

# Critical capacities for membership growth in voluntary sports clubs

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## Abstract

Numerous studies have investigated the organisational capacity (OC) in voluntary sports clubs (VSCs), but there is a paucity of studies that have used qualitative methods to examine OC in relation to membership growth. Against that background, this article sets out to identify critical capacities for membership growth in VSCs. Data was collected through telephone interviews with 49 Danish VSCs, all of which reported significantly growing membership numbers over a five-year period. We made a thematic analysis, using the OC theory from Hall et al. (2003) to identify critical capacities in relation to membership growth within five capacity dimensions, comprising human resource capacity, financial capacity, infrastructure, and process capacity, planning and development capacity, and relationship and network capacity. In conclusion, our study identified critical capacities for membership growth that other studies on OC in VSCs have found to be important for goal achievement, but we also identified differences in the role of some capacities. For instance, the clubs in our study were not very formalised in their work with club development, but rather had an adaptable mindset and worked to recruit and retain members as part of their day-to-day operations. Further, that passionate and competent volunteers, the centrality of local community involvement and collaboration, financial stability, and the ability to make innovative use of facilities are capacities driving for membership growth in VSCs.

**Keywords:** organisational growth, sports association, sports organisation, organisational change, strategic management

## Introduction

Voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) have a key role in providing sport activities and services in local communities (Balduck et al., 2015). Besides their focus on providing sports, VSCs are often regarded as main actors in the implementation of broader socio-political functions (Doherty et al., 2014; Nagel et al., 2020). VSCs are thus ascribed many functions, and due to changes in patterns of sports participation (Borgers et al., 2016) and increasing competition from commercial sports providers (Scheerder et al., 2020), they face challenges regarding member recruitment and retention. Following this, the overall trend has in recent decades been towards modestly decreasing VSC participation rates at a European level (Scheerder et al., 2020) and in Denmark (Rask et al., 2022). Taking this general trend into consideration, it seems relevant to focus on VSCs that experience membership growth to understand why they are successful in recruiting and retaining members.

A conceptual framework that has often been applied in studies that examine why voluntary organisations, including VSCs, are successful or unsuccessful in achieving their goals is organisational capacity (OC), and most of these studies has relied on the OC model developed by Hall et al. (2003). They define capacity as the ability of an organisation to draw on or deploy organisational capital to achieve its goals when taking into consideration the constraints and facilitators in the environment of the organisation (Hall et al., 2003). While most studies on OC in VSCs has focused on OC in relation to goal achievement, we were able to identify one study that had a focus on the role of OC for membership growth (Corthouts et al., 2023). This study provides novel knowledge about the capacities that are associated with membership growth (e.g., economic health and policy attention) and how VSCs can adopt through innovation to create organisational growth (as an organisational performance parameter). However, the study relies on a limited number of pre-determined indicators related to each capacity dimension, and with its statistical approach it is not able to give specific examples of cases where performance output is membership growth. This leaves a knowledge gap regarding the critical capacities for membership growth in VSCs, where our study by applying the interview method will be able to contribute to the literature with deeper explanations and descriptions on how VSCs can work towards membership growth.

Against this background, we will use the OC model from Hall et al. (2003) to identify and describe critical capacities for membership growth in VSCs. With critical capacities, we are looking into the mechanisms and actions by which the selected VSCs have been able to increase their membership numbers within the dimensions of the OC model. It is important to distinguish between common dimensions within the OC model and the critical capacities within each dimension, as they are all context-specific (Christensen & Gazley, 2008; Eisinger, 2002; Doherty, Misener & Cuskelly, 2014). Meaning, when we are investigating critical capacities within the dimensions of the OC model, they can be critical for some VSCs and may not be as relevant for other.

Regarding the distinction of our study from other studies on OC in VSCs with a focus on goal achievement, it should be noted that the VSCs included in our study have not been selected according to whether membership growth was a goal for the VSC or not. For some, the membership growth they have experienced might as well be a by-product or other goals and activities conducted by the VSC. As such, our study provides knowledge about the capacities that the VSCs experience as critical for their growth, which is important as membership growth can be seen as a relevant measure for the success of a VSC. Membership growth also brings more resources to the VSCs as they generate income from membership fees (Vos et al., 2011), which in Denmark is the main source of income for VSCs (Laub, 2012). Another incentive for Danish VSCs to recruit more members can be found in the public funding scheme, where parts of the subsidies are distributed according to the number of members within each VSC (Ministry of Culture, 2019). However, it is also worth noting that the main public funding for VSCs is the facility provision from municipalities to VSCs free of charge or with the payment of a minor utilisation fee. This is provided to all VSCs based on national legislation regardless of membership numbers (Elmose-Østerlund & Ibsen, 2020). As such, few Danish VSCs – small and large – struggle with facility provision and finances; instead their main challenge is to recruit and retain volunteers (Elmose-Østerlund & Ibsen, 2020), which are also a central resource to ensure membership growth. Regarding membership growth in particular, a survey study from 2015 showed that about half of the Danish VSCs had experienced roughly unchanged membership numbers in the five-year period leading up to the survey, while the remaining half of the VSCs were almost evenly distributed between VSCs with moderate to large membership increase and decrease (Elmose-Østerlund & Ibsen, 2020).

## Conceptual framework and literature review

The conceptual model of OC by Hall et al. (2003) has been developed in the context of studies conducted in non-profit organisations, including VSCs. The model positions OC between the external environment, which can influence the capacities of an organisation, and the outputs and outcomes produced by the organisation, which is reliant on the OC of the organisation. Hall et al. (2003) identified five capacity dimensions:

- *Human resource capacity* is defined as the ability to deploy human capital within the organisation, including the competencies, knowledge, attitudes, motivation, and behaviours of individuals. Human resources are placed centrally in the OC model and are described as a key dimension, because it directly impacts on all other dimensions.
- *Relationship and network capacity* relate to the ability of an organisation to draw on relationships with different stakeholders.
- *Financial capacity* is defined as the ability of an organisation to develop and deploy financial resources.
- *Infrastructure and process capacity* is defined as the ability of organisations to deploy or rely on infrastructure, processes and culture, products related to internal structure or day-to-day operations, information technology and intellectual property.
- *Planning and development capacity* can be defined as the ability to develop or draw on organisational strategic plans, programme plans and designs, policies, and proposals.

Since we only identified one study that addresses OC for membership growth in VSCs (Corthouts et al., 2023), we will in the following sections, elaborate broadly on the literature regarding the role of OC in VSCs to tease out relevant factors influencing membership growth structured along the five capacity dimensions.

### *Human Resource capacity*

The centrality of human resource capacity in the OC model of Hall et al. (2003) is confirmed by studies that focus on human resources and volunteer management in VSCs (Doherty et al., 2014; Wicker & Breuer, 2011; Svensson et al., 2017; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). Numerous studies found human resources to be decisive for the opportunities of VSCs.

Misener and Doherty (2009) found that human resource capacity was the most critical capacity for the achievement of goals, which was further confirmed in the study by Doherty and Cuskelly (2020). Further, a study by Wicker and Breuer (2011) found that problems related to human resource capacity were seen to be the main problems German VSCs face, regarding the recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Jointly, the studies show how many VSCs experience a lack of sufficient human resources, which could be related to the fact that volunteers far outnumber paid staff in VSCs. According to Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2020), the majority of VSCs are run predominantly by volunteers in all ten European countries included in their study. Paid staff are most frequently hired by VSCs for positions such as coaches and instructors, while a small number work in leadership positions. Connected to this, Tayler et al. (2003) and Svensson et al. (2017) found that having paid staff could be a way to counter limitations in human resource capacity related to a short-fall of qualified volunteers. Focusing on factors influencing membership growth, studies besides the literature on OC, is addressing service quality as crucial for recruiting and retaining members in sport and leisure contexts (e.g., Avourdiadou & Theodorakis, 2014).

### *Relationship and network capacity*

Different studies concerning non-profit organisations have underlined the centrality of relationship and network capacity, and state that this capacity can enable access to shared resources, knowledge, and experience (Brown et al., 2016; Doherty et al., 2014; Svensson et al., 2017). Further, the study from Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2021), found that most of the VSCs who participated in an OC building and club development programme reported that they had become more visible in the local community, but they did not report a significant increase in collaboration. Greater visibility can lead to higher membership as more people become aware of the club and its offerings.

Some of these findings are also confirmed in other studies that are not focusing on OC development. A study focusing on business model solutions for VSCs by Bradbury et al. (2021), found that partnerships led to membership growth and diversity, enhanced financial viability, improved governance, greater community connection and improved human resource management functions. Ibsen and Levinsen (2019) further showed widespread collaboration between VSCs and local public institutions in

Denmark, but for most VSCs as a marginal activity and most pronounced among what they named ‘community oriented’ VSCs. It seems that many VSCs is focused on creating collaborations, albeit with different objectives.

In sum, these studies show that collaboration can be found in many forms. However, collaborations with other organisations can be a demanding process and establishing and managing successful collaborative engagements has been found to depend on factors such as human resources, including management competencies, and local embeddedness (Bryson et al., 2007; Gazley, 2010). Thus, sharing resources and being engaged in collaboration with the surrounding organisations can also provide significant benefits and make the VSCs more attractive to potential new members by being more diverse, offering better programmes, facilities and services, as well as by making the VSCs better connected to their communities.

### *Financial capacity*

In the study by Corthouts et al. (2024) on the role of OC for membership growth, they found VSCs with a healthy economic status to be more likely to experience membership growth than VSCs with an unhealthy economic status. Wicker and Breuer (2011) is also stating financial capacity as a critical capacity dimension within VSCs, as a growing imbalance between expenses and revenues was identified in sports clubs in Germany. In a Canadian study on OC, Gumulka and colleagues (2005) found that VSCs have fewer financial resources compared to other types of voluntary organisations, which often results in problems related to financial management and obtaining external revenue.

On the other hand, the study from Elmoose-Østerlund and Ibsen (2020) focusing on participation in VSCs in Denmark, found that most clubs seem unchallenged by the financial situation. Around one in five VSCs experienced big or very big problems with their financial situation in relation to their day-to-day operations and current scope of activities, while around three in five VSCs report to have no or only small problems in these regards. This can be related to the financial subsidies provided by the Danish government, where Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2020) in another study focusing on VSCs contribution to public welfare, found that the number of active members within VSCs across different countries is affected by the amount of financial support from the governing bodies. In three of ten countries (Poland, Spain, and Hungary), having a less generous funding

scheme compared to the other involved countries, the number of active members is also lower.

These findings indicate that problems regarding financial capacities are context-specific and financial problems do not have equal impact on every VSC and their ability to increase membership numbers. A key capacity seems to be the size and stability of the revenues of VSCs, which, among other things, can be affected by the number of members (Gumulka et al., 2005; Courthouts et al., 2020). How the financial situation is utilised to increase membership numbers based on the included studies remains slightly unclear but could be related to the VSCs financial capacity to invest in better resources, manage operations effectively, and offer attractive programs, all of which are essential for attracting and retaining members. Conversely, financial instability can limit a club's capacity to grow and meet member needs.

### *Infrastructure and process capacity*

The infrastructure and process capacity dimension contains both the physical infrastructure and organisational processes within the VSC. Concerning the OC dimension physical infrastructure, Wicker and Breuer (2013) found that sports facilities are required to provide most sports programmes, and that recruitment and retention of members is, among other variables, determined by public sport facilities, as these resources is reducing organisational problems in this regard. Findings from the OC study from Loss et al. (2020) and the study regarding sports clubs in Scotland from Allison (2001) revealed that, regardless of club size, organisational growth was difficult for some VSCs due to the shortage of facilities and a need for better management of existing facilities. Further, in the study about VSCs contribution to public welfare by Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2020), the facility needs of most VSCs seem to be covered, but the need for facilities that serve specific purposes or groups might not be. Thus, a lack of facilities can limit the possibilities for membership growth in some VSCs.

Regarding organisational processes, Doherty et al. (2014) found formalisation in board structure and written policies and procedures for the board, volunteers, coaches, and players to enable standardised practices within the clubs, which improved day-to-day management. Doherty et al. (2014) further identified communication to be a critical capacity in relation to organisational processes, especially when engaging in regular, up-



to-date, and two-way information exchange with volunteers and members about plans, programmes, and issues within the club. This is further elaborated in the studies on sports clubs and participation in England by Nichols et al. (2012) and Taylor (2004), which also indicated that a formalised structure in VSCs will enable them to address increasing pressures more efficiently and increase membership growth. Formalisation and communication can thus be positive features in relation to the goal achievement of VSCs, and to increase membership numbers.

### *Planning and development capacity*

In relation to planning and development capacity, Corthouts et al. (2024) examined the role of the policy attention of VSCs and found that VSCs with extra policy attention devoted to youth sports was more likely to experience membership growth than other VSCs. Studies on organisational effectiveness also point out that strategies and policies play an important role for VSCs goal achievement, because organisations with concrete ideas about development are more likely to achieve their goals and experience less organisational problems (Green & Greisinger, 1996; Shilbury & Moore, 2006).

Misener and Doherty (2009) also found that planning and development capacity had a strong impact on goal achievement. The VSCs included in their study recognised the importance of long-term strategic planning to ensure that programmes met complex expectations of multiple stakeholders. With strategic plans, VSCs can find a way to overcome challenges in relation to stakeholders, and challenges such as recruitment and retention of members, volunteers and coaches can be accommodated by having strategic plans, as also indicated by the studies on OC by Wicker and Breuer (2013) and Seippel et al. (2023). By addressing these challenges proactively, VSCs can maintain and grow their membership.

Jointly, planning and development capacity within a VSC are directly related to membership growth, as working with strategic plans seems to improve the sustainability of VSCs, and their ability to overcome challenges, due to minimised uncertainty, while promoting stability and future growth. However, the study on the contribution of VSCs to public welfare by Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2020) shows that the majority of VSCs are run mainly or exclusively by volunteers, and while some VSCs state that they work with long-term planning, most VSCs function in an informal manner and operate on a day-to-day basis. This can hinder their ability to im-



plement strategic initiatives effectively, potentially limiting membership growth.

## Research gaps and agenda

There is a rich vein of literature on the topic of OC in VSCs and other non-profit organisations. The recent study by Corthouts et al. (2024) developed this field by focusing on the ability of VSCs to adopt innovative services and their organisational growth in terms of membership evolution from an OC perspective. However, a significant limitation of this study, and much of the cited literature, is that while critical capacities are identified, the specific actions and explanations VSCs use to address their successes or challenges with these capacities are not elaborated. It is evident that all capacities influence the management and membership growth in VSCs, but it remains unclear how they exert this influence and how they can be utilized most effectively. By using interviews, this study aims to bridge this gap by delving into the applications of these capacities and the concrete steps VSCs take to exploit their strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. Understanding these dynamics will provide deeper insights into optimizing organisational capacity for sustained membership growth and overall success in VSCs.

## Methods

Data was collected in connection to the European CHAMP project (Bailey et al., 2020), which sought to provide the sports movement with innovative tools and educational programmes to promote physical activity and increase memberships in VSCs. The CHAMP project included nine partners (International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education, The European Sports NGO, The Swedish Sport confederation, The Danish Sport confederation, The Lithuania Sport confederation, OPES Italia, Sport Confederation of Portugal, Estonian Foundation of Sports Education and Information, and Latvian Sports Federations Council), that all contributed with data from their respective countries. The project resulted in three intellectual outputs and an online course, giving a description of 1) how knowledge about modernisation and innovation in sports clubs can foster more physical activity, 2) challenges and possible solutions based

on the data collected from the included countries, 3) knowledge about innovative good practice in the fields outside of sports, and last the online course, which will support representatives from VSCs and sports organisations across Europe to initiate innovative solutions to manage a modern sport organisation. This article draws on the interviews conducted in Denmark.

### *Data collection*

Our data consists of qualitative telephone interviews with 49 Danish VSCs. The data collection was led by the Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF), and 31 of the interviews were conducted by the first author of this article, who was employed in DIF at the time of the data collection. All VSCs were fully informed about the purpose of the data collection, the responsible parties, the participant selection process, and how the data would be managed and disseminated. Further, that participation within the interviews was voluntary, and they could withdraw consent at any time, and their data would be treated confidentially. The 49 VSCs represent the VSCs willing to participate from a list of 107 VSCs with at least a 3% increase in membership numbers each year from 2014 to 2019. The 107 VSCs were identified using information from the Central Registry for Associations (Centralt Foreningsregister, 2023) to which the VSCs must on a yearly basis report their membership numbers. As more than 11,000 VSCs are registered in the Central Registry for Associations, the fact that only 107 VSCs met the inclusion criteria means that it is a small minority of the Danish VSCs that has grown to the same extent as the VSCs sampled. For most VSCs, the membership development is rather stable (Elmose-Østerlund & Ibsen, 2020).

Even though significant membership growth was the only selection criteria for this study, the VSCs represent different club sizes and sports and are geographically dispersed throughout Denmark (see appendix 1). The variation regarding sports ensure that we are not only focusing on sports that are experiencing membership growth on a national level (i.e., trend sports) but also sports that are experiencing decreasing or stagnating membership numbers on a national level. Thus, the growth in the selected VSCs does not only represent sport-specific participation trends on a national level.

### *Interviews and interview guide*

Prior to the interviews, an interview guide was developed as part of the CHAMP project to address the agenda of this project (Bailey et al., 2020), where themes and questions were based on knowledge from previous findings (Kärrå, 2021). Primary focus for the interview guide developed by CHAMP was to identify the challenges faced by VSCs and their solutions for these challenges to address their main purpose as earlier described. DIF then modified the interview guide to suit a Danish context and align their research agenda, which especially focused on VSCs experiencing membership growth and how they achieved this despite challenges. This revision ensured a clearer focus on membership growth in VSCs and aligned questions regarding the Danish approach to managing VSCs. After this the interview guide went through a validation process, consisting of expert validations followed by two pilot interviews. Validations were done by the project team in DIF which consisted of five people, who all had expert knowledge about the topic of sports in general and VSCs in particular.

The interview guide was semi structured (Bryman, 2016) and aimed to illuminate why the VSCs had succeeded in getting more members. The purpose was explained at the beginning of the interview, followed by factual questions, such as the numbers of volunteers and members and the goals of the VSC. Then reflective questions about specific actions taken by the VSC related to membership growth were asked. These questions focused on themes like visibility, communication, retention, and recruitment of new members, and were posed in an open-ended question format (Bryman, 2016), e.g., ‘Which specific efforts did the VSC use to attract new members (if you did any) and can you explain them to me?’ and ‘What is the immediate explanation for the VSC’s success in recruiting more members in recent years?’. All interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were conducted with the chairperson or a board member within each VSC.

The interview guide was not developed to address the five dimensions of capacities within the Hall et al. (2003) model, as it was developed as part of the CHAMP project to seek explanations and actions leading to membership growth. However, when data afterwards, by the first author, was analysed, patterns related to the framework from Hall et al. (2003) was clear and thereby used thematically for this article. So even though the interview guide included questions aligned with the dimensions of the OC model, such as the value of volunteers, if and how the VSCs succeeded with retention and recruitment, if and how financials have had an impact on increasing membership, if and how they had been working with specific

challenges, the club goals, marketing, and collaboration within and outside the VSC, there can be perspectives in relation to the theoretical framework that may not necessarily have been uncovered in full, as data was gathered in another context.

### *Data analysis*

To prepare for analysis, each interview was transcribed in real-time during the conversation and afterwards revised to correct any spelling errors and fill in any missing words. This way of transcription was a decision made by DIF. To identify patterns of meanings across data for this article, a thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016) was used, based on coding frames representing the capacity dimensions by Hall et al. (2003). After reading through the data and creating codes based on the OC framework, subthemes were developed dynamically from the interview data, and included several steps, as described in Braun et al. (2016). Our already created codes were now organised into themes by clustering codes into what is called 'higher-level' patterns that refer to meanings which are broader and capture more than one specific idea. These themes were noted as critical capacities (Table 1), all describing something critically relevant to the research question. The material was individually coded by the two interviewers, and afterwards discrepancies and similarities were discussed to verify the coding itself and to ensure the validity. The VSCs will be referred to as S1, S2, etc. up to and including S49.

## Findings

Based on the data thematization, an overview of critical capacities has been developed (Table 1). Our analysis elaborates on these critical capacities and the differences and similarities identified between the VSCs. This is done to understand the mechanisms and actions by which these organisations have been able to increase their membership numbers.

### *Human resource capacity*

In terms of human resource capacity, critical capacities have been identified as: 'passionate volunteers', 'competencies' and 'paid staff'.

**Table 1.** *Critical capacities for membership growth identified in 49 Danish VSCs.*

<i>Capacity dimensions</i>	<i>Critical capacities</i>
<i>Human resource capacity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Passionate volunteers</li> <li>– Competences</li> <li>– Paid staff</li> </ul>
<i>Relationship and network capacity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– External collaboration</li> <li>– Involvement in the local community</li> </ul>
<i>Financial capacity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Stable income</li> <li>– Alternative sources of revenue</li> </ul>
<i>Infrastructure and process capacity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Formalisation</li> <li>– Internal communication</li> <li>– Facilities</li> </ul>
<i>Planning and development capacity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Adaptable mindset</li> </ul>

## Passionate volunteers

Many VSCs indicate that having passionate volunteers who do a little extra and are deeply dedicated is a key factor in their success in increasing membership numbers. S3 describes their coaches as passionate as they make an extra effort that is crucial for the VSC:

The parents praise the coaches. They are ambitious and committed and function as contact persons who are good at receiving and embracing everyone. We can feel the impact of these passionate souls – they make a difference.

Passionate volunteers are described as those who have the courage to make changes and start new initiatives. S9 was founded by one person, who has an interest in keeping young boys away from the streets. With his drive, they established a well-functioning and growing club. In S13, new board members were the passionate volunteers who gave the club new energy and created a VSC with the courage to make changes that led to the recruitment of new members. Another example is the chairperson of S24, who is passionate about giving new members a good start:

All new members talk to me before they sign up, otherwise I call them. The first time, there must always be someone to receive them. (...) This procedure also ensures that the drop-out rate is very low.

However, some VSCs experience a shortage of passionate volunteers, which S7, S13 and S28 describe as a limiting factor for the potential of the VSCs to experience membership growth.

## Competences

S11, S31, S48 and several more of the VSCs are aware that a desire for club development often leads to an increased focus on the competences of the human resources. Our analysis showed that VSCs often choose to focus on development of the volunteers and the overall competences in the VSC. S8 describes:

Development of coaches is one of the most important factors in a successful VSC. We have a coach budget of approximately 5,400-6,700 Euros per year.

The VSCs experience that their coaches through courses receive qualifications in relation to, for instance, planning and age-related training, and, when needed, the courses can provide them with pedagogical competences. Some VSCs also provide board members with tools for effective leadership, such as administration skills to lead in a way that can create development and increase membership numbers. Four of the VSCs require their volunteers to have completed specific courses prior to their work within the VSC. S14 explains that it helps to ensure a certain quality, which leads to greater member recruitment and retention.

Other VSCs focused on utilising the existing competence of volunteers. Besides his work in the VSC, the chairperson from S9, is, for instance, part of a network community with relevant links to his work in the VSC, which enables him to transfer competences to the VSC context that helps during recruitment processes.

(...) today all board meetings are proactive meetings, where we talk about opportunities for the separate sports branches. The sports branches always have a representative, and they are discussing and sharing experiences and success histories and so on. We are learning from each other's mistakes and successes.

As S1 describe above, another way of sharing internal resources is through knowledge sharing and learning from each other's experiences for the VSCs to experience membership growth.

## **Paid staff**

Although the majority of the VSCs are dependent on volunteers, those with paid staff experience increased focus on club development and structure. Tasks are shifted from volunteers to paid staff, easing the workload and improving volunteer retention, which is crucial in relation to recruitment and retention of members. S28 elaborates:

One of the most significant initiatives we have done was to hire a coach (...) this provided an increased structure in general (...) and has relieved the tasks for the volunteers – it has been a huge strength. (...) Next step for us must be to hire someone who can do the administrative tasks and execute decisions and ideas, so that all good ideas will be implemented.

In general, the interviews showed that paid staff can serve multiple functions, including coaching, volunteer management, and administrative work, making them a valuable investment for the VSCs. However, some VSCs (e.g., S9, S12 and S13) express that having paid staff is a financial expense that they are not able to prioritise, but that they still experience increased membership. This indicates that having paid staff is not necessarily a critical capacity for membership growth in the majority of VSCs.

## *Relationship and network capacity*

Critical capacities regarding relationship and network capacity include ‘external collaboration’ and ‘involvement in the local community’.

## **External collaboration**

There is a tendency for many VSCs to build external collaborations and to benefit from those collaborations regarding membership growth. For example, S3, S18 and S36 collaborate with public institutions, such as local schools. In some cases, the coaches of the VSCs teach sport to pupils at the school, while in other cases the pupils train for free in the VSCs. Finally, some VSCs offer teachers at the school knowledge in preparing a lesson within their sport. S3 explain:

We have a collaboration with the local school, where third graders can play volleyball. The whole class come and train and try the sport. (...) The aim is to give good experiences, including giving schoolteachers new inspiration for any sport lesson with volleyball on the programme, and of course recruit new members.



External collaborations with the local municipality are also present in some VSCs. The focus here is often on activating certain target groups and contributing to public welfare, where the VSCs receive support to start up new teams, or the municipality refers a specific target group to the VSC. S2 describes:

We have a good collaboration with the municipality, who are running an offer called 'Room for all', which is for children and young people. The municipality recommend us and use us in their activation programme.

Generally, both the VSCs and the external partners seem to benefit from these collaborations. However, the collaborations may not always lead to direct recruitment of new members, but some VSCs express that the collaborations generate interest and publicity that may lead to recruitment in the longer term.

Other forms of external collaborations mentioned by S4 and S31 can be with consultants, most often employed by national or regional sports organisations regarding club development, which can lead to membership growth. In addition, some VSCs collaborate with other VSCs to get more members and start up activities together. Because VSCs often face similar challenges, they make use of knowledge-sharing to utilise each other's experiences.

### **Involvement in the local community**

Many VSCs express that investing in the local community is a crucial factor to recruit new members. Some VSCs participate in and support local events and initiatives, while others consider themselves 'locally rooted' and thereby feel a responsibility to contribute to the local community. The VSCs also see a value in supporting the local community and thereby making initiatives to benefit the entire area, while others collaborate with local associations, for example to organise events. S40 describes:

We have a collaboration with the local household association, where we arrange events, such as lectures and concerts. We share the expenses, and the VSC is exposed to a broader target group and is seen in another context than sports. It helps to create a local gathering place, where there is room for everyone.

S22, S35, S36, S40 and more VSCs explain that this kind of local network can generate positive publicity through word of mouth, which may lead to membership growth.

### *Financial capacity*

Within the financial capacity dimension, the critical capacities identified were ‘stable income’ and ‘alternative sources of revenue’.

#### **Stable income**

Most VSCs rely on membership fees as their primary source of income, which vary depending on the activity and are often determined based on the VSCs economic situation and target groups. S3, located in an affluent area, charges high fees for development purposes, while S46 keeps fees low to retain members. In addition, S8, S12, S35, S46 and others focus on having a lower fee, as they thereby experience a greater interest and retention of their members. S46 notes:

Many other VSCs keep the membership fee high, and that makes people drop out. The membership fee must be so low that the members will not drop out of the sport if their finances are under pressure.

The VSCs that strive to have a low membership fee express that this is only possible due to other sources of income. A low membership fee seems to entail the need to find other financial resources to build a stable financial capital but is seen as fundamental for member recruitment and retention.

#### **Alternative sources of revenue**

The VSCs are aware of the possibilities for applying for foundation grants, and many of the VSCs make use of these, but to different extents. Several VSCs apply for foundation grants for specific projects, expanding facilities, collaborating with the local community, or purchasing new equipment, which has led to increasing membership numbers and good publicity in the local area.

Besides foundation grants, S6, S22 and S48 describes how they earn money by arranging activities such as revues, parties, children’s events, and birthdays, while others (e.g., S1, S5 and S36) participate in local and larger festivals and cultural days, where the members help the organising association in return for earning money for the VSC. S5 explains:

The festival runs over three days, where we have 120 different tasks, which are covered by the members and volunteers, thereby earning money for the club.

By attending such events, the VSCs experience that in addition to making money, they receive good publicity and increase their recruitment possibilities.

### *Infrastructure and process capacity*

‘Formalisation’, ‘internal communication’ and ‘facilities’ were identified as critical capacities within the VSCs’ infrastructure and process capacity.

### **Formalisation**

Most VSCs emphasize the importance of formalisation in the form of an organised structure. S39 experiences that their focus on formalisation is a success:

When you work with a multi-dimensional effort built on volunteers and their competences, it is important to have some clear and visible guidelines they can follow. This gives direction and allows you to make new initiatives.

As a marketing strategy, many VSCs inform about the club externally, e.g., by making information about the club’s activities, goals and values available. S39 constructed and distributed a leaflet about the VSC, describing its values and activities, which they believe has led to membership growth.

Some VSCs have also designated people for specific tasks, thus creating formality in the form of work tasks and the delegation of these. S11 hired a PR manager and S1 has a treasurer in charge of the finances. Additionally, some VSCs have volunteer calendars outlining the tasks of the year. All initiatives that make for a better management of the VSCs and, in turn, play a role in relation to membership growth.

### **Internal communication**

Many of the VSCs focus on dialogue with and retrieving feedback from their members, all by having an official website, and for some VSCs by having visible leaders and staff who are present during training, meetings and in general. This helps the VSCs get a better sense of what the members

desire and which tendencies prevail within the VSC – an information they can draw on for the recruitment and retention of members. S36 describes:

(...) another important experience is that communication is simply better when you are face-to-face – it is best to talk on equal terms. The board is visible with at least one board member at almost every training within the VSC.

Some multisport VSCs operate with meetings across departments to involve as many as possible in the decision-making, as well as to share knowledge and help each other. An illustration of how formalisation and internal communication can be connected is found in S46:

In order for the board to reach our goals and not work all the time, we created subcommittees, with one group of people in each who have the responsibility that follows. There is one board member in each committee, so they can make day-to-day decisions. People should feel that when they are volunteering, they are heard.

Through communication between volunteers and members, some VSCs can inform about plans, programmes and act efficiently based on day-to-day needs and demands. Some VSCs also express that this has helped them to retain members and volunteers.

## **Facilities**

Facilities seem to be crucial for most VSCs and can affect membership numbers. S4 describes how the club's good and specialised facilities has increased awareness and led to a positive effect on member recruitment. For S41, the location and quality of the facilities are paramount:

Before, our old clubhouse was completely hidden away. Now we have a brand new clubhouse at the front of the harbour, and we are calling it Denmark's best facilities. We get much more attention due to the central location and optimised quality.

Conversely, a lack of facilities can result in stagnation in membership numbers and referrals to other clubs. S42 experienced this after some time with increased membership:

People are calling all the time and want their kids to play table tennis. But we simply have no space. We have a waiting list and must refer them

to other clubs. (...) we are doing nothing to recruit more members, we simple do not have the room.

Other VSCs found solutions to the lack of facilities by making better use of the local area. S10 explains how they have brought their sport to the people with the concept of 'backyard football', and thereby got new members they otherwise would not have had the space for.

### *Planning and development capacity*

One critical capacity was identified within the planning and development capacity dimension: 'adaptable mindset'.

#### **Adaptable mindset**

Though some VSCs have developed written strategies for club development, it is also a prominent trend among the interviewed VSCs to focus on club development on a day-to-day basis and on generally being adaptable. Most VSCs are aware of local needs and trends and believe that when one is not afraid to try something new and follow the trends of the society, it provides a positive return. S4 explains:

We started a training team for parents as we wanted to make use of the time they were already spending at the club. Now, they train at the same time as their children, and we have gained new members. It was an experiment that turned out quite well.

The VSCs explain that being adaptable is crucial to membership growth. Two further illustrations of the adaptive mindset can be found in S3, who started up a 'Filipino team' based on a large group and support from au pairs connected to the specific community and in the concept 'backyard football' described in the section about facilities.

## **Discussion**

Our study identified critical capacities for membership growth that other studies on organisational capacity (OC) in voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) have found to be important in relation to goal achievement, but we also identified differences in the role of some capacities. In the following, we

discuss the critical capacities for membership growth identified in this study in relation to existing literature on OC in VSCs.

### *Human resource capacity*

The capacities we identified as critical for membership growth align closely with findings from Misener and Doherty (2009) and Doherty et al. (2014) regarding goal achievement. This includes the relevance of passionate and competent volunteers, which according to Svensson and Hambrick (2016) are drivers of development and change. Further, having passionate volunteers that ensure a good welcome for new members of the club is an internal resource that benefits the retention of new members. Regarding competencies, Taylor et al. (2003) noted that competent volunteers enhance decision-making and strengthen the abilities of a VSC. However, it is worth noting that the VSCs included in our study point to the importance of both competent leaders and coaches, but most often with a focus on qualified coaches. In this case, there is a specific focus on increasing the existing internal human resources by providing courses to the coaches and leaders. Building internal resources is a common way to promote human resource capacity (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2021) and for the VSCs in our study, these coaches are described as essential for providing quality training, which increases the likelihood of member retention and recruitment through word of mouth. As such, our study underlines the importance of qualified coaches for membership growth.

While other studies report paid staff to be a critical capacity for goal achievement in VSCs (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016), we find that this is true only for the few VSCs that have paid staff. Those VSCs having paid staff describe how it enables them to focus more on club development and structure, which leads to the formation of new activities with appeal in the local community. Contrary to findings by Wicker et al. (2018) and Schlesinger and Nagel (2013), the VSCs in our study that have paid staff do not find their reliance on paid staff to have counterproductive effects on volunteering. Instead, the paid staff allows them to ease the workload on volunteers, which they describe as having a positive effect on volunteer retention. However, our findings also indicate that even though paid staff brings several benefits, they also represent a financial expense that not all VSCs can prioritize, despite recognising the potential advantages. Notably, VSCs without paid staff are still experiencing membership growth. For example, S9 was founded to keep young boys

off the streets and thrives due to the chairperson's passion, competence, and community awareness. Similarly, S12 that focuses on keeping membership fees low and making their programs affordable has also experienced membership growth despite not having paid staff.

Thus, paid staff can help foster membership growth and are seen as critical by the VSCs that employs them, but most VSCs with membership growth rely solely on volunteer efforts. This further underscores the importance of fostering internal human resources, in this case a strong volunteer base, regardless of whether paid staff are employed.

### *Relationship and network capacity*

Most of the VSCs mention external collaboration and their involvement in the local community as critical capacities in relation to membership growth, which is consistent with previous literature on goal achievement in VSCs (Doherty et al., 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009). However, Ibsen and Levinsen (2019) observed that even though most VSCs are positive towards external collaborations, these are often marginal activities unless the VSC has a community orientation. This finding is somewhat parallel to the mutually reinforcing relationship we find among the VSCs with membership growth, as they focus on involvement in the local community and through this involvement they engage in external collaborations with public institutions, the municipality, sports organisations and other local VSCs or associations. By being involved in the local community, the VSCs find that their visibility is increased and that they obtain a positive reputation and can establish direct connections to potential members. Thus, the external networks and a general involvement in the local community seem to play an important role for VSCs with membership growth.

### *Financial capacity*

Regarding financial capacity, our finding that the VSCs are focused on creating a stable income aligns with studies by Gumulka et al. (2005) and Doherty et al. (2014). Further, Doherty et al. (2014) point to the ability of VSCs to find alternative sources of revenue as a critical capacity in relation to goal achievement, which align with our findings. An interesting finding from our interviews is that many of the VSCs emphasise keeping the membership fee low enough to enable all groups in the local community to join and to keep being attractive despite members' financial situation.



This focus on financial accessibility is likely to be connected positively to membership growth, but it can also challenge the stable income of these VSCs. Either these VSCs need to recruit a larger member base to obtain sufficient revenues, or they need alternative sources of revenue, such as through foundation grants or by arranging or participating in local activities or events – which requires additional resources and effort. Opposite we also find S3, located in an affluent area, that charges a higher membership fee, providing the VSC with a stable income that supports development purposes. This financial stability allows them to allocate more resources toward new initiatives and overall club development, without the same need to establish alternative revenues or recruiting the same number of members as VSCs having low fees.

Thus, while financial accessibility is vital for community inclusivity and membership growth, VSCs must carefully balance fee structures and revenue generation strategies to ensure long-term sustainability and development.

### *Infrastructure and process capacity*

Within the infrastructure and process capacity dimension, formalisation and internal communication is connected to membership growth by the interviewed VSCs. This seems to conflict with the informal structure of most VSCs (Taylor, 2004; Doherty et al., 2014), and while Allison (2001) found that management in sport clubs was typically based on trust and experience rather than formal contracts and codes of practice, the VSCs in our study are emphasizing the importance of having an organised structure with formalised guidelines and tasks for the volunteers. As highlighted by S39, it provides direction and facilitates the initiation of new activities, contributing to the club's success and growth, and match a described tendency towards a more formalised structure in VSCs (Doherty et al. 2014; Misener & Doherty, 2009). This way of looking at formalisation can be an indicator of a positive, forward-looking organisational culture where board members and volunteers work together to make the VSC grow and develop. Taylor (2004) suggested that developing a culture that is consistent with a contemporary, formal organisation will increase capacity and promote overall club development, which in the case of formation of positions and delegation of tasks is also present in the interviewed VSCs.

The interviews also reveal that availability of facilities can help foster membership growth, while a shortage of facilities can have the opposite

effect. Within the literature, facilities are one of the most critical capacities for VSCs in relation to goal achievement, but also one of the biggest challenges (Allison, 2001; Misener & Doherty, 2009). However, it is worth noting that some of the interviewed VSCs with membership growth have been able to obtain this despite a lack of facilities. As also identified in a study by Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2021), the VSCs manage to offer activities outside of the traditional facilities by utilising other available indoor or outdoor spaces. Thus, VSCs with membership growth seem to be more innovative in utilising the local environment when offering activities.

### *Planning and development capacity*

Regarding planning and development, we identified some similarities with studies on the role of OC in relation to goal achievement. Having an adaptable mindset is a critical capacity for membership growth and can be seen as parallel to the finding of Doherty et al. (2014) that creative planning is a critical capacity in relation to goal achievement. While strategic planning is often seen as important for goal achievement (Doherty et al, 2014), it is not frequently highlighted by VSCs in our study as a factor in membership growth. Instead, these VSCs focus on club development as part of their day-to-day operations, adapting to the needs and demands of members and the local community. This can be related to the fact that community-oriented VSCs tend to be informal in nature (Sharpe, 2006) and that long-term success generally depends on how the day-to-day operations of the club are carried out (Allison, 2001), which is in line with what the interviewed VSCs describe as some of their main factors influencing membership growth. This finding contrasts with some of the literature that emphasises the important role of strategic management for goal achievement (Green & Greisinger, 1996; Shilbury & Moore, 2006), but aligns with Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2021), who found that even though the included VSCs were, as part of a development programme, forced to formulate strategic plans, few VSCs continued to do so after their participation in the development programme. It is worth noting that both in this study and in the one by Elmoose-Østerlund et al. (2021), strategic planning was not completely absent, but rather not implemented to a large extent in most of the VSCs. Inglis, Alexander and Weaver (1999) cautioned that when a non-profit board continually focuses on the operational aspects of the organisation, strategic activities and resource planning can be overlooked, which can be an explaining factor to the need of especially the critical capacities

including passionate and competent volunteers and alternative revenue in our VSCs. Simply due to the lack of capacity to plan strategically, thus, our study shows how strategic planning is not a prerequisite for membership growth.

### *Potentials and limitations*

Our study has provided rich information about explanations for membership growth in a selection of Danish VSCs that had experienced a significant membership growth within the five years leading up to the study. However, at the same time the VSCs represent different club sizes and a wide range of sports, which increases the potential for generalisation of the capacities for membership growth to Danish VSCs broadly. Regarding generalisation of the results to VSCs in other countries, we find it likely that our findings could be cautiously generalised to other European VSCs that in comparative studies have been found to function in a relatively similar manner despite country-specific differences in the political framework for sports, sports infrastructure, participation trends, etc. (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2020). The relative importance of the critical capacities for membership growth might vary between countries. For instance, more VSCs in Spain, Hungary and Poland have been found to be struggling to obtain enough financial resources and sport infrastructure (i.e., facilities) (Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2020). This could potentially mean that financial capacity as well as infrastructure and process capacity play a more important role for membership growth in these countries and other that share the same challenges that are much less prevalent in Denmark.

As mentioned previously, the focus of the interview guide on providing explanations for membership growth, rather than specifically addressing all OC dimensions, is a limitation of our study. Another limitation is that the interviews were conducted with a single representative from each VSC. Consequently, our findings are reliant on the memory and perspectives of one individual regarding the explanations for membership growth. However, given that the interviewees were all centrally positioned within the VSCs, the interviews are likely to have yielded valuable and valid information about the VSC.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to identify critical capacities for membership growth through interviews with 49 Danish voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) with significantly increasing membership numbers over a five-year period. Our focus on organisational capacity (OC) in relation to membership growth and the use of qualitative methods sets this study aside from other studies on OC in VSCs. As a conclusion, this study highlights the importance of various critical capacities – passionate and competent volunteers, external networks and a general involvement in the local community, financial stability so that the accessibility for all potential members is clear, innovative use of facilities and being adaptable according to the needs, wishes and demands of members and volunteers as well as in the local community – in driving membership growth in VSCs.

The findings in this study provide a starting point for further studies regarding why some VSCs experience membership growth, while others experience stagnating or even declining membership numbers. It would therefore be interesting to contrast this information by also interviewing VSCs that experience declining membership numbers to identify similarities and differences regarding OC.

## Declaration of interest

The authors has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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# Appendix 1

## *Characteristics of interviewed VSCs*

Club	Members (2018)	Discipline	Region in Denmark
S1	618	Badminton, Football, Handball, American Football/Cheerleading, Gymnastics, and Other sporting activities (activities that are not included in the register's categorisations)	The Region of Southern Denmark (Funen)
S2	328	Canoe and Kayak	The Region of Southern Denmark (Funen)
S3	471	Volleyball	The Capital Region of Denmark
S4	296	Tennis and Padel	The Region of Southern Denmark (Funen)
S5	166	Badminton	The Region of Southern Denmark (Southwest)
S6	598	Football, Handball, Tennis, Volleyball, Badminton, Athletics, Swimming, and Pétanque	The Capital Region of Denmark (Bornholm)
S7	123	Floorball and Disability Sports	The Region of Central Jutland
S8	3172	Athletics, Fitness, Disability Sports, Running, Orienteering, and Triathlon	The Capital Region of Denmark (Bornholm)
S9	210	Kick- and Thai Boxing	The Region of Zealand (East)
S10	1995	Football, Handball, Dance, and Music	The Capital Region of Denmark
S11	360	Horse Riding and Disability Sports	The Region of Southern Denmark (Southwest)

S12	175	Fencing and Disability Sports	The Capital Region of Denmark
S13	178	Shooting Sports	The Region of Zealand (Northwest)
S14	168	Ice Skating	The Region of Zealand (North)
S15	224	American Football and Cheerleading	The Capital Region of Denmark
S16	147	Volleyball	The Capital Region of Denmark
S17	230	Badminton	The Region of Zealand (South)
S18	2268	Swimming	The Capital Region of Denmark
S19	406	Boxing	The Region of Southern Denmark
S20	380	Badminton, Billiards, Table Tennis, Bowling, Fitness, Gymnastics, Mind Sports (e.g., Bridge or Chess), Tennis, and Other sporting activities (activities that are not included in the register's categorisations)	The Capital Region of Denmark
S21	1060	Boxing, Powerlifting, and Weightlifting	The Region of Central Jutland
S22	1194	Dance and Music	The Capital Region of Denmark
S23	2706	Golf	The Capital Region of Denmark
S24	131	Cycling and Triathlon	The Region of Zealand (North)
S25	144	Football	The Region of North Jutland
S26	145	Floorball	The Capital Region of Denmark
S27	117	Table Tennis	The Region of Zealand (North)

S28	183	Volleyball	The Region of Southern Denmark
S29	372	Handball	The Capital Region of Denmark
S30	1508	Fitness and Gymnastics	The Capital Region of Denmark
S31	635	Fitness	The Region of North Jutland
S32	624	Badminton, Floorball, Handball, Swimming, Fitness, and Gymnastics	The Region of Central Jutland
S33	192	Senior Sports	The Region of Central Jutland
S34	1004	Fitness and Gymnastics	The Region of Southern Denmark
S35	539	Fitness	The Region of North Jutland
S36	501	Badminton, Gymnastics, Swimming, and Other sporting activities (activities that are not included in the register's categorisations)	The Region of North Jutland
S37	152	Boxing	The Capital Region of Denmark
S38	151	Bowling and Disability Sports	The Capital Region of Denmark (Bornholm)
S39	574	Badminton	The Region of Central Jutland
S40	433	Badminton, Fitness, Football, Gymnastics, Canoe and Kayak, Running, Surf and Raft, and Volleyball	The Region of Central Jutland
S41	89	Diving	The Region of Southern Denmark (Funen)
S42	139	Table Tennis	The Capital Region of Denmark
S43	174	Powerlifting and Weightlifting	The Region of Zealand (West)

S44	189	Orienteering Race	The Region of North Jutland
S45	207	Canoeing, Kayaking, and Rowing	The Region of Southern Denmark (Southwest)
S46	267	Triathlon	The Capital Region of Denmark
S47	344	Fitness	The Region of Central Jutland
S48	242	Shooting Sports	The Capital Region of Denmark
S49	257	Floorball	The Region of Zealand (North)