

(SP) THE GEOGRAPHICAL EMBEDDEDNESS OF PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL CLUBS IN NORWAY

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Introduction

Within social theory there is a growing attention towards a “middle-ground” position arguing for a co-evolutionary dynamics between actors, practice and context (Scott 1995, Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003). This implies recognition of an interdependency between institutional set-up and organisational practice. The agency of an organisation is structured by its context or institutional framework, but is simultaneously contributing towards the development of this framework. Organisations act through institutions, rather than as blind followers of rules or as fully autonomous actors (Amin and Thrift 1994). This paper elaborates the agency – structure complex through an analysis of the interdependency between top football clubs and their local context.

Over the last century, football has constituted itself as the world’s game. Football has become an emerging international business with an institutionalized community of organizational actors that establish, maintain and transform the rules of the business across nations and boundaries (Holt et al. 2005). In this paper, we discuss the organisation of Norwegian top football clubs. Similar to professional football in other European countries Norwegian top football has experienced increased commercialization since the early 1990s (Gammelsæter and Ohr 2002, Morrow 2003). This development has been characterised by a growth in turn-over, the development of larger and more complex organisation and a more prominent position for economical institutions and market transactions. The conventional view is that professionalisation and commercialisation has resulted in a de-coupling or dis-embedding of the single club from its local context. However, by analysing the spatiality of the club – environment linkages, and the inter-dependency between football clubs and its institutional contexts, we put this assumption to a test. How is the practice of a football club influenced by its local context, which linkages are tying the club to the region and which local resources are of importance for the operation of the club?

Methods

The data for our discussion is taken from an ongoing project on the organization of top football clubs in Norway. Several top clubs have been investigated by a research group. Each case study is based on several interviews with persons that are or have been part of the club or connected to the club (for instance managing director, marketing consultant, accountant, board members, investors, sponsors etc.). In addition, we have analysed existing documents and literature.

Discussion

In our empirical analyses we have discussed different aspects of the geographical embeddedness or dis-embeddedness of football clubs. Several of our selected club have recently stated that they have become aware of the importance of re-developing their local image. One example is Tromsø IL, that is northernmost club in the Norwegian top league. It was promoted to the top division for the first time in 1985. In 2001 Tromsø was relegated from the top league, but although it was promoted the next season, an understanding had emerged among its representatives that the club needed to strengthen its position in the region

to keep playing in the top league. The club wanted to develop a more efficient and professional organisation and to attract more capital, knowledge, and supplies of young talent. This spurred the development of a comprehensive strategy process, kicked off in 2002. Club representatives promote the impression that the process and the subsequent action plan are deeply rooted in the club. Contrary to many other top clubs, Tromsø runs a large youth division. A key member of the organisation states that “*we want to grow in members, we want to expand the youth division, and we want even more people working as volunteers for the club*”. The team, to a large extent, is seen as an extension of this mutualism as the club strategy states that the team “*should mainly be based on players from Northern Norway*”. In general, Tromsø have tried to organise the supply of critical resources through alliances and collective projects between the club, public authorities and diverse local profit and non-profit organizations. Support from public authorities, residents and local industry is essential when the club engages in new projects, such as stadium upgrading.

Another example of an increase local awareness is Aalesund FK. Until 2002 Aalesund was known as the largest Norwegian city that has never had a team in the top division. But that year the club was promoted to the top division for the first time. The club is embedded in a business culture based on a legacy of industrious yet internationally oriented entrepreneurs and businessmen creating businesses from their own hard work, risk-taking and stamina. In this culture there has been little space for entertainment and pastime, and whilst the many local football clubs always have attracted some funds from sponsors as part of the sponsors’ community policies, local businesses have hesitated to use huge funds in football. The image of professional football as consisting of over-paid young play-station-playing players obviously clashes with the industriousness of the local business culture of which Aalesund depends for revenue. When Aalesund launched a semi-professional model, which is extraordinary for a club at the highest level in Norway, requiring that their players study or work part-time, it was most likely not developed as a clever move directed at aligning the club’s policies and practices with local cultural values with the intention of attracting more revenue from local sponsors. It is more likely that the model was the upshot of the combination of a management that was embedded in this local culture and the reminder found in the backdrop of the financial problems in many of the top clubs in Norway around at the beginning of 2000. However, the club seem to have strengthened its position in the region. At the turn of the century, the club management was happy with 7-800 gates for league matches. In April 2005 the club inaugurated its new 11.000-seater stadium, and despite fighting at the bottom end of the league table, almost every home match was a sell-out in the 2005 season.

A third example of the interconnection between a place and its football club is Sogndal. The club started to develop a key position in the community when it as a club on the third league level defied the odds to be runner-up in the Norwegian FA Cup in 1976. Since 1990 Sogndal Football has qualified for the top league in nine seasons, which is extraordinary for a place that counts about 6500 inhabitants. The art of networking, i.e. trust based relationship between actors occupying various key position in the society, has been activated several times to promote the development of Sogndal Football. It is also a core element behind a recent development project, Fosshaugane Campus, which is a multifunctional stadium project developed in close cooperation with local education institutions. Sogndal Football has been the key actor or “engine” of the project. This role of local entrepreneur relates to the development of a professional administrative management at the club. The administration has a vision of upgrading the club such that it can follow current trends in Norwegian and international football. A multi-function stadium that utilizes multiple sources of income to increase revenue is seen as an essential feature for a modern football club (Morrow, 2003), but these new multi-function stadiums of European football are located in cities and

metropolitan areas of a far larger scale than Sogndal. This makes Sogndal Fotball a special case.

Conclusion

Our discussion has highlighted the importance of local networking. It has also illustrated that a football club can relate to its community in various ways. Over the last century, football has become an emerging international business where rules and principles are spread across nations and boundaries (Holt et al. 2005). Despite such tendencies towards international homogenisation, our cases illustrate a certain degree of heterogeneity in organisational practice. At least at a national level.

Another assumption within the literature is that the internationalisation and professionalisation of an organisational field, such as the football field, implies a one sided process towards geographical dis-embeddedness (see for instance Ohmae 1990, Giddens 1991). The various way our selected top clubs are embedded in their geographical context illustrate that this assumption is a simplification. Giddens describe dis-embedding as a state where social relations are detached from their localized context of interaction. This implies that the production of culture and organisational identities has changed to a large degree from being a concern of communities to a global affair. However, we will argue that the transformation of a field should be seen as a form of recasting of social, political, and economic processes both “upwards” and “downwards” in scale, rather than being reduced to an upscaling of processes from the local to the global scale.

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