

# Causes for professionalization in national sport federations in Switzerland: a multiple-case study

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## ABSTRACT

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**Aim and design:** This study explores causes for professionalization in Swiss national sport federations (NSFs). We conducted a multiple-case study employing a qualitative approach with interviews and documents from seven NSFs. A three-level framework guided the analysis in distinguishing NSFs endogenous causes, and causes in their external and internal environment.

**Results:** Causes for professionalization were widely similar in the NSFs. Conflicts on the board, unclear decision-making competences and initiatives of key persons have prominently triggered professionalization, particularly for differentiation of strategic boards and executive headquarters, specialization and paid staff. The Swiss government, Swiss Olympic Association and sponsors (external environment) have brought about considerable adaptations in NSFs' strategies, accountability issues and commercialization, whereas expectations of NSFs' member organizations (internal environment) have had little impact on their professionalization in general. Rather, the NSFs view them as necessities they themselves do not perceive. Our analysis revealed additional NSF-specific factors (e.g., popularity, financial resources, attitude of individuals towards professionalization) that have an impact on pace and continuity of the process once it has been initiated.

**Conclusion:** Our analysis is a first step towards understanding the professionalization process in Swiss NSFs. Referring to the similar causes for professionalization, uncertainty and competing for resources may have led some NSFs to mimic those NSFs they deem successful, leading to similar conditions that call for professionalization (e.g., with respect to workload and internal expectations). Respective networks between motivated people in the NSFs and stakeholders could support a deliberate professionalization. NSFs endogenous and NSF external causes for professionalization seem to be reciprocal. This should be considered more specifically in the analysis of professionalization in NSFs. Single-case studies would be useful to understand the mechanisms and eventual phases more clearly, to identify eventual barriers and avoid unintended consequences to, finally, support NSFs' professionalization in an efficient manner.

### Keywords:

Professionalization – organizational change – sport federation – sport organization – multiple-case study

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## Introduction

To align with current societal norms, such as modernity, rationality and accountability, national sport federations (NSF) need to reflect on their structures and processes and make appropriate adjustments. Doing so is vital for gaining legitimation in the organizational environment and society and garnering the financial resources essential for them to be able to meet their goals (e.g., Child & Rodrigues, 2011; Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014). Seemingly, common responses to the new challenges have been, for example, establishment of new management structures, governance, formalization of daily practice, and employment of people with specific qualifications (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014). Furthermore, strengthening their position against public and private institutions, and a range of stakeholders (state, sponsors, member clubs, media, etc.), sport federations need to respond to multiple liability issues (Bayle & Madella, 2002; Evetts, 2011; Kikulis, 2000; Slack & Hinings, 1992). Organizational adaptation in sport federations has been described as a transformation 'from a volunteer driven to an increasingly business-like phenomenon' (Chantelat, 2001; Dowling et al., 2014). The development can be summarized as a form of professionalization that is undertaken to manage present challenges (e.g., Dowling et al., 2014; Skinner, Steward, & Edwards, 1999). The objective of this study is to explore causes for professionalization in Swiss NSFs. We aim to uncover NSFs endogenous causes, and expectations from their external and internal environment that cause professionalization.

To consider a comprehensive transformation, we refer to professionalization in a broad sense addressing structures and processes, strategies and activities, as well as persons and positions of the NSF (Ruoranen, Klenk, Schlesinger, Bayle, Clausen, Giauque, et al., 2016).

Studying professionalization in sport organizations is not new (Dowling et al., 2014; Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015). However, studies on causes of professionalization in sport organizations tend to consider only a few organizational factors that can promote or hinder the process of professionalization (e.g., growing tasks, financial resources, organizational values). Current research also lacks differentiation between internal and external causes that may, however, have relevance for detecting interrelationships between NSF internal pressures and expectations from their environment for professionalization. We endeavor to fill these gaps through a multiple-case study in the Swiss context. The cases, which include not only popular but also less popular sports that have been ignored so far in previous, prominently Anglo-Saxon studies (Dart, 2014), will be investigated by applying a multi-level framework for analyzing causes for professionalization (Nagel et al., 2015). In doing so, we contribute to the knowledge of relations of professionalization in the headquarters to their member organizations that – aside from Ferkins and Shilbury's study (2010) on national-regional governing relationship – has received little attention (Dowling et al., 2014). In addition to knowledge on development of NSFs,

we aim to contribute to analytical and theoretical concepts of professionalization. Understanding how change evolves and knowing more about mechanisms behind professionalization processes in different NSFs from the same field can aid them in avoiding ineffective service and strategy development. This is particularly important, because NSFs are largely financed by membership fees and public grants.

In the next section, we present the conceptual background of the paper and related previous research. Thereafter, the Swiss sport system – the environment of the analyzed NSF – is introduced, followed by our method. The results are divided into three subsections along the analytical framework, and, finally, discussed.

## Conceptual background and previous research

Nagel et al. (2015) have summarized the current sport management and sport sociological literature and positioned forms, causes and consequences of professionalization in sport federations into a multi-level framework. The review is based on three dimensions of professionalization according to Bayle and Robinson (2007) and Legay (2001): professionalization of 1) activities (e.g., quality management), 2) individuals (e.g., qualification, paid employment), and 3) structure and processes (e.g., board structure, formalization). The review embraces various theoretical backgrounds (e.g., contingency, agency and institutional theory) and presents causes for professionalization on three levels: endogenous causes (e.g., increased workload and key persons), and causes in federations' external and internal environment (e.g., pressure from sponsors and requirements of umbrella organizations, or expectations from member organizations).

The review uncovers a mainly constructionist perspective on professionalization. On the one hand, professionalization in sport federations has been caused by pressure from their external environment. On the other hand, NSFs respond to the pressure differently. In particular, the interests of NSFs and stakeholders may differ, because NSFs are committed to their members' interests. Therefore, we should also consider NSFs endogenous conditions as affecting changes in sport organizations (e.g., Horch & Schütte, 2009). Kikulis and colleagues (Kikulis, Slack, & Hinings, 1995) explained variation in organizations' responses to institutional pressures with the active role of key actors in the design of organizations. Interests of organizational members and their decisions characterized the stepwise changes, for example towards (de-)centralization. Amis, Slack and Hinings (2002) found that Canadian national sport organizations, whose members held values congruent with the prescribed changes, were able to make large-scale organizational change successfully. Conversely, organizations whose members opposed the changes entered into a period of largely superficial conformity. Also, O'Brien and Slack (2003) explain differences in the transition from amateur to professional status in UK rugby clubs by values and beliefs of

powerful new actors who brought professionally orientated institutional logic with them. They pointed out that, while elite support is necessary for radical change, it is not sufficient.

While these approaches build on interests and decisions of key actors, other scholars apply the contingency theory and assess other (internal) situational characteristics as effecting changes in (sport) organizations. These can be, for example, financial resources, size, culture, and leadership relations (Horch & Schütte, 2009). Slack and Hinings (1992), for example, found a considerable hindering influence of organizational culture (e.g., shared operating norms, ideology, myths) that was challenged by professionalization. Resistance of volunteers, for example, often stems from fear that changes erode the traditional values of the organization (Horch & Schütte, 2009; Slack & Hinings, 1992; Welty Peachey, Zhou, Damon, & Burton, 2015). Scarce financial resources are another situational characteristic hindering professionalization, whereas international competition and media coverage may promote it (Nagel et al., 2015).

Expectations from stakeholders, such as the state or umbrella organizations, (e.g., National Olympic Associations), have often been considered important for understanding professionalization from neo-institutionalist perspectives (Washington & Patterson, 2011). Funders or collective actors such as political institutions, but also evolutions in civic and economic conditions can cause changes in processes and structures, and affect a transition of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in general towards businesslike organizations (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Seippel, 2002; Vos, Breesch, Késenne, Van Hoecke, Vanreusel, & Scheerder, 2011). Pressure from the external environment can be coercive, normative or mimetic, with the tendency to result in isomorphic organizations within their field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Slack & Hinings, 1994).

Since sport policy, the logic and proportion of subsidies of the total income of sport organizations differ between countries, the impact of the external environment on professionalization of NSFs probably depends on the specific national sport system, and varying coercive pressures of governments. Several studies (e.g., Amis et al., 2002; Edwards, Mason, & Washington, 2009; Slack & Hinings, 1994) have found clear coercive pressure by the government in Canada, whereas in Norway and Belgium the pressure through state funding has been rather low (Seippel, 2002; Vos et al., 2011). The influence of the state and other stakeholders on NSFs through conditioned subsidies reveals that NSFs depend on external resources to be able to perform their activities (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Through resource dependence, the state can control sport organizations' actions and have the potential to instrumentalize them (as intentionally operating agents) for sport policy (Vos et al., 2011).

Against this background, it may be interesting to investigate circumstances causing professionalization from a multi-level perspective in a specific state context. We believe that it is important to consider institutional influences, individual key actors, as well as internal unintended stimuli equally. For that purpose, the multi-level framework of Nagel et al. (2015) appears

an eligible entry. For a better understanding of the mechanisms behind professionalization, we intend to contribute to refining that framework by means of inductively collected empirical data from NSFs. Hence, we explore what role the state, member organizations and other stakeholders play in the professionalization of NSFs in Switzerland, whose sport system is relatively open and where NSFs are permitted autonomy. Also, we examine whether there are other, more instrumental influences or interests dominating professionalization of Swiss NSFs. Consequently, this study explores 1) NSFs endogenous causes, 2) expectations from their external environment, and 3) expectations from their internal environment that cause professionalization in Swiss NSFs.

### *Swiss sport system*

In Switzerland, sport policy is based on principles of subsidiarity and autonomy. The implementation follows the Swiss federal policy system (Bayle, 2017; Chappelet, 2010; Kriesi & Trechsel, 2008), constituted on a federal, cantonal and municipal level. The Federal Office of Sport (FOSPO), together with the NSFs, are responsible for policy development. However, the 86 NSFs and their umbrella organization, Swiss Olympic (SO), are responsible for implementation of the policy. They organize both grassroots and top-level sports autonomously, which opens the system for individual and collective initiatives. While both are widely independent from the Confederation, the only supervisor who can have direct impact on the NSFs is SO (Bayle, 2017). To support and strengthen its member NSFs, SO has established a federation promotion concept whose central element is an agreement about the NSF's goals. The financial support to reach the agreed performance is bound to five "promotion categories," to which each NSF is assigned. For the categorization into 1-5 (1 qualifying for the highest grant), SO uses several criteria regarding both characteristics of the sport (e.g., individual/team) and organization of the NSF (e.g., manager). Nevertheless, for the most part, the NSFs are autonomous in implementing the organization development strategy of SO.

## **Method**

To analyze factors contributing to professionalization in Swiss NSFs, a multiple-case study was conducted, applying a qualitative content analysis according to Gläser and Laudel (2010, 2013). Semi-structured interviews and public documents of seven Swiss NSFs were analyzed inductively. The study contributes to a bigger study project on professionalization of national and international sport federations.

### *Selection of cases*

A purposive sample of NSF was achieved by considering number of members, sport (individual/team, winter/summer,

Olympic/non-Olympic), as well as the NSF's scope (single/multiple disciplines) (Table 1). To consider also NSFs whose scope differ from common NSFs, the umbrella federation of sports for people with disabilities PluSport was included. Data were collected by means of interviews with key persons and analysis of available, mainly public documents. The availability and points of reference in the documents were crucial for the approximate period of analysis, mainly addressed also in the interviews. Overall, roughly the last ten years were covered.

#### Data collection

*Documents.* Documents were analyzed ahead of interviews to collect information and get familiar with crucial reference points in the NSF's development as well as its previous plans. Some documents, especially annual reports and protocols, look back and can thus be used to create a chronology due to their regularity. Causes for professionalization were assigned to three levels in a data matrix: NSFs endogenous, NSFs' external

**Table 1:** Selection of cases

| Federation                              | N Clubs <sup>1</sup> | N Regional/<br>Cantonal<br>Federations | N active<br>members/<br>licenses <sup>1</sup> | N paid<br>employees <sup>2</sup> | Interviewees  |
|---|----------------------|--|---|----------------------------------|---|
| PluSport (PS; multi-discipline)         | 79                   | 8                                      | 9'134   | 32 <sup>3</sup>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General director (GD) (<i>interview conducted Nov 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Chief Grassroots sport and Chief Marketing &amp; Communication (together, <i>Jan 2016</i>)</li> <li>• President (<i>Jan 2016</i>)</li> </ul>    |
| Swiss Fencing (SF)                      | 52                   | 0                                      | 2'736   | 4 <sup>4</sup>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• President (<i>Oct 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Sport Manager (<i>Dec 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Past national trainer (<i>Nov 2015</i>)</li> </ul>   |
| Swiss Gymnastics (SG; multi-discipline) | 2'957                | 28                                     | 247'662                                       | 43 <sup>5</sup>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Media and Chief Marketing &amp; Communication (together, <i>Jun 2014</i>)</li> <li>• General Director (<i>Sep 2014</i>)</li> <li>• President (<i>Jul 2015</i>)</li> </ul>  |
| Swiss Handball (SH)                     | 247                  | 7                                      | 18'958  | 9.7 <sup>6</sup>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Handball promotion/Director of a regional federation (<i>Mar 2016</i>)</li> <li>• President (<i>Mar 2016</i>)</li> <li>• General Director (<i>Apr 2016</i>)</li> </ul>   |
| Swiss Ski (SS; multi-discipline)        | 756                  | 12                                     | 67'560  | 41.1 <sup>7</sup>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Directory/Sport Director (<i>Aug 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Acting Chief Directory/Marketing Director (<i>Oct 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Member of presidium/President of a regional federation (<i>Dec 2015</i>)</li> </ul> |
| Swiss Unihockey (floorball, SU)         | 416                  | 7                                      | 32'356  | 15.5 <sup>8</sup>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Director (<i>Apr 2015</i>)</li> <li>• President (<i>May 2015</i>)</li> <li>• Chief Trainer education at FOSPO / different past functions in SU (<i>Jul 2015</i>)</li> </ul>                                    |
| Swiss Volley (SV)                       | 503                  | 15                                     | 29'396  | 13.5 <sup>9</sup>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Director (<i>Mar 2016</i>)</li> <li>• President (<i>Jun 2016</i>)</li> </ul>   |

<sup>1</sup> Swiss Olympic (n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> For PluSport, Swiss Fencing, and Swiss Gymnastics the number refers to persons. For Swiss Handball, Swiss Ski, Swiss Unihockey, and Swiss Volley the number refers to full-time equivalent.

<sup>3</sup> PluSport (n.d.e, p. 4)

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with President of Swiss Fencing, October 24, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> State July, 2017 (Swiss Gymnastics Federation, n.d.c, Table: Der STV in Zahlen. [Swiss Gymnastics Federation in numbers]).

<sup>6</sup> State June 20, 2015 (Swiss Handball Association, 2015, p. 42).

<sup>7</sup> Swiss-Ski (n.d.a, p. 60).

<sup>8</sup> State May 1, 2015 (Swiss Unihockey, n.d.d, p. 7).

<sup>9</sup> Swiss Volley (n.d.e, p. 29).

environment and their internal environment. NSF internal factors that were seen to have facilitated or hindered the process were noted openly. Additional information about the NSF's professionalization was registered as well. The documents were mainly gained from the NSF's homepages and included:

- Strategy papers and conceptions (e.g., projects, communication, also of SO)
- Annual/financial reports and protocols
- Publications (e.g., member magazines, leaflets) and media reports

The documents can be found in the references for each NSF separately. Additional documents were studied to gain an overall picture of each NSF.

*Interviews.* 2-4 persons from each NSF were interviewed (Table 1), face-to-face and by a minimum of two of the authors. The main criteria were the interviewee's overview of the NSF's professionalization. Thus, also persons with past positions were included. Because of further study objectives, the interview guide did not focus only on causes but also included other questions on professionalization (e.g., consequences). The frame of the interview was professionalization of the NSF to date, related strategy and challenges. Thereby, the topics were persons and positions (e.g., positions of paid staff v. volunteers), structures and processes (e.g., communication and decision-making), and strategies and activities (e.g., strategy development and evaluation). To enquire about causes for professionalization, the guide followed the three levels of the framework of Nagel et al. (2015). If not explained automatically, causes for adaptations and barriers to their implementation were asked about constantly. For example:

"What were the causes for [e.g.] hiring someone for marketing?"

"Whose initiative was [the mentioned adaptation]?"

Finally, the interviewees were asked about causes for professionalization at large, clearly referring to the three levels of the analytical framework, as well as about factors that have facilitated or hindered the NSF's professionalization. The interview guide was adapted for each NSF according to knowledge from the documents, as well as for each interviewee in consideration of the position of the interviewee (e.g., elected member/paid employee) and his/her relationship to the NSF (e.g., long-/short-term). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The average duration was 1.5 hours.

#### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed inductively applying open coding and supported by Atlas.ti software. Open coding allows adapting dimensions of a category during the analysis and complementing the category system by knowledge derived from the material that does not suit any existing category (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, 2013). The code-tree followed the levels of the multi-level framework of Nagel et al. (2015). Subcodes

were assigned to an appropriate head code but kept close to the material. Interviews were constantly compared with previous ones and codes renamed to be more open. To reduce the code-tree, codes and codings were compared in-between and, where feasible, merged or removed. Thereby, codes for causes for professionalization were assembled adhering to the multi-level framework. In addition, NSF-specific internal factors that were deemed facilitating or hindering professionalization were gathered for each NSF separately (Appendix) and then generalized. For trustworthiness (Guba, 1981, cited in Shenton, 2004), data interpretations were reviewed by the research team, which determined reasonable final terms/characterization and presentation of the results. The interviewees had the opportunity to check the translation of their quotations. The detected causes for professionalization were roughly related to forms of professionalization that had commonly been affected by these as indicated in the empirical material (i.e., professionalization considering persons and positions, structures and processes, and strategies and activities).

## Results

The results are presented for each NSF separately in three sections: NSF's endogenous causes (Table 2), and expectations from their external (Table 3) and internal environment (Table 4) that have caused professionalization in these NSF. In addition, the tables link these to particular forms of professionalization that commonly have been affected, and present additional NSF-internal factors that were found to have been facilitating for or hinder NSF's in meeting expectations from their environment for professionalization.

#### *NSFs endogenous causes*

There seem to be certain NSF-specific endogenous circumstances that cause professionalization (Table 2). From this perspective, causes for professionalization were very similar across the seven NSF and could be resumed into four groups.

*Deficits in decision-making.* Deficits in decision-making in the NSF's governance and management have been a central cause for professionalization in the seven analyzed NSFs, with the goal to determine a strategic role of the board. In some NSFs, there was also mismanagement, that is, financial crisis and leaders who dominated the elected board. Consequently, for example in PS, statutes were revised, the leadership became shared between a strategic board and operative general secretary, and the organizational structure was adapted (already at the beginning of the 1990s). The General Director (GD), who had several years of experience also in the board, formalized the processes further following his "Professionalization initiative 2009". That was enabled by a progressive attitude of the board members and their trust in the GD, and relatively healthy finances. In SU, in turn, "about 4 years ago we had a board

**Table 2:** Causes for professionalization: NSFs endogenous causes.

|                                    | NSFs endogenous causes  |                    |  |   |  | Forms of professionalization   |                   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------------|--|---|--|--|-------------------|--|
|                                    | PlusSport (PS)  | Swiss Fencing (SF) | Swiss Gymnastics (SG)  | Swiss Handball (SH)   | Swiss Ski (SS)   | Swiss Unihockey (SU)   | Swiss Volley (SV) |  |
| <b>Deficits in decision-making</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unclear responsibilities and competences (also between general secretary and board)</li> <li>• discrepancies, little cooperation between departments</li> <li>• unequal decision-making</li> </ul> | –                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unclear responsibilities and competences (also between general secretary and board)</li> <li>• lengthy processes, conflicts between volunteers and paid staff</li> <li>• internal conflicts of interests («long-term members»)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• regional federations too powerful</li> <li>• board members had also operational responsibility/competences</li> <li>• board members required (more) power</li> <li>• discrepancies, little cooperation between departments</li> <li>• discrepancies between paid-volunteer engagement</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conflicts in decision-making between presidium and directory</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unclear responsibilities and decision-making (also between general secretary and board)</li> <li>• unequal decision-making</li> </ul> | –                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• differentiation of strategic board and executive general secretary</li> <li>• definition and allocation of competences</li> </ul> |
| <b>Organization structure</b>      | –   | –                  | –  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little national coordination (decentralized structure; member organizations, leagues)</li> </ul>   | –  | –  | –                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• centralization</li> </ul>   |

**Table 2:** Causes for professionalization: NSF's endogenous causes – continued.

|   | NSF's endogenous causes  |  |   |  |  | Forms of professionalization  |   |   |
|---|--|--|---|--|--|---|---|---|
|   | PluSport (PS)  | Swiss Fencing (SF)   | Swiss Gymnastics (SG)   | Swiss Handball (SH)  | Swiss Ski (SS)   | Swiss Unihockey (SU)  | Swiss Volley (SV)   |   |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>growth (members, services etc.)</li> <li>to further secure decentralized federation structure</li> <li>to strengthen political position</li> <li>increased (internal) expectations on work</li> <li>need to generate financial resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>success</li> <li>increased requirements for top level sport</li> <li>weak administration and structures compared to sport technical sector</li> <li>need to generate financial resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>size (esp. events to gain visibility and improve image)</li> <li>overloaded volunteers (regional federations)</li> <li>difficult to find volunteers</li> <li>key-moment: international goals missed</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>comprehensive development (top-level sport and match organization is not enough)</li> <li>overloaded volunteers</li> <li>no process coordination (esp. between regions, and)</li> <li>key-moment: international goals missed</li> <li>need to generate financial resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>size and success</li> <li>increased requirements for top level sport</li> <li>weak administration and structures compared to sport technical sector</li> <li>increased (internal) expectations on work</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>growth (members, services, events to gain visibility)</li> <li>increased requirements for top level sport</li> <li>overloaded volunteers</li> <li>difficult to find volunteers</li> <li>increased (internal) expectations on work</li> <li>need to generate financial resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased workload</li> <li>loss of members, efforts to gain visibility</li> <li>increased requirements for top level sport</li> <li>need to generate financial resources</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>paid employees (administration)</li> <li>differentiation and specialization</li> <li>development of marketing and modern means of communication</li> <li>marketing and sponsoring</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Increased expectations and requirements</b>              |  |  |   |  |  |   |   |   |
| <b>Management philosophy and initiatives of key persons</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of (new) GD, president and board members</li> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of Sport Director and president</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>requirements of national trainer for best promotion/support of athletes</li> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of Sport Director and president</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>initiatives and management philosophy of president</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of president («one-man-show») and (new) GD</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of (new) GD and staff</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of board members and (new) GD</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>president's commitment</li> <li>management philosophy and initiatives of GD («Mr. Volley»)</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reduced intern selected board</li> <li>strategic constellation of board (networks, expertise)</li> <li>professional attitude of president and board members</li> <li>paid GD, differentiated general secretary with clear competences</li> </ul> |

whose members actually have done a lot for the development of floorball, but who also claimed a great deal of decision-making competences" (SU president). However, in several cases, competences still cause conflicts within the boards as well as between them and current paid GDs, impeding organizational changes. In case of SG, after first initiatives more than 20 years ago, the delegates accepted a statute revision not earlier than 2006. However, taken out from the strategy 2014-2019 – and claimed by the interviewees, too – responsibilities and competences are not entirely clear.

*Organization structure.* In SH, professionalization was put in process because of inadequate federation structure that hindered cooperation and efficient operation: "There was neither a General Director nor was the federation otherwise lead, the president took over intermittently, the departments worked in their own silos... often, the staff couldn't be found in the offices and there were no regular meetings" (SH GD).

Activities of regions and clubs were not nationally coordinated. Consequently, the NSF established a more harmonized general secretary and centralized the NSF structure – at the end top down – to standardize processes to be more efficient. In SV, in turn, efforts to reduce regional federations; were not approved by the member organizations.

*Increased expectations and requirements.* Overall, through professionalization, the analyzed NSFs strive for professional structures and conditions for athletes and clubs to be internationally successful: "In top-level sport, you have to be a professional player, and professional management is required not only for the athletic part, but the same is true for the marketing part, for handball development etc." (SH president). In some NSFs, failures of national teams had been the key moment for starting professionalization, whereby the new benchmarks make the work more challenging. Increased expectations for quality of work (e.g., people's qualifications) within the NSF but also relationships with different stakeholders have forced the NSF to build departments, staff, strategies, etc., to better merchandise their sport and thus generate financial resources. At the same time, restricted financial resources have slowed down or hindered professionalization in various areas (e.g., employment of paid staff).

Also, growth of NSFs, including events and services for member organizations, has increased work and complexity of tasks, which NSFs intend to manage by professionalization: "We offer much more services...so, we said, we would professionalize the federation regarding marketing and communication, and then we established this paid position" (PS M&C).

In SF, national trainers had driven professionalization in the federation for years. Under a constantly changing board until 2005 without any common vision, resources were put into sport and indispensable administration, disregarding organizational structures. This was possible because of the confidence from SO in the federation's international success. However, because of increasing success, managing the federation became

increasingly time-consuming and complex. Thus, it became impossible for the trainers to further manage "federation's issues that were no concern of mine" (SF past-trainer). Ultimately, organizational structures, responsibilities and administration were insufficient to manage the sport. The same applies to SS. *Key persons and management philosophy.* The data showed a high relevance of key persons' management philosophy. In several cases, it was dissatisfaction of board members that caused the first moves toward professionalization: "one-man-show" (SH Regional Director), "double-head leadership" (PS GD) caused uproar, leading to deselections and reduced boards. To form a strategically capable board, the NSFs pay attention to the volunteers' expertise in the private sector (leading positions), as well as networks: "It doesn't make sense to have five persons from the basis [in the board] and none of them understands anything about finance" (PS Chief Grassroots). NSF boards seem to ensure a "professional" attitude at work by recruiting board members through personal networks. As an exception, SF highly values a fencing background.

At the headquarters, in turn, differentiation and specialization have commonly been driven by management philosophy of GDs that they bring in from the private economy: "What I changed was the organizational structure with clear responsibilities for everyone, especially for the management team...The management team has to be empowered to have a clear and strong position vis-a-vis the board" (SV GD). Also, specific and more recent changes concerning daily processes to support strategy development are introduced by paid staff, particularly the GD. The implementation, however, mostly requires the acknowledgment of the board. The NSFs have implemented little process coordination so far, which can be hindering for further federation development, because many tasks are done "ad hoc." However, management and monitoring tools are under development in the NSFs. In contrast to the other NSFs, in SF it was a national team trainer and sports director, who initiated and drove professionalization until 2008, when they were released by the new president from administrative tasks.

#### *Expectations of stakeholders in sport and society (external environment)*

Professionalization has been triggered also by NSFs' relationships with actors from their external environment (Table 3). Mostly, NSFs receive financial support only, when they fulfill the requirements placed by the state and other stakeholders. As explained above, Swiss NSFs operate widely autonomously. However, there are some concepts stipulated by the Confederation that apply to all. FOSPO conducts most of them in cooperation with SO. Business partners and media have also caused particular forms of professionalization, whereby NSFs' positions in these relationships differ.

*State and policymaker.* The societal meaning and democratic organization of sport obliges Swiss NSF to establish further services for kids and grassroots sport. In addition, because of the meaning of sport in the international context, FOSPO



**Table 3:** Causes for professionalization: NSF's external environment.

|  | Expectations of stakeholders in sport and society   |  |   | Forms of professionalization  | NSF-internal facilitating and hindering factors   |
|--|---|--|---|---|---|
|  | PluSport (PS)   | Swiss Fencing (SF)   | SG, SH, SS, SU, SV  |   |   |
| <b>Government and policy maker (FOSPO)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>requirements for efficient sport promotion and spending of funds (FOIS, ZEWO)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expectations on young athletes' promotion</li> </ul>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expectations on young athletes' promotion</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>concepts for sports promotion</li> <li>expanded general secretary (paid staff, differentiation, specialization)</li> <li>output measurement, auditing</li> </ul> | <p><b>facilitating factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>solid finances</li> <li>success</li> <li>sponsor relationships</li> </ul> <p><b>hindering factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scarce financial resources</li> <li>invisibility in the media</li> <li>overloaded staff and volunteers</li> <li>lack of transparency / resistance of member organizations</li> </ul> |
| <b>Swiss Olympic</b>                       | –   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>performance agreement</li> <li>auditing system</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>performance agreement</li> <li>auditing system</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>documentation of strategy, implementation and governance structure</li> <li>output measurement, auditing</li> </ul>  |   |
| <b>Business partners and media</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>do not claim any requirements</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expectations of media for highest actuality</li> </ul>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased expectations on work/return, e.g., professional marketing, communication and sponsor support in the NSF</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>establishment of (specialized) marketing/ event organization</li> <li>media and market analysis</li> </ul>   |   |

has established a program for sustainable top-level athlete promotion. That, in turn, enables NSFs to create professional training conditions for athletes, which the NSFs otherwise could not offer (e.g., additional paid positions).

Although a SO member, PS, whose main aim is integration of people with disabilities, is not supervised by SO but the Federal Office for Social Insurance (FOIS) and Swiss Charity Monitoring (ZEWO). The requirements of FOIS seem very similar, including performance agreements and a specific auditing system. However, the subsidies are prescribed for services and distributed to the clubs, whereas top-level sport is funded by SO. Recently, FOIS has begun requiring accounting for each club and service separately. That prompted PS to create a position responsible for the clubs' accounting, because they cannot handle it by themselves. So far, PS has no output measurement instruments – “we did not have to have that” (PS GD) – but has to invest in such tools now, because FOIS plans to switch from performance agreements to an efficacy orientation.

*Umbrella organization Swiss Olympic.* In the preamble of the federation promotion concept SO writes: “In the strategy of SO of 2012, the support and strengthening of the member federations as a service provider...[is] the highest legitimation of SO.” Performance agreements are a central element of federation promotion. Therewith, SO has considerable impact on NSFs' professionalization. For SO, the agreements are “a long-term strategy...securing the planning for SO, as well as for the NSF” (Swiss Olympic, 2013, p. 4). “Eligibility for promoting” of the NSFs depends on the respective grading, and their financial resources determine their “capability for promoting”

(ibid). Because of these obligations, NSFs have to present 4-years-strategies, which had been – if existing at all – vague in some, even bigger NSF so far.

The federation promotion concept “should not consider only high-level sports, but has to include also leadership and ethics in an adequate manner” (“completeness”), and “the self-responsibility and scope of design of the member federations are to be acknowledged and reinforced” (“autonomy”) (Swiss Olympic, 2013, Preamble). Despite “some additional laps”, the NSFs understand the requirements of SO and welcome the transparency between all actors, for, “if you want grants, you have to do some adaptations and you just do it” (SV GD). As explained before, in SF, there was clearly a need for new structures and adaptation of processes to ensure appropriate management of the sport. However, it was only after pressure by SO that necessary actions were taken:

[SO] animated us to improve the headquarter structures and administration ... First I was against this system, because they forced us into additional expenditures ... At the end, they were right; after optimizing the administration, we could generate resources to gain funds better, use the systems, we rationalized and made them more efficient. At the end, it costs, but we still benefit. (SF president)

Autonomy of NSFs in strategy implementation may to some extent explain why, despite the contracts and similar concepts that all NSFs need to fulfill, professionalization and current designs differ between NSFs. The implementation then

depends on, for example, financial and human resources, or the role of member organizations, which tend to be more critical of the need of such concepts.

*Business partners and media.* Sponsors and media partners undeniably impact professionalization of all analyzed NSFs. The president of SH wrote in the Annual Report of 2012/13: "I've previously pointed to the international professionalization and related commercialization, new approaches of national sponsors in grassroots sport,...and the fully altered communication environment" (Swiss Handball Association, 2013, p. 29). The main aim of business partnerships is to generate financial resources for building the best possible training conditions to promote international success and guarantee NSFs' function as umbrella organizations. SH, SU and SV seek visibility via platforms, such as well-showcased events, to attract people and ensure sustainability: "Best sustainability is when we get young players to a big event saying 'Wow, that's what I want. Now I'll go and train more'" (past-SU/FOSPO).

In business partnerships, NSFs are bound to diverse organizational adaptations (apart from SF, which perceives no pressure from sponsors, because these support athletes), such as hiring qualified people for marketing and public affairs. "A great amount of the money [from the sponsor] goes into communication [to present the sponsor]" (SH president). However, GD of SH says, "respective structures, such as centralized marketing systems, are necessary" to manage the requirements of sponsors efficiently. As a reaction to the exponential event expansion of the NSFs, PS, for example, extended event development and hired an additional person "to serve the media more specifically and to build a network" (PluSport, n.d., p. 10). Somewhat ambivalently, business partners may require a contact person, or someone for marketing.

The positions of the analyzed NSFs on the market differ, because sports that are little noticed in society are less attractive for media and sponsors. The NSFs seem willing to follow the requirements of business partners – or they may have no choice. Since media and sponsors are needed for securing all kinds of resources, for NSFs that are hardly visible, to adapt to present needs appears difficult and can be done only in small steps. The mutual sponsor of the team sports SU, SH and SV (Mobiliar; an insurance provider) has not only required professionalization, but even supported the NSFs in the process. The relationship has brought them far more than financial resources. It has helped the NSFs to improve their performance (e.g., event organization) and thus significantly contributed to their popularity and visibility.

We've been lucky with Mobiliar, we basically got it without any investment. They basically found us, which is rare in sport. It was a milestone [in professionalization of SU]; how they've supported us and brought us popularity, made us presentable, with innovative good ideas, the whole entertainment framework. I think, we got a lot...and made an incredible impact, what was possible only thanks to them. (past-SU/FOSPO)

SU, SH, SV and the Swiss basketball federation established a stock corporation on the initiative of Mobiliar – "a really professional partner" – to "act as counterbalance to ice hockey, soccer, skiing" (SV president). For bigger platforms for all actors, the four NSFs guarantee Mobiliar professional communication and more consumer services, such as player statistics, in return. SS and PS have attracted business partners for many years. Thus, compared to the five other NSFs, they are more empowered in those relationships. Especially alpine skiing is very popular in Switzerland, whereas PS, although until recently unknown even in politics, has always profited from a "disability bonus"; "disability sport is attractive, young, dynamic, it appeals to people to donate" (PS Chief M&C). Solid finances have enabled PS to enhance professionalized services to their member organizations and respond better to environmental changes. SS, in turn, has concentrated its resources into professionalization of marketing and event organization, including paid staff.

#### *Relationship with and expectations of member organizations (internal environment)*

Little professionalization in NSFs has been caused directly by member organizations. Some NSFs, especially PS, SG and SU, have been forced to professionalize the relationship with their dissatisfied member organizations. The visions drifted apart and member organizations felt overrun in the strategy and federation development. This is manifest in the following example:

They were dissatisfied with the voluntary disciplinary committee, the decision-making takes too long... dissatisfied with the new homepage...And then, the clubs complain "when we once deliver delayed match reports, we get fined. My dear federation, the homepage still isn't updated. Do you get a fine, too?" (SU president)

Interviewees from other NSFs also stated that the member organizations have been neglected in federation development. Their dissatisfaction and mistrust became evident as NSFs have made the tasks more demanding for their member organizations (through new process management, larger headquarters, steering instruments, etc.) to finally address these as "their needs." Hence, in the course of NSFs' professionalization, member organizations feel that they too have the right to express higher expectations. However, the common drivers for the professionalization of service delivery for clubs and regions are employees at the headquarters. Being aware of the volunteer basis and scarce resources of the member organizations, the NSFs "have to find a balance between the needs of the volunteers, who do their work with enthusiasm as a hobby, and a professional appearance" (SG GD). Once NSFs realized that the clubs lacked the time and expertise to address the growing demands, they hired employees to support the clubs: "It's clear that twice the number of camps [for club members] means more work. We realized that we've missed out on the club support so far and hired

Table 4: Causes for professionalization: NSF's internal environment.

| Relationship with and expectations of member organizations  |  |  |   |   |   |   | NSF-internal facilitating and hindering factors  |
|---|--|--|---|---|---|---|--|
| PluSport (PS)   | Swiss Fencing (SF)   | Swiss Gymnastics (SG)  | Swiss Handball (SH)   | Swiss Ski (SS)  | Swiss Unihockey (SU)  | Swiss Volley (SV)   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mistrust and dissatisfaction</li> <li>• needs disregarded</li> <li>– deficient communication between NSF and clubs/regions</li> <li>– GS not well organized; responsibilities not clear (for clubs)</li> <li>– little awareness of the work of the GS</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased expectations</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• high workload for volunteers</li> <li>• expectations on support (e.g., event organization)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NSF's perception of processes of member organizations, i.e., presumed deficits</li> <li>– disorganized club/match arrangement (diversity, little nationwide coordination)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>do not claim any requirements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dissatisfaction, asymmetric power relation – deficient communication between NSF and clubs/regions</li> <li>• increased expectations on services</li> <li>• pressure through members' expectations</li> <li>• NSF's perception of processes of member organizations (i.e., presumed deficits)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>do not claim any requirements</li> </ul> | <p><b>facilitating factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• solid finances</li> <li>• clubs' involvement in planning and decision-making</li> </ul> <p><b>hindering factors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• scarce financial and human resources</li> <li>• lack of time or capacity of volunteers to master new tasks</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Relationship with and expectations of member organizations</b></p>  |  |  |   |   |   |   | <p><b>Forms of professionalization</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support in administration, consulting (club advisors)</li> <li>• communication platforms</li> <li>• transparency</li> </ul>  |

now two persons who literally go to the clubs" (PS Chief Grassroots sport). Other expectations of the clubs concern mostly services to their members and expectations from media and the public (e.g., social media, good event organization). Our analysis did not show intentions of NSF's regarding headquarters, decision-making, or evaluation/steering tools that were not fulfilled because of resistance of member organizations. Transparent communication is the key to avoiding resistance against further professionalization.

## Discussion

This study explored causes for professionalization in seven Swiss NSF's, based on a three-level framework for analyzing causes for professionalization (Nagel et al., 2015). Although the NSF's differ, for example, in size, organizational structures, and international resonance, causes for their professionalization have been widely similar. Thereby, causes at external and endogenous level seem to influence each other reciprocally and are hard to distinguish. NSF-specific conditions, particularly financial and human resources, popularity of the sport and (striving) attitude of individuals towards professionalization seem to have an additional impact on NSF's' capability to respond to external expectations.

### *Theoretical reflection of the findings*

Referring to the similarity of causes for professionalization – besides external pressure – competing for resources and uncertainty may have led some NSF's to mimic and model themselves on those NSF's that they deem successful, leading to similar conditions (e.g., with respect to workload and internal expectations) that call for professionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). It is also conceivable that shifts in societal norms have influenced the thinking of board members, leading them to transfer their management perspective from the private sector into the NSF (O'Brien & Slack, 2003), reflected, for example, in domains ascribed to each board member. However, the conceptions that strategy makers have of an appropriate umbrella organization seem to be "initial bursts of change" and deficits in decision-making "high-impact-elements" that, due to their symbolic role in effective functioning of an organization, are preferably adapted early for further professionalization process (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004a). Such conditions are independent of the NSF's size, as is increase in workload, which emerges as a side-effect of international success and maintenance of it (O'Brien & Slack, 2004), on the one hand, and from internal and external requirements for the quality of work, on the other hand.

Our study contributes to knowledge of causes for often taken-for-granted institutional arrangements and practices that legitimize the "new" organization, and thus to perspectives of institutional theories of how fields of sport organizations are constituted and how their environment affects their

characteristics (Washington & Patterson, 2011). The expectations on professionalization from NSF's' external environment reflect general trends in society, such as the meaning of entertainment, the weight of performance measurements (Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Macris & Sam, 2014) and rationalization, and seem to be aimed at demonstrating professional NSF's (Hwang & Powell, 2009). The state has also become more efficiency-orientated and expects evidence for the use of funds, the result of which is that personal relationships and trust no longer suffice. This is particularly implicated in the requirements for PS that are in line with those of the other NSF's, although PS is answerable to other funders (social insurance) and its scope of service (social integration) differs from the other NSF's.

Resource dependence theory recognizes organizations as intentionally operating actors that are not able to perform their activities without resources from their environment (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). That implies social mechanisms and makes the theory a helpful supplement to institutional mechanisms. As we saw, the institutions that exert coercive pressure on the NSF tend to be the ones on which NSF's commonly depend (Edwards et al., 2009; Vos et al., 2011). We may ask whether causes for professionalization can be discovered – retrospectively, per se – or whether we should focus on the reasoning, rationale and aims of (organizational) actors behind professionalization of NSF and support institutionalist approaches with, for example, resource dependence theory. Such a perspective is missing in the present analytical framework. It could, however, support analysis of both intended and unintended consequences of professionalization, such as the risk that, when budget allocation is strictly dependent on performance, NSF's concentrate as much on the relationship with the contributor as on real improvement of their performance (Gilmour, 2007, as cited in Macris & Sam, 2014). Continuous adaptations as such may also run into legitimacy problems, contrary to the goal of professionalization (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Macris & Sam, 2014).

Expectations from NSF's' member organizations evolved from umbrella federations' professionalization, rather than triggering it as suggested by Nagel et al. (2015). Furthermore, the NSF's postulated clubs necessities that the clubs themselves did not perceive. For efficient use of resources, stakeholders should keep an eye on necessities and assumptions in the NSF. The discrepancies could result from a certain collision of "sports-for-all" logic promoted by the sport movement itself with commercialization and performance measurement of competitive sports (Stenling & Fahlén, 2009). A specialized club advisor, now established in some NSF's, may elude demands that clubs raise following the requirements of the NSF. However, conversion to a service provider bears the risk that NSF's to some extent neglect their duty to advocate the clubs' interests. Our analysis confirms that transparent communication to reduce information asymmetries between umbrella and member organizations are of utmost importance (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004b; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010). Club supporters as "buffers" could help sport clubs to continue with a community-

oriented sport and professionalize only to a certain degree compared to the competitive sport part of the NSF (Ferkins, Shilbury, David, & McDonald, 2005; Skille, 2009), also in terms of warranting clubs' autonomy. Principal-agent theory could be a useful approach to address the meaning of professionalization for member organizations together with the role of the NSFs as agents driving their interests, to contribute to more symmetry in the relationship. It could address, for example, factors that promote mechanisms to ensure symmetry (e.g., securing shared values, defining short-term goals) or issues that both parties deem appropriate to be required from paid staff/umbrella organizations and vice versa.

#### *Reflection on the multi-level framework for analyzing professionalization in NSFs*

The framework of Nagel et al. (2015) appears too simplified for an analytical framework, and it does not capture factors that influence professionalization once it first has been initiated nor interrelationships between the levels. The analysis of seven Swiss NSFs revealed though that professionalization is continuously influenced by factors that apply to the NSF unequally but are essential to meet expectations from the external and internal environment. Considering plainly which actors or circumstances bring about professionalization disregards a dynamic process of varying pace, directions and possibly throwbacks. Definition of competences between a strategic board and operative general secretary, for example, has been an initial goal of professionalization. However, in several cases these still cause conflicts. Referring to our findings, several circumstances that the multi-level framework deems as causing professionalization seem rather factors that would have an influence on the nature and pace of an ongoing process (e.g., financial resources), or factors that have a considerable influence on first gaining these resources (e.g., size, media). These factors seem to be in line with internal situational characteristics that research applying contingency approach has considered as barriers or facilitators for professionalization (Horch & Schütte, 2009). Scarce financial resources may trigger professionalization when the NSF begins to restructure the organization to optimize efficiency. However, financial resources play an essential role in allowing professionalization to be brought about, as has been discovered also in previous studies (e.g., Welty Peachey et al., 2015). SS, SF and PS ("disability bonus") appreciate the profit they have from solid finances for professionalization. SS and SF are not the only NSFs with disciplines in the highest category of SO (i.e., internationally successful); however, additional revenue from sponsoring (SS) and "advantageous stance" towards SO (SF) may have strengthened their favorable financial situation. NSFs of less popular sports invest in marketing and communication, because they struggle with the interdependence of success in sport and attractive preconditions, that is, presence, interest of media and sponsors and financial resources, whereby the last two affect the conditions for the first two – and the chain

closes. Since similar conditions, plus structures and strategic concepts determine subsidies from SO, NSFs' internal efforts may not be sufficient for professionalization. Or, the NSFs may not be strong enough to argue against it.

#### *Limitations and future studies*

This study has some limitations. Our subjective perception of Swiss NSFs may have influenced the selection of the cases, excluding less professionalized federations. Although our analysis reached back to a time when the NSFs operated in a straightforward manner and mostly voluntarily, our data may still miss information about all barriers to eventual professionalization initiatives faced by the NSFs. To better understand barriers – or reasoning for not approaching professionalization – future studies could focus only on less professionalized NSFs. The selection of the interview partners could have biased the (prominent) role of individuals in professionalization. Being familiar with the NSF's professionalization could mean that they also perceive an essential role of themselves in the NSF's development, especially in seemingly successful cases (Freitas, Girginov, & Teoldo, 2017). Nevertheless, the interviewees traced professionalization back to diverse persons, not necessarily themselves, confirming a central role of persons in different positions initiating and driving professionalization. The same was evident for the restricting role of key persons. These results remind us that we should also consider theories other than organizational ones in NSF studies; for example, social identity theories (e.g., what role do the differences between the identities of a board member, who is passionate about sport, and an employee, whose identity reflects a manager's role, have for strategy development?), or the leader-member-exchange theory (e.g., what would be the best indicators of a relationship with the most productive potential between club presidents and employees at the headquarter?) (cf. Todd, Andrew, & Sowieta, 2009). Since professionalization is mostly deemed a desirable process of modern organizations, social desirability of informants must be considered: besides personal impact, interviewees may be interested in the good reputation of their NSF. This issue we addressed by including persons of different, also past, positions, with shorter and longer history in the NSF, persons who also have criticized the development, as well as documents. Also, it is possible that interviewees are open about past deficits to emphasize positive development. Nevertheless, a retrospective view can distort one's perception of causes for professionalization. Thus, our interviewees may have rationalized it retrospectively with endogenous causes, although external pressure would have been crucial, such as the requirements of SO regarding the level of grants (e.g., Chief Sports, talent development concepts). Longitudinal observations would be useful to eliminate false rationalization of change by the interviewees, as well as to better consider "emergent changes" in organizations that may have no causal explanation (Smith, 2004). Furthermore, we acknowledge the

issue of generalizability of the results from the Swiss context. However, they present a good starting point for analyzing causes for professionalization and factors that have a further impact on the process in other countries.

Further research is needed to investigate forms of professionalization in more detail and to discover causes – and barriers – for more or less successful professionalization. Research should not disregard unintended consequences of professionalization. The question of whether professionalization leads to more effective outcomes, or whether it is a rationalized “institutional myth” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) should be addressed. Single-case studies could be useful to understand more clearly the mechanisms, potential phases, to avoid unintended consequences. This may be of interest for SO and the Swiss NSF, too, to optimize the development of clubs and support for athletes.

## Conclusion

The endogenous and external causes for professionalization in Swiss NSFs seem to be interdependent resulting in a reciprocity of the same. Although Swiss NSFs are widely autonomous, they can be steered by the state and SO. Since professionalization is costly, and in order to improve their activities, NSFs remain dependent on their external environment, which is increasingly demanding. However, there are NSF-specific factors that allow (or hinder) professionalization to be advanced as expected from NSFs’ external and internal environment. These may be added by SO to considerations for allocating subsidies. Networks between stakeholders and key actors in the NSF could be an appropriate strategy for avoiding barriers and completing a deliberate professionalization of intended outcomes. Our analysis is a first step towards understanding professionalization processes in Swiss NSFs. Knowing the factors that have triggered NSFs to change their structures and processes can help advisors accompanying Swiss NSFs, as well as NSF managers, to scrutinize the necessity of changes and avoid unintended consequences, and thus support NSFs’ development in an efficient manner.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Data Availability Statement

All relevant data are within the paper.

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**Appendix:** NSF-internal factors that facilitate or hinder NSFs in meeting expectations from their environment for professionalization.

|                             | <b>PluSport<br/>(PS)</b>   | <b>Swiss Fencing<br/>(SF)</b>  | <b>Swiss Gymnastics<br/>(SG)</b>   | <b>Swiss Handball<br/>(SH)</b>  |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Facilitating factors</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• solid financial situation (societal resonance, good sponsor relationships)</li> <li>• commitment of people and striving individuals</li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• «a privileged NSF» for SO (international success)</li> <li>• trust between president and sport manager</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For generating financial resources:</li> <li>• impact of successful single athletes</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sponsor (Mobiliar)</li> <li>• clubs' initiatives</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Hindering factors</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• invisibility</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• scarce financial resources (sponsors prioritize athletes)</li> <li>• knowhow (even structure) is person-dependent</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• scarce financial resources (unattractive image in society)</li> <li>• deficient planning/strategy</li> <li>• conflicts of interests</li> <li>• resistance of member organizations</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• volunteers not capable to master new tasks</li> <li>• scarce financial and human resources</li> <li>• conflicts of interests, quarrel and little process coordination</li> <li>• resistance of member organizations</li> </ul> |
|                             | <b>Swiss Ski<br/>(SS)</b>  | <b>Swiss Unihockey<br/>(SU)</b>  | <b>Swiss Volley<br/>(SV)</b>   |   |
| <b>Facilitating factors</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• solid financial situation (good sponsor relationships, international success)</li> <li>• popularity, media presence</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• solid financial situation</li> <li>• sponsor (Mobiliar)</li> <li>• clubs' initiatives</li> <li>• striving individuals</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sponsor (Mobiliar)</li> <li>• trust between president(s) and GD</li> <li>• active committees</li> <li>• (clubs generally willing for development)</li> <li>• GD</li> </ul>                          |   |
| <b>Hindering factors</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discrepancy between organization of sport and administration</li> <li>• structure</li> <li>• conflicts of interests</li> <li>• lacking knowhow (staff and discontinuity)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little (media) presence</li> <li>• scarce financial and human resources</li> <li>• vision incoherence and communication NSF-clubs</li> <li>• conflicts of interests</li> <li>• inadequate infrastructure</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• little (media) presence and acknowledgment in society</li> <li>• scarce financial and human resources</li> <li>• resistance of member organizations</li> <li>• inadequate infrastructure</li> </ul> |   |