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Leveraging Small-Scale Sport Events: Challenges of Organising, Delivering and Managing Sustainable Outcomes in Rural Communities, the Case of Gorski kotar, Croatia

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Abstract: Sports and events play an important role in local identity building and creating a sense of community that encourages participation and increases social capital. Rural communities are specific areas with special needs and can face challenges and restraints when it comes to event organisation. The purpose of this paper is to identify organisational challenges and analyse the potential to achieving long-term sustainable social and economic outcomes linked to small-scale sports events in rural communities. Organisational challenges of rural communities in terms of organising sport events are examined and discussed using the framework of event leveraging developed by O'Brien and Chalip. This methodology is applied and discussed to a case study focusing on small-scale winter sport events in rural Croatia. Semi-structured interviews with local organisers were conducted in order to collect data on the overall event organisation and management, local coordination, role of community stakeholders and challenges facing strategic planning, with the intent to identify objectives for future events. Results were discussed independently and in the context of the leverage framework, with reflection on its applicability to rural communities as the event organisers. Recommendations are provided based on critical insight from the literature and are oriented on how to streamline the process of organising, delivering and managing of events in remote rural communities. Finally, the idea of inter-community organisation is proposed to ensure long-term social and economic benefits and to address the existing issues of overlapping of stakeholder categories, mixed objectives, distrust among stakeholders and inefficiently used local resources.

Keywords: social impacts; social and economic leveraging; rural communities; small-scale sport events; Croatia; Gorski kotar

1. Introduction

Sport events undoubtedly create diverse and complex impacts. The impacts on hosting communities are economic, socio-cultural, environmental, psychological and political [1]. There exists much scientific literature focusing on the economic impacts of sport events, including tourism figures, income generation and increased tax revenue from expenses [2]. In addition, much work has described synergic effects between sport events and tourism development visible through increased consumption, promotion of the destination, repeated visitation, long-term business relationships, new investments and employment [3–7]. However, while economic impacts are widely assessed, and

usually based on monetary gains (and sometimes speculation), it is also becoming increasingly important to address the social and cultural impacts of sport events. Social impacts involve a range of conditions, and are often difficult to manage and adequately address [8–12]. Regarded as "soft" impacts, social impacts can be observed and analysed based on participant, spectator and organiser perspectives, and also by other stakeholders actively or passively involved in the event [13].

To understand social impacts and leveraging holistically, it is important to observe communities before, during and after the event, as well as the role of the community as a primary stakeholder in the organisational process—this is especially important in cases that are deemed peripheral, smaller in scale, or have the potential to deliver sustainable events that are inclusive (see [14]). It is important because, if properly planned, smaller events typically achieve comparatively higher levels of impact (in terms of economic, social and environmental indicators) for the hosting community than mega-events, [15,16]. When events are organised within the community and with local resources (as opposed to events that are organised by external organisations), it is important to note that rural communities have certain specific characteristics that might significantly influence the management and delivery of an event and its outcomes (such as scarce resources, empowerment issues, overlapping of stakeholder categories, existing social networks and trust level). It is difficult to generalise impacts in rural communities; when identifying common patterns, authors must always take into account that each community has its own unique mixture of social cohesion/division, inward- and outward-looking tendencies, continuity and change—and these can significantly differ (even between neighbouring rural communities) [17]. All these considerations, led to the following research questions: (1) What are the organisational challenges that rural communities face when trying to achieve social and economic leveraging by hosting sporting events? (2) Could existing resources in rural communities be better organised and managed to achieve desired social and economic outcomes? Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify organisational challenges and to analyse potentials for achieving long-term sustainable social and economic outcomes by hosting small-scale sports events in rural communities. For the empirical analysis, the paper focuses on small-scale sledding events (Sledding Cup) in rural Croatia. Hosting events has multi-purpose objectives to satisfy the needs of locals as well as outside participants (visitors), making this a suitable case for researching the role of rural communities as event organisers. This paper uses the framework of event leveraging developed by O'Brien [18] and O'Brien and Chalip [19]. To link to and build on the existing literature, research objectives include: identifying key challenges regarding event organisation in rural communities; re-considering strategic objectives and means proposed in the social and economic event leverage models (in order to be more applicable to rural communities); and address through discussion a more efficient organisational structure for delivering sport events in rural regions.

Specific characteristics of rural communities, along with the analysis of their organisational challenges significantly influence strategic planning and identifying leverage points, as well as impose different formulations of targeted social issues pursued by the event organisers—which is theoretical contribution of this paper. As a practical contribution, this work focuses on the potential for establishing an innovative multi-stakeholder organisational structure oriented on event organisation suitable for creating (and sustaining) long-term positive event outcomes, which is a rather under-investigated topic. It must be noted, that outcomes will differ in accordance to each case. While it is difficult to broadly generalise findings and results, this paper recognises the importance of conducting case-specific research that focuses on the local production of knowledge to critically inform outcomes and results for wider impact and dissemination.

2. Research Framework

To understand the role of the host community in organizing events, along with the various difficulties less-developed rural areas face during that process, this section looks at organizational issues of rural communities followed by the notion of leveraging pertinent to sport events and organisation.

2.1. Organisational Issues of Rural Communities

Foundational work has addressed the notion of community as a social construct. Tönnies [20] mentions that communities are mechanical formations forged from what is organic into products of social interactions. Communities are inherently sociological, and researchers are challenged to "identify points among the (often) exclusive boundaries, defining membership and where social cohesion is deemed most significant" [21] (p. 921). A widely accepted definition of community is based on four conditions: membership, influence, integration or fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections [22]. These conditions emphasise cohesion and are referred to below in the analysis to reinforce points linked to community and social impacts. The first condition, membership, is essential because communities are defined by geographical boundaries (or administrative units) [23]. Influence involves social capital, and what locals have to contribute [24,25]—in this case, to the organising, planning or management of sport events. Reinforcement acts as a motivator of social behaviour, and "it is obvious that for any group to maintain a (positive) sense of togetherness the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members" [22] (p. 12). Shared emotional connections focus on interrelationships, participation and community wellbeing. Shared emotional connections represent desires to get involved, because collective emotions are supported through shared interactions based on similar interests that fulfil the needs of a community [22].

Rural communities are oftentimes characterised by dispersed less-dense populations located in the periphery beyond urban areas. Less-developed rural communities are often faced with scarce resources, and interactions are more likely to be based on what resources are available. This can result in difficulties when it comes to networking, cooperating and delivering joint projects (including events). While rural areas may have physical advantages (in terms of natural settings), adequately using and managing existing potential is where rural communities struggle to compete. This is particularly visible through research on local community participation concerning processes of tourism development [24] and how they organise and promote sport events [26,27]. From the organisational process point of view, the need to retain willing and capable stakeholders is essential is less-developed rural communities. This means securing involvement in organizing and planning events. Without the contribution of a range of stakeholders, events would probably cease to exist, resulting not just in a withholding of potential economic benefits from event organisation, but also diminished social and recreational opportunities for community residents [28].

In terms of stakeholder identification, in many cases, significant overlap between rural event stakeholder types were identified (due scarce resources and organisational capacities); research shows, even for events organized primarily to attract outside visitors, the community remained the primary stakeholder group (strong involvement of community members in organization, sponsoring, participation and attendance in the events) (see [29,30]). The participation of rural community members in any kind of new initiative is dependent on several factors, including: physical geography and local environment; the extent and complexity of regeneration programs and agencies in the area; the nature of human and social capital in terms of existing skills and willingness to participate, existence of social exclusion; the strength of the local voluntary and community infrastructure; and the nature of local political relationships [31]. Potentially, then, a very efficient and sustainable way to involve the community is through planning, organising, managing and implementing activities that support community development (and help reinforce the four conditions outlined above). Achievement in the form of common objectives is described and discussed in the work of Peredo and Chrisman on community-based enterprises [32] and in papers on rural social enterprises (see [31,33]).

Therefore, in terms of organising sports events in rural communities and maximizing their social and economic benefits for the host community, there is a need to better understand organizational dynamics and use those insights to create more specific leveraging framework—which is what this paper will contribute.

2.2. Notion of Leveraging in Terms of Sport Events Organisation

One of the most comprehensive models dealing with overall sustainable planning of sport events is the model of social and economic leverage (see [19,34–36]), which encompasses all three pillars (economic, social and environmental) of sustainability. Event leveraging is explained as the implementation of various strategies by stakeholders, to maximise benefits from hosting an event or festival [34]. However, leveraging theory differs based on short- or long-term outcomes of events, and highlights the necessity of moving from impact assessment (post hoc) towards strategic analysis of cause-and-effect pathways leading towards specific event outcomes [18]. This approach provides more opportunities to learn from and create strategies that will influence and focus on the benefits of events during the planning stage. However, leveraging should not be limited to the event organisers, and should include input from other community stakeholders, interested and/or responsible for local development [37,38]. The formation of strategic alliances in various forms (i.e., private–public partnerships, partnerships between private sector companies, and civil/private sector partnerships) also contributes to achieving long-term positive outcomes of events, as well as creating a portfolio of events in order to effectively use (and promote) existing infrastructure, products and services within the community [13,39].

The main elements of economic leveraging include optimisation of total trade and event revenues. However, there are five measures to operationalize these two elements (enticing visitors to spend, minimising booth effect, fostering business networking/enhancing business relationships, using events for promotion and building a destinations brand) [37], which are each equally important and have gained different meaning and context. These points are reflected on below in the findings, but to achieve more sustainable outcomes for a community, it is essential to assess social impacts and leveraging.

Social leveraging is more complex and can be viewed through the process of generating and cultivating liminality by fostering social integration and feelings of celebration as part of the event atmosphere [19,35]. While there is often much focus on the importance of economic impacts, it is increasingly important to focus on events and social benefits [40]. As a concept arising from anthropology, in this context, liminality is referred to as a local ambiguity or sacredness (in a positive sense), which can lead to a sense of community, or *communitas* [18]. In order to differ liminality from engagement by the event, team spirit and other positive emotions participants experience during the events, it is important to highlight: "liminality is not intrinsic to events … it is essential that there be a feeling of celebration that breaks down social barriers, thereby enabling behaviours and social interaction that might otherwise be unlikely or impossible during everyday life" [37].

Important work on this topic has been done by Chalip in 2006 [35], who emphasised that events create social atmospheres to help reinforce a sense of celebration and camaraderie (as key elements for creating liminality and *communitas* at sport events). These elements can be created by the following strategies: enabling sociability, creating social events, facilitating informal social opportunities, producing ancillary events and theming [35]. Each of these strategies can also contribute to economic leveraging, because involvement motivates people to gain the necessary training or create supporting enterprises, thus increasing individual capital. However, creating liminality and an increased sense of community does not automatically lead to long-term positive social change in the local community [18].

In order to achieve social leveraging it is important to choose the strategic objective(s)/social issues that could be addressed by the event. After the selection of social issues, O'Brien and Chalip propose two key strategic objectives: (1) bringing the targeted social issues to stakeholders' attention; and (2) using event media to stimulate change in the community's agenda regarding specific social issues [36]. However, from the perspective of rural communities, such targeted social issue might not be present in the plans of organisers. However, *communitas* and liminality might be considered to improve capacity building and to bring together various stakeholder groups. Bringing together different stakeholder groups will help establish long-term networks and combine skillsets to maximise existing skills and resources [41].

Empirical research using social and economic leveraging model elements was carried out (e.g., [18,34,42–44]). Specific research has examined event portfolios in terms of leveraging (see [39]).

However, the potential application of the model outlined in this research is based on sport events organised in rural communities, and challenged emerged in terms of mixed event objectives, scarce organisational resources and overlapping stakeholder interests, which have not yet been analysed.

3. Methodology

This section starts with some regional and event-related context before outlining the research methods and data collection. The unique nature of this case study lies in its organisational structure. All nine racing events are unique (with different infrastructure, choice of partners, duration, and marketing methods), but they are all joined by a similar competition structure. This unique structure is important to understand in this case, not only in terms of organising, planning, managing and implementing event-related activities in rural communities, but also for the purpose of analysing significant geographical (scattered villages), sociological (every village has local identity) and economic (scarce resources) influences. Moreover, each community put restraints on the existing stakeholder structure and event organisation.

3.1. Contextual Background

Gorski kotar is a rural mountainous area in western Croatia located between two major Croatian tourism markets, Zagreb (the national capital) and Rijeka/Istria (coastal tourism destinations). It comprises three towns and six municipalities which are each self-government units, and regardless of their size they each have own representing body (assembly in towns or council in municipalities) and executive bodies that perform their own local administration. Although the local budget of towns and municipalities provides a wide range of local services (e.g., pre-school education, communal infrastructure, local tourism planning, sport programmes, culture and social welfare), Gorski kotar is suffering from depopulation and the overall standard of living is lower than the national average. Departing younger generations threatens the area's social and economic sustainability. Currently, there is little economic generation (mainly from forestry and wood processing) but there is potential to diversify and offer more services to attract people back to Gorski kotar.

In Croatia, tourism is used as a development strategy in less-developed areas such as Gorski kotar. Regardless of the fact that all nine local self-government units in Gorski kotar have established local tourism boards, some towns and municipalities are more tourist oriented—with a range of accommodations and hospitality services, hiking and cycling paths. Meanwhile, other municipalities, despite the interest in building a tourism industry, need to understand how to better leverage natural attractions, human capital and how to advertise (the scattered) private accommodation units to maximise business during events. Towns with less-developed tourism establishments struggle due to a lack of other relevant services (such as coffee shops, restaurants and information centres). In terms of sport, Gorski kotar has a wide network of local sports clubs with a long tradition of nationally recognised achievements in winter sports (especially cross country skiing and biathlon). However, the lack of quality infrastructure and lack of abundant snow due to warmer winter temperatures over the last decade are restraining factors impeding the future development of winter sports/winter sports tourism.

An informal network uniting the tourist boards in Gorski kotar was established to coordinate existing sport and tourism offerings as well as create joint tourism projects. In 2012, these coordinated efforts worked to commence the Sledding Cup of Gorski kotar event (referred to hereafter as SCGK). Sledding (as a popular activity) was chosen due to less organisational demands and smaller financial requirements for the preparation of events (compared to skiing and other winter sports). Moreover, the SCGK has the potential to attract a large base of recreational participants that is "fun for all ages". The idea was to create a recognisable winter recreational competition/tournament that would bring together all the communities of Gorski kotar. SCGK's specific organisational structure must be noted: nine separate racing events joint under a single tournament with each event applying the same rules and scoring system. Nine different local organisers (the local tourism boards) are in charge of organising each event.

3.2. Methods

A case study method was used for the purpose of this primary research due to its applicability for investigating events and real-life contexts. Such an approach is appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred [45].

3.2.1. Data Collection

In order to gain initial insights to better understanding process(es), relationships and patterns emerging from the primary data, the first step was to gather general regional and event context data. Extensive desk research was undertaken by assessing secondary sources and materials on Gorski kotar combined with on-site visits to all nine local communities within the Gorski kotar. This was done for the purpose of understanding the "big picture" of the area, its infrastructure, sites, tourist potentials, current image and visibility. Following the secondary and initial data collection, semi-structured interviews were then conducted with eight local organisers (tourist board directors) to gain deeper perspectives from those immediately involved in organising SCGK events. Due to the previously described specific event organisation context, local tourist board directors (TBDs) from 8 (out of 9) local communities were interviewed. The directors are key figures in the event organisation process, responsible for decision-making, strategic development and act as operational managers responsible for all local field operations. Exclusive decision making and strategic planning of the SCGK event is dependent on the committee of the local TBDs. Therefore, interviews with TBDs in this case offered the most reliable insight concerning event-related issues. It is also important to understand the dual role of tourists board directors, who must plan strategically for an individual event whilst meet the desired outcomes for the region as a whole. This is not the same as ensuring local sustainability and managing expectations of local community members who participate (in competition or as volunteers) in local sled racing events.

Each interview with TBDs included similar core questions dealing with choices facing event organisation and management. Initial questions addressed existing local infrastructure, volunteers versus paid services, arrangements with local food and beverage providers, transport and any additional services required to support event delivery. Strategic points concerning this event, such as future visions, how to extend the duration, and how to attract more visitors, were addressed, as well as the inclusion or exclusion of certain stakeholders in the event planning and delivery process. Special attention was given to the internal coordination of local organisers and the idea of establishing a new inter-community organization responsible for certain joint activities and the future planning of SCGK. Based on each interview supplemental questions sought additional insight on a number of other issues that emerged during interviews, including the event atmosphere, local mentality and community social capital. A final detailed question was asked to address the vision of tourism development in Gorski kotar and anticipated challenges the region faces based on regional/national policies of local development.

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2016. Each interview lasted between one and two hours to ensure enough time to cover the above-mentioned topics related to SCGK. Interviewees offered their personal opinions and detailed description of previous and current cooperation with other local tourist boards as well as cooperation with various stakeholders within their community. Insight gained contributes to the analysis and offers wider perspective into the complexities and inter-dependence of cooperation (and impacts) when hosting events in small communities.

3.2.2. Data Analysis

Contextual analysis in this paper is based on all the information gathered during the desk research. The approach, suggested by Eisenhardt [46], was chosen using a within-case and cross-case analysis method. Firstly, based on each interview with a TBD, along with the use of secondary information related to the host community responsible for that event, a detailed case narrative was written to describe the main elements of the organisation process for each local event. This also

helped reveal networks, local relationships and partnerships contributing to event organisation. This resulted in eight local event analyses to help generate insight within each case for the purpose of a cross-case comparison. Data were analysed manually in order to facilitate a comparative and conceptual analysis.

When analysing the data, themes emerged from the cross-case analysis of descriptions and narratives of each case—which allowed the researchers to identify important similarities and differences. This was done to gain a greater understanding of the present organisational dynamics, and to identify organisational challenges common to all events. Based on the results, theoretical understanding critically informs the discussion based on potentials for leveraging and creating more efficient organisational structures. For that matter, grounded theory was used (see [47]) in an exploratory manner to identify some common patterns and categories relevant to SCGK as a whole, but also generalised enough to show how this case contributes to research on rural communities. Independent and parallel data coding and final themes (organizational challenges) were identified through discussion and joint decision by the two authors both present at the interviews.

4. Results and Discussion

Results are presented under the identified themes that emerged from the study data. Section 4.1 of the analysis provides a review of overall impacts and organisational challenges encountered at previous SCGK events. Then, Section 4.2 presents the findings supported by social and economic leveraging theory. Identified problems are commented on and compared to the literature for the purpose of expanding the existing body of knowledge with insight related to rural communities as sport event organisers. Such a discussion positions and compares insights to support the interpretation and implications of this research. It must also be noted that in the following analysis sections, the identities of the interviewees are protected by pseudonyms consisting of the abbreviation of their job position (e.g., Tourist Board Director: TBD1; TBD2).

Section 4.3 builds on the previous two subsections and proposes a new inter-community organisational structure for delivering events in rural areas. While the discussion is specific to this case-study, these recommendations are also applicable to other cases facing similar issues. In all research, recommendations surrounding organisational structures can only be informed once thorough research has been undertaken to determine what is appropriate for each case. While cases will differ, a guiding theoretical framework (in this case leveraging) helps link case-specific understanding to the wider academic literature. In the light of contemporary challenges that rural communities face when organising sport events, there is a need for a more specific approach to social and economic leveraging at the operational level. Even though this proposal is mainly built on results and evidence from this particular case study, discussions in this final sub-section are general enough to be used (with necessary modifications due to the particular sport and internal organisational characteristics of the communities) for the purpose of future research and analysis concerning events in rural communities.

4.1. Overview of General Impacts and Key Organisational Challenges

4.1.1. Diverse Visions of the Future Development and Target Participants

Attracting tourists and visitors to Gorski kotar during winter was the main motive behind creating SCGK. As TBD2 discussed (similar to statements by other interviewees): "the main idea was to attract people to come to all races and consequently visit and know better Gorski kotar as a region". Today, the event seems well accepted among local residents (children, as well as adults) who socialise and engage in outdoor recreation opportunities that include elements of sport and competition. Organisation in the form of a tournament (cup) has further motivated participants to attend all events, not just the race held in their community of residence—which is making a direct contribution to economic, as well as social, exchanges within the region. This also links to shared emotional connections based on the integration and fulfilment of needs. According to the organisers, each racing event attracts 20 to 70 active participants. Unfortunately, there are no official statistics on the numbers

of spectators but estimates widely range from 20 to 100 according to TBDs. Most of the participants (and spectators) are from Gorski kotar and some also travel in from nearby cities. In general, TBDs (as organisers) are very satisfied with how local residents have accepted SCGK based on their participation in racing events. However, from a tourism management perspective concerned with the future sustainability of the event, the main goal is to further promote the events to attract more visitors/tourists from outside the region, as mentioned:

> *Although, we don't keep statistics on overall number of visitors of sledding races, it seems that there are much more local people present there, than visitors and tourists*. (TBD1)

> *There are some visitors from neighbouring cities, but I think, most of the SCGK participants are residents of Gorski kotar*. (TBD3)

> *It was great to see that idea of sledding cup was so well accepted by local families and their interest in sledding as a form of recreation increased dramatically*. (TBD5)

> *I would like to see more tourists to come at the events […] and we have to make additional efforts to achieve that*. (TBD6)

Such insight is not exceptional since some studies on event organisation in rural areas show that local residents often engage in the community organised events because of the sense of community cohesion [29]. Additionally, the recreational nature of the event where everyone can participate (not just registered athletes) makes the SCGK significant among community members. SCKG participants are heterogeneous, from children and adults interested in a new experience to more experienced participants with semi-professional sleds. Unpretentious fun without much emphasises on competing was a main attraction for families according to TBD1. However, after a few SCGK events, some families became increasingly interested in sledding and achieving good results. Some went as far as investing in sleds, practicing often and requested more sophisticated time measurement equipment. This resulted in local sledding clubs wanting to involve themselves in organisation to give the events a more "professional" atmosphere. This led to differing points of view among TBDs. Even though increased competition might bring new target groups to Gorski kotar, most interviewees were in favour of maintaining the initial "fun" and "social" atmosphere that the event created for the communities. TBD3 wanted to ensure the event was open to all potential participants:

> *From the start, we knew that we don't have possibilities to create big sledding events and professional competitions so main idea of SCGK was to promote identity of the region and its tourist appeal in terms of unpretentious enjoying the snow and fresh air*.

Alternatively, other local organisers saw more benefits in leaving the organisational logistics to the sport clubs to allow them to create official competitions (in the form of a league) and bring professional athletes to Gorski kotar. Such insight was highlighted by TBD4:

> *As a tourist board director, I don't have knowledge, skills, nor capacities to create quality sledding competition, it would be better if some expert(s) could take over that job and create a more professional race, perhaps even bring some foreign sledding athletes […] My job would then be to organise additional promotion and tourist services during the event*.

Arguably, the two perspectives outlined above differ in terms of social and economic impacts. The latter solution introduces issues of how to finance increased organising costs. Despite differing perspectives, all local event organisers were preparing to jointly invest in common equipment and infrastructure for all racing events. Arguably, communities will seek ways to make their location unique [21], which results in delivering an event based on local initiatives, desires and a place identity they wish to create. Another problem facing event orientation lies in the fact that without a clear vision and mutually agreed objectives, it is not always possible to strategically plan and fulfil desired social and economic outcomes [13,48]. Although organising events that emphasise competition (to attract more skilled athletes) might be more lucrative in economic terms, wider issues would likely arise due to the insufficient existing infrastructure and the need for subsequent (i.e., private)

investment (and these would be questionable when considering longer-term sustainability) [3,49]. At the same time, this may decrease interest among community members if the element of a fun recreational atmosphere is lost. If the community stakeholders see decreased interest, then the spill-over results would be less local volunteers, donors and civil-society engagement. This emphasises the fact that rural events can be cohesive or controversial, depending on event success and satisfying community stakeholder expectations [28,29]. Potential barriers to increasing the number of participants include: a lack of available capacity to absorb new participants; crowding out of local participation at the event; and disincentives resulting from elite performances that seem outside the reach of aspiring participants [44].

4.1.2. Insufficient Financial and Operational Capacities for Increasing the Overall Event Quality

Very low budgets allocated by local tourist boards are also prevailing problems, which influence the overall quality of each event:

> *There is very limited amount of money that I can use for racing event organisation, so I rely a lot on the volunteers helping with preparing the track and being assistants during the race*. (TBD3)

> *As a person in charge of the tourist board, I cannot afford to spend most of the year's budget on this one event, because we are always having lots of activities planned and projects that need our financial support*. (TBD4)

> *I am the only tourist board employee and it is not possible for me to involve myself solely on the event, especially in terms of the amount of work and time necessary to improve the quality of the event.* (TBD8)

In many cases, the TBDs are the only people employed in the local tourist boards, which reinforce the comment by TBD8. Moreover, if there was more money there would be funds available to employ additional staff to look after the event and improve overall quality (points expressed by most TBDs). The TBDs believe, giving the funding situation, they are unable to improve the quality of the events, but referring back to TBD3's comment above, there is much reliance on volunteers.

Some equipment is joint property of all local tourist boards, transported from one racing event to another. When planning individual races, tourist boards have full freedom when selecting the location of the run (based on the slope of the hill, the use of a local road, or an already existing private sledding track), how to plan and manage the sledding track, and who can offer additional services during and after the event. Only the hot tea is guaranteed as per the agreed rules, and everything else is up to organisers. Several issues surrounding additional event elements (organisational capabilities, social capital, existing networks and partnerships) in each community were discussed by interviewees, which led to the next identified challenge (theme).

4.1.3. Weak Local Networks and Lack of Cooperation among Local Stakeholders

In some communities, volunteers come from local associations or informal groups, and contributed to decreasing the overall event delivery costs. Because local networks are identified as being weak, this resulted in conflicting interests among different groups and various stakeholders. In most cases, volunteers significantly helped in event organisation and delivery—thus playing an essential role when it came to establishing local networks. Their mobilisation and overall contribution to the events was however dependent on the efforts and personal connections of their local TBD:

> *They [referring to the volunteers] are from various associations, some of them are my neighbours, some of them are friends, cousins or acquaintances of my family and I know I can count on their help.* (TBD2)

> *Scarce amount of snow and unfavourable weather conditions almost led to the cancellation, but a group of my friends whose children are regular participants of the races worked the whole day to create and maintain an adequate sledding track* (TBD7).

However, in one community, a group of volunteers (who were also event participants) tried to actively influence the event organisation. These event participants tried to organise a sledding event without the approval of the TBDs, and this resulted in distrust among locals because they used the same name for the event. Because their attempt to create their own racing event was not accepted among TBDs in charge of the SCGK initiative, this emphasises the question of "ownership" over the brand and identity of SCGK. Given the distrust and lack of a sound organisational structure, this has stressed the need to develop rules when it comes to developing new racing events by independent groups of individuals. Several TBDs spoke about these issues and their overall consensus was they wanted to maintain control of the events and oversee the organisation. TBD5 stated: "I don't care if they create ten new sledding races, as long as they don't use name Sledding Cup Gorski kotar". However, as expressed by TBD2 just above, direct acquaintances assisted (volunteered) with the organisation, but arguably the organisational process does not always include all community members—and this may be why some participants attempted to organise without the approval of TBDs so they could influence the event.

Interviewees noted a lack of trust and cooperation between event organisers and local stakeholders. Therefore, there is a need to establish partnerships with the private sector and sponsor networks in Gorski kotar. However, at the moment, TBDs mentioned that such sponsor networks are not well-developed; for instance, food and beverage providers are only present at a few of the races. Most of the organisers decided to retain control over all event-related services within their own capacities, without any formal partnerships with (local) transport, hospitality and other service providers. Their explanation of such behaviour is based on cost/budget savings. TBDs also mentioned that private businesses are not interested in offering their services because some events attract low participant numbers—so there is a perceived lack of profit to be earned. Speaking about a private entrepreneur (who has a private sledding track as well as a restaurant and accommodation services) with whom negotiation over the provision of a sled track was conducted, one interviewee stated:

> *He is only interested in making profit from renting us the sled track and the price he set does not take in consideration additional value that the hosting of sledding races will provide to his business like promotion and additional income from hospitality services*. (TBD2)

This reinforces that lack of knowledge (and a lack of care) concerning how an event impacts a community and local business owners. Another explanation offered based on this lack of knowledge and cooperation is based on previous negative experiences with private sector partners/providers given the range of terms/demands they required. There are also problems with deciding which providers to choose when more than one existed. Herein lies problems surrounding personal links among organisers and existing relationships in the community, which can blur objective decision-making, and create disappointment, which can lead to issues of mistrust locally.

Some local organisers did provide additional complimentary services included in the event participation fee (for instance mulled wine) or had convenient on-site infrastructure to offer extended services. Although useful for increasing participant and visitor satisfaction, this had caused confusion and raised false expectations at other events. Several TBDs reported this problem, and they emphasised the need to standardise event-related services in order to avoid internal competition of the events.

4.1.4. The Need for New Organization

Keeping in mind the above-mentioned themes, most of the tourist boards (as local event organisers) have expressed concern regarding logistical aspects of sport organisation, as stated by two interviewees:

> *We need a partner who would be in charge of logistic issues regarding the race organisation and who would be reliable enough, as well as flexible because of unpredictable weather conditions and the need for fast reactions*. (TBD1)

> *Centralisation of activities related to the race itself would significantly help tourist boards in organisation and might contribute to higher level of professionalism and a more coherent identity of SCGK*. (TBD6)

Such insight was unanimous, recognising that significant change was needed to improve organisation. TBDs agreed that they could benefit from creating a more stable organisational structure to improve overall event delivery and joint strategic planning to operational issues involving equipment transfer and additional offers on site (on event day). There was, however, a divided consensus among TBDs on how to go about developing a new organisational structure. Some TBDs felt there needed to be a main organiser who would oversee all the SCGK events and would work in collaboration with the individual communities. Alternatively, some simply felt there needed to be more joint cooperation and communication among TBDs:

> *I guess we all (tourist board directors) could and should organise much better and coordinate activities and efforts jointly, in order to create recognisable events with a unified identity and integrated logistics. (TBD7)*

Since interviewees did not have detailed ideas on how to enhance the structure and organisation of the events, which is addressed in Section 4.3.

Despite the above-mentioned challenges and obstacles, SCGK has had a significant impact and has a number of prospective development plans. Development potentials and overall events benefits are recognised by various stakeholder groups in the region of Gorski kotar, and also at the national level. More than half of the interviewees confirmed the importance of SCGK for further shaping Gorski kotar as destination promoting fun and recreation (as recognised positive feedback from media and general public). Keeping in mind limited capacities, there is a need for innovative strategies to ensure the long-term social and community sustainability, not just for this specific case study (SCGK), but in other rural events faced with organisational challenges.

4.2. Discussion: Economic and Social Leveraging Opportunities

Concerning specific elements of the individual event organisation process (and the specific characteristics of rural communities), economic and social leveraging measures based on the work of O'Brien and Chalip [19] and Schulenkorf [48] are discussed in this section to critically reflect on the case study results. Table 1 presents the overall case study findings in relation to social and economic leveraging elements.

Table 1. Economic and social leveraging elements and opportunities for the case of SCGK.

Leverage Element	Case Study Results
Enticing visitors to spend (see [19])	Need for a wider range of additional services and products for visitors and participants on-site
Lengthening visitors' period of stay (see [19])	There is a potential to create and offer weekend events
Minimising the booth effect (i.e., keeping event expenditures in the local economy) (see [19])	Preferential choice of local entrepreneurs and suppliers in developing partnerships and cooperation
Using the event promotion to build the host destination's brand (see [19])	Lack of resources for more active campaigns; Lack of recognizable design and a unique visual identity associated with the event; Promotion is highly dependent on unpredictable weather conditions
Using the event to foster business networking and enhance business relationships (see [19])	Not enough efforts focusing on long-term networking and sustainable partnerships between sectors at the community level; Problem of risk in delivering immediate effects (weather)
Liminality, *communitas* and celebrating atmosphere (see [19])	Vital importance of active local community involvement; Scarce opportunities to socialise outside the venue
Local capacity building through participation in event organisation (see [48])	Difference between communities in informal support to event organisation (informal network and relationships, mobilisation of resources)

Important elements need to be further incorporated into event planning to entice visitor spend throughout the duration of events, which in this case can be up to three or four hours (this is a quite long time for participants, and especially for spectators, who wait without any additional services provided). When organising additional offers, services and products (preferably of local origin), the main problem is the number (and structure) of participants and spectators is difficult to determine ahead of the event. SCGK attendees are mostly locals and are not perceived by the local producers and hospitality services providers as a particularly viable target group. Still, the importance of sport consumption [36] and creating strategies that make events more appealing to people has been addressed in previous research [50]. However, but there is often no sustainable and participatory planning agenda set up between sport and tourism stakeholders that meet existing leveraging opportunities to make optimum usage of existing infrastructures, which can result in problems [37]. Enticing visitors to spend is directly connected to creating opportunities for them to lengthen their stay. To support this, all TBDs agree that they need to deliver weekend sledding events opposed to daily events. Alternatively, in order to attract visitors from outside the region to stay overnight, they should create innovative programmes for the sledding events along with advertising supplemental opportunities in the immediate area/region. Motivating visitors to spend more time in the region might also be achieved by putting on additional events such as open and closing ceremonies. This is also a way to display elements of local culture. Such an approach can bring dual effects: they provide additional reasons for attendees to extend their stay [19], while also including opportunities to socialise, learn, achieve and add to the event's celebratory aspects related to liminality [34]—as a social leveraging antecedent.

Minimising the booth effect (i.e., keeping event expenditures in the local economy) is also closely connected to previous elements since the value of offering local products contributes not only to the local financial viability, but also adds to the overall authentic experience. Inter-regional event supply chains have been suggested (see [38]), in terms of using local management, labour and concessionaires to retain event-related expenditures within the local economy. Finally, using the event to foster business networking to enhance business relationships should be integral part of the organising process (so to promote local products during the events). Still, a lack of interest among local businesses remains a crucial problem. They are focused on immediate effects (incomes) of participation and less concerned about potential long-term effects of cooperation (including promotion and contribution to future event expansion). Complex cross-sector partnership challenges and the risk of failure (or underperformance) are due to the diversity in organisational aims, in addition to communication barriers and difficulties of developing joint modes of operation. Perceived power imbalances, building trust and managing logistics of working with geographically dispersed partners are crucial components of strategic planning and organisation management, for desired outcomes to be met [51].

Social leveraging is encompassed and discussed based on the potentials to create liminality and *communitas* among participants. However, due to the often mentioned overlapping of the stakeholder categories in rural areas (especially in this case), these elements might also be examined (and to be created) by those involved in event organisation. As small-scale sport events, SCGK sledding races are dependent on the number of participants and spectators in order to create a festive atmosphere and provide a unique experience. In addition, active local community involvement in event participation is vital. Moreover, activities envisaged during the event should be appealing to visitors, and also attractive and accessible for local community members. Therefore, more efforts should be made to socialise outside the venue—in terms of possibilities for attracting participants and spectators who arrive earlier and stay after the competition (both related to the visitor's period of stay). Strategies like enabling event-related social opportunities by producing ancillary events and developing themes [35] might contribute to liminality creation. However, to succeed in these strategies, an event needs to attract a suitable number of attendees (participants as well as spectators). Creating a fit between the event and the socio-cultural fabric of the host community is important to ensure social leveraging and motivating community members to participate in supplemental organised activities and to encourage visitors to extend their stay [18]. Further exploitation of created

liminality and *communitas* might be considered differently in rural communities. Instead of identifying "additional" social issues, perhaps the mere forming of community networks and bonds will increase social cohesion as well as support the development of (inter-)community capacities through event participation [13,52]. This is arguably a desired social impact, and likewise important to improving quality of life. If local communities are given the opportunity to actively participate in event design, they have control over the impacts and community benefits. Increased responsibility can also lead to feelings of ownership and empowerment, which is crucial to the process of local capacity building in the inter-community sport for development projects (see [48]) and identified by authors as a key potential social leverage element.

Problems with community participation include a wide range of issues, including: the ability to reach all community members and motivate them to participate; the fact that many individuals do not possess any interest nor time to take over some community responsibilities; obstacles in community norms and values (such as participation of women); and possibilities for ineffective results in cases where there is a lack of guidance and coordination in community participation surrounding the process of event organisation (see [29,53,54]). General community participation is also usually related to empowering people, as this contributes to wellbeing by developing collective identities based on social solidarity, gaining resources and the power to achieve individual and collective goals. In addition, achieving greater equity and enhancing individual and collective capacities leads to more sustainable futures (see [48,55]). The main problem lies in the fact that organisers do not take into consideration those effects in planning the event but rather focus on more "visible" or tangible outcomes of the events, which are economic benefits.

4.3. Proposal of the New Inter-Community Organisation

The results and discussion presented above emphasise the need to outline better community-led organizational mechanisms to enable participation and foster local resources for the purpose of capacity building and increasing local social capital. These mechanisms should include cooperation among the public, private and civil sector (especially in event organization) based on specific goals aimed at generating long-term benefits and integrating local community stakeholders.

Regarding the motivation of volunteers and other provided contributions by local community members (local businesses as well as residents), this case study evidences that event organisation requires a strong working knowledge of service delivery. This is especially important in rural areas because there is a need to gain support and create opportunities for community members to get more involved in organizing and planning events (see [29]). The idea is to establish new community-based sport enterprises explicitly in charge of delivering the organisational elements of events. In this case, this includes creating and marking sled tracks, transferring equipment and time judging for all SCGK events. Existing volunteers from all communities should be included in the new organisation, as well as representatives from sledding sport clubs as "field experts". The cost of buying new common equipment for the events should be covered by the coordination of local tourist boards. A certain share of participation fees should also be transferred to the new community-based sport enterprises for the purpose of covering costs of transferring equipment and other costs related to forming the sled tracks. Foremost, volunteers and enthusiastic members need to contribute to the organisation, but the implementation of activities opens opportunities for subsequent financial valorisation of new infrastructures. For example, a sled track created for the purpose of the race might be used during the weekend for recreational sledding with affordable prices—and therefore may (temporarily) improve the existing tourist offer. Other possibilities to contribute to the financial sustainability of new organisation initiatives include (paid) transfer of participants and spectators to and from the event site, or organising additional activities like sightseeing or ski-tours in coordination with local tourist boards.

Outsourcing part of the activities to this (new) organisation would significantly help local organisers focus on core activities such as event promotion by concentrating on efforts that promote local products and services alongside the event offer. At the same time, the existence of inter-community organisation might improve integration, by bonding social capital across communities to

better create platforms for cooperation. Building platforms for cooperation will assist with managing future activities and projects across all communities and promotes local knowledge/skill transfer. Efficiently using existing resources combined with available local human capital presents an innovative form of organising beyond profit-seeking. Arguably, bundling existing tourist offerings will not burden local budgets, and is a sustainable model for the development of community through sport activities and organisation. Achieving consensus between members, agreeing on roles and responsibilities, rules for participation in the organisation process and keeping the overall interest of the wider community above individual interests each represent planning and organisational challenges. Among these, probably one of the most serious obstacles in this proposed organisation is the lack of trust among members of local communities, along with potential conflicts of interest. Individual and group interests are often pursued over organisational or broader network interests, and there is a high degree of managerial complexity involved in the process of running such collaborative organisations [56]. To address trust issues, Miles [57] recommends hiring independent staff to manage the organisation—in order to insure an impartial approach. However, this is not entirely consistent with the idea of community capacity building and empowering local social capital because it may distance people from stages of planning and implementation. What is needed is clear and transparent decision making along with supporting administration processes. The absence of a strong administrative network (when it comes to event organisation) results in largely informal cooperation and coordination—but even when high levels of integration are evident, client outcomes are not always favourable (see [58]). The creation of a new organisational structure will raise important challenges when managing various community interests, as well as trying to define an efficient governance system based on optimal engagement and using various available (tangible and intangible) resources.

The above-mentioned challenges are mostly oriented on operative issues facing event delivery and organisation. However, strategic questions dealing with identifying and delivering economic and social benefits are aimed at involving communities—which is even more challenging. Event planners in rural communities often lack necessary strategic planning considerations, capacities and the power to self-evaluate (in terms of identifying the level and the potential of existing social capital and needs for capacity building). Schulenkorf [13] argues that the inclusion of external experts is necessary to maximise the effects of existing active (and reciprocal) engagement of local knowledge. Moreover, outside perspectives represent "neutral facilitators" or "change agents" in (inter-) community development projects. Even though the cooperation of different local communities within the same rural region is not usually referred to as inter-community relationships, capacity building, creating long-term networks, trust and participation mechanisms are each strategic social leveraging outcomes, and can contribute to positive change. Some theoretical works on community enterprise principles and challenges (see more in [32]) might also help in the initial planning phase, as well as looking into successful examples of enforcing community based enterprise in the sector of tourism [59].

5. Concluding Thoughts

This paper has addressed the complexity of organising sport events in rural areas by emphasising specific characteristics based on strategic planning and identifying desired social and economic outcomes. The event leverage framework is a comprehensive and useful model in strategic planning, especially in terms of economic benefits for the communities. However, due to the overlapping of stakeholders, strategies aimed at achieving increased financial results through attracting new participants and visitors should be implemented carefully in order not to lose the support of local residents (who are likewise important event participants). Community members often make up several existing stakeholder groups (involved as volunteers, sponsors, local providers of services, or act as visitors during events). In that manner rural areas demonstrate significant levels of sensitivity when it comes to changes in event planning and organisation, which is also underlined by the scarce resources and the need for more support from the public sector. Therefore, in cases when local community members form the majority of an event's active and passive participants,

elements of economic leverage such as minimising the booth effect and fostering business networking can ultimately enhance local business involvement and play an important role in ensuring there is a sense of cohesion among the community and stakeholders.

Social leveraging is much more complex because it initially comprises a higher level of abstraction. Moreover, desired social outcomes in rural communities are not always expressed in the form of a "cause". It might be useful to foster liminality creation (and *communitas*) not just among the participants, but also among organisers of local events in order to use it for the purpose of capacity building to increase social capital and (where that is possible) create inter-community networks and cooperation. Therefore, building long-term cooperation that overcomes barriers associated with local community identities helps foster participation in joint activities by efficiently combining and using limited resources that have significant social importance locally.

In theory, as well as in practice, there is a gap in the knowledge and understanding of mechanisms on how to deliver social and economic community benefits. By focusing on event organising, delivering and managing, this paper offers new insight on structures suitable for achieving social and economic community benefits. Creating mechanisms that empower local members and maximise individual and common resources is at the forefront of local dependent economic and social sustainability. Clear rules and transparent management is useful from economic (voluntary work, avoiding duplication of activities and costs for each local organiser) and social (capacity building within and across the communities of the same region) perspectives—which is actually ensuring long-term positive impacts and sustainable event leveraging. The idea of planning for future economic and social leverage for this case study through the creation of inter-community organisation still needs further research and examination. Establishing transparent multi-stakeholder organisations with clear rules and goals, as proposed in this paper, might help in overcoming the issues of various interests, overlapping stakeholder groups, distrust and mixed objectives identified during the research.

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