

THE NORWEGIAN SPORTS CITY PROGRAM'S SOCIAL BENEFITS

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Context

The Norwegian Sports City Program (SCP) was initiated by a Government white paper in 1992 (St. meld. nr. 41, 1991-1992), and since 1993 activities have been implemented. It is based on the Government's belief in realizing social objectives through sport, which might be seen as a part of revitalizing the significance of civil society as a key to increasing interpersonal contact and developing democracy (Putnam, 1995). The SCP was meant to prevent youth from drug abuse and criminal involvement, and to work for social integration. Considering the Sports City Program as social policy (Hill, 1997), there is one special aspect: it is implemented by the Norwegian Olympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NOC) – which is to a high degree voluntary, and achievement oriented at every level. The Sports City Program follows the NOC structure through district sport associations and local sport councils down to sport clubs. Research has shown how it has passed through different phases in state-sport organization relationships (Skille, 2004a), and how there have been doubts about whether social policy can be delivered by an organization like the NOC (Skille, 2004b).

But what about Alfred, a downtown Oslo adolescent, with a different *habitus* than we usually find among sporting adolescents in Norway? What is his experience of the program? This paper will discuss the SCP as a case study of social policy, and scrutinize the question of how effective it is to 'implement civil society in a top down perspective'. Theoretically, it leans on a model from political science, which declares that effective implementation ultimately relies on the grass-root bureaucrat or practitioner who meets clients face-to-face on the street (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975).

Methods

This paper presents results from a larger study. It is based on two sets of methods; firstly, documentary analysis to identify the official Norwegian attitude to sport as a societal tool, and secondly, data gathered from grass root level, comprising interviews with 8 leaders and coaches of sport clubs and 10 adolescents participating in activities which received funding from the SCP. My focus will be, however, on the informant called Alfred, who had a special story in respect of social/political issues that sheds light on broader political and organizational matters.

Results

Documentary

There are many, widespread motives for Government to fund sport, and, different ministries hold it as a possible tool for reaching their goals. The health report, of course, pointed to the health value of sports and physical activity, especially related physiological benefits and preventing somatic diseases. A report from the Ministry of Child and Family Affairs emphasized sport's potential for social belonging, meaning (-ful leisure) and identity development. A report about immigrants, from the Ministry of Local and Regional Development, held sport as an arena for integration; through community development and self-realization. Taking the most challenging urban areas with regard to immigration and integration, the SCP is mentioned in particular. In short: it is apparently assumed that everything should work out well if the majority of the population participates in sport.

The specific sport reports from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs hold both intrinsic – sport participation valuable in itself as another cultural activity (through joy, fun, mastery and achievement), and instrumental objectives (as above) to be important for the public sector's involvement (St. meld. nr.14, 1999-2000: 36-7). Thus, the trend is an increasing belief in sport's social benefits.

Survey

Regarding sport club leaders and coaches, every one of the interviewees emphasized the concept of a low threshold for participation. What a low threshold is, however, may differ from club to club, and also between leaders and participants in the same activity. In the two downtown sport halls where I conducted interviews, the low threshold coming out of the SCP was related to the attitude of the leaders and coaches. They had to be just as much social servants as coaches, while the aim of their

mission clearly was connected to getting youth off the street. The funding from the SCP made possible work that would not have been done otherwise, through paying coaches and keeping membership subscriptions to a minimum. Connected to the latter, there lies an assumption that parental involvement is absent. While the leaders see themselves as much as social servants as sport leaders, the participants do not necessarily have that feeling. And perhaps that is a precondition for participation, that they do not feel themselves as social clients – but rather as worthy, full sport participants.

For the participants, the importance lay in the elements of *accessibility* and *freedom*. It is crucial for Alfred and his friends that the sport activity is close to their home, the internet-café and the metro station - places they usually hang around during leisure time. Regarding freedom, the point is that the activity fits with the rest of their lives. To practice once a week, and play a match once a week during the season feels suitable. One of Alfred's friends, who used to play soccer, underlined this point. He used to be considered a talent, with great opportunities for a future career at a higher level. When he became a junior (turning 16) the demands increased, including more frequent training. Combined with the fact his football club was some distance from home and school, he quit. He could not use all his time after school for sport, time he usually divided into work, sport, and hanging round with his peers.

So far, everything looks according to plan. The first interviews – with Alfred and his friend – were conducted just before a summer holiday, with the intention of keeping contact and interviewing several other team mates of Alfred after school – and most organized leisure activities – started up again. However, when I called Alfred's sport hall to get the timetable to get in contact, the team no longer existed, because as the leader of the sport hall and the sport club expressed it, adolescents of this age (16-19 years) were too hard to handle. Therefore their priority will be offer sports to younger kids, to 'catch them' earlier, and (assumably) to have a chance to raise them according to the conventions of a sport club and to be a 'proper' citizen.

Discussion/Implications

While the Government's goal with the SCP was to meet social and political objectives, it may suffer from using the voluntary and achievement-oriented NOC as implementer. Thus, the leaders and coaches of the sport club are of major importance, because they are the ones meeting and treating the SCP's targets, youth on the street. There is a discrepancy of logics when sport volunteers are given the role of professional street-level bureaucrats on mission from the Government (cf. Hill, 1997). Despite the club volunteers being genuinely interested in giving adolescents in some of the 'worst' parts of the city a sport offer, and a strong belief in its social benefits of sports, it is understandable that some leaders expressed this as a challenge that was sometimes too big, as described above. I think that, if the Government wants social/political effects from sport that exceed the effects coming out of physical activity and participation in organizations, other forms of implementation than the NOC-approach must be considered. Neighbourhood renewal through sport depends on the willingness of the grass root implementer (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975), and cannot be forced through by a top-down policy. Social capital among people has to develop in a local context, based on local initiatives and individuals (Putnam, 1995). What can be done from the top is to grant money to support local initiatives.

References

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