

Multi-level governance in sport – Understanding sport federations’ capabilities and barriers for coordinating decentralized entities

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Introduction: To achieve their organizational objectives, national sport federations (NSF) depend on the collaboration of their member organizations, in particular regional entities and local sports clubs. In this regard, regional federations are expected to promote young talents or to implement health-related concepts and clubs are expected to run grassroots programs. However, sports clubs as well as regional federations enjoy a high degree of autonomy and their goals may differ from the NSF’s objectives. Therefore, coordinating decentralized entities’ goals and strategies as well as implementing joint programs throughout all organizational levels is an important issue for NSF’s management. However, the existing literature in this field is limited. In this regard, O’Boyle and Hassan (2014, 308) note, “it is unknown how NPSOs [non profit sport organizations] can manage imperative performance dimensions within their organisations to ensure the sustainability of a consistently high-performing organisation.” Thus, this study attempts to shed light on the following research questions: *What are sport federations’ capabilities to coordinate decentralized entities and which barriers exist for implementing joint policies on regional and local levels?*

Conceptual framework: Sport federations’ governance issues can be spotlighted by bringing policy implementation processes in mind: Decentralized entities shall be aware of and attentive towards NSF’s policy, they shall both understand and implement respective goals/strategies in the NSF’s sense (Skille, 2008, May et al., 2013). To get an insight into how sport federations’ management can increase awareness, understanding and implementation of coordinated policy across both regional and local levels, Willke’s (2001) distinction of regulative media (i.e. power, money and knowledge) is applied. As conceptual tool, Willke’s heuristic helps to reflect coordination mechanisms and to identify opportunities as well as limitations of governance instruments used by sport federations.

Empirical strategy: This case-study research investigates governance issues using the example of the German Swimming Federation (DSV) and one of its 18 regional governing bodies (Schwimmverband Württemberg), representing about 200 clubs (out of about 2.400 DSV-wide).

The DSV's multi-level organizational setting with its democratic system of governance can be seen as indicative for (European) sport federations' structures. The empirical design comprises seven semi-structured interviews with honorary board members and paid management staff representing the federation on national and regional level. Governance issues are examined in the context of high-performance sport, focusing on federations' governance instruments such as training schemes, talent identification and promotion policies as well as coaches' formation and further education.

Results and discussion: Event though the analysis focuses on a single case, some interesting generalizations can be drawn, as the focus lies on governance characteristics following structural regularities. In general, it can be assumed that the same structural causes are likely to produce the same governance conditions (Enjolras & Waldahl, 2010; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010). Preliminary results indicate that money and primarily knowledge seem to be appropriate regulative media in the sport federations' complex, multi-level governance setting. To improve sport federations' knowledge-based governance instruments, the development of consensus and shared values involving all levels and decentralized entities should be emphasized.

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