with existing processes, and its ability to build and sustain change over time. These capacity outcomes are assessed both in terms of their immediate impact on capacity and the NPSC's ability to maintain them. If the outcomes have not been achieved or sustained, the NPSC reverts back to readiness for capacity building and alternative strategies, creating a feedback loop. Finally, these outcomes affect (6) *program and service delivery*, that is, the activities undertaken by the NPSC, and feed back into future capacity building efforts, thereby making it a continuous and adaptive cycle rather than a one-off intervention (Millar & Doherty, 2016). See Appendix 1, for an overview of the original model.

2.3.1. Framework Extensions

While Millar and Doherty's (2016) model provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding NPSCs' capacity building, it primarily conceptualizes the process as intraorganizational, despite building on Hall et al. 's (2003) framework, where relationships and networks are central. This is a limitation, as a growing body of research highlights capacity building to be shaped by external relationships and network dynamics (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Czekanski et al., 2021; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025; von Schomberg et al., 2025), alongside calls for greater theorization of capacity building as an embedded and relational phenomenon (e.g., Misener & Doherty 2013; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020; Crick & Crick, 2020). Furthermore, in relation to the framework, recent studies have outlined the need to expand it by incorporating interorganizational relationships and network dynamics (Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025).

Specifically, within the model, networks are primarily treated as something NPSCs can respond to, draw upon, develop, or as a strategy, rather than as relational structures that

actively shapes capacity building processes. As a result, the emphasis remains on internal resources and readiness factors, whereas broader structural and relational conditions receive limited attention. For example, the framework does not account for how interorganizational relationships might shape strategic choices, or whether capacity building may be co-constructed among network actors. Therefore, to address these identified limitations and better explain NPSCs' capacity building processes, the authors incorporate two complementary theoretical extensions: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Social Network Analysis (SNA).

First, SET is employed to understand how resources, knowledge, and support are exchanged through interorganizational interactions. The theory posits that actors engage with one another to achieve results that could not be obtained independently, with exchange relationships characterized as: (1) *dyadic*, (2) *interdependent*, (3) *bidirectional*, and (4) containing *extrinsic and/or intrinsic rewards* (Czekanski et al., 2021). SET enables a more explicit theorization of relational mechanisms that can be argued underdeveloped in Millar and Doherty's (2016) model, particularly with regards to how exchange dynamics shape strategic choices and resource mobilization. Incorporating SET therefore strengthens the model by conceptualizing capacity building as co-constructed through negotiated and reciprocal interactions (Czekanski et al., 2021). Nonetheless, examining only individual relationships limits the understanding of broader network interactions, as exchange relationships do not occur in isolation but are embedded within wider interorganizational systems (Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Misener & Doherty, 2013). This implies that SET needs to be complemented by a network perspective.

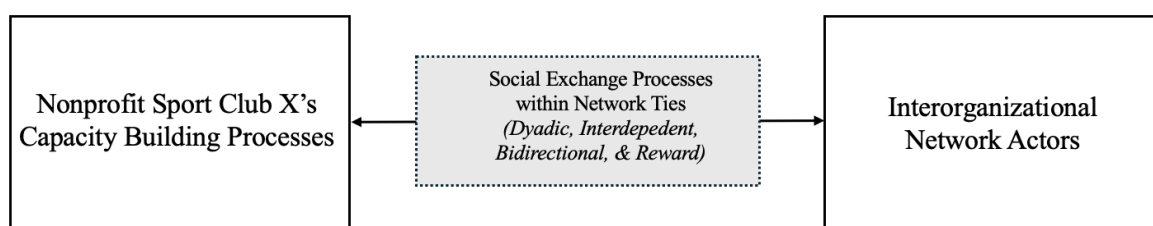
Accordingly, the second extension includes a social network perspective, examined through qualitative SNA. This viewpoint is used to understand how NPSCs are embedded in interorganizational systems, placing the relationship between the club and its external actors at the center of analysis (Spindel, 2024). Prior research applying this theoretical lens in sport contexts further supports this approach, showing that although NPSCs maintain multiple relationships, there remains scope to strategically develop and leverage additional ties (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; von Schomberg et al., 2025). Incorporating SNA therefore enables an analysis of how NPSCs currently utilize their network ties to access resources, while also identifying network structure and network positions role in their capacity building processes (Wäsche et al., 2017; von Schomberg et al. 2025).

2.3.2. Framework Usage

Using Millar and Doherty's (2016) model as a foundation, complemented by SET and SNA as theoretical extensions (see Figure 2), enables a more comprehensive understanding of NPSCs' capacity building processes. SNA captures the network ties in which the club is embedded, SET is employed to assess the extent to which these ties align with the four characteristics (dyadic, interdependent, bidirectional, and including rewards) necessary for social exchange to occur. Further, in line with the exploratory purpose of the study, the upcoming analysis places greater emphasis on the extensions. See Appendix 2 for details regarding the application of the extended framework.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that these proposed extensions are not intended to make causal claims, but rather serve as a structured approach to examining Club X's capacity building processes and how networks and interorganizational relationships shape them. The chosen extensions primarily emphasize the relational and financial outcomes of capacity building processes, due to their theoretical focus. This narrows the scope of the study as other dimensions might receive less emphasis. However, this is a deliberate choice, aimed at addressing a relatively underexplored research area and a domain in which NPSCs often lack clarity and direction.

Figure 2. *Theoretical Extensions, SET & SNA*



3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the study's chosen methodology, starting with the scientific research approach (3.1.), followed by the scientific research process (3.2.), discussions of quality (3.3.), and ethical considerations (3.4.).

3.1. Scientific Research Approach

3.1.1. Research Methodology: An Exploratory, Qualitative & Abductive Approach

To address the research question, the authors employ an exploratory approach. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the conditions facing NPSCs and enabled a flexible research approach that could evolve as new insights emerged (Saunders et al., 2023, p.179). While the research scope was initially broad, it narrowed throughout the research process, thereby further supporting the selected research purpose (Saunders et al., 2023, p.179). A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was chosen to explore interviewees' perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.408) and facilitate the recognition of critical patterns, themes, and relationships (Saunders et al., 2023, p.654) within Club X, as well as from an interorganizational and network perspective.

The choice of method is further supported by existing research calling for more qualitative studies in the NPSC context to complement their quantitative findings (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014; Muñoz & Solanellas, 2024; García-Fernández et al., 2025). Moreover, through in-depth interviews as a part of our qualitative stance, rich descriptions and deeper insights into the internal and external environment of the club were obtained, which are difficult to capture using solely standardized quantitative measures (Morse & McEvoy, 2014).

With regards to theory development, an iterative process, continuously moving between data and theory, has been employed (Suddaby, 2006). This abductive approach allowed for exploration of the collected interview data while simultaneously using Millar and Doherty's (2016) theoretical model and the outlined theoretical extensions to identify, analyze, and explain patterns (Saunders et al., 2023, p.158). Drawing on existing theory as a guiding lens, the abductive approach allowed the back and forth between data collection, data processing, and relevant literature (Bryman & Bell et al., 2015, p.27), in turn, enabling the authors to extend and refine this study's theoretical framework and analytical focus.

3.1.2. Research Stance

With regards to epistemology, an interpretivist research stance was adopted, implying that interpretations, meanings, and narratives govern what is considered legitimate in the research (Saunders et al., 2023, p.146; Bryman & Bell et al., 2015, p.35). Instead of changing Club X's practices, the focus has been on developing a comprehensive understanding of the club's internal dynamics, as well as its external relationships. Moreover, as sport is fundamentally connected to people and their experiences (Inglis, 1992; Brustad, 2009), an interpretive research lens could be argued well suited.

3.1.3. Research Case

A case study was deemed the most suitable approach for several reasons. Firstly, there have been explicit calls from the original model authors and other researchers for more in-depth case studies focusing on capacity building in NPSCs, as this approach is seen as especially valuable for understanding how such processes evolve (Millar & Doherty, 2016; Balduck et al., 2014).

Secondly, prior research has emphasized the need for more in-depth exploration of interorganizational relationships and networks' role in NPSCs' capacity building (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Hambrick et al., 2018), for which case studies are well fitted (Yin, 2003; Morse & McEvoy, 2014). Specifically, this approach enables extensive data collection and a more holistic view of the NPSC's environment, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of complex processes, including organizational practices and interactions that influence capacity building (Morse & McEvoy, 2014). It is also well suited for exploring everyday operations and their significance to those involved, insights unlikely to emerge through brief interactions (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Morse & McEvoy, 2014).

Thirdly, this study fulfills Yin's (2003) criteria for when a case study is appropriate, as the research question is "how", the authors have no control over the club's behavior, and the study examines a contemporary phenomenon.

3.2. Scientific Research Process

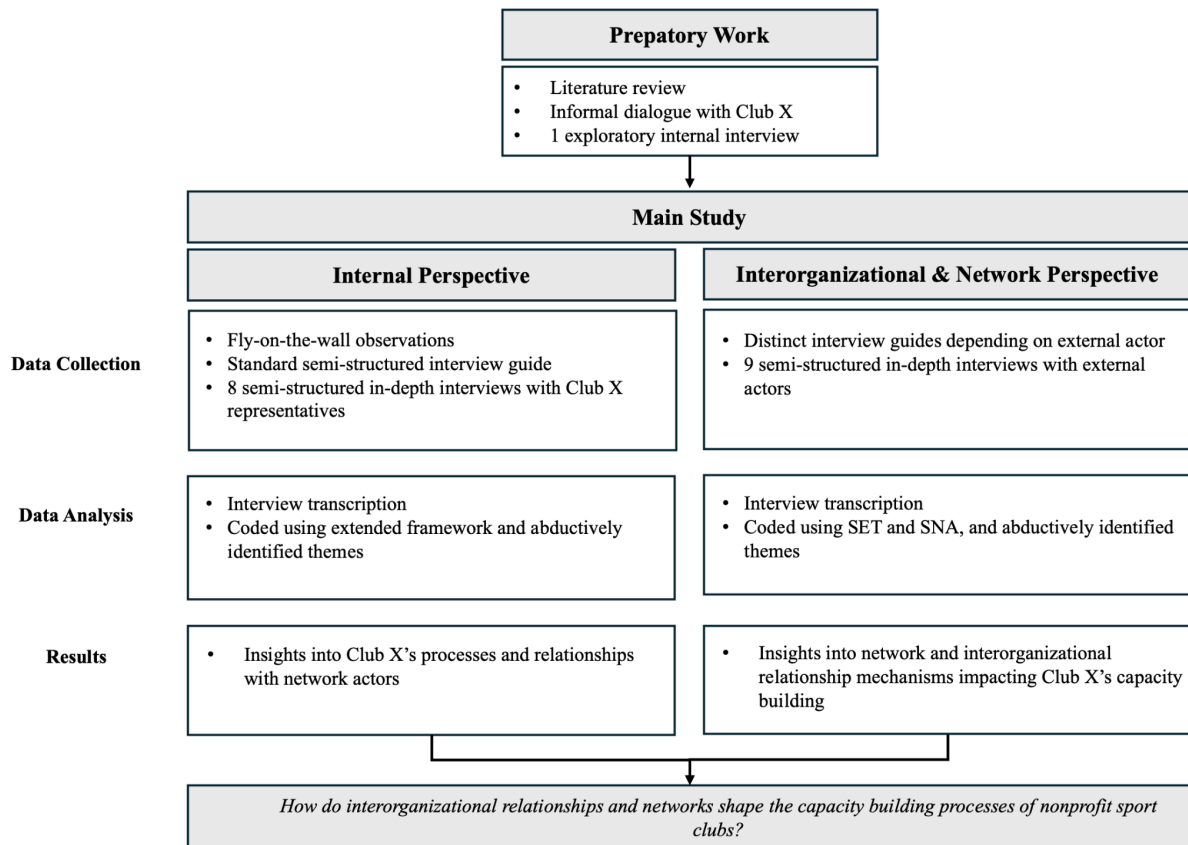
Early in the research process, a case study approach was selected based on the considerations outlined above. The selection of context and club was facilitated by the authors' familiarity

with the track and field environment. Additionally, although context-specific, Club X's relevance to the broader track and field context created favorable conditions for developing an understanding of interorganizational relationships and networks role in NPSCs' capacity building processes.

Furthermore, one of the author's long-standing involvement in Club X, facilitated contacts to set up early-stage interviews. Specifically, one exploratory interview with a Club X representative was completed three weeks into the research process to gain a deeper understanding of the organizational context and to calibrate the interview guide. This early involvement revealed that Club X operates within an extensive network of external actors with seemingly varying levels of engagement. Therefore, recognizing the importance of these relationships, the research scope was expanded to include an interorganizational and network perspective to better understand Club X's capacity building. In addition, literature emphasizing the importance of a deeper understanding of these dimensions' role in NPSCs' capacity development further supported the chosen scope (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Crick & Crick, 2020; Rossi et al., 2024).

In sum, the overall research process was structured around two main components: (1) the internal perspective of Club X and (2) the interorganizational and network perspective involving external actors relevant to the club. See Figure 3 for an illustration of the process.

Figure 3. Research Process Outline



3.3. Research Design

3.3.1. Internal & External In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to enable an open exploration (Bryman & Bell et al., 2015, p.13) and ultimately develop a thorough understanding of NPSCs' capacity building processes and how they can be strengthened to enhance organizational performance. The following sections discuss the selected interview sample, the interview design, and the data processing.

3.3.1.1. Interview Sample

As emphasized, this study deploys a case study strategy using Club X as the basis for the interview sample. To complement this internal perspective, external interviews were selected based on their relevance to Club X's network. Additionally, non-participant observations were conducted in Club X's home environment, observing daily operations and attending a board meeting to gain further contextual understanding of the club.

Motivated by the authors' decision to conduct a case study and the relatively limited sample size that follows, a purposive sampling method was applied (Saunders et al., 2023, p.322). This approach entails selecting participants in relation to the research question and the study's overall objectives (Becker, 1998). In line with this, internal interviewees from Club X were selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) a minimum of two years' involvement in the club; (2) holding an influential position within the club; and (3) representation of diverse perspectives. In contrast, the selection of external interviewees evolved throughout the interview process as the authors gradually developed a clearer understanding of Club X and relevant actors within its network. External interviewees were selected based on (1) their involvement in the broader organizational environment in which Club X operates and (2) their existing or potential relationship with Club X.

Moreover, the number of interviews was not decided before the data collection process. Instead, the authors concluded the interview process once sufficient data had been collected and no new insights emerged, that is, when the stage of empirical saturation could be determined (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, the response rate among the contacted participants was high, indicating the perceived importance of the examined issues. That said, this study resulted in a final sample of 18 interviewees, of whom 9 were internal and 9 external (see Appendix 3).

3.3.1.2. Interview Design

To support the chosen qualitative research design, a semi-structured interview approach with open-ended questions was adopted. This enabled in-depth responses related to predetermined themes of capacity building, interorganizational relationships, and networks, while also ensuring comparability and flexibility depending on the direction of the interview (Saunders et al., 2023, p.444). For the internal interviews, a standard interview guide was used, where modifications were made depending on the interviewee's role and insights from the research process (see Appendix 4a). Nonetheless, for the external interviews a tailored interview guide was developed for each interview, reflecting the different roles and responsibilities of each actor in relation to Club X (see Appendix 4b).

Moreover, as mentioned, one author is currently affiliated with Club X, an embedded position that initially motivated the study, facilitated access to interviewees, and enabled targeted questions through a broad understanding of the club's context. This position was

complemented by the other author's external role, enabling familiarity and critical distance throughout the research process. The authors are aware that prior familiarity with the club could introduce bias, such as a preconceived perception of the club and its challenges (Flemming, 2018). To mitigate this risk, both authors participated in each interview (with one exception) to help ensure impartiality during the data collection process, with the author without a direct connection to the club contributing to a more neutral perspective. Throughout the interviews, the authors alternated between asking questions and taking notes, which is beneficial for fostering an open and collaborative environment that encourages rich insights (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014).

The majority of interviews were conducted in person (see Appendix 3), while the remaining were held via Zoom due to scheduling difficulties or interviewee preference. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, as this is the native language of the interviewees and the authors. While this may introduce minor translation issues in quotations, it allows the interviewees to express their perspectives more elaborately, and the authors therefore consider the benefits to outweigh the potential drawbacks. Lastly, interview length ranged from 26 to 71 minutes, reflecting the semi-structured nature of the interviews, allowing for varying amounts of follow-up questions and elaboration in the responses.

3.3.1.3. Data Analysis

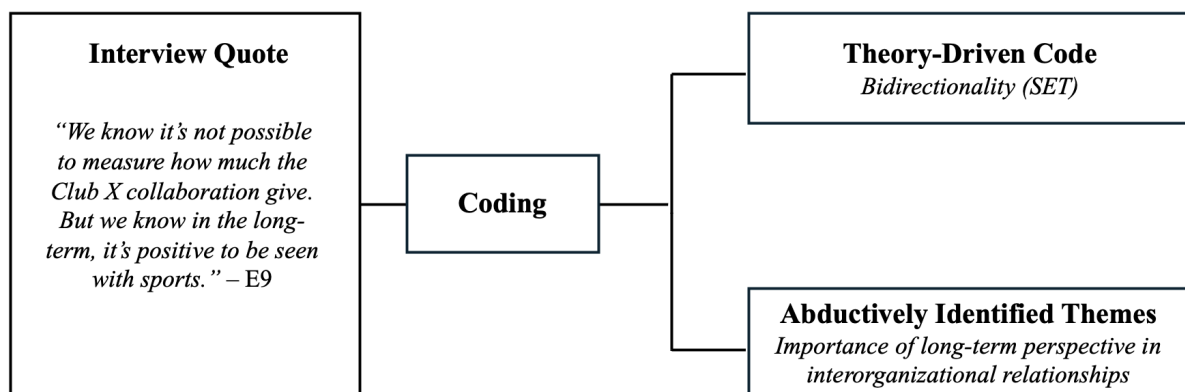
Before each interview, participants were asked for their consent to have the interview audio-recorded for transcription purposes. This allowed the authors to revisit the dialogue, consequently facilitating a more thorough data analysis. The data processing started with the authors familiarizing themselves with the data, where both authors independently reviewed each transcript and highlighted relevant excerpts. This phase was conducted individually to minimise the risk of mutual influence and ensure independent assessment of the data (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024).

Following the initial data review, a directed qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the data, drawing on existing theory and prior research findings to guide the development of coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This approach is specifically suitable for refining and extending existing theoretical frameworks in new contexts (Assarroudi et al., 2018). The internal interviews were coded based on constructs derived from Millar and Doherty's (2016) model and the added extensions (SET

and SNA), while the external interview data was coded only based on the extensions, given the focus on Club X's capacity building processes and the role of interorganizational relationships and networks in these. Notably, the SET and SNA extensions were incorporated during the analytical phase. This implies that the interview guide was not constructed with them specifically in mind, which helped limit potential bias in the interview phase. A common limitation of a directed content analysis is otherwise the risk of confirmation bias and response bias (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In addition to theory-driven coding, thematic coding was conducted on all interviews, based on what interviewees deemed important in interorganizational relationships and networks for capacity building (see Figure 4). The thematic analysis enabled the authors to identify and describe patterns within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Figure 4. *Example of the Coding Process*



3.4. Quality of the Study

3.4.1. Quality Considerations

An important consideration throughout the research process is ensuring the accuracy and trustworthiness of the process and its findings. Accordingly, following Lincoln and Cuba (1985), the authors have throughout the research process considered how to ensure the findings applicability and relevance. The quality of this study is assessed based on the four qualitative research criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (ibid).

3.4.1.1. Credibility

Credibility concerns the internal validity of the study and refers to how well the researchers' interpretations reflect the observations and data collected. Credibility was strengthened through data triangulation, specifically through prolonged engagement within the research context, including 18 in-depth interviews with both Club X members and external actors, attending a board meeting, and spending time in Club X's environment. This enabled the authors to compare different perspectives on the studied phenomenon. In addition, researcher triangulation was ensured by both authors being present during all interviews and jointly reflecting on the collected data throughout the research process. Also, since the quotations have been translated to English, it may involve some loss or alteration of meaning. To minimize this risk, the translations were carefully reviewed by both authors ensuring that the meaning was preserved as accurately as possible (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985).

3.4.1.2. Transferability

Transferability refers to external validity meaning the extent to which the findings may be relevant to other contexts. However, in qualitative research this cannot be established directly, instead, rich contextual descriptions enable readers to assess the findings' transferability to other NPSCs' contexts (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). Thus, by describing Club X's context and the delimitations of this study, readers can assess the findings' transferability.

3.4.1.3. Dependability

Dependability concerns the stability and transparency of the research process and the extent to which it is systematically organized and clearly documented (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). To enhance dependability, the research process has been thoroughly described throughout the study. In addition, the study incorporated an inquiry audit, whereby the assigned supervisor regularly monitored the research process and the interpretations made, further strengthening dependability.

3.4.1.4. Confirmability

Confirmability is essential as it reflects the degree to which the research findings are grounded in empirical evidence rather than shaped by the authors' personal assumptions and biases (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). To support this, the authors documented the empirical material by recording and transcribing interviews and ensuring transparency in the analytical

process through the use of quotations from the raw data (ibid.). Moreover, as both authors have experience within the track and field environment, with one author involved in Club X, there is a potential risk of biased interpretation. Therefore, continuous reflexivity, together with researcher triangulation, was employed to minimize the risk of biased interpretations (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

From an ethical standpoint, to ensure Club X's and the interview participants' anonymity, the authors used anonymized labels and excluded interviewees' roles. Further, measures including requiring interviewees to sign a digital consent form before the interview, storing audio-recordings, transcriptions, and notes on the authors' personal devices, and deleting them after the grading of the thesis minimized the risk of unauthorized access to sensitive information (Vetenskapsrådet, 2024). In addition, Open AI was used to improve grammar, coherence, and flow and no names or other identifying information in connection to interview quotations or sensitive data were entered into the AI system to ensure confidentiality (see Appendix 5 for usage details).

4. Empirical Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings, starting with an overview of Club X (4.1.), followed by an internal (4.2.) and interorganizational and network perspective (4.3.) on the club's capacity building.

4.1. Background to the Case Organization: Club X

Club X is a relatively large Swedish nonprofit track and field club with members across all ages, from children to senior and veteran athletes. The club undertakes a range of activities, including (1) organizing training sessions, (2) providing opportunities for athletes to compete at regional, national, and international levels, and (3) hosting or co-hosting events such as track and field competitions and road races. That said, Club X is primarily volunteer-based and aims to promote wide participation within the track and field sphere.

Club X has a decentralized organizational structure, but with an elected board responsible for its strategic direction. The club heavily relies on voluntary engagement from its members, albeit with a limited number of paid staff supporting key functions, including a sports director, three administrative employees, and several coaches. This structure gives rise to challenges common in NPSCs, including securing sufficient financial resources, increasing human engagement, balancing competitive ambitions with broad participation, and strengthening organizational capacity while navigating resource constraints.

4.2. Internal Perspective on Club X

The following sections present the empirical findings, with basis in the extended theoretical framework, supported by quotations from the interviews with Club X representatives.

4.2.1. Capacity Based Stimulus

At the initial stage of the capacity building process, the empirical material shows that Club X's capacity building efforts were primarily driven by a growing recognition that the existing ways of operating were no longer sufficient to fulfill the club's internal demands and long-term ambitions. Thus, instead of being pressured by a single occurrence, the need for change emerged gradually through a combination of financial pressures, organizational growth, and leadership shortcomings.

4.2.1.1. Economic Perspective

The interviewees identify Club X's financial situation as a prominent driver of capacity assessment. Several interviewees describe how periods of financial strain compelled the club to review costs and priorities carefully.

"During the Covid-19 pandemic, we were close to going under as a club, but we evaluated our finances and managed to reverse this trend. [...] but it has meant that we have changed [as a club]." – I1

This economic strain contributed to a wake-up call resulting in the implementation of stricter structures around aspects such as volunteer assignments and general downsizing of expenditures to cover the necessary costs: *"We take a stricter approach now"* – I1.

4.2.1.2. Growth & Leadership Perspective

Beyond economic constraints the empirics demonstrate that capacity building stimuli emerged as the club grew. Several interviewees describe Club X's growth into a larger, more complex NPSC, while elements of its organizational structure have not developed at a corresponding pace. As I5 notes, *"[Club X] has gone from being a small club to a large one, but still remains somewhat in a small-club structure."* In particular, the club's expansion with respect to active members, training groups, and ambitious goals has increased the demand for coordination, planning, and clearer responsibilities.

"We have always been a relatively operational board [...] but the challenge is that there are few people actually doing something when tasks need to be carried out. [...] It's more who wants to help, but structure and delegation are needed." – I9

"Now that a leader has come in, it's like day and night. [This person] is a very good informal leader, but the club has been lacking a formal leadership figure who knows track and field and who can lead others and dares to make decisions." – I8

This indicates that capacity building was not only driven by economic pressures, but by a recognition that it lacked sufficient structure to support its day-to-day operations and long-term development.

4.2.1.3. Resource Perspective

Another pattern in the empirics is that capacity building efforts appear to often have been triggered when emerging challenges became difficult to overlook. In particular, interviewees emphasize how resource constraints led to changes and development being postponed until the degree of pressure became severe, requiring resource allocation.

“We are constantly monitoring [the club’s] economy [...] but it hasn’t always been like that. There are things that trigger [change] and need resources.” – I4

In sum, the data indicates that Club X’s capacity building was stimulated by internal factors, including financial pressures, growth, and organizational issues, interacting with external changes such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Together, these factors accumulated gradually and eventually required the club’s response.

4.2.2. Identified Capacity Needs

The stimuli discussed above not only generated pressures for change, but also revealed limitations in Club X’s existing organizational capacity. Specifically, the empirics indicate that the club identified several interdependent capacity needs, notably in financial and human resources, infrastructure, and relationships. A common thread across the interviews is that the club has faced several periods of financial pressures: *“one of the biggest challenges is the pursuit of money, everything costs money”* – I5 and *“the economy [of the club] is always something that you have to work very hard on”* – I9. Given the club’s persistent financial strain, its ability to address this challenge in a long-term manner appears limited, with sponsorship and human resources emerging as key barriers.

“We have some, but not many sponsors. I would guess that other clubs are better off when it comes to sponsorship.” – I3

“Say we have 20 ideas, you can handle the 3-4 most important ideas. [...] you need someone who is passionate about it and pushes it, it’s difficult when many people in the club have other commitments. Without the right people it stays as a paper product.” – I2

Nonetheless, these human resource challenges also appear to be intertwined with shortcomings in the club's organizational infrastructure and processes, particularly regarding limited structure and follow-up. As I8 noted, *"Documented knowledge doesn't exist at all."* while I9 explained, *"I got to do a lot of other things on the board [beyond my role], you need to step in where needed."* This appears to result in temporary involvement followed by gradual disengagement: *"I have gotten people to help. People raise their hands, get involved for a while before eventually dropping out."* – I7.

Finally, relationships and networks emerge as an overarching capacity dimension in the empirical material. Particularly, the club's ability to leverage and grow strong external relationships was depicted as essential for securing financial resources, engaging human resources, and accessing crucial knowledge.

"[It's] very important to have good contacts with the municipality, governing actors and the district to mention a few" – I1

"You cannot afford to be careless with relationships. They are worth building. That's when you can obtain valuable exchanges." – I5

Nonetheless, although some of the existing relationships function well, limitations are described regarding the club's ability to fully leverage, develop, and expand them.

"Some of us use our contacts and networks. However, it can be done to a much greater extent, but I think many are somewhat hesitant to make use of their contacts."
– I1

"We sent out surveys to all members when looking for new partners [...] but we get very few responses per occasion, it's a bit strange." – I9

4.2.3. Strategic Response & Organizational Readiness

Exploring Club X's capacity needs highlights ongoing challenges in responding effectively to various stimuli, despite signs of progress. This section, therefore, outlines the club's strategic

responses and the extent to which these initiatives reflect organizational readiness to implement and sustain capacity building efforts.

Club X's central response concerns efforts to strengthen revenue-generating activities, by focusing on events and competitions that maximize the allocation of limited resources. As I1 describe, *"The club has ended collaborations that were economically disadvantageous,"* a reasoning that was further reinforced by I2 stating that, *"We wouldn't organize events unless they are financially viable."* There is also an expressed ambition to develop a more deliberate and financially oriented event strategy, reflected in the statement by I4, *"[...] we need to expand our presence in the long-distance racing segment as they are the most economically viable."*

Moreover, interviewees highlight efforts to strengthen Club X's long-term financial position by maintaining a broad athlete base, ultimately creating a resource pool that can develop into coaches, volunteers, and board members.

"That's our recipe for success in comparison with clubs that don't have the same structure when it comes to young people. [...] We aim to ensure a broad base and retain members for as long as possible." – I1

"Identifying passionate individuals early on is essential for our [club's] economy. [...] We actively engage with club members, from grassroots to elite." – I4

However, despite pursuing long-term strategic initiatives and demonstrating a strong understanding of its opportunities and challenges, the empirics reveal limitations in the club's organizational readiness to build and maintain capacity. These include a continued reliance on voluntary engagement, which is constrained by challenges in sustaining participation (*"Creating engagement requires making volunteering attractive."* – I4), difficulties in translating ideas into action (*"People commit but fail to deliver."* – I9), and constraints in structure, time, and commitment to find revenue streams (*"We can get hundred percent better at getting sponsors."* – I5).

In sum, the internal interviews indicate that Club X representatives are increasingly aware of its challenges and that initiatives are implemented to address the club's capacity needs.

However, the findings simultaneously highlight limitations in the club's ability to fully implement and sustain these efforts, particularly due to constraints in financial and human resources. This suggests that while initiatives are being introduced, their long-term effectiveness depends on the club's development of organizational readiness. However, since these dynamics are deeply embedded within a broader environment, it is crucial to consider how external factors shape the club's development. This is explored in section 4.3.

4.3. Interorganizational & Network Perspective on Club X

This section provides an overview of Club X's network relationships and their role in its capacity building processes (4.3.1.), followed by themes across the interviews that shape these exchange relationships (4.3.2.).

4.3.1. Network Relationships' Role in Club X's Capacity Building

Club X operates within an extensive network including the actors described in the following sections. Through these relationships, the club gains access to important resources such as training facilities, financial support, and collaborative opportunities, together contributing to the club's survival and development.

4.3.1.1. Club X's Municipality

Club X interviewees describe the municipality as one of the most important network actors for the club, *"Without their engagement, I believe we wouldn't be able to develop the club"*–I6. Over time, the relationship has enabled Club X to co-develop initiatives such as competitions and a school-based sport project targeting disadvantaged youths.

Through this relationship, Club X gains access to financial support through training facilities, infrastructure and equipment investments, as well as network opportunities. In return, the municipality benefits from increased visibility through the club's sporting and event-related success, help with community initiatives, exclusive access to competitions, and training sessions for municipality employees. Interactions occur through formal and informal channels, such as club office visits, phone calls, lunches, and club-arranged training sessions with municipality staff. This exchange is thus sustained through continuous dialogue and close personal contact, enabling joint planning, resource allocation, and early identification of potential misunderstandings.

“There’s a good dialogue about making the right investments at the right time.” – I2

“The close dialogue means that I’m not afraid to raise issues with them, and vice versa.” – E8

From Club X’s perspective, the relationship is approached through making suggestions and opportunities for joint solutions, rather than demands. Interestingly, the internal interviewees contrast this to other sport organizations’ communication strategies with the municipality.

“We try not to come across as complaining, but instead bring constructive ideas about how we can collaborate. But they [the municipality] mean that with [other sport organizations] it’s somewhat the opposite.” – I2

4.3.1.2. Club X’s Largest Sponsor

The interviewees describe Club X’s relationship with its largest sponsor as long-term and mutually beneficial, although they emphasize slightly different outcomes of the collaboration. Representatives from Club X highlight the importance of the sponsor’s financial support, where I1 outline it as “[...] *our single largest source of revenue.*” Initially, the collaboration enabled Club X to purchase goods on credit from the sponsor and sell them in its café at a margin. From the sponsor’s perspective, this functioned as a reinvestment model: *“The money we invested in the club was reinvested multiple times in our store through their purchases.” – E9*

An important development in the relationship was the introduction of the discount booklet, which was jointly developed a few years into the collaboration after Club X expressed a need for support due to increased overhead costs. The sponsor was not interested in providing direct monetary support, but instead decided to produce its own discount booklet.

“If you got a discount booklet per person, and you have 2,000 members. And multiply that by 150 crowns. Then you receive 300,000 crowns. [...] So it’s an extremely important part of their finances.” – E9

The discount booklet is described as mutually beneficial since it enables Club X to generate significant financial income, while also helping to drive business to the sponsor's store. The use of the discount booklet is also something that the sponsor directly can track and use to estimate how much business the collaboration generates. In addition, it gives Club X's members a convenient way to contribute to the club by purchasing and using the booklet: *"We got 100% of the revenue. But they get back when people run to their store."* – I2

From the sponsor's perspective, the relationship is primarily driven by a desire to contribute to the local community, and society at large, resulting in limited demands on the club.

"For us, tracksuits or training t-shirts have always been where we want to be visible. [...] The most important thing for us is that we want to give back to the municipality where we operate." – E9

Beyond social values, the collaboration is seen as something that could generate long-term financial benefits for the sponsor, even though it may not be measurable in exact numbers. Overall, interviewees describe the almost 14-year relationship as stable and trusting with less frequent contact. E9 suggests that the long-standing relationship may have created a degree of complacency: *"You might get led into a bit of false security. We don't hear from each other as often anymore. [...] But the relationship is good. It's just not as it used to be."* – E9

The reduced interaction is partly explained by limited time and competing priorities from other nonprofits the sponsor supports. However, the sponsor describes potential to further develop the relationship by, for example, increasing its visibility and initiating joint initiatives.

4.3.1.3. Other Clubs & Formalized Club Collaborations

One theme throughout the interviews is that Club X competes with other clubs in areas such as league trophies, which *"drive Club X forward"* – I6. However, beyond the competition arena, relationships with other clubs are seen as highly collaborative and central to the club's operations. Interviewees describe how cross-club relationships are vital for strengthening clubs' collective capacity, since they allow Club X to jointly organize and generate revenue from competitions, exchange knowledge and experiences, and reduce costs by facilitating the sharing and coordination of limited resources. Beyond this, these relationships also facilitate

joint training sessions, shared travel to competitions, and collaboration in broader initiatives, such as collective statements protesting cost cuts by governing actors.

“I think we collaborate with many clubs to make things come together.” – I6

“There is some competition, but you save resources by working together.” – I7

Club collaborations also enable risk sharing, for instance, in relation to competitions that are important for the sport itself but not necessarily profitable: *“If you’re organizing together, you can break even, or take a very small loss. It’s about spreading the damage.” – I4*

In addition, formalized club collaborations, ranging from contract-based collaborations between clubs to event-based organizations involving both clubs and commercial actors, helps strengthen clubs’ capacities. From Club X’s perspective, such arrangements help generate revenue, enable the sharing or transfer of financial risk, and execution of competitions not possible individually. They also provide platforms for connecting with other actors, for instance, through organized “get togethers” – E1. Such collaborations are also seen to drive the club’s purpose of inspiring participation in sports and promoting public health.

“It wouldn’t have been possible to carry it out [competition] with just Club X, there’s a large financial scope, and a high level of uncertainty so you need to be several.” – I4

However, Club X has also exited formalized club collaborations when they were deemed economically unsustainable: *“We exited the collaboration when it was economically unprofitable [...] and re-entered when profit-share and influence improved.” – I1*

In addition, the interviewees describe these relationships as highly interdependent, as actors often take each other into consideration, such as when scheduling competitions to optimize resource use.

“We don’t want to schedule things on the same weekend, because to some extent we depend on each other. There would be competition not only for runners but also for

resources. So it becomes a form of coordination, to instead benefit from each other.” – E7

4.3.1.4. Governing Actors

Relationships with governing actors are largely rule- and regulation-based, as they provide frameworks for how competitions are conducted, distribute grants, and arrange education sessions. Governing actors also help organize competitions, enabling Club X’s members to compete while raising the visibility of its athletes. As I2 notes, Club X is often described as a strong partner in arranging large competitions: *“They often ask us because they know we do it well and we often say yes. It becomes a win-win to have a good collaboration.”*

Simultaneously, interviewees outline how some of these relationships function less well, with examples such as high participation fees and removed regional competitions. Several interviewees, including both Club X and external actors, highlight a need for stronger support from governing actors. Some interviewees express frustration over how governing actors’ excessive salary costs and ineffective support affect clubs and athletes, while others such as E4 cannot even pinpoint their contribution.

“[The governing actor] has removed more and more support from clubs.” – I4

“We have quite limited collaboration with them, and we wish it were stronger.” – E6

As E6 explains, these relationships are a difficult balancing act as governing bodies constitute important network actors:

“The relationship is somewhat difficult, as they focus heavily on the central office operations and I think there’s a lack of a broader perspective on Swedish track and field, beyond just the central administration’s activities.” – E6

However, the empirics outline a dissonance in the actors’ views of the support provided through the relationship, since the governing actors emphasise that they actively strengthen clubs’ capacity through, for instance, enabling *“[...] meeting platforms between our sport federations and our partners”* – E5. The governing actors also highlight that it is *“[...] up to the clubs to take on this work to”* – E2, while they outline how they struggle with finding

capacity: *“It’s a bit of a resource issue internally for us to have time for this [supporting clubs with sponsorships].”* – E2

4.3.1.5. Peripheral Actors

Club X currently has limited interactions with peripheral actors such as running communities. However, internal interviewees argue that these are activities the club could also initiate: *“We don’t have that much running groups for amateurs like others do. That’s something we could become better at.”* – I2

E1 also notes that their relationships with NPSCs are limited, but that clubs can help introduce individuals to organized sport: *“it would’ve been fun to show that this part of running also exists.”*

4.3.2. Mechanisms Shaping Social Exchange Processes

4.3.2.1. Bidirectional Value Creation as the Foundation for Collaboration

A common theme across the empirics is that relationships are built on the ability to create bidirectional value and that long-term collaborations are not based on one-sided contributions: *“If it’s just one-way, it won’t be long-term”* – E9. Many interviewees emphasize social values such as public health, youth sport participation, and local development as main motivations for engagement with Club X. For instance, the municipality frames its relationship with Club X as an *“investment”* – E8 into an organization that promotes values and conducts activities aligned with its own objectives, such as public health and community development, rather than solely a sponsorship.

“It’s not possible to measure how much the Club X collaboration gives us back. But we know in the long-term it’s positive to be seen together with sports.” – E9

External interviewees also emphasize that, beyond contributing to a good cause, there is long-term value in being associated with these initiatives, for instance, the largest sponsor describes how the discount booklet generated revenue for Club X while also driving customer traffic to the sponsor’s store. Furthermore, interviewees outline that value can be created for both parties through cost reductions, access to resources, and platforms for discussion: *“So we give them a platform that they can use to talk about health at the company.”* – E3

4.3.2.2. Alignment of Expectations & Perceived Value

The interviewees consistently emphasize the importance of articulating the value each party gains from the relationship, as undefined value is difficult to recognize: *“It’s important to know the relationship’s purpose to see if the goal of the collaboration has been achieved.”* – E7. In practice, this involves actively developing and articulating concrete value propositions.

“Find what fits each partner, and make sure to ask both questions. Often, you only ask what they want. Instead, you need to identify solutions that address our needs and theirs. What can we offer them, and what can they offer us?” – E3

“It’s about sitting down and brainstorming. What do we have? Or what could we create? [...] What can we provide that makes it worthwhile for them to partner with us?” – E9

To address this, many external actors emphasize the importance of aligning expectations by defining the purpose of the relationship and understanding the other’s needs and target groups. In particular, listening is described as central: *“I think you should listen more than you talk [...] to understand what the actual need is.”* – E8

However, despite its importance, interviewees outline that creating value for both actors is not always straightforward. Several external actors describe situations where collaborations did not develop further due to mismatches in perceived value. For instance, an initiative involving support to an elite athlete was not pursued further, as it did not align with the sponsor’s primary focus on youth and community-oriented activities. This challenge is also highlighted as contributing to NPSCs’ difficulties in forming new relationships, as companies do not always perceive the value of collaborating, as they in many cases are looking for relationships going beyond purely monetary exchange for visibility. The interviewees indicate that relationships and sponsorships are increasingly moving away from focusing on exposure alone, instead emphasizing the importance of relationships with parties who communicate values they want to represent or that can support their strategic objectives. For instance, one external actor highlights how they created activities related to youth engagement as it is important for their sponsors.

“You can’t just ask companies for money anymore, instead you have to explain, what’s in it for us?” – E8

“Not everything is governed by the value of a sponsorship [...] Instead, it’s more about what you actually do with the partnership. How you choose to communicate about it.” – E7

4.3.2.3. Continuous Communication & Personal Relationships

The interviewees highlight the importance of continuous communication and personal interaction in building and maintaining relationships, as well as in achieving more effective collaboration outcomes. Relationship building is also highlighted as important for sustaining and developing capacity.

“8-9 out of 10 sponsors we bring in come through relationship-building [...]. The key is to build relationships and trust with actors who are potentially interested.” – E6

This is also illustrated through the municipality relationship, where ongoing dialogue through both formal and informal channels, such as meetings, phone calls, lunches, and coffees, is seen as key for relational development: *“You need to have continuous dialogue [...] otherwise I can’t keep track.” – E8*. At the same time, relationships may weaken if interaction decreases. As illustrated in the case of Club X’s largest sponsor, contact has become less frequent, which is described as weakening the relationship.

4.3.2.4. Network Embeddedness & Positioning

The interviewees emphasize the importance of understanding one’s network position for relationship development, as it enables actors to build and maintain relationships, identify relevant partners, and leverage existing ties: *“It’s about finding and meeting the right people.” – E9*. Some external actors also highlight the importance of having dedicated roles focused on managing partnerships and building relationships.

Awareness of other actors within the network is seen as important for facilitating collaboration and maintaining strong relationships. Several interviewees explain how they actively consider other actors in activity planning. For example, events are often coordinated to avoid overlap and competition for resources, aiming to enhance collective capacity.

“We’re colleagues with other larger races. As competitors, we contribute to each other’s development by, for instance, not scheduling races on the same day.” – E3

External actors also emphasize the importance of multi-actor collaboration, as it is seen to strengthen the joint ability to achieve desired outcomes.

*“The municipality cannot do everything. Civil society cannot do everything. The business sector cannot do everything. But if we join forces, we can achieve so much.”
– E8*

Lastly, interviewees describe the importance of creating and engaging in networking opportunities. These events are seen as vital to connect, exchange knowledge, and identify potential collaborations.

4.3.3. Summary of Empirics

Taken together, the empirics show that Club X’s relationships with its network actors enables it to gain access to additional resources and opportunities, as well as the sharing and coordination of limited resources. Furthermore, key factors identified to shape exchange relationships are the importance of bidirectional value creation, alignment of expectations and perceived value, and continuous communication and personal contact. The findings also demonstrate the relevance of considering network positions and network embeddedness, as the actors are aware of and adjust their activities based on others’ actions.

It is important to acknowledge that the empirical material is rich and multifaceted, including several dimensions that could have been elaborated on. However, given the expanded theoretical framework, the subsequent analysis focuses on relational and financial outcomes, while other dimensions remain less explored. This choice is further motivated by calls to explore these dimensions more closely (e.g., Crick & Crick, 2020; Rossi et al., 2024).

5. Analysis

This chapter analyzes the empirical findings from the internal (5.1.) and interorganizational relationship & network dimensions (5.2.-5.3.) using the extended framework (see Figure 2) and relevant literature, concluding with the implications of the analysis (5.4.).

5.1. Club X's Internal Capacity Building Processes

Millar and Doherty's (2016) model provides a foundation for understanding NPSCs' capacity building processes. However, as discussed in the theory section, the model primarily conceptualizes them as unfolding within NPSCs, whereas the empirical findings suggest that internal dynamics alone do not fully explain Club X's capacity building processes. Therefore, this section uses their model as a starting point to analyze how capacity building processes unfold within Club X, while also identifying its limitations.

Consistent with Millar and Doherty's (2016) model, Club X's capacity building processes have historically been initiated as a result of a combination of stimuli, including financial constraints, human resource shortages, and leadership shortcomings, prompting the club to assess its capacity needs and formulate strategies to address them. For instance, the pandemic and rapid club growth have led Club X to implement strategies such as downsizing, stricter rules and regulations, and the appointment of formal leadership. Nonetheless, in several cases, despite clear stimuli, an acknowledged need for action, and the formulation of some alternative strategies, many initiatives do not progress to implementation or are sustained over time, indicating deficiencies in Club X's organizational readiness to build and maintain capacity. This suggests that, although Club X continuously moves through the initial stages of Millar and Doherty's (2016) model, specifically the recognition of stimuli and the assessment of capacity needs, organizational readiness seems to hamper further progression in its capacity building processes.

The empirical findings specifically highlight limitations in organizational readiness to be closely connected to constraints in human and financial resources. Resource constraints of this kind are not unique to Club X, instead it is described as common in NPSCs (Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Wegner et al., 2022). In the case of Club X, these constraints limit its readiness for long-term initiatives by reinforcing a short-term focus despite its internal commitment and ambition. This adds to Wegner et al. (2022), who argue that 'passion for the cause' may both

enable and constrain capacity building processes by diverting attention away from the long-term perspective. High ambitions and intentions for long-term initiatives and continuous development are present, but limited financial and human resources seem to hamper the capacity to fully implement and sustain them. Further, aligned with Swierzy et al. (2018), the internal interviews consistently demonstrate that Club X is aware of the importance of voluntary engagement and its essential role for capacity building processes. However, despite this understanding, interviewees describe how Club X struggles to find the engagement and mobilize people to devote their time to support the club.

Altogether, this highlights a wider challenge, while the ambition is in place, internal resource constraints hamper Club X's organizational readiness. In response to this, the internal interviews highlight how the club has started to direct its attention towards fostering stronger interorganizational relationships and networks to access critical knowledge and mitigate financial and human resources constraints. For instance, the empirics underscore how the club has developed some successful initiatives through well-functioning relationships with external actors, characterized by a shared assessment of capacity needs and the formulation of mutually beneficial strategies (e.g., a discount booklet with its largest sponsor). Such efforts aligns with Hall et al. (2003), and not least an increasing number of studies emphasizing the importance of external relationships and networks in capacity building processes (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Czekanski et al., 2021; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025; von Schomberg et al., 2025).

Consistent with Wicker and Breuer (2011), the findings reveal a growing understanding among interviewees that external relationships and networks serve as crucial channels for accessing resources, and thereby should be further integrated into the club's strategic considerations. The interviewees particularly emphasize that Club X's external engagement with existing and potential sponsors still is somewhat limited and that the club generally could interact more with actors across its network. This points to improvement potential within existing processes by underscoring that significant value could be realized by building and strengthening these relationships.

In sum, the empirical findings echo what the reviewed literature demonstrates, namely, the importance of interorganizational relationships and networks in strengthening Club X's capacity by enabling a shared assessment of capacity needs and joint strategies, ultimately

strengthening capacity building outcomes and helping to address the club's resource constraints. However, despite these insights, there is a need to move beyond Millar and Doherty's (2016) model to better understand how interorganizational relationships and networks shape Club X's capacity building processes.

5.2. The Role of Club X's Network on Capacity Building

When delving deeper into Club X's capacity building processes, through this study's theoretical extensions, the empirics demonstrates that network relationships are central in shaping the club's capacity building processes, since the ties enable access to resources and competencies that would be difficult for it to mobilize independently. For instance, relationships with other clubs and formalized club collaborations facilitate the coordination and saving of scarce resources (e.g., volunteers and equipment), sharing of knowledge, and event-related capabilities. This strengthens both Club X's readiness for capacity building, as well as their joint capability to organize competitions, events, and social initiatives.

The study's findings extend Jones et al. (2017) study by showing, in practice, how stronger relationships with other clubs and formalized club collaborations reduce financial risk and function as platforms for resource exchange, overall strengthening their collective capacity. This suggests that relationships between NPSCs not only hold potential value, as outlined by Jones et al. (2017), but actively contribute to NPSCs' capacity building processes, underscoring that capacity building is not primarily an internal process, but is co-constructed through ongoing exchange relationships with external actors. Further, this aligns with prior research showing that interorganizational relationships help strengthen NPSCs' capacity, by enabling access to resources, contributing to innovation, and improving performance outcomes (e.g., Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020; Crick & Crick, 2020). This study also extends Hambrick et al. (2018) who identify similar relational dynamics in NPSCs focused on social development, by showing the importance of exchange relationships in another NPSC's context.

The analysis shows that Club X is rooted in a network of exchange relationships with multiple external actors, including the municipality, sponsors, other clubs, formalized club collaborations, governing actors, and peripheral actors. This aligns with existing research that has demonstrated how NPSCs are typically embedded in broader interorganizational

networks (e.g., Jones et al., 2017; Hambrick et al., 2018; Crick & Crick, 2020). However, these relationships are not uniform, but rather serve different roles in Club X's capacity building processes. For instance, the municipality and the largest sponsor emerge as central actors in Club X's network, providing continuous access to resources, as well as enabling long-term stability through ongoing projects. In contrast, more peripheral actors such as running communities rather act as a source of external stimuli for Club X's capacity building processes by functioning as a source of comparison, inspiration, or competition. This can be seen to add nuance to the current research, which has primarily emphasized interorganizational relationships' overall significance to capacity building processes, by showing how actors' network positions shape both the extent of their influence and the type of contributions they make (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Hammerschmidt et al., 2020; Brand et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Club X's own centrality in relation to these external actors is key for its capacity building, since a central position enables the club to better leverage relationships and access resources. Club X's centrality in the Swedish track and field context is distinct, illustrated by, for instance, its close interactions with the municipality, governing actors, other clubs and sport collaborations to arrange events and initiatives. However, the empirics demonstrate that not only the NPSC's centrality is important, as shown by Hambrick et al. (2018), but also the external actors' network relationships. For example, the municipality has a stronger tie with Club X than other sport organizations, whereas the club's sponsor supports many nonprofits, which is described to act as a constraint by limiting the attention and resources allocated to the club. Overall, this suggests that the role of centrality in shaping Club X's capacity building processes is not only determined by its own position, but also by external actors' relationships with other actors.

Moreover, the empirics show how Club X's degree of network access, as well as the presence or absence of brokers shape its capacity building processes. For instance, the limited number of network ties to large sponsors restricts Club X's access to resources, thereby constraining its capacity building processes. Although the empirics suggest that such sponsorships are possible, they are not fully realized, indicating limitations in how network opportunities are activated. To mitigate this, Jones et al. (2017) highlight the potential value of introducing brokers to improve network cohesion and bridge structural holes, a dynamic that these findings demonstrate in practice. The municipality, for example, acts as a broker by

connecting otherwise separate actors through initiatives such as projects for disadvantaged youths and partner meet-ups. These activities facilitate access to new partners and enable knowledge transfer and resource flows across network boundaries.

Furthermore, governing actors appear to occupy positions that could enable them to act as brokers by providing clubs with partnering opportunities and access sponsorship knowledge. However, their role is perceived by interviewees as more gatekeeping than actively connecting actors, suggesting that there are underutilized structural holes where potential linkages are not effectively activated. In line with Jones et al. (2017), this highlights how improving the network structure and more effectively leveraging brokerages' roles could increase NPSCs' access to resources while reducing their dependence on a few external actors.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that Club X's capacity building is shaped not only by its existing relationships but also by its structural embeddedness within its network. The ability to access, combine, and leverage resources depends on both actors' network positions, how effectively network opportunities are utilized, and actors' ability to occupy and leverage brokerage roles. Nonetheless, while the SNA extension highlights the importance of network structures and network ties it provides limited insights into how and why certain relationships enable capacity building processes, while other existing or potential network ties remain underutilized, which will be further explored in section 5.3.

5.3. The Role of Club X's Social Exchange Processes on Capacity Building

Building on 5.2, which highlighted how network relationships provide access to resources, the findings indicate that network ties alone do not guarantee capacity building. Rather, the empirics suggest that the extent to which these relationships shape capacity building processes is contingent on the social exchange processes through which value is generated (Czekanski et al., 2021).

The findings underscore that Club X's capacity building processes depend on the actors' ability to create reciprocal and value-generating relationships. Interviewees outline how Club X's network relationships are characterized by interdependent and bidirectional exchange,

where actors both contribute and receive intrinsic and/or extrinsic rewards from the relationships. This is particularly evident in Club X's relationship with central actors such as the municipality and its largest sponsor. While these actors provide financial and material resources, they simultaneously derive value from the collaboration, for example, through contribution and association with broader societal objectives such as public health and integration. In similar ways, other clubs and formalized club collaborations also enable Club X to arrange competitions it would not have been able to do on its own. This aligns with SET, which suggests that the effectiveness of collaborations depend on the extent actors perceive they achieve results they could not accomplish independently (Czekanski et al., 2021).

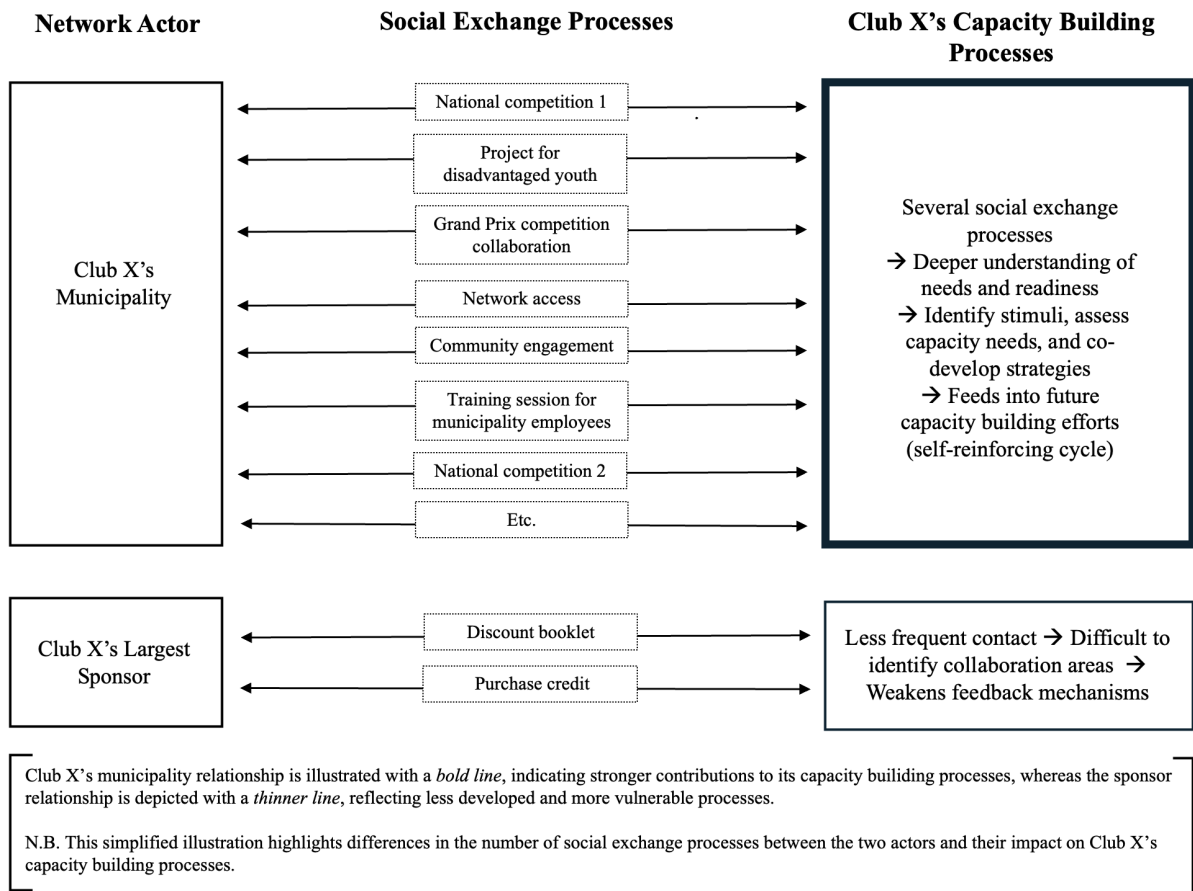
Furthermore, the empirics indicate that the degree of alignment, in actors' perceptions of the relationship's reward, shapes the club's capacity building processes. Particularly, shared social values and understanding of the outcomes of the relationship enhance alignment and the effectiveness of the exchange processes, which, in turn, implies that relationships where actors share a similar understanding of the purpose and value, appear to function more effectively. This is evident in collaborations with other clubs and formalized club collaborations, where the actors are aligned in what constitutes the reward, making it easier to establish and sustain the relationships. However, this alignment is less evident in relationships with more dissimilar actors, such as potential sponsors. Misalignment, in the form of a lack of understanding of what constitutes the reward in exchanges with Club X, is described to make external actors reluctant to engage, ultimately resulting in relationships either failing to take shape or functioning less effectively. This constrains Club X's capacity building processes by limiting the development of meaningful and contributing relationships, suggesting that capacity building constraints appear based on differences in how exchange relationships are perceived. At the same time, successful initiatives such as the school project with the municipality indicate that Club X is beginning to articulate this value more clearly, although internal interviews highlight that further improvement is needed in communicating this value. In line with SET, this suggests that alignment in perceived intrinsic and/or extrinsic reward of the relationship is critical for social exchange to take place and, consequently, for capacity building (Czekanski et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, in some cases, both Club X and its external actors describe how they share similar values and understand what the other party can offer, yet surprisingly joint capacity building efforts remain underdeveloped or have not fully materialized. The findings suggest

that alignment is not enough, but rather must be actively nurtured through continuous communication and personal relationships, which helps reinforce alignment, enhance exchange processes, and contribute to capacity building processes. This is specifically evident in Club X's relationship with the municipality, where continuous dialogue and close personal contact enabled the actors to align expectations and co-develop multiple initiatives. In contrast, the relationship with the largest sponsor appears to have become more stagnant. A key difference between these relationships is that in the case of the municipality, there have been multiple and continuously ongoing social exchange processes, through exchanges such as training sessions for the municipality staff and exclusive access to competitions whereas the sponsor relationship is characterized by more limited interaction, suggesting that the relationship could be further developed. From a SET perspective, continuous communication and repeated interactions can be seen to reduce uncertainty by increasing the actors' understanding and expectations of the relationships perceived reward, as well as strengthening the actors' feeling of reciprocity (Czekanski et al., 2021).

Interestingly, the findings show that multiple and continuous social exchange processes strengthen Club X's capacity building processes by reinforcing the different stages of Millar and Doherty's (2016) model. Through multiple exchanges, actors develop a deeper understanding of each other's capacity needs, readiness for capacity building, and the outcomes of joint initiatives. This shared understanding helps Club X and its external actors identify external (e.g., business opportunities) and internal stimuli (e.g., cost reductions), assess capacity needs, and co-develop alternative strategies. In this way, social exchange processes create a positive self reinforcing cycle for the club's capacity building, where repeated interactions facilitate a deeper understanding of each other's capacity needs, constraints and opportunities, that, in turn, feeds into future capacity building endeavors. In contrast, relationships characterized by fewer or less frequent social exchange processes limit the actors' ability to identify new areas for collaboration and weaken the feedback mechanisms within the capacity building processes. For instance, Club X's largest sponsor explains that they want to develop the relationship more, but further initiatives do not materialize. As a result, both the relationship, and the capacity building processes become more vulnerable to disruptions. See Figure 5 for a simplified illustration of the differences between the municipality and the sponsor relationships.

Figure 5. *Illustration of Club X's relationship with its municipality and largest sponsor*
(Berg & Szalkai, 2026)



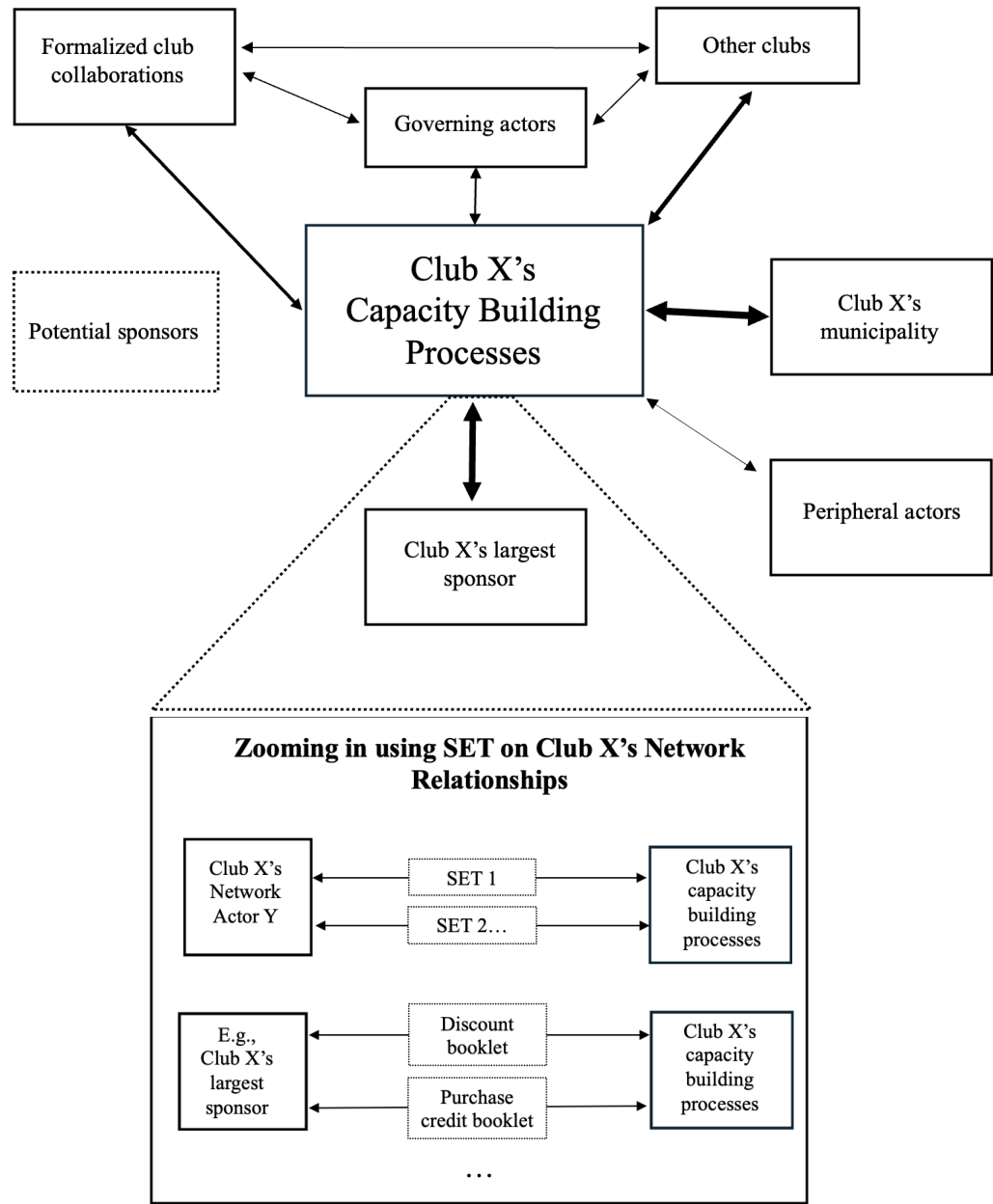
5.4. Implications of Analysis

The analysis shows that Club X's capacity building is not primarily an internal process, but rather co-constructed through multiple relationships with external actors. The SNA extension underscores the importance of network activation, actor positionality, and the strength of network ties for Club X's capacity building processes (Spindel, 2024), while SET highlights the importance of alignment of perceived rewards for forming and sustaining relationships (Czekanski et al., 2021). However, somewhat unexpectedly to the authors, the SET analysis shows that alignment alone is insufficient for effective capacity building. Instead, NPSCs must actively maintain and strengthen relationships through multiple and continuous social exchange processes with their network actors, as this enables them to better understand each other's needs, constraints, and develop joint opportunities which support the initiation of future capacity building processes. Without continuous exchanges, capacity building processes risk halting or failing due to increasing misalignments between actors. These

findings support previous research that emphasize the importance of interorganizational relationships and networks (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025) and further extends this knowledge by highlighting, through a SNA and SET perspective, the impact these dimensions have on NPSCs' capacity building processes.

To situate the empirical findings within Millar and Doherty's (2016) process model of capacity building, an extended framework is presented below (see Figure 6). The illustration shows how Club X's capacity building processes, through an SNA lens, are situated within a network of external actors with varying strong network ties. This highlights that NPSCs' capacity building processes are not solely intraorganizational but are shaped by network relationships with other actors. In particular, the framework emphasizes how SET can be used to better understand the strength and weaknesses of NPSCs' network actors' ties, which, in turn, has implications for its capacity building processes. The authors acknowledge that this framework has limitations, as its theoretical extensions primarily direct attention toward the relational and financial dimensions of the capacity building processes. However, it can still be argued to offer a new lens to understand capacity building.

Figure 6. *Application of The Extended Framework to Club X's Capacity Building Processes*
(Berg & Szalkai, 2026)



Network tie strength is illustrated by the number of social exchange processes between Club X and its network actors. A higher number of exchanges suggests stronger ties, while a lower number suggests weaker ties. A social exchange is defined as *dyadic, interdependent, bidirectional, and reward-based* interactions.

6. Discussion

This chapter begins by answering the research question (6.1.), followed by a discussion of theoretical contributions (6.2.), practical implications (6.3.), limitations of the study (6.4.), and future research (6.5.).

6.1. Answer to Research Question

NPSCs operate in an increasingly challenging economic environment that constrains their capacity building efforts (Wicker & Breuer, 2013; 2015). However, within the NPSC field, researchers highlight interorganizational relationships and networks as critical mechanisms for shaping and strengthening capacity building processes, and outline the need for further research (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Rossi et al., 2024). In response, this study aimed to delve deeper into these dynamics by asking: *How do interorganizational relationships and networks shape the capacity building processes of nonprofit sport clubs?*

Drawing on the empirical analysis of Club X and its network actors, the authors identify that interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes through four interrelated mechanisms: (1) *interorganizational relationships influence all stages*, (2) *network structure and actor positions*, (3) *alignment of perceived rewards*, and (4) *multiple and continuous social exchange processes*.

Interorganizational Relationships Influence all Stages

Interorganizational relationships are shown to influence all stages of the capacity building process, as ongoing interactions with external actors help NPSCs to collaboratively identify stimulus and capacity needs, assess their current readiness, explore joint strategies, and together create successful initiatives and events.

Network Structure & Actor Positions

Network structure and actor positions have been shown to both enable and constrain NPSCs' capacity building processes by shaping their resource access, organizational readiness, and their ability to mobilize and utilize network relationships. NPSCs and their external actors' network positions shape opportunities for capacity building, as a central position and brokers facilitate connections and relationship building. Nonetheless, gatekeeping by external actors and untapped network ties constrain NPSCs' capacity building processes.

Alignment of Perceived Rewards

The degree of alignment in NPSCs' relationships with their network actors impacts their capacity building processes. Alignment, reflected in a shared understanding of the relationship's value and purpose, as well as the ability to create reciprocal value, is critical for exchange processes to unfold and capacity building to take place. Misalignment in what constitutes the relational reward in exchanges with NPSCs, reduces external actors' willingness to engage, resulting in relationships either failing to take shape or functioning less effectively, ultimately constraining NPSCs' capacity building processes.

Multiple & Continuous Social Exchange Processes

Alignment is not enough for effective capacity building. Multiple and continuous social exchanges with an external actor strengthen NPSCs' capacity building processes by enabling the parties to better understand each other's needs, organizational readiness, and joint opportunities, thereby creating a positive self-reinforcing cycle that enables future capacity building processes. In contrast, relationships characterized by fewer or less frequent social exchange processes limit the actors' exchange of knowledge and ability to identify new initiatives, consequently limiting NPSCs' capacity building processes.

Taken together, these mechanisms deepen the understanding of how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes, in turn, providing insights that can help them to better navigate challenges, strengthen their capacity, and ultimately enhance their organizational performance.

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

By focusing on interorganizational relationships and networks role in NPSCs' capacity building processes, this study aims to contribute to the wider academic discourse by addressing the identified interlinked research gap connected to: (1) the need for more qualitative research on NPSCs' organizational performance (e.g., Lachance & Kerwin, 2025; García-Fernández et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025), and (2) the more nascent area concerning the role of interorganizational relationships and networks in NPSCs' capacity building processes (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2018; Crick & Crick, 2020; Wegner et al., 2022). Specifically, although existing research highlights the significance of interorganizational relationships in relation to NPSCs' capacity building processes (e.g., Rossi et al., 2024, Brand

et al., 2023), the findings extend this by illustrating four interlinked mechanisms that impact NPSCs' capacity building processes; the omnipresence of interorganizational relationships across all stages, network structure and actor positions, the degree of alignment in perceived rewards, and the importance of multiple and continuous social exchange processes within NPSCs' relationships with external actors.

Furthermore, regarding the chosen theoretical framework the authors have expanded Millar and Doherty's (2016) process model of capacity building by complementing it with interorganizational and network dimensions, operationalized through the use of SET and SNA. This helps address calls and supports recent studies outlining the need to expand it by incorporating these dimensions (Rossi et al., 2024; Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2025). In particular, these extensions enable a closer examination of how networks and interorganizational relationships affect NPSCs' capacity building processes. Additionally, given that the findings illustrate internal capacity alone as insufficient to effectively support capacity building processes, the inclusion of these dimensions represents relevant extensions from the authors perspective.

6.3. Practical Implications

The four interrelated mechanisms identified in this study provide several implications for practitioners across multiple stakeholder groups, including NPSCs, NPOs, governing bodies, municipalities, and sponsors. From the perspective of NPSCs and NPOs aiming to build capacity effectively, the findings underscore the importance of fostering interorganizational relationships by (1) *strengthening network structure and positions*, (2) *ensuring alignment of perceived rewards with external actors*, and (3) *foster multiple and continuous social exchange processes*.

Strengthening Network Structure & Positions

The findings demonstrate the importance of gaining a central position and connecting with brokers to facilitate relationship building. For practice, this suggests the potential value of identifying and connecting with brokers and other actors in the network to enhance centrality. However, the findings also highlight the importance of identifying gatekeepers and untapped network ties, as these can constrain their capacity building processes. For instance, a potential

avenue is to join forces with other actors to collectively address gatekeepers, as illustrated by Club X's statement with other clubs protesting cost cuts.

Ensuring Alignment of Perceived Rewards with External Actors

To establish successful relationships, the findings indicate the significance of clearly defining the intended outcomes of relationships, articulating the value each party derives, and establishing structures for joint discussion of value co-creation. Specifically, this may involve setting aside time for discussions with partners to identify mutually beneficial initiatives, as well as conducting internal workshops to clarify the organization's value proposition.

Foster Multiple & Continuous Social Exchange Processes

The findings emphasize the importance of fostering multiple and ongoing social exchange processes with external actors to strengthen capacity building. Practically, this suggests the need for NPSCs and NPOs to prioritize regular communication, building personal relationships, and creating regular opportunities for exchange, such as meetings, joint initiatives, and informal interactions, as seen in Club X's relationship with its municipality.

Although the study primarily examines NPSCs' capacity building processes, their interconnectedness with external actors suggests that the findings also extend to these stakeholders. For instance, from the perspective of governing actors, the findings suggest that they could better utilize their network connections to support NPSCs, while, from the perspective of sponsors, the findings highlight the need for both parties to articulate mutual value and foster dialogue when aiming to create long-term relationships.

6.4. Limitations of the Study

While offering valuable insights, this study is subject to certain limitations. Importantly, since the study focuses on a single case, a selected Swedish nonprofit track and field club operating within a specific organizational and institutional context, the findings cannot be assumed to be directly generalizable and transferable to other settings. However, despite the importance of acknowledging this limitation, the study's purpose was not to generate generalizable findings, but rather to obtain an interpretative and in-depth understanding of the role of Club X's interorganizational relationships and networks in its capacity building processes. Furthermore, given the qualitative nature of this study, the inclusion of interpretations from

both the authors and interviewees is inevitable. This implies that certain aspects of interorganizational relationships and networks may have been given greater or lesser emphasis. Also, despite efforts to ensure reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process, such as clearly documenting the empirical material and using researcher triangulation, the authors' interpretations may have influenced the thematic analysis.

6.5. Future Research

Given the growing scholarly attention of NPSCs' capacity building processes the authors aim for this study to inspire further research in the field that expands on the role of interorganizational relationships and networks for their capacity building. A natural extension of this study would be to examine the transferability of the findings beyond the specific context investigated. Conducting similar research in other sport settings, NPO sectors, or national contexts, such as clubs operating in a different funding set-up, could generate distinct results. To extend this line of inquiry, a multiple case study approach could be valuable, as it allows for a comparative analysis of whether clubs across different contexts and with varying amounts of resources face distinct capacity building circumstances. Additionally, complementing the study with quantitative insights, such as quantitative SNA, may, for example, provide a more concrete and measurable understanding of the extent to which network positions affect access to resources and capacity.

Further, considering the importance of interorganizational relationships and networks it would be interesting to delve further into these aspects. This could, for instance, involve examining network and broker support more closely by exploring specific strategies for how governing actors can enhance support, given the identified limitations in network access and brokerage. Lastly, the importance of aligned perceived rewards and multiple continuous social exchanges in strengthening interorganizational relationships suggests that adopting a micro-level perspective could be valuable. Specifically, given volunteering's essential role in NPSCs, similar dynamics may also shape relationships between clubs and volunteers.

7. Conclusion

The study aimed to develop a more nuanced understanding of how interorganizational relationships and networks shape NPSCs' capacity building processes. In short, the findings demonstrates (1) how interorganizational relationships influence all stages of the process, as well as the importance of (2) network structure and actor positions, (3) the alignment of perceived rewards, and (4) multiple and continuous social exchange processes in strengthening NPSCs' capacity building.

In practical terms, this underscores the importance for NPSCs to continuously ask, “*What's in it for us?*” – E8, when engaging with external actors and aiming to develop interorganizational relationships. Although it might seem like a simple question, the findings emphasize the importance of engaging with it both at the outset and throughout relationships to ensure that mutual value is continuously clarified and adjusted over time. NPSCs that move beyond focusing on capacity building solely through the lens of what they can gain and instead focus on what can be co-created can more effectively strengthen their capacity building processes, foster sustainable long-term relationships, and ultimately enhance their organizational performance.

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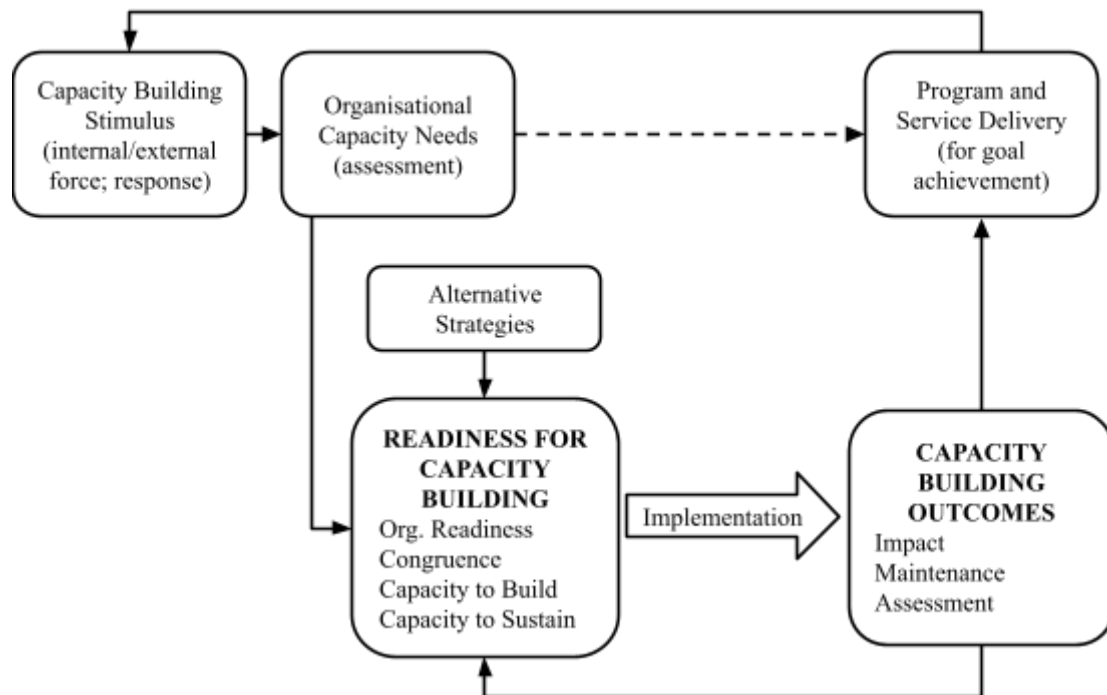
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9. Appendix

9.1. Appendix 1: Millar and Doherty's (2016) Process Model of Capacity Building



9.2. Appendix 2: Usage of Extended Theoretical Framework

Level 1 - Foundation of Analysis	Description	Usage
Millar & Doherty's (2016) Capacity Building Process Model	The model provides a theoretical foundation for understanding and analyzing a NPSC's organizational capacity building processes.	Utilized to obtain an overview of Club X's capacity building efforts, with the six key concepts (see below) offering a deeper examination of each stage of the processes.
Key concepts		
(1) <i>Capacity building stimulus</i>	Internal (e.g., declining membership, increasing overhead costs) and external (e.g., business opportunities, funding cuts) triggers that initiate capacity building processes.	Utilized to identify what initiates Club X's capacity building efforts.
(2) <i>Organizational capacity needs</i>	Concerns how the NPSC assess gaps between existing and required capacity.	Utilized to examine how Club X identifies and prioritizes its capacity needs that has been prompted by capacity building stimulus.
(3) <i>Readiness for capacity building</i>	Concerns the NPSC ability to implement capacity building efforts, which is influenced by factors such as organizational readiness, alignment with existing processes, and its capability in building and sustaining change over time.	Utilized to assess Club X's readiness to implement its capacity building strategies.
(4) <i>Alternative strategies</i>	Concerns alternative strategies used by the NPSC to address the identified capacity gaps. For instance, partnerships with external actors, equipment acquisitions, and penalty fees for missed voluntary engagement.	Utilized to identify Club X's strategies and responses to external and internal stimuli.
(5) <i>Capacity building outcomes</i>	Concerns the immediate impact and long-term sustainability of the NPSC's capacity building efforts.	Utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of Club X's strategies and their contribution to its organization.
(6) <i>Program and service delivery</i>	Concerns the activities undertaken by the NPSC, which feed back into future capacity building processes.	Utilized to assess how capacity building outcomes influence Club X's operations and future capacity building processes.

Source: Millar & Doherty, 2016.

Level 2 - Theoretical Extension: SNA	Description	Usage
Qualitative Social Network Analysis	Outlines the relational ties the NPSC has with its network actors, as well as ties between network actors.	Utilized to gain a better understanding of Club X's embeddedness in its network. SNA has also been used to analyze how Club X currently utilizes their network ties to access resources, while also identifying opportunities and constraints in how its network positioning affects its capacity building processes.
Key concepts		
<i>Ties</i>	Refers to the interorganizational relationships in which the club is embedded.	Utilized to analyze how Club X utilizes its network ties to access resources, while also identifying opportunities and constraints related to how additional interorganizational ties can strengthen its capacity building processes.
<i>Centrality</i>	Refers to the extent to which an actor occupies a central position within the network.	Utilized to assess the degree of influence each relevant actor has over aspects such as resources and decision-making in Club X's network, as well as its impact on Club X's capacity building.
<i>Brokers</i>	Refers to actors who connect otherwise unconnected actors, facilitate access to resources and information, as well as support negotiations with NPSCs external actors.	Utilized to identify actors within Club X's network who function as brokers or have the possibility to act as one.
<i>Structural holes</i>	Refers to gaps or missing connections within the network.	Utilized to identify potential opportunities or constraints in Club X's access to resources and information.

Sources: Wäsche et al. 2017; Jones et al., 2017, p. 157; Hambrick et al., 2018; Spindel, 2024; von Schomberg et al., 2025

Level 3 - SET Extension	Description	Usage
Social Exchange Theory	Explains how relationships are formed and maintained through exchange processes characterized by four key characteristics.	Utilized to assess the extent to which Club X's network ties align with the core characteristics of social exchange. It has also been used to evaluate relationship quality and understand how these relationships enable or constrain the exchange of resources and knowledge, ultimately impacting Club X's capacity building processes.
Key characteristics		
<i>Dyadic</i>	Refers to actors who want to sustain a relationship with one another.	Utilized to identify actors with relational ties to Club X.
<i>Interdependent</i>	Refers to exchange actors depending on one another to achieve specific outcomes.	Utilized to examine the interdependence of Club X's network relationships.
<i>Bidirectional</i>	Refers to a reciprocal relationship characterized by both actors contributing.	Utilized to examine the bidirectionality of Club X's network relationships.
<i>Extrinsic and/or extrinsic rewards</i>	The intrinsic (e.g., the feeling associated with supporting a good cause or a sense of community) and/or extrinsic reward (e.g., monetary compensation, resources) the actors receive from the relationship.	Utilized to examine the extent and type of value exchange between actors in Club X's network.

Source: Czekanski et al., 2021

9.3. Appendix 3: Interview Specifications

Code name	Case Org X	Date	Interview form	Length
I1	Club X	2026-02-06	In-person	60 minutes
E1	Running Community	2026-02-12	In-person	57 minutes
I2	Club X	2026-02-13	In-person	66 minutes
I3	Club X	2026-02-13	In-person	71 minutes
E2	Governing actor A	2026-02-16	Digital - Zoom Meeting	58 minutes
I4	Club X	2026-02-17	In-person	54 minutes
I5	Club X	2026-02-17	In-person	52 minutes
I6	Club X	2026-02-18	Digital - Zoom Meeting	36 minutes
E3	Formalized club collaboration - Private company A	2026-02-19	In-person	58 minutes
E4	Other club	2026-02-19	In-person	51 minutes
I7	Club X	2026-02-19	Digital - Zoom Meeting	37 minutes
E5	Governing actor B	2026-02-20	Digital - Zoom Meeting	26 minutes
I8	Club X	2026-02-24	In-person	35 minutes
E6	Formalized club collaboration - Private company B	2026-02-25	Digital - Zoom Meeting	39 minutes
I9	Club X	2026-02-25	In-person	46 minutes
E7	Formalized club collaboration A	2026-02-26	Digital - Zoom Meeting	60 minutes
E8	Club X's Municipality	2026-03-02	In-person	60 minutes
E9	Club X's largest sponsor	2026-03-02	Digital - Zoom Meeting	38 minutes

9.4. Appendix 4: Interview Guide(s)

Appendix 4a: Interview Guide for Internal Interviews (Club X)

Topic	Question
<i>Background information</i>	• Can you briefly describe yourself and your current role in the club? ◦ How long have you been involved in the club? • What are your primary responsibilities? What are your main tasks? • In what way do you feel your role contributes to the club's overall operations?
<i>Club context & operations</i>	• How would you describe the club's operations? • What are the club's most important goals today? What does the club want to achieve in the next five years? ◦ How are sporting goals, social/nonprofit goals, and financial considerations balanced? • What do you perceive as the club's greatest strengths? • What are the biggest challenges the club is currently facing?
<i>Stimulus: What triggers change?</i>	• Has there been specific events or crises that have forced the club to change? ◦ Examples? • When do you notice that "now we need to do something differently"? ◦ Examples?
<i>Financial situation & resource constraints</i>	• How would you describe the club's financial situation? ◦ What are the primary sources of revenue? ◦ Which costs are the most significant? • In what way do financial constraints affect daily operations? • Have financial challenges changed over time? • Are there investments or initiatives the club would like to pursue but cannot due to financial or resource constraints?
<i>Organizational capacity & capacity building</i>	• Which resources are the most important for the club to function? • How do you implement or initiate new initiatives? ◦ What tends to work well in execution? • What hinders new initiatives? What is important to overcome these barriers?
<i>Strategy & strategic decisions</i>	• Would you say the club works strategically, for example through long-term planning or clear priorities? ◦ How are strategic decisions made within the club? Which stakeholders are involved? • Can you give examples of strategies the club uses to achieve its goals?

	• Do you use your contacts/network to create opportunities for the club?
<i>Collaboration & competition</i>	• How would you describe the relationship between the club and other track and field clubs? • Are collaborations with competitors strategically planned, or do they occur more spontaneously? • Can you give examples of successful or unsuccessful collaborations with other clubs? • How do these collaborations affect the club?
<i>External actors & networks</i>	• Which external stakeholders does the club interact with? • How do these relationships influence the club's decisions? • Are there expectations or demands from these stakeholders?
<i>Future outlook</i>	• From your perspective, what are the biggest strategic challenges for track and field clubs today in achieving their goals? • What role do you think collaboration with other clubs will play in the future? • If resources were not a limitation, what would the club prioritize? • What is most important for the club's long-term survival?
<i>Closing questions</i>	• Are there any additional aspects you think are important to highlight that we have not discussed? • Why do you think some track and field clubs succeed more than others? • What advice would you give to a similar club?

Appendix 4b: Interview Guide for External Interviews

The interview template for the external interviews has been adapted for each external interview, to reflect differences in the external actors' relationship with Club X, organizational structure, and degree of institutional governance. See below for the standard template used, as well as an example of how it has been adapted.

Topic	Question
<i>Background information</i>	• Can you briefly describe yourself and your responsibilities towards clubs? • How do you in general work with sponsorships and collaborations with clubs?
<i>Relationship with Club X</i>	• Can you tell us about your relationship with Club X? ◦ <i>What works well?</i>

	○ <i>Do you have any examples of activities and/or initiatives that have been specifically successful?</i> ○ <i>Do you have any examples of activities and/or initiatives that have been less successful or challenging?</i> ● What do you perceive as the outcomes of the relationship? ● Are there activities or initiatives where you both benefit especially much?
<i>Collaborations, relationships & relationship selection</i>	● What does your relationships with clubs generally look like? ● How do you determine which collaborations to engage in? ○ What makes a club an attractive partner for you? ○ Are there any specific demands or expectations from your side? ○ What factors determine if the relationship becomes long-term? ● Do you engage in networking opportunities between external actors and clubs? If so can you describe your involvement? ● How do you perceive the value of networking between multiple clubs and external actors, if any?
[Networking opportunities] <i>This is an example of additional questions added, because of prior knowledge about the external actors' engagement in relationship building activities.</i>	● Can you tell us more about the network engagements you have participated in or organized related to Club X? ● Would you like to see more of these types of activities? Why/Why not?
<i>Areas of developement</i>	● Is there anything you would like to develop in your relationship with Club X? ● Are there any new forms of collaborations you would like to try? ● Can Club X become a better collaboration partner?
<i>External actors role for nonprofit sport clubs</i>	● What role does external actors have in nonprofit sport clubs long-term survival? ● How do you perceive the balance between nonprofit values and commercial partnerships?
<i>Future outlook</i>	● How do you view your future engagement with local nonprofit sport clubs? ● Do you believe relationships with nonprofit sport clubs will be more or less attractive moving forward?

Closing questions

- If you would give advice to nonprofit sport clubs that want to strengthen their relationships with external actors, what would it be?
- Are there any additional aspects you think are important to highlight that we have not discussed?

N.B. The interview guides have been translated from Swedish to English.

9.5. Appendix 5: AI-Disclosure Note

In this thesis, artificial intelligence has been used in a restricted and careful manner. See below for usage details:

1) ChatGPT has been utilized throughout the writing process to improve grammar, coherence, flow, and professionalism using prompts such as:

- *“Can you please ensure that the provided sentence/section is coherent with a clear structure and line of reasoning, and importantly that it is grammatically correct. However, do not alter the content in any way.”*
- *“Can you improve the transition between these two sections, aiming to ensure a cohesive and logical flow.”*

2) ChatGPT has been used to cut nonessential words to meet the required word limit using prompts such as:

- *“Can you help me shorten this abstract to 250 words by removing non essential words. However, keep the meaning of the content and the original phrasing to as large extent as possible.”*

3) ChatGPT has been used as an internal check prior to the interviews to ensure that the interview questions are as impartial as possible.

- *“Do the following questions [insert of interview guide questions] capture the topic and are they unbiased? Please bold the ones that need revision.”*

The primary identified risk of using ChatGPT, for the above mentioned purposes, is that the AI tool might change the meaning or content of the provided paragraphs or generate inaccurate suggestions. To mitigate this every language improvement suggestion has been manually checked to ensure that the content has been kept. The interpretations and analytical reasoning has been left to the authors.