

Low threshold indoor sport facilities on neighbourhood level. An analysis of 'sport hangars' in Flanders (Belgium)

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Aim of paper and research questions

This paper describes a study on a new phenomenon in Flanders (Belgium), which is the provision of accessible local sport facilities for specific target groups on neighbourhood level. The purpose was to analyse the functioning of so-called 'sport hangars'.

Literature review

Since the 1960's, the primary task of local sport services in Flanders is to stimulate sport participation among its population as a whole and to compensate for voids in the existing local sport provision (De Knop et al., 2006). This has resulted in the determination of several specific target groups in local sport promotion based on specific characteristics (e.g., youth, disabled persons, elderly, women, ethnic minorities, ...). Despite several sport promotional efforts of the (local) government over the years, to date, a number of these groups are still not or to a limited extent involved in sport (Scheerder, 2004).

One of the key issues in reaching problem groups through sport promotion is to optimise the accessibility to the sport offer. Since the beginning of the 90's, an increasing number of municipalities in Flanders have therefore started to organise sport initiatives on neighbourhood level which became known as 'Neighbourhood Sport' (Theeboom & De Maesschalck, 2006). While in the first years, the neighbourhood sport offer primarily made use of open air facilities (i.e., public squares, parks and streets), the need grew to organise indoor activities which could provide a wider range of sports, as well as a more permanent offer. As the possibilities to use regular sport infrastructure are very limited because of the high utilisation rate by the organised sport, alternatives had to be found. In most cases, this has resulted in a more creative use of existing facilities that could be turned into sport infrastructure, such as the reuse of former factory warehouses, which became known as 'sport hangars'.

Research design and data analysis

Co-ordinators of all Flemish sport hangars (n=11) were contacted and were willing to co-operate to this study. Prior to a visit to each of the sport hangars, co-ordinators received a questionnaire by mail that was later used during the visits. The questionnaire (which was pilot tested) consisted of open as well as closed questions.

Results

Findings, among other things, indicated that most sport hangars can be found in the larger Flemish cities and are situated in socially deprived areas. A majority is located in renovated factory halls. Two are newly built, one makes use of a former school gym and another is situated in an indoor parking lot. More than half of the coordinators indicated that the hangar was opened because of the lack of indoor sport facilities in the neighbourhood. Other reasons that were mentioned referred to a distinct demand of the local community or were related to the fact

that the existing sport facilities were not available or adjusted to specific target groups. All but one of the hangars are owned by the local (municipal) government and co-financed through specific social funds. The majority of the respondents aim for socially deprived youth as their primary target group. Other target groups are youth in general, local sport clubs and social organisations. Only one coordinator indicated not to focus on a specific group. All respondents also indicated to aim for social integration.

Other data of this study relate to sport offer, communication, promotion, equipment, personnel, supervision, finances, user rates and the availability of various facilities (e.g., dressing room, shower, toilets, sport surface, grandstand, cafeteria, office, first aid room, etc.).

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Discussion and conclusion

The lack of sufficient sport infrastructure in socially deprived areas has forced neighbourhood sport providers in Flanders to look for an alternative infrastructural offer. Next to so-called 'light sport infrastructure' (e.g., small multifunctional outdoor sporting fields), in recent years a number of Flemish cities have started to provide low threshold indoor sport facilities on neighbourhood level. Findings from this study indicate that these so-called sport hangars are providing an alternative for specific target groups, which often have limited access to regular sport infrastructure. Although this can undoubtedly be regarded as a positive evolution because it can facilitate sport participation among these groups, it should not mean that efforts are no longer needed to work towards a better accessibility of all groups into the regular infrastructure. Nor should it mean that deprived groups should automatically settle for 'second hand' sport facilities.

References

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