

## Assessing Volunteer-Based Cultural Organizations in Portugal: What Potential?

Timothy Koehnen, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Economics, Sociology and Management (DESG)

Centre for Transdisciplinary Development Studies (CETRAD)

University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD)

Avenida Almeida Lucena, 1

5000-660 Vila Real, Portugal

Tel. + 351 259 302 229 \* FAX + 351 259 302 249 \* E-mail:tkoehnen@utad.pt

Tiago Santos

Former UTAD/DESG Student

Rua Passagem de Nível

3770- 226 Oliveira do Bairro, Portugal

Tel. + 351 938547637 \* E-mail: o.santo.tiago@gmail.com

### Abstract

*The case study evaluation addresses organizational behavioural components within volunteer-based cultural organizations in rural mountainous communities in northern Portugal. The assessment of the organizational components resulted in specific suggestions for increasing non-formal educational planning for these volunteers articulated to organizational concerns and community development. The established volunteer-based-platform permits consideration of non-formal educational programs to increase community and organizational decision-making capacity, empowerment, and reflection for alternative leadership styles.*

### Key Words:

volunteers, organizational behaviour, community development

### Introduction

In the summer and fall in Portugal, there are many cultural and social events tied to religious celebrations, traditional agricultural gatherings, and of course local fairs. These religious events and celebrations permit rural villages and towns to maintain a link to the cultural past as well as to draw an influx of tourists with links to the ancestral community population. An important component of these gatherings by clans and families are the musical and dancing folk groups that are a part of these cultural and social traditions. Musical and cultural organizations have a role in these celebrations by linking visitors to the local rural identity and the community. As

volunteer-based cultural organizations, they also strengthen the linkages between economic activities such as local employment initiatives associated to tourism (Kayser, 1994).

Through their cultural performances, these volunteer-based organizations create synergy with the local economy involving increased receipts for restaurants, local shops, and hotels. The role of the cultural and musical groups in the process of local development also links to the improvement in the quality of life within these rural areas by the participatory volunteer-based activities. Such cultural and musical activities could also serve as developmental forums to strengthen individual and group

capacities for organizational and local governance through non-formal, volunteer-led educational programs directed at these issues (Eyben & Ladbury, 2006; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006).

### Methodology

This exploratory research used a qualitative methodology involving a case study design that followed procedures recommended by Creswell (1994) and McNabb (2004). The purpose of the research was to describe and assess potential administrative and organizational difficulties associated with cultural and musical organizations comprised of local volunteers. The case study questionnaire collected qualitative data that described the organizations, explored the organizational behaviour of these organizations, and investigated potential administrative strengths and weaknesses as viewed by an organizational leader. The questionnaire was adapted from a Ford Foundation study by Fowler (1988) as a community organization assessment (Martins, 2006; Santos, 2008). The authors also gathered non-participant observation and secondary data that complemented the case study questionnaire (Isaac & Michael, 1981).

A particular focus of the case study evaluation was to identify felt and unmet non-formal educational needs of the volunteers within these organizations, as well as additional capacities that could be learned by these musical and cultural volunteers. This research focus reflected a documented need for strengthening administrative, leadership, social capital through volunteerism), and empowerment capacities in these rural areas (Koehnen, 2009; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006). Thus, the study also addressed the potential of the volunteer-based platform (i.e., the volunteers within these organizations) for discussing

organizational and community development issues.

A regional board of tourism provided the researchers with a list of cultural and musical volunteer-based organizations in the geographical area of the study, *Serra de Marão*. The *Serra de Marão* envelops the municipalities of *Amarante*, *Cabeceiras de Basto*, *Marco de Canaveses*, *Mesão Frio*, *Mondim de Basto*, *Murça*, *Santa Marta de Penaguião* and *Vila Real*. These municipalities represent a mountainous low-density population area with scattered communities. From the total list, the authors identified 39 volunteer-based organizations from which to collect case study data. The questionnaire was sent by post to the 39 organizations. Leaders from 18 of the organizations responded resulting in a 46% response rate.

### Findings

#### *Organizational Features*

The data revealed that 55% (n = 10) of the responding volunteer-based organizations were musical folk groups, 28% (n = 5) were cultural and recreational associations, and 17% (n = 3) were community cultural centres. The organizational leader in all folk groups was an actual volunteer, and the responding folk groups included children, young people and senior citizens in traditional cultural activities. These volunteer-based organizations were all non-profit or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Seventy-eight percent of the responding organizations were founded during 1977 and 1987. This historical period for Portugal followed a peaceful governmental revolution and entry into the European Union.

Two predominant dimensions defined the responding volunteer-based organizations: those with fewer than 25 members (53%) and those with between 25

and 50 members (27%). This confirms that organizations are made up of a collection of volunteers who come together to accomplish activities and in this case related to cultural and musical activities. The survivability of these volunteer-based organizations in a low-density region appears to be stable despite a negative population growth (-2.2) and an aging index of 143 senior citizens per 100 children (a ratio of the population greater than 65 and children zero to 14 years old) for the area of the study (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2006).

*Assessment and Discussion of Organizational Purpose, Identity and Structure*

The mission or purpose of the responding volunteer-based organizations was represented by what the organization intends to accomplish, and these entities signify cultural and musical preservation. The assessment of purpose was explored using four questions that had a numerical five-point scale, with five being highest. Table 1 presents the leaders' responses regarding organizational mission/purpose using a different quality measurement for each question. The organizational leaders' responses to the four questions indicated that

the average mean score was respectable (4.0) for the general assessment of organizational purpose. The leaders assessed a mean of 3.8 for the clarity by members to the organizational purpose. The leaders also assessed that the organizational purpose was, in general, uncontested by members (mean = 3.8); believed that the organizational purpose was realistic (mean = 4.4) and that the membership legitimately chose the organizational purpose (mean = 4.1). The members supported the purpose for their organization by performing at the cultural events and even indirectly supported tourism.

Similarly, organizational identity was assessed (again using a five-point numerical scale with 5 being highest) and a different quality measurement for one of the three questions (Table 2). The leaders responded with a mean of 3.7 that the organization expresses an individual identity in what it does. As to ownership of the organization, it is controlled by the members and not by outsiders (mean average was 4.6). The operational organizational decisions are more or less controlled through a participatory manner by members (3.9). Obviously, the musical groups perform in a participatory manner.

Table 1  
*Leaders' Perceptions Concerning Mission or Purpose*

Assessment of Organizational Purpose	Leaders' Responses (5 point scale)					Mean	s.d.
	5	4	3	2	1		
1. For the members, the organization's purpose was <i>clear to unclear</i> .	33%	50%	6%	-	11%	3.8	1.21
2. The purpose of the organization was <i>uncontested to contested</i> .	29%	36%	29%	-	6%	3.8	1.07
3. The purpose was chosen in <i>realistic to unrealistic</i> terms.	39%	61%	-	-	-	4.4	0.50
4. The purpose was <i>completely to not at all</i> chosen legitimately by the membership.	65%	6%	18%	-	11%	4.1	1.41

The organizational identity reflected organizational ownership, cooperation and consensus among the volunteers to the purpose of the organization. This is important for creating a positive relationship among the volunteers instead of incompatible relationships with an overwhelming number of disagreements. These volunteers can be a platform or social system to identify potential rural and community impressions and problems.

Organizational structure was assessed (again using a five-point numerical scale with 5 being highest) with the same quality measurement for the four questions (Table 3). The question of whether leadership was selected and legitimately controlled by members had a mean response of 4.4. As to organizational tasks, the respondents assessed that tasks are consistently defined by the purpose of the organization (mean = 4.6) and that tasks are frequently delegated according to member skills (mean = 3.9). The leadership style reflects a more vertical, top-down communication process and is also associated with maintaining control and order and using a more autocratic/less participatory leadership style (Pina e Cunha, 2000).

The organizational structure was

reflected in the tasks to be completed and the management style, while linking the performance to organizational purpose (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2006). The respondents frequently believed that the organizational structure was tailored to the organizational purpose (mean average of 4.1 in a five-point scale). Organizational structure can be identified as the horizontal, vertical or mixed administrative style. The administrative style will also reflect the type of leadership in the organization.

### Discussion and Implications

These volunteer-based cultural organizations share an organizational identity and history. Organizational identity is supported and maintained by organizational volunteers who represent a platform for possible non-formal educational interventions in these rural areas. These groups of volunteers can be a part of forums to discuss community development activities. The volunteers could be motivated through non-formal educational programs to not only improve their organizational capacities, but also to initiate group discussion to enhance learning about the decision-making process in community development.

Table 2  
*Leaders' Perceptions Concerning Identity*

Assessment of Organizational Purpose	Leaders' Responses (5 point scale)					Mean	s.d.
	5	4	3	2	1		
1. The organization <i>very much to not at all</i> expresses an individual identity in what it does.	47%	29%	24%	-	-	3.7	0.83
2. The <i>members to outsiders</i> control the organization.	61%	33%	6%	-	-	4.6	0.62
3. Operational organizational decisions are <i>very much to not at all</i> controlled through participatory manner.	22%	55%	18%	6%	-	3.9	0.80

Table 3  
*Leaders' Perceptions Concerning Organizational Structure*

Assessment of Organizational Purpose	Leaders' Responses (5 point scale)					Mean	s.d.
	5	4	3	2	1		
1. Leadership is <i>very much to not at all</i> selected and legitimately controlled by members.	65%	11%	18%	6%	-	4.4	0.98
2. Tasks are <i>very much to not at all</i> defined by purpose.	72%	22%	-	6%	-	4.6	0.78
3. Tasks are <i>very much to not at all</i> allocated according to member's skill.	33%	33%	28%	-	6%	3.9	1.08
4. The organization is <i>very much to not at all</i> tailored to its purpose.	44%	28%	28%	-	-	4.1	0.61

The volunteers reside in low-density, rural areas that are represented by decision-making that involves only a few members of the population. For this reason, the Social Development Institute (a national Portuguese organization) identified the need for social change at this level (Koehnen, 2009; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006).

These volunteer-based organizations are dependent on external financial support which comes primarily from the local government. The respondents revealed that there was a very high (43%) or high (19%) level of dependence for outside funds (62% of the respondents). These funds are associated to capital and recurrent expenditures and not on volunteer labor. The dependence upon outside funds establishes a need or consideration for non-formal educational programs that could strengthen volunteer members' capacities to identify additional sources of funds and other means of financial support and procurement.

The voluntary-based organizations' successes in the recognition of cultural heritage were expressed in the relatively positive assessment of the various organizational behavioural components such as identity and purpose. The assessment also indicated some constraints in organizational structure and other aspects. The findings

identified sufficient organizational limitations and concerns to further discuss the inclusion of specific non-formal educational programs and modules. Such non-formal educational programs could strengthen membership capacity in these volunteer-based cultural and musical organizations.

The volunteer-based-platform can be a solid foundation for educational interventions to strengthen empowerment and social capital in these rural areas. The established volunteer-based platform can be the gateway for additional educational interventions for youth development, organizational administration, and community development in order to increase members' empowerment, social capital, and other community development capacities. The interventions could be directed at these volunteer-based-platforms, while inviting other citizens of these communities to participate in the learning process and discussion.

### **Volunteer-Based-Platform: Can it Complement Additional Interventions?**

Numerous authors (Koehnen & Baptista, 2007; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006; Koehnen, Baptista & Portela, 2004) have recognized the importance of non-formal

educational programs for rural populations in Portugal. Continuing education for these populations needs to be addressed to both improve the quality of life and the livelihoods of the rural population. Volunteer-based cultural organizations can be a targeted non-formal educational group for improving community and local development capacities and reducing exclusion. The non-formal educational objectives can complement other community educational felt and unfelt needs of volunteers. Non-formal educational programs could be considered an educational intervention to permit reflection upon and discussion of an alternate organizational structure that involves more members of the organization (i.e., volunteers) in the decision-making process.

A non-formal educational program consisting of a series of modules about the strengths and weaknesses of the horizontal organizational structure could be developed. One specific module could deal with increasing organizational participation by discussing all aspects in the implementation and use of a volunteer advisory council. Boyle (1981) identified the purposes of advisory councils in local organizations as: 1) collecting and analyzing data associated to community and organizational concerns; 2) identifying both community and organizational problems, needs and resources; 3) collective decision-making about development activities for the community, and 4) informing the local population about the problems that need to be resolved. The volunteer advisory council is a tool to assist members and non-members in increasing their capacities to participate in the management of volunteer-based organizations as well as increasing social capital and civic performance in their communities. In order to make additional improvement in the administration of volunteer-based organizations, the non-

formal educational planning process can consider other modules that could discuss different leadership styles (e.g., autocratic, democratic, participative, distributed, etc.) in organizations, group problem-solving and decision-making processes, and even funding procurement.

Non-formal educational programs can also be addressed for the improvement of the decision-making process and governance in community development. The volunteer-based-platform can be used to launch non-formal educational programs to address social action programs that are implemented by the local population. The educational module can explain and discuss social change and the social action process along with the steps to implement within the community. These volunteer-based organizations could serve as the catalyst for the local development process to be more participatory, increasing political empowerment.

Beal and Hobbs (1964) outlined the following steps in the social action process that should not be considered linear, but rather open to back-stepping and grouping of the steps: 1) analysis of the existing social systems; 2) convergence of interest; 3) analysis of the prior social situation; 4) delineation of relevant social systems; 5) initiating steps; 6) legitimization; 7) diffusion; 8) definition of need by more general relevant groups and organizations; 9) decision to action by relevant social systems; 10) formulation of objectives; 11) decision on means to be used; 12) plan of work; 13) mobilizing resources; 14) action steps; and 15) evaluation. This community development mechanism can be a learning process for mobilizing the local population, and increasing community problem-solving capacities, volunteerism, governance and empowerment (Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, Bird, 2007; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006). This process is also particularly important in

increasing the outreach for volunteer-based organizations. The social action process would assist such organizations in improving inter-organizational communication with other institutions. According to Luttrell, Quiroz, Scrutton, and Bird (2007, p. 5), “relational empowerment moves beyond the concept of individual or collective empowerment to include a consideration of the importance of individuals (or groups) developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of the relationships with other institutions.” These empowerment relationships link to the importance of forming partnerships for community development (Koehnen, Baptista, & Portela, 2004).

### Conclusion

The relevance of non-formal educational programs is related to a philosophy of continuous education and community-driven development in rural areas. Community-driven development can be attained when a majority of the community members have increased their social capital and participate in the decision-making process. In low-density rural regions in Portugal, governmental leaders tend to dominate the decision-making process as well as other developmental dimensions (Koehnen, 2009; Koehnen & Cristóvão, 2006).

Volunteer-based organizations can serve as a community-learning forum for increasing empowerment and social capital in these scattered rural communities. The developmental role of non-formal educational programs in rural communities in Portugal needs to be engaged by appropriate governmental policies and frameworks. These scattered communities require continuous educational programs in order to move them from communities that are inactive in their community development process to more vitalized communities. In

this respect, the membership from these volunteer-based organizations and the local population need to become more active in the decision-making process.

A community-based process of empowerment and decision-making reflects a dynamic community with the increased participation by volunteers from volunteer-based organizations and other entities. Citizens who have equal social capital and know-how for decision making can challenge and assist local governmental leaders in these communities. The democratic governmental and civic process can be expanded through on-going non-formal educational programs in these rural and scattered communities.

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### **About the Authors**

Timothy L. Koehnen is an Associate Professor within the Department of Economics, Sociology and Management at the University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro (UTAD) in northern Portugal. He is responsible for research, outreach, and teaching numerous courses, but the course entitled, “Management and Local Development” reflects his professional research interests.

Tiago Santos recently completed an undergraduate degree in management at UTAD where he participated in the research project under the supervision of the co-author. Tiago is also a member of a musical group.