

## 1 Introduction

Because voluntary sport clubs (VSC) are non-commercial, producing and delivering affordable sports services requires large numbers of committed individuals. Hence, volunteers continue to be a VSC's most important resource (e.g. Misener and Doherty, 2009; Wicker and Breuer, 2011). However, many Swiss VSCs are reporting problems in recruiting and retaining long-term volunteers (Lamprecht *et al.*, 2012a), and similar problems can also be observed in other countries such as Australia (Cuskelly, 2005), Belgium (Scheerder and Vos, 2009), Germany (Breuer, 2011), and Great Britain (Nichols *et al.*, 2005). A specific analysis of Swiss football clubs reveals that 60% of all clubs have major problems in recruiting and retaining referees, 47%, in recruiting and retaining coaches; and 47%, in recruiting and retaining staff for formal positions on their boards (Lamprecht *et al.*, 2012b). These problems do not just affect the work of the clubs (such as ensuring that coaching continues without interruption); they can also lead to sanctions by the football association (fines for missing referees, exclusion from playing in matches or tournaments etc.).

VSCs try to respond to these problems by initiating structural changes or modifications of their volunteer management. However, any far-reaching changes in the ongoing flow of personnel as a resource are complex and require purposeful and coordinated efforts (Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, many VSCs are finding that they are unable to manage these challenges in an appropriate way with their existing routines, and there is a rising demand for external advisory support (Byers, 2009). Accordingly, sports associations, as their umbrella organizations, are trying to assist their member clubs. They are offering advisory services or the available management know-how (portfolios, checklists) so that clubs can modify their volunteer management and reduce the existing problem pressure. However, it can be observed that even though these advisory inputs are standardized, the resulting ways in which structural changes are realized and how solutions are

applied to existing personnel problems in VSCs differ greatly. It seems that external impulses may be interpreted and translated (programmed) into the real situation in a club in very different ways. What are the reasons for these differences in the effects of advisory input?

Because VSCs are interest organizations with their own typical structure, it is necessary to examine these organizational characteristics in more detail. According to Luhmann (2000), organizations (in this case, VSCs) must be viewed as social systems consisting of (communicated) decisions. This means that they are reproduced continually through decision-making processes (Luhmann, 2000; see Thiel and Mayer, 2009, for sport clubs). Hence, any implementation of external advisory inputs will be associated with (complex) club-internal decision-making processes. Therefore, appropriate decisions are needed in order to bring about structural changes that will lead to a more effective handling of the volunteer problem.

## **2 Literature Review**

The literature reveals a broad body of research on decision-making processes within the context of organizational changes in national and local sports organizations (e.g. Amis *et al.*, 2004; Fahrner, 2009; Kikulis, 2000; Kikulis *et al.*, 1992; Nagel, 2006; O'Brien and Slack, 2003; Steen-Johnson and Hanstad, 2008; Stevens and Slack, 1998; Thibault and Babiak, 2005). However, these studies examine the personnel domain only peripherally, and they consider it mostly in the context of increasing the efficiency and professionalization of various areas of personnel management (e.g. Ferkins *et al.*, 2009; Horch and Schütte, 2009; Seippel, 2004). Some studies have analysed personnel-related decisions in sport clubs explicitly and investigated the conditions under which volunteers or paid staff are recruited (e.g. Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014; Seippel, 2002, 2004; Thibault *et al.*, 1991; Thiel *et al.*, 2006). While offering some insights into the specific personnel recruitment practices, they reveal large differences between various types of voluntary sport organisations (e.g.

Seippel, 2002). The available findings indicate that it is frequently only individual, dominant key actors or small groups of members who determine club policy and make personnel decisions (e.g. Amis *et al.*, 2004; Ferkins and Shilbury, 2012; O'Brien and Slack, 2003; Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014). In addition, many VSCs do not engage in any systematic and widespread recruitment procedures to fill their vacancies, and their personnel recruitment is shaped largely by informal rules. The dominant approach is to ask individuals directly or to disseminate information through informal communication channels (Fahrner, 2009; Thiel *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, clubs often lack differentiated and binding criteria for selecting personnel, and most VSCs have no systematic or wide-ranging recruitment programmes; instead, recruitment is mostly non-standardized and informal (e.g. Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014; Schreiner and Thiel, 2011). Finally, the specific structures and the club culture (i.e. shared cultural values or the club's distinct self-image) play a key role in how decisions are made (e.g. Amis *et al.*, 2002; Slack and Parent, 2005). In summary, club-specific structures grant their decision makers a contingent scope for action that varies according to the degree of formalization of decision-making processes within the club (Hoye and Cuskelly, 2003; Thiel *et al.*, 2006).

A number of studies have also examined the relationship between policymaking authorities (for sports) and sport clubs as policy implementers – in particular, the conditions favouring implementations in sport clubs together with the restrictions and problems (with the willingness and ability to implement change) they impose when applied in a top-down way (e.g. Donaldson *et al.*, 2011; Harris *et al.*, 2009; Koski, 2012; May *et al.*, 2013; Nichols *et al.*, 2005; Skille, 2008, 2009). Indeed, in view of the heterogeneity and diversity of VSCs, many clubs have only a limited capacity to respond to the demands of policy delivery (Cuskelly *et al.*, 2006a; Harris *et al.*, 2009; May *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, findings show that sport clubs often react defensively when they gain the impression that something is being imposed on them from outside (Bennike *et al.*, 2014; Koski,

2012; Skille, 2008; Thiel and Meier, 2004). As interest organizations, VSCs are ideally autonomous and independent. As a result, it is not possible to impose changes in organizational structures directly from above. This limits the possibility for external guidance and influence.

### ***Research Shortcomings and Research Questions***

As the literature shows, until now no studies have taken a closer look at the practicability of advisory programmes for VSCs and the transfer of these inputs to the clubs' practical routines. Additionally, little is known about how VSCs deal with (external) advisory impulses, and which different decision-making practices can be identified. Current sport club research has paid little attention to the decision-making practices that clubs engage in when participating voluntarily in external advisory programmes to optimize their internal structures and processes. Processes of organizational decision making are linked strongly to the specific conditions under which VSCs are reproduced. As a result, gaining a clear understanding of how decision-making processes work in VSCs is crucial when developing appropriate advisory concepts or management tools designed to produce successful structural change (e.g. Koski, 2012; Skille, 2008).

Hence, the present study aims to establish the basis for effective advisory concepts by analysing the decision-making processes in VSCs within this specific context using a case study design. It asks which processes, mechanisms, and factors underlie the club-specific decision-making processes in the specific context of an external advisory programme, and how these specific decision-making processes can be summarized and classified by emphasizing the commonalities and differences in how VSCs apply external advisory inputs.

### **3 Theoretical framework**

Examining VSCs to find out how decisions come about reveals that these often seem to be shaped by inconsistency, unexpected outcomes, and randomness (Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that such decisions cannot be analysed according to any rational decision-making model (e.g. Amis and Slack, 2003). Their specific structural characteristics permit only a very limited degree of rationality (e.g. Nagel, 2008; Slack and Parent, 2005). However, their decision-making processes can be analysed adequately within the framework of concepts from behavioural decision-making theory (e.g. March, 1994; Simon, 1970). These concepts assume that bounded rationality is a fundamental characteristic of decisions in organizations. Non-profit organizations, in particular, are shaped by a specific mode of decision-making that Cohen *et al.* (1972) have called the “garbage can model”. Because VSCs can also be conceived of as “organized anarchies” (e.g. Emrich, 2009), this model offers an appropriate approach to understanding their practices and analysing their decision-making processes (e.g. Nagel, 2008; Slack and Parent, 2005). The key concept in the garbage can model is the assumption that decision-making processes in organizations consist of four “streams”: (1) problems, (2) actors, (3) decision-making opportunities, and (4) solutions. These four streams will now be applied to VSCs.

The decision-making process can be understood as an interaction between these four components. Neither the process nor the interaction between the components is subject to logical constraints, nor do they follow a linear sequence of decision-making steps. Instead, the four streams flow together more or less arbitrarily (Cohen *et al.*, 1972; March, 1994, see Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014, for VSCs). (1) The **problems** are the current issues causing concern both inside and outside the club that are related to the external advisory programme. They may be raised by the project team of the club or emerge through the external inputs and the subsequent activities. That is to say, problems can also be introduced to the club from outside by either individual people or other organizations

(e.g. advisors, other sport clubs). (2) The outcome of decisions depends not only on the particular problem but also on the **actors** who have to deal with it and who make the various choices.

Individual actors, collective actors, and other corporate actors (e.g. advisors) may all be involved in personnel-related decision-making processes. (3) **Decision-making opportunities** are the situations or occasions in which personnel decisions are sought, discussed, and made. Depending on the urgency of specific problem states and who is responsible for dealing with them, decision making can proceed within the committees formally specified in the regulations and statutes of a club (e.g. general assembly of members, executive board) or at informal meetings (e.g. discussions within informal groups or networks). Finally (4) the **solutions** present possible responses to the personnel problems and the external advisory programme that have been identified in a club. The emergence of solutions for certain problems can proceed in either a planned or a random way.

#### **4 Contextual Background**

Before presenting the methodology for analysing decision-making processes in VSCs, the background of this paper will be described with a focus on the specific advisory programme that is relevant for the empirical part of this study. This will be followed by the specific research questions for that concrete setting.

##### ***The advisory programme***

Approximately 32,000 voluntary staff are needed to offer the sporting and social services successfully in the 1,450 football clubs belonging to the Swiss Football Association (SFA) (Lamprecht *et al.*, 2012b). Being well aware of the importance of these human resources, the SFA assigns high priority to the issue of volunteering. To simplify recruiting this important resource, the SFA developed an advisory programme entitled “MFIF” (*Mehr Freiwillige im Fussballverein*

[More volunteers for football clubs]). This is a management tool designed to tackle existing problems in volunteer management and come up with new solutions. The advisory programme targets clubs that are currently facing problems in the field of volunteer work. Clubs can register voluntarily for the programme and it is offered to them free of charge.

### ***Concept and design of the MFiF advisory programme***

The advisory programme was developed on the basis of studies on the ability of VSCs to change (Slack and Parent, 2005; Thiel and Meier, 2004). This ability obviously needs to be taken into account when developing guidelines for such a programme. The programme also drew on features of volunteer management in VSCs (Chelladurai, 2006; Cuskelly *et al.*, 2006b) in order to develop key components associated with volunteer recruitment (e.g. method of approach, expected activities, etc.). The resulting advisory programme took the form of four workshops serving as a type of “systemic advice” (Bette, 2009). A systemic advisory programme does not try to intervene in the VSC directly, but to stimulate internal optimization from the outside with the aim of “helping clubs to help themselves”. Therefore, the advisory programme aims only to encourage the VSCs to change from within by providing suitable know-how and examples of possible actions to guide them. From the perspective of processes of reflective self-regulation (Bette, 2009; Senge, 2006), the impetus for change or adaptation always has to come from the club itself. Hence, instead of pursuing actionist planning strategies, an advisory programme must seek to present perspectives and insights regarding what a solution to the existing personnel problems might look like in order to encourage the club to take a new look at itself from within.

The clubs participating in the programme attended four workshops over a period of four to five months. Mostly the project team included board members (see table 1, e.g. presidents, technical directors or secretaries) and other committed club members. During this time they were supervised

and assisted as they progressed through the following three phases of implementing the steps in their clubs or incorporating them into a club development plan. This supervision and support was provided by an instructor, a manual (practical guidelines and aids), and a data processing software application (online).

*Phase 1 - Initiation and Analysis:* The project started by analysing volunteer work in the club. First of all, the current situation is determined by updating membership and volunteer figures. This will serve as the basis for subsequent measures. This includes listing all activities carried out currently by volunteers and any current job vacancies.

*Phase 2 - Communication and Information:* The second phase focuses on developing a campaign to attract the members' attention by presenting volunteer work in the club in a positive light. This should create a positive image of volunteering among club members. The campaign also informs all members about the project and its aims. Members and parents of adolescent members are updated on the progress of the project by email or letter to ensure that they all feel personally involved.

*Phase 3 - Recruitment and Retention:* In the final step, potential volunteers are approached directly (face-to-face or by phone) with a view to recruitment. If successful, they are assigned vacant positions and measures are taken to retain them. Finally, the club documents the procedure and measures, and uses this documentation to formulate a mission statement for volunteer work.

## **5 Method**

A case study design was chosen to analyse decision-making processes in VSCs associated with an external advisory programme. Case studies are particularly suitable for examining the whys and wherefores of a process and pursuing an explorative approach (Yin, 2009). Because the review of the literature showed that there are currently no studies on this issue, this study is explorative.



Therefore, a case study is the appropriate design for examining real, complex processes and interrelations in this organizational context (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). It also permits the description of phenomena that are not clearly delimited from other phenomena (Slack and Parent, 2005; Yin, 2009). Guided by behavioural decision-making theory, case studies can deliver findings on real organizational situations (Stake, 2005). It is precisely this advantage of being able to map complex situations in real life that has led to an increasing use of case study analyses in the field of sports management. They allow a phenomenon to be viewed holistically (high internal validity) and make it possible to compare different sample cases with each other (Skille, 2013).

### ***Data Generation and Analysis***

Accepting the premise that the case-study approach contributes to (exploratory) theory building permits the use of qualitative research instruments. Problem-centred interviews are appropriate here because they provide valuable insights into decision-making processes within the sports clubs involved. These were conducted with 10 of the 12 VSCs participating in the advisory programme. These clubs were all taking part in an SFA pilot project (limitation up to 12 participating clubs) in 2012/13 on introducing a new advisory programme for football clubs (see Table 1). All cases included in this study shared similar characteristics such as the type of leadership (purely by voluntary board members) and sporting performance at the grassroots level. Interviews were semi-structured (i.e. a guideline with questions in which the actual wording and order varied) so that they were flexible enough (i.e. interviewees could respond freely to questions and introduce new topics) to permit both a deductive and an inductive approach in the subsequent data analysis (Mayring, 2010, p. 54). Club members participating in the workshops were chosen for the expert interviews because they were the recipients of the external advice and they were the ones serving as mediators and translators of the external input when implementing it in their own clubs.

Due to their good access to information and their comprehensive knowledge on the clubs and their procedures, these key individuals (experts) were able to describe the processes, and particularly the decision-making processes, in the desired context during club-specific interviews. Several representatives of the clubs were interviewed to obtain different perspectives on the process while also collecting comprehensive information about the procedures within the club (to counter the problem of recall bias). Interviews focused on how the decision-making influenced the working process. Thus, the guideline was composed of three phases: initiation and analysis (e.g. analysis of voluntary work), communication and information (e.g. information within the team, conducting a campaign on behalf of volunteering), and recruitment and retention (e.g. recruiting a promotional team, approaching potential volunteers systematically and personally, allocating and retaining new volunteers). Regarding these phases, the interviewees were asked to give information on what decisions were made and how they affected the action taken. That is to say, the ten clubs examined how they made use of the advisory programme offered by the MFiF project and how they were trying to translate these inputs into the club's operations and to implement measures. The period of investigation was the nine months stretching from the beginning of the workshops until the time of the interviews.

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The interviews were subsequently analysed on the basis of Mayring's (2010) qualitative content analysis. This approach guarantees a high level of intersubjective comprehensibility and comparability. The first step was to read all interviews carefully several times and to code them flexibly enough to allow new and differentiated sub-categories to be detected in the material. Sentences and paragraphs (units of analysis) addressing the decision-making processes were

selected. The second step was to assign these paragraphs to sub-categories using Atlas.ti© software (Version 7). Findings on each subcategory were summarized and allocated to the specific phase of the advisory programme. This inductive approach was then combined with a deductive procedure by assigning the sub-categories to the existing main categories (Creswell, 2013). The main categories in this study are the four streams of the garbage can model.

Two aspects of the findings were used to assess the quality criteria of this use of qualitative research methods: (1) intersubjective confirmability and (2) validity (Lamnek, 2005).

Intersubjective confirmability was achieved by following a systematic and specific theoretical methodology and strict analytical rules (Mayring, 2010). The validity of the findings was determined in terms of the communicative validity (Flick, 1999): two researchers analysed the interviews independently, the results were reflected upon critically, and then merged. In addition, a cumulative validation was carried out by reflecting on and integrating the findings into the theory (Lamnek, 2005). Attention was also paid to selective plausibility (Flick, 1999, p. 239) when presenting the results. This means that the findings were documented by displaying selected interview passages.

## **6 Results**

The findings from the ten case studies are reported in summary form in two parts. The first part describes the degree and extent of the implementation in the ten case studies. After grouping the clubs, the second step examines the decision-making process. Theory-based categories are used to present the decision-making process based on one representative case from each group while dividing the process into the three phases of the MFIF project.

### ***Degree of implementation of MFiF method by specific clubs***

This section describes and illustrates the procedures and measures adopted by the clubs (see Table 2). The clubs taking part in the MFiF project can be divided into three groups based on the degree of implementation:

#### *Group 1 – Low implementation of the external input*

Although these clubs took part in the workshops and analysed the volunteer work in their club, they subsequently reduced their involvement in the project and stopped pursuing its goals. Accordingly, they neither launched a volunteering campaign nor organized a personal appeal to new volunteers as proposed by the external advisory programme. This group of clubs did not recruit any additional volunteers by means of newly established methods because they continued to use their existing practices. The external input was acknowledged, but it did not lead to any concrete measures during the time under investigation. Three clubs can be assigned to this group (Clubs 1–3, see Table 2). They stopped implementing the input once they had analysed their volunteer work.

#### *Group 2 – Partial implementation of the external input*

The second group also analysed the volunteer work in the club but then continued to implement the programme. In the next step, these clubs developed a volunteering campaign and agreed on measures for communication within the club. However, this communication was the last step in implementing the campaign. Although the clubs had launched the volunteering campaign, they did not follow this up by approaching individual club members systematically. Accordingly, only a few volunteers were recruited through the MFiF project. Two clubs (Clubs 4 and 5, see Table 2) can be assigned to this group.

#### *Group 3 – Rigorous implementation of the external input*

In contrast to the other two groups, this third group assimilated the external input and developed and implemented it in its own distinctive way. After analysing their volunteer work and the design of a volunteer campaign, these clubs put together a promotional team that approached club members and the parents of youth athletes systematically and tried to recruit them for volunteer activities. Five clubs were assigned to this group (Clubs 6–10, see Table 2). They ended up actually recruiting many new volunteers by following a combined strategy (face-to-face and by phone).

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***Relations between club-specific decision-making processes and degree of implementation of external input***

Focusing on three cases reduces complexity and helps to present the decision-making processes in a comprehensive manner. The representative cases used are Club 1 (from Group 1), Club 4 (from Group 2), and Club 6 (from Group 3). These cases show strong similarities to the other cases in their corresponding groups, and all three cases can be reconstructed on a solid database. Shared and different decision-making practices are described first, followed by an explanation of which decision-making processes seemed to be successful for the club-specific implementation of the external input and which constellations within the clubs fostered or hindered this process. The next section summarizes the four streams in the three different phases of the MFiF project (see Tables 3–5).

*(1)Phase of the project: Initiation and Analysis*  
*Problems*

In the first phase, the project teams received a great deal of information on the organization of the external advisory programme. To some extent, this abundance of input overwhelmed the clubs and it was too much for them to assimilate and process (see Table 3). This resulted in a drawn out orientation and analysis process. In contrast to the other groups, Group 1 produced no written documents in the form of a project plan, and the decisions made during the process were not recorded in writing either. This led to problems in setting and meeting deadlines and in coordinating the further procedure. After initiating the process, the clubs began to analyse their volunteer management and realized that this stocktaking could not be done within the project group alone. In addition, involvement in the MFiF project used up much of the available time of club representatives and required additional effort. These resources were not always available, because representatives were also involved in the day-to-day operations of all clubs.

Such a lack of priority setting was typical of Groups 1 and 2. This was associated with deciding at short notice to take part in the project, and with a lack of or a low level of involvement on the part of the club's board as a whole. As a result, the project received little support within the club and moved ahead more slowly.

#### *Actors*

Particularly in Group 3, the leading individual adopted a coordinating role within the project group and delegated tasks to other members of the project team and other club members when necessary. This broad assignment of duties and the involvement of many different persons distinguished Group 3 from other groups. In comparison, the project teams in Group 1 were often inadequate in their scope, sometimes consisting of only a single person, and were therefore unable to manage the necessary tasks. In many clubs, this lack of participants imposed a major strain on the project group during the initial phase and sometimes even overtaxed it.

#### *Decision-making opportunities*

In the first phase of the project, both formal and informal decision-making opportunities were utilized. Because the idea of the project was usually introduced to the club by a committed club member and then promoted by the club, the project promoters used the decision-making opportunities available through their work in the club. In most cases, the decision to register for the external advisory programme was reached together with other interested members on an informal level. As a rule, the idea was then presented at a board meeting and discussed in greater detail, and the implementation of the project was then decided in this context. To carry out more extensive analyses of the club as a whole, Groups 2 and 3 made use of formal decision-making opportunities such as board meetings at which representatives of the different sectors were present.

### *Solutions*

The analysis of the current volunteer management provided an overview of existing problems and potential starting points for the subsequent recruitment activities. To support this analysis, Group 3 got other people involved who were either in close contact with the volunteers or who were familiar with the procedures in the club (board, committees). This made it possible to analyse the situation from different perspectives and list vacancies.

To avoid overburdening the members of the project team, clubs in Groups 2 and 3 took advantage of the breaks between competitions (summer and winter break), when they were under comparatively little strain from sports operations, to analyse their volunteer work.

Alongside this advice-centred procedure, some clubs also opted for alternative solution strategies. Particularly those clubs that felt little pressure to act and saw correspondingly little need for action (Group 1) largely rejected the external advisory programme. These clubs continued with their own tried and tested methods, and although they continued to participate in the workshops after reaching this decision, they did not intend to take any further steps.

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*(2) Phase of the project: Communication and information*

*Problems*

Because club representatives did not consider themselves to be experts in the field of communication, their selection of communication tools was guided by the templates and inputs provided during the workshops, and they turned to people with expertise in the field for their implementation. From its conception, through its elaboration, to its implementation, the communication campaign required many resources. Indeed, although the templates and the input from the workshops simplified the process, much effort was still required. In Groups 1 and 2, this considerable effort together with the restricted resources led to delays and the need to readjust deadlines.

*Actors*

For the second phase, communication and information, clubs primarily looked for people with the necessary expertise and technical competence to design and implement the communication campaign. As a result, they drew on the specific skills of individual members of the project groups or club during this phase, and these members then implemented the campaign ideas. Groups 2 and 3 were mostly able to recruit such specialists internally. However, some clubs hired external specialists for the visual implementation of the campaign. Although these external specialists did not contribute as volunteers, they did have ties to the club and offered special terms for the visual implementation of the campaign. One striking aspect of this was that the project leader within the club assumed the role of opinion leader, took charge of the process, and pushed the implementation ahead. The same individual also coordinated communication within the project group and with the board. This ensured that necessary tasks were completed and the board was kept up to date.



### *Decision-making opportunities*

Members used many informal decision-making opportunities to prepare the communication campaign during the communication and information phase. They developed and exchanged ideas, especially via electronic media, and assembled the individual tools. They used formal decision-making opportunities to finalize the prepared measures and to inform the club's management.

### *Solutions*

In the second phase, Groups 2 and 3 turned to the club members and the parents of the youth members via their existing communication channels. Afterwards, they launched a targeted and coordinated communication campaign using print and digital media to emphasize the procedure within the club and to highlight the importance and necessity of honorary positions. This increased people's awareness of the work of volunteers and raised their status. In addition, the clubs introduced new communication tools. These were designed to increase awareness of the importance of the procedure and the urgent need to recruit new volunteers. To carry out the communication campaign within the club, members adopted suitable templates from the workshop and personalized them to fit the intended target groups.

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### *(3) Phase: Recruitment and retention*

Due to the rejection of the external advisory programme, Group 1 did not take any further measures and will no longer be described in this section.

### *Problems*

Whereas the clubs in Groups 1 and 2 stopped or were delayed in implementing the programmes, Group 3 recruited a promotional team to approach and win over new volunteers

personally. However, coordinating and selecting suitable occasions for specific target groups along with the high demands placed on the promotional team posed considerable problems for the clubs. The time demands were particularly high for the promotional team, and tight schedules prevented members of the club from participating in it. Another limitation to winning over new volunteers was the interruption of sports operations in the breaks between seasons. During this tournament-free time, activities within the clubs were reduced, personal contacts were less frequent, and opportunities to contact potential volunteers were temporarily unavailable to the promotional team.

#### *Actors*

The project teams in Group 3 set up specific promotional teams to make personal contacts with prospective volunteers. These teams were composed primarily of members of the board and experienced members of the club who knew their club well and had a relationship with the defined target group. Alternatively, other clubs in Group 3 used the existing project team to approach people. This further increased the workload and the demands made on the project team, because it called for new competencies such as conversational skills.

#### *Decision-making opportunities*

Fundamental decisions on determining recruitment practices, such as setting up a promotional team or organizing the occasions at which recruitment would take place, were prepared by the project group and approved at board meetings. Group 3 also used a board meeting to train promotional teams. Afterwards, the project groups or promotional teams continued working autonomously and used informal decision-making opportunities to agree on the implementation process.

#### *Solutions*

Because the project teams were unable to cope with the work involved in approaching people on their own, they put together promotional teams that took over this job and contacted people

personally. The promotional teams looked for people with close connections to different groups in the club and were therefore known to these groups. In addition to approaching people face-to-face, some clubs in Group 3 contacted potential volunteers by phone. This gave access to people who could not be reached on the club premises or at certain events. It proved to be a particularly good way to contact the parents of youth players. The project teams prepared dossiers (including checklists, questionnaires, and tips) to help the promotional teams offer tasks that would fit the persons contacted and help to recruit them as new volunteers. One strategy that proved to be helpful was to prioritize vacancies. This structured the lists and made it easier for the promotional team to focus on what is important. In this phase of approaching and winning over new volunteers, input from the workshops and an exchange of experiences with other clubs also proved helpful. Finally, the results and the success of the recruitment measures were communicated to the entire club and new volunteers were assigned to their tasks.

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## **7 Discussion**

The aim of this study was to analyse the decision-making processes and the underlying practices of VSCs in order to better understand how they receive and implement external advisory input. Proceeding from the bounded rationality of decision-making processes in such organizations, decisions in relation to an external advisory programme were analysed on the basis of the garbage can model. This proved to be a suitable framework with which to grasp the underlying decision-making processes theoretically and access them empirically. Furthermore, the case study design with its qualitative approach was an appropriate method both to track the process of implementing

the external advisory programme in VSCs and to understand and explain the complex decision-making practices in more detail.

Different aspects of the present findings support previous research on decision-making processes in VSCs. First, they confirm the reactive behaviour among VSCs reported in other studies (e.g. Fahrner, 2009; Nagel, 2008, Schlesinger *et al.*, 2014). In relation to the external advisory programme, decisions were often a response to external inputs (e.g. advice, templates) rather than a club-specific strategy. Furthermore, they adopted the best practice examples to fit the specific situation in their club and executed the external input accordingly (“imitation”; see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Second, as already reported in other studies (see e.g. Amis *et al.*, 2004; O’Brien and Slack, 2003, for general club policy; Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013, for corporate social responsibility), the decision-making process was determined by “key actors”. The project team or the project leader pushed the implementation process forward and selected favoured solutions and strategies (e.g. communication measures, recruiting strategy). These key actors enabled the introduction of new practices. As an alternative, the clubs that rejected new practices reverted to their old tried and tested volunteer management routines.

The above-mentioned findings are also in line with the concept of bounded rationality (e.g. Nagel, 2008; Slack and Parent, 2005). Although the VSCs followed a clear schedule and a structured roadmap, no club mentioned that the decision to participate in the advisory programme was taken after an internal strategic analysis. They saw it as a chance for improvements in the domain of volunteer management and registered for the programme because the SFA offered corresponding support. Furthermore, the clubs that pulled out of the process of implementing the new management concept indicated that this decision was a consequence of a lack of (personnel) resources. The given orientation and being guided by the available resources make the assumption of bounded rationality even more plausible.

Despite the standardized advisory input, the pictures that emerged in the ten clubs after completing the workshop differed greatly. The number of newly recruited volunteers ranged from 0 to 53 (see Table 1). This indicates that it is possible to achieve a marked increase in the number of volunteers in a comparatively short period, but that the use of external advisory services to support the club does not guarantee that new volunteers will be found. The findings indicated that the way in which VSCs made their decisions did not necessarily relate to the solution or to the effectiveness in dealing with recruiting-related problem states.

From the perspective of reactive behaviour, it is the problems that determine the decision-making process. The VSCs participating in the advisory programme are having to face the issues and the upcoming challenges that are being discussed. These different problems are of concern to all clubs in a comparable way. However, although they face similar problems, the pressure they exert and consequently the priority assigned to tackling them differ greatly. These disparities have a direct influence on the solutions chosen later in the process. Clubs with low (perceived) problem pressure retain the same structure, whereas clubs with a strong need for change implement new measures and apply more external support.

When it comes to the participants in the decision-making process, many similarities can be observed. Dominant key actors pushed the implementation process forward and secured the commitment and engagement of other members. Major differences between the three groups were the number of persons involved and the delegation of tasks to them. Whereas key actors led all clubs, those who implemented the new concept (Group 3) were especially good at gaining support from the club board as well as from a broader range of functionaries. Thanks to this internal support, these clubs were able to handle the workload and could activate more personnel resources when needed. At the same time, the inclusion of leading characters created confidence and transparency – thereby reducing internal resistance and increasing the freedom of action of the

project team (Nagel and Schlesinger, 2012). However, the key actors in Group 1, and partly in Group 2, were overburdened. That is, on the one hand, key individuals sustained the progress within the club; but, on the other hand, the concentration on key individuals could also lead to the rejection of changes and new practices. These findings are in line with other research reporting a positive effect of participation of club members on recruiting new volunteers (Østerlund, 2013) and showing that the success of the implementation depends strongly on the participation of a sufficient number of club members (Nutt, 1998).

With regard to the decision-making opportunities, no group-specific differences were observed. All clubs used both formal and informal decision-making opportunities. To accelerate progress, informal meetings proved appropriate for decisions on technical issues, whereas strategic decisions were often taken in board meetings.

The solutions included a broad range of different actions and measures. This breadth of solutions reflected the different approaches of the participating clubs. Whereas some clubs included and adopted the solutions provided by the advisory programme, other clubs stuck to their previous, proven practices. The analysis in terms of groups was particularly good at revealing these differences. It revealed the diverse measures taken to implement the external inputs and showed how a standardized external advisory programme can be applied variably. The clubs subscribed voluntarily, and initially announced their intention to implement a new volunteer management practice. However, the analysis showed that participation in an external advisory programme does not necessarily lead to either new volunteers or a change in voluntary management. Not all clubs were able to recruit new volunteers by applying the external advisory programme. Consequently, the efficacy and effectiveness of the decision (the problem solution) within the advisory programme varied greatly. Additionally, the necessary solutions for a rigorous implementation of new recruiting measures require a willingness to change current strategies and perform an individual examination

and therefore a club-specific adjustment of the external advisory inputs. To enable the implementation process, clubs also have to provide sufficient material resources (for the communication campaign). Moreover, a partial formalization of the course of action increases the effectivity and the sustainability of the programme. External advisory programmes lead to the successful recruitment of new volunteers only when these aspects are considered.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Although the present study provides insights and starting points, there is a strong need for further theoretical and empirical analyses because of the many open questions and the limitations of the current findings. Moreover, as for case studies and qualitative research in general, any generalized conclusions are limited by the small sample size. Applying a qualitative design also makes it impossible to replicate the results (Skille, 2013; Stake, 2005). Additionally, this article focuses exclusively on football clubs. Nonetheless, further analyses based on case study designs – especially with sport clubs that could be considered to differ fundamentally from those included here – could assess the utility of these findings, specify the characteristics found so far, and, above all, trace other relevant aspects of decision-making processes. These should focus particularly on comparable decision-making situations (e.g. in relation to other external advisory programmes) and analyse the different practices of clubs and the influence of club characteristics in more depth. Future research should focus on the effectiveness and the quality of the advisory programme in order to ascertain what has a positive effect on the participating clubs and on the outcome. Whereas some clubs were able to recruit many new volunteers in a short space of time, other are still threatened by major problems that they have been unable to reduce. This makes it necessary to ask how far the external advisory programme is or is not effective in terms of dealing with personnel problems. What measures and inputs have a direct impact on the VSCs? And what advisory

measures are key factors for a successful implementation? Hence, further research should also examine the parameters that restrict or promote the organizational learning that will lead to successful processes of organizational change.

### ***Practical implications for advising sport clubs***

Practical implications of the present study address two different levels. First, on a sports club level, it becomes clear that a few key individuals drive the process, take responsibility for the upcoming solution, and therefore shape the decision-making processes in the context of an external advisory programme. Although these key individuals are important for the decision-making and implementation process, the support and participation of other members of the club is just as crucial. Sport club management has to realize that after taking the first steps and choosing the head of the project, the next step has to be to win the support and commitment of more club members if it wants a sustainable application and implementation of an external advisory programme. Moreover, it is important for VSCs to adapt and implement the advice themselves and develop a target-group-specific recruitment strategy (see Egli *et al.*, 2014, on types of volunteers). Only by acting upon the advice and implementing the corresponding measures can sport clubs turn recommendations into organizational know-how and ensure that such knowledge also remains available for future use (Willke, 2009). This requires the appropriate structures, procedures, and regulatory systems.

Second, from the perspective of a sport association (as provider of advisory services), the usefulness and sustainability of an advisory programme does not just come from a good concept and helpful templates, but also from the way the association gains access to the sport clubs. If it has an understanding of the underlying decision-making processes, the sport association can optimize its interaction and communication with the associated clubs and their key individuals by providing functional decision-making opportunities and proven solutions. By establishing effective and



interactive communication measures, the associations can secure an early involvement of key individuals and take the first step towards helping a sport club to recruit new volunteers.

In conclusion, contemporary sport club advisory programmes need to apply club-specific decision-making patterns and logics while simultaneously considering how to balance these characteristics with the standardized advisory inputs provided.

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