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Östgöta Textile- an innovative network in a triple helix logic – towards peer incubating

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Abstract:

This paper tells the story of a group of small, creative firms collaborating in a regional network and forming an association to promote growth. The network is a triple helix context and supports the firms to growth through what we call a peer-incubating process. This article builds on an action-research project supporting the development of the association and the network 'Östgöta Textile'. The analysis of the Ostgota Textile network shows that the local and low-tech firms have received critical support from the academic and governmental networks during the formative process. The main conclusion and implication is that by supporting a triple helix network, even in other sectors than traditional high tech industries, entrepreneurial activities and growth can lead to growth in small firms

Keywords:

textile creative firms; innovative networks; regional development; action research; triple helix; entrepreneurs.

Introduction

The firm is seen as a key actor in the growth of regions in economic terms (see, for example, Karlsson et al., 2006) and in terms of new creative patterns (Florida, 2002, 2004). Innovation is most often seen as a crucial part of growth of the firm and the innovation context as the regional system of innovation (see, for example, Edquist et al., 2001). Policies and practices promoting growth in jobs and regional development most often include the promotion of local firms and entrepreneurship. In the triple helix logic, a close network of actors from government and universities support firms. Such support is most often structural and focusing on innovative high-tech sectors. But also small art and handicraft firms need such support and can gain from networking and collaboration, even if these businesses usually grow slowly.

The entrepreneurs are essential for making innovations lead to economic change and growth. However, this paper focuses on how really small and growing firms in the traditional textile-handcrafting sector contribute to regional growth through collaboration and networking. As firms they were small, vulnerable and exposed, but through a supportive triple helix network

they grow and became more sustainable. This analysis aims to show the importance of triple helix collaboration for growth and sustainability of small textile firms.

The innovative aspects of new and/or growing firms are a form of creative practice. A particular form of creativity is art and craftwork. Art and craftwork do not lead to mass employment. There is rather a form of quality growth providing something other than quantities. The outcomes are creative environments and the unique role of the arts in making a difference in people's lives. Such growth is most often counted in other aspects than jobs and money. Artwork is adding other values to society, but to promote established firms and secure jobs they have to gain economic outcomes as well. This type of growth demands other forms of support from governments and other forms of knowledge facilitation. Environments accepting and promoting other forms of making business and a livelihood are essential for the survival and development of craft workers and the firms. In this case study we have promoted, supported and analysed such a network. The Östgöta Textile network was combining craft firms, university competences and local governmental actors. As such we will discuss this in terms of the triple helix logic and we will focus on the performance of extensive entrepreneurial behaviour in terms of political, social, artistic and even economic entrepreneurialism. Within the network, the craftwork developed a peer community and a sharing and caring atmosphere. Since they thereby helped each others' firms to grow and develop we will discuss peer incubation of craft firms.

This paper tells the story of a group of small, creative firms collaborating for their own development and regional growth. All the firms in the network are all lead by enthusiastic women in different stages of doing business through textile handicraft. Some firms include only a single person working part-time and others firms run almost industrial businesses and have been in the market for nearly a century. But the common theme is taking the cultural heritage of textile design and production further by increased sales and even by opening up business as local tourist attractions.

1.1 Aim of the article

This article builds on an action-oriented research process and presents a process where small textile firms collaborate to improve growth and develop their businesses through the network Östgöta Textile association. The aim of the paper is to present and discuss the implication of this process by focusing on who acted entrepreneurially, what was the role of the university from a triple helix logic, the potential of considering the network as a 'peer-incubator'.

The research approach has a clear inductive approach building on our action research oriented process of following and promoting the small firms in their growth processes. The problematisation of the case study focus on how and who formed the process and we will also contribute to and extend the meanings of the triple helix approach. By a single case study we will open for more general and discussion of implications builds on theories of regional development and triple helix, but extends the interpretations to elaborate on the conceptualisation of incubating firms, in line with the problematisation approach (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Our analysis will highlight both the experiences from the specific case study and elaborate on the concept of peer-incubation that might open for support of small firms in other sectors as well.

The paper proceeds in three steps. Since our action research approach, as the main method, has formed our research approach this will be presented before the theoretical framing, as in line with a more inductive approach. Thus we will discuss these challenges and relate the two

processes to a theoretical frame, which is used later on for analysis in more traditional meaning. The process has been a core focus in itself. The main part of the paper tells the story of the development of the association of Östgöta Textile and finally we will combine the two sections and discuss further implications drawn from this process as a journey and as a case study.

2 Research approach – methods and theoretical framing

The methodological approach in this project has been both to initiate a creative and growing network that supports local firms and at the same time to follow the process from an academic analytical perspective. The analysis thus has a solid inductive ground, in the meaning that the fieldwork was conducted very openly and the theoretical perspectives were added later in the research process. Thus the research method is presented prior to the theoretical framing that will also be further developed and given meaning through the analysis.

2.1 Method – setting the stage and waiting for the actors to play

This paper builds on an inductive and action oriented research approach. The authors of this paper have been part of the project and have actively supported the formation of the Östgöta Textile network. Hereby we have acted as both researchers and project facilitators. The combination of these roles has been conducted very deliberately, and it was integrated from the funding for the project and has thus followed through the project.

An important building block in the design of the study is that we formed an inner project group, where one of us became a core partner. This group set the stage for the development of the network, rather than given directions for the participants on how to play. This approach of the project management was made deliberately and guided the process. As researchers we have both guided and observed the activities and the members of the network and association. Our methodological approach has been inspired by interactive research (see, for example, Svensson et al., 2002). We have taken an active part in the project (we have partly been players on stage, even if we try not to control the story) and the relations to the members of the network and association have contributed to our analysis. This participatory approach requires a deep sense of ethics on the part of the researchers in order to separate the roles and also to use the material collected with care. If the members forget to think about us as researchers, we get better access to data but at the same time we do not want the members of the network and association to feel used (Nählinder, 2005).

Methodological inspiration comes from action research, ongoing evaluation and interactive research (see, for example, Argyris, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2001). Our involvement in the studied project can even be seen as an additional step, actually creating the arenas where our informants act. By first forming and shaping the project and now reflecting on the outcome, we have to be even more aware of our roles as researchers, as evaluators and as project facilitators (see also Dzamila et al., 2010). We, as researcher, have taken on different roles as researchers and different degrees of involvement – one of the researchers more or less acts as project leader of the network. We have had an open focus when following and promoting the process. As a consequence, we as researchers have played central parts in the project we are studying. Another way of putting it is to say that the researcher and the entrepreneurs in the small firms have co-produced the thick description of the network forming process that lays the ground for the academic analysis.

The fieldwork material consists of fieldwork notes taken by researchers, interviews, informal focus group discussions and extensive online discussion among the network members. In this paper the quotations from the online discussion makes up the main validation of the process. In addition, some of our field notes from meetings and study visits are included when they could even further validate our analyses. We as authors have made all translations from Swedish.

The participating researchers made the first step of forming this network by facilitating funding from a regional research council. Four researchers from Linköping University based in different academic fields have played different key roles in the development of the process. Johanna Nählinder has acted as a project leader and is a lecturer the Institute of Technology and is an associate at HELIX research centre on working life research. Lecturer Maria Silverhielm teaches in the craft teachers programme and at master level in design and textile production. Professor Kajsa Ellegård at the department of Tema Technology and Social change has a broad approach based in time-geography and her research focuses on regional planning, sustainable development and energy saving practices. Professor Elin Wihlborg focuses on local public administration, e-government and regional sustainable development. Among the textile firms the entrepreneur Ulla-Karin Hellsten, has been the key contact bridging the university competence to the textile firms. By the funding from the regional research council, Hellsten has also had a part-time employment in the project to promote and lead all meetings and thereby to form and facilitate the development of the network. She has also been integrated in the research practice in parallel with the researchers.

The design and development of this project integrates both research competences and craft and design competences to develop a network and in order to promote both regional and firm growth. Hence, the research and academic analysis can never be fully separated from the work in the network. As researchers and authors of this paper, we cannot separate ourselves from that approach and our close integration into the project. It is not possible to talk about objectivity or ordinary forms of validity or reliability. But what we loose on traditional research methods we have gained in access and from been innovative and actually contributing to real growth and development.

2.2 Theoretical framing – regional development, small firms and entrepreneurs

The methodological approach, as an active and indeed participatory approach in the development of the network and the participating textile firms, has been the core focus in this research process. The reflective and analytical approach has been added later in this research process. The analysis builds on a reflexive approach relating to research on regional development and collaboration, that was an underlying approach in the formation of the project. This is made through two focuses, the triple helix logic and interpretation of entrepreneurship in artwork.

The triple helix model emphasises the importance of an iterative process of the three spheres or helices: university, industry and government. In contrast to theoretical models such as innovation systems or clusters, it points out the importance of universities and their interaction in general for economic development (Etzkowitz, 2008).

In this logic, the modern university has a social contract beyond the objectives of teaching and research. This contract includes both long-term relations and short-term engagements to capitalise knowledge, argue Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000). The triple helix thus encourages universities to play a more active role in regional and economic development. The

cooperation of helices is albeit dynamic, also potentially unstable (Fogelberg and Thorpenberg, 2012).

The triple helix logic does not only cover traditional economic growth measured in terms like employment, monetary flows and regional gross production. The logic can also be used to focus on the meanings of and interaction among different forms of knowledge, policy instruments and sustainable life quality in general. It is thus a form of networked logic focusing on changing conditions and dynamics of development (Etzkowitz, 2008).

In networked contexts, entrepreneurs are important for making active connections and consciously forming and reforming the networks (Sørensen and Torfing, 2008). There is a need for a broad understanding of entrepreneurs, especially in relation to sustainable regional development, including social, political and traditional economic entrepreneurs (Baumol, 1990; von Bergmann-Winberg and Wihlborg, 2011). The multitude of perspectives on what the phenomena 'entrepreneurship' encompasses, also includes the network formation as an entrepreneurial traits of the actors in the processes (c.f., Nählinder, 2011).

Triple helix arrangements are usually formed as network that can have a stable core and shared resources. Actors from different sectors participate in the network for different reasons and they contribute with different resources such as knowledge, contacts, time and money. Together, however, they have an ambition to build something new and support participating firms from the business sector. Even firms that have been in business for long can need support to develop or stay in business. This is probably even more the case in small, instable markets.

An incubator is usually seen as a both place, often an office hotel or industrial village, and institutional arrangement providing financial and other growth-supportive institutional arrangements for entrepreneurial firms (Markley and McNamara, 1995). The incubator shelters the budding firm during sensitive periods of growth (Bergek and Norman, 2008). It is a metaphor from the use of incubators in the care of small babies. In this line the firm incubator has developed as a common policy tool where government provides support to sensitive and growing firms. The environment of the firm incubator can vary in relation to the different needs of the firm. For example, the 'Business incubator Jämtland' (<http://www.bistartup.se>) focuses on regional growth in the mountains area and supports skiing and other winter sport innovations. Another example of a Swedish niche incubator is the 'Gothia science park' (<http://www.gsp.se>) specialising on development and design of computer games. Such examples all have a location and the people making up the firms come together and meet daily at the same place to support each other.

The network, which was later on formalised as an association, studied here is formed through a triple helix logic, including actors from the business, university and local governmental sectors. The next section presents the process of forming the network and later on the association without explicit references to these theoretical perspectives but they will be visible in the analysis again.

3 Östgöta Textile – the story of the network formation

The Östgöta Textile association took off from the project called 'Kultexturism', funded by a regional research fund. There was a network of local textile craft workers that formed the association. Kultexturism emerged from the personal contacts between professor Ellegård and

the textile entrepreneur Hellsten, who has been running Östgöta Ullspinneri for 30 years. The initial ambition was to apply for EU funding for regional development, but it appeared to be overpowering. Since the main ambition was to support textile work in the region of Östergötland, there emerged a reason to bring everyone together. A meeting in the spring of 2009 resulted in a common idea of collaboration and focusing both on research, practice and support for the firms. Instead funding was gained from the regional research council, co-funded by the municipalities in the region and the university (<http://www.liu.se/cks>). The formulation of the application was the first step to gather researchers with different competences and the entrepreneurs. Through the 'Kultexturism' project, they formed the leading project group.

In addition to this project group, there was one group formed with representatives from the central administration in four municipalities, which both anchored and legitimised the project as regional. The project plan – as described in the application – outlined a framework to facilitate cooperation between municipalities, textile workers and academia, supporting the business activities of the entrepreneurs, inspired by the triple helix logic. In this case the: local governments (municipalities), small-scale textile firms and different competences from the university in the region.

One of the core ambitions of the project was to form this network of representatives from the municipality and the firm network in a sustainable manner. One additional idea expressed and formulated in the project plan was for the textile handcrafters to develop strategies of becoming, or at least be parts of, tourist attractions and developing tourism in the region. However, did not prioritise this goal. The funding from the regional research council covered some of the work in the leading project group. However, by arranging meetings and supporting the formation of networks of creative handicraft firms and municipalities, there was a small spillover of resources. The formation of the Östgöta Textile association became sustained of the enrolling of the textile firms.

3.1 The next step – the network is transformed to the association Östgöta Textile

The Kultexturism project group started to search for suitable members for the handcrafter network. This enrolment process was mostly carried out by Hellsten, based on her personal contacts, and was complemented by the network Silverhielm had developed as a design teacher at the university. Using a snowball method, Hellsten interviewed and visited potential network members. As textile designer and handcraft practioners with a long time in the business, she had the status and knowledge of how to approach them. Hereby the firms' and the businesses' needs came in focus. If this enrolment process had been made by the municipalities or the academics, we would probably not have reached as many participants as we now did. Hardly any of the members who were offered membership declined.

Figure 1

Time-project illustration of the networks and association. Triple helix components.

Source: Based on Hägerstrand (1985)

It was not easy to identify or even describe potential firms and agree on the criteria for inclusion in a yet non-existent network. There was, however, a growing common understanding based on trust among them actually joining and thereby forming the network. Three criteria guided the formation of what became the Association Östgöta Textile. First, all included firms had to work in one of the four municipalities included in the project. Secondly, the participating handcrafters had to have a textile profile to be included into the network. Although one interesting goldsmith was found, she was not included on the basis that she was working with the wrong craft. Thirdly, prospective members were to have a business and they were to be energetic and willing to build on the network.

When the network was formed, all members were invited to a first meeting at the university. Thereby the leading project group continued their work and so did the representatives from the municipalities.

The process hereby became divided into four different groups. The first group was the leading project group, who had come up with the idea and found the funding for their work. The second group consisted by the textile crafters or entrepreneurs enrolled to the project. They were meeting in the Kultexturism network. Third there was a group of representatives from the municipalities, supporting the firms and the development of the network. The fourth group was the more formalised association Östgöta Textile that emerged from the project and became the sustainable structure for the collaboration among the firms.

Figure 1 omits the very frequent meetings of the inner group since including them would make the figure more obscure and would not add to the visualisation. This is an image set up from the perspective of the leading project group and other actors' perspectives would probably have given other illustrations.

3.2 Impressions from the forming of 'Östgöta Textile'

The process described here is in a rather straightforward manner, but in reality it took place on several arenas at the same time. Thus it is important to take note of some specific aspects of the process, first and foremost the key role played by Hellsten. She is herself one of the handicraft entrepreneur, has struggled to develop her family business and has been successful in that respect for long (Hellsten, 2011). She has played a key role in the formation of the network by facilitating contacts and strategic supervising to find contacts, opportunities and resources for collaboration as well as development for the single participant firms. An important activity knitting the association tighter together has been to arrange common exhibitions, showing both the association and the products and design from each firm.

The leading project group has been a nucleus with a difficult role: to support but not to take over. This role has been challenging as it requires:

- the formalisation of communities and the arena
- the mobilisation of representatives from the municipalities.

Since one important part of the project was to make the results of the activities sustainable, these have been significant tasks.

4 Building a triple helix through networking – three critical phases

Based on our close relation to the project and by following the process as described above and shown by the illustration). Three critical phases has been identified by following the development of the Östgöta Textile association. The first critical phase identify here, is the inclusion of the members of the association. The formalization of the group where the arrangements were decided is seen as the second critical point. Finally, the first common arrangement is a critical situation that will realise the network , through a regional exhibition where the group enters the stage as an actor in the local art scene.

4.1 Inclusion – first critical phase

All processes start with inclusion on participants, without them there is no processes. In this caes Hellsten acted as an initiator for Östgöta Textile through her participation in the Kultexturism project. Based on the criteria for inclusion made in the Kultexturism group, there was a list of 20 female textile firms from four municipalities as defined in a document (enclosed to e-mail, 2010-05-03). The starting points also formed the Kultexturism network.

The selected firms were invited to a first meeting in May 2010, to introduce the project idea and start the process of making the members work as a team. An ambition at the meeting was to encourage new contacts and collaborations. There was a mingling area with coffee and fruit, but still no one was really open for making connections spontaneously. Instead they all sat down and waited for a prepared speech by the organisers Hellsten and Nählinder. The meeting came to focus more on what they lacked as businesspeople and finding out needs and motives for participating in the network (field notes and minutes from meeting). Most of them had knowledge of one another, but they lacked personal relationships. The ambition at this first meeting was to create an allowing arena where all the invited felt proud to be included. There was a willingness to work for a common good among the members of the network.

The first success was that they actually showed up at the meeting at the university and that they saw the potential of a common network. They also agreed about the idea to contribute to the network and consider the leading project group as supporters and process facilitators. The second meeting was in September 2010 to focus on the initiatives and their needs. At this meeting, three working groups were formed to focus on cooperation, marketing and the Östgöta Textile concept. Ideas on what the network could do were also gathered.

In June 2010, there was also a first meeting with the representatives from the municipalities. The four municipalities in the project differ enormously in size. The smallest, Ödeshög, has 5,245 inhabitants and the largest, Linköping, 147,334 inhabitants (SCB, 2012). Thus, the representatives showing up at the meetings also had different competences and resources. But all of them had a positive approach, showed an interest in the issue and general willingness to support. That meeting was very different from the meeting with the handcrafters – first, they were only four, which meant that they were not in majority. They were also very uncertain as to how they could contribute.

In October 2010, there was a joint meeting of textile firms and the municipal administrators. They met for the first time and had difficulty reaching a common discussion agenda. The meeting was more parallel than joint. In spite of efforts by the promoting scholars, the chair of the meeting did not manage to get them to communicate very well. The municipal representatives asked for more information regarding the purpose of the project and were uncertain about their roles. One important comment was that they wanted a formal group of textile handcrafters to have as a counterpart and contact point. Meanwhile, the textile entrepreneurs had seen and seized the opportunity and already were further ahead in the formalisation of the network.

To conclude the inclusion had to be quite a long and fumble process that was open for different interpretations and discussions. There had to be flexibility both regarding the differences among the firms and the capacities of the municipalities to support. The third part the university here supported different ideas and contributed with knowledge but without taking a leading role. The idea of the main focus was discussed and formed through the inclusion process to make all participants aware of and agree on the core ideas. Hereby they also lay the ground for the formalisation phase of the process.

4.2 Formalisation – the second critical phase

The handcrafters were working in their working groups to develop the network. Over e-mail and when they met later on during the autumn, they had an intense discussion concerning the name of the project. The decision was eventually taken to buy the internet address of <http://www.ostgotatextil.se> (e-mail Lena B 11-02-16). This was the first step towards formalisation of the network and formation of the association. A lot of activities had been going on since the networked was initiated. One of the participants expressed this in an e-mail to the network.

“Really what many activities we have going on around our working groups. Fun! A bit messy and all my thoughts are woven into each other. But that is probably the way it is in the beginning of something that will be really great!” (E-mail member of network, e-mail 2010-09-26, our translation)

The leading project group offered two special workshops in February 2011, as the handcrafters had asked for. Nählinger held one workshop on use of the web and blogging. Silverhielm held one lecture on the pedagogical approach masterclass. Hereby the university became a more active part in the triple helix partnership. The aim of the lectures was to show and introduce tools to develop the entrepreneurs' design competences and strategies. These workshops also helped to consolidate the work in the network. They formed a common inspiration ground for the textile firm women based on the academic resources.

Based on the handcrafters decided to design a marketing and information brochure with all interested ventures in it. This work was initiated at a meeting in May 2010 and it was later seen a key step of the formalisation of the association. Being artistic, a lot of good work and ideas went into designing the folder. The folder made the association of Östgöta Textile real and visible. The folder's design was similar to the website. All these activities were initiated by the members of the handicraft network. The firms came in focus and the growth and development of business making became the main focus of the work. The association was indeed formed bottom-up rather than through a top-down process. The support from the academic and governmental actors decreased and took more passive forms as the Östgöta Textile association developed.

4.3 Realisation – a third critical phase

The third phase we identified as critical is the realisation. In this case it started in the autumn of 2011 when the network intensified their work to become an association. Specifically important was the two-day meeting where Ulla-Karin came with a suggestion of by-laws for the association. She had prepared these by-laws based on those of another association in which she was active. Thereby the process of the formation of Östgöta Textile was speed up both socially and formally. The idea of a joint exhibition in the summer of 2012 was also launched. This functioned as an incentive to form the group and working closer together. Another important initiative was launching the website at the internet address of which had been purchased earlier.

The spring of 2012 was a period of reorientation of all three communities. The leading project group of Kultexturism went into a finalising phase since the external funding of the project was coming to an end. The municipal representatives were also given other roles and there were new ideas about support and development options. The handcrafters' network in Kultexturism lost importance as the association Östgöta Textile association was formalised. But the handcrafters' association Östgöta Textile was now real and focused on two joint activities. There was now a consensus about the formation of an association. The by-laws were adopted on February 13th and the first annual meeting was held on March 26th. There will be a common exhibition in a renaissance castle (<http://www.lofstad.nu>) in the middle of the region, running from June until August 2012. The exhibition will be formed by the participants in the association and will be funded with support from the regional public museum. This exhibition is not end of the project, but rather an important beginning of its next step.

5 The network as a support for growth in textile practice – analysis

In this analytical section, we will return to the research questions formulated in the beginning of the paper. Thus we will first discuss the role of the triple helix logic of the network. Second, we will highlight the role of the policy entrepreneurial ambitions in the network and association and finally discuss the concept peer incubation.

5.1 The triple helix logic and the role of the university actors

This dynamic process of innovation and firm development included the three critical components of the triple helix: the university, the firms and government/the public. The university here acted through a group of individual researchers in different academic fields. The actors within the university made the initial formulation and found funding for the project. Both academic and organisational competences were provided from the university sector here. The representatives from the university sector played a role in making the university an overlapping institutional sphere, as highlighted by Etzkowitz (2008) and Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000). The meetings took place at the university and the academic competences were transformed and translated into useful and meaningful implications for the local textile entrepreneurs. The mix of academic competences and the common interest in textile work in this team lowered the threshold between academic competence and the practices of the entrepreneurs.

The participating firms were textile handicraft business with women as entrepreneurs. The firms were not competing but complementing each other and all businesses were different in size. By coming together in the network, they could relate to the other spheres of the triple helix logic. The actors representing the government in the triple helix logic were representatives from the central municipal administration. They did not, however, generally see Kultexturism as a forum for developing links between themselves or with the handcrafters. The main problem however was that they could not simply identify any available resources for support in the municipal organisation. Thus the link between the governmental representative and the firms was the weakest link in this triple helix and it had no clear iterative approach. However, on a rhetorical level there were indeed arguments for participation and the importance of the work often by relating to the importance of creativity and culture for economic growth in more general terms (Florida, 2002, 2004).

5.2 Collaboration and combining competences

Almost all participants in these processes had some type of entrepreneurial behaviour in one way or another. Even the academic actors extended their reach into unconventional activities and knowledge building. There are a variety of roles that can be taken on by those who are considered to be entrepreneurs [Baumol, (1990), p.894]. Taken together the common aim extended the meanings and use of different competences in the group to reach further and into new areas. As the initiator of the whole process, Hellsten, was indeed an entrepreneur of all of the networks and also the association. She is at the same time an entrepreneur who has enabled her own family business to survive many threats and changes during the 30 years in business (Hellsten, 2011).

The textile handcrafters are acting entrepreneurially through the formation of their firms and their design. There were several clear statements by the participants during the formation of the by-laws that the member of the association had to be more than hobby businesses. Being a handcrafter is about art and development. The creativity is built into daily practice and is a common inspiration among them. One of them said at a meeting:

“I could not do this to make money, but it is a way of making life. My life and others’ lives. We need art and beautiful things, not to survive – but to have a life.” (Statement by handcrafter at meeting June 2011)

This statement can be seen as an expression of an art-entrepreneurship, focusing on resources and benefits other than money. Hereby they break several traditional norms of entrepreneurship. They are not making high-tech, they are not making money, they are not men, they are not running growing firms and they are not in growth areas. Still they are indeed entrepreneurial. Even if this could be seen as a low-tech technology the development and potential for growth is essential. The formation processes also show the how triple helix logics are formed and which projects are on the agendas for such practices.

5.3 Peer incubation – a new interpretation

In a more extended sense, this network and later on the association formed and formalised the support among the participating firms, and in line with the discussion above it can be seen as a form of peer incubation. The participators are together forming an environment that supports the growth of their firms and their business in the region and more generally. The incubation of new or growing firms has been a common policy tool to promote both the individual firm and regional economic growth. Incubators support companies, often in an early stage, through the development phase until they can function and grow on their own. Incubators are most often arranged and provided by regional public authorities or public-private cooperation organizations (see, for example, Bergek and Norrman, 2008).

The argument here is that, in situations like this, the firms themselves act as incubators for each other, supporting both the growth of their firms and probably the market as well. The governmental and here also academic support have encouraged the incubation, but in this case they did not form nor implemented incubator. Östgöta Textile is not an incubator in the traditional meaning of incubators (like Markley and McNamara, 1995), but as a peer network it takes on roles similar those of a firm incubator.

Through the term ‘peer-incubator’ we want to draw attention to how support for firms is provided by peers in the same sector. This can be seen as a soft policy instrument, such as project formation support to a group of firms. Here they act together as good roles models for each other by equally and communally striving to promote the ideas of textile handicraft and design. The impact of this network is therefore as important as the impact from incubators.

Conclusions, discussion and some implications

The first experiences from these processes build on the interactive research participating, supporting and forming the network and the association. Initiating a process like this demands a high degree of flexibility and patience. A process like this has to take its own ways; different actors groups must be able to make their own interpretations of what is going on and what they see in it for themselves. It is also problematic to make research out of a process that the researcher has been close to and even woven into. It is complicated to make ‘one’ description of the process that everyone can agree on. It is also complicated to find a theoretical framing that can help making a distance without losing the details of what has happened in the network.

The analysis of Östgöta Textile shows that the local and low-tech firms have received an important amount of help and support from the academic and governmental networks during the formative process. We describe how different types of entrepreneurs have taken on leading roles in this process and finally we elaborate on the idea the network as a form of peer incubation.

In spite of the theoretical complications it is worth noting that the triple helix has again worked as a tool for change and analysis. It is also interesting that this local and 'low'-tech network can be contextualised by the triple helix logic. The conceptualisation and elaboration on the concept 'peer-incubation' also shows potential for both practice and academic analysis. There are indeed potentials to improve the vibrancy of our expressive life and integrate it into both the meanings and interpretations of regional system of innovations and the triple helix logic. However, that integration probably requires that we consider the entire system of creative enterprise and expressive life in relation to the region. The policy-making actors and representatives from public administration have here just briefly related to this here. Networks like Östgöta Textile can be forerunners both for their own practises and also function as role models for improved and extended growth in this type of businesses.

Based on our close participation in the development of this networked practice, we argue that there is a need for an effective public leadership with a capacity to be creative and entrepreneurial. There is also a need to develop competences and structures for leaders in creative occupations to be more connected, and to be more effective in both the broader sense and as related to the public interest. Thereby we can open for dialogue and debate around the challenges and opportunities facing a healthy and vital system of creative enterprise and expression and regional growth beyond economic growth.

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FIGURE