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Making Regional Sports Tourism Networks Work: A Qualitative Network Analysis

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Introduction and objectives

Due to a heightened experience orientation as well as a growing health awareness in modern society, sports tourism has become a social phenomenon of great significance. Today, sports tourism is an integral part of almost every tourist region, and consequently, sports tourism is a matter of socio-economic, political, and ecological importance.

However, there is only limited scientific knowledge about structures and processes in the organisation of sports tourism. In order to manage Regional Sports Tourism (RST), knowledge about the structural functioning of RST is essential. Hence, it is necessary to understand the complex interaction of individual operations and the development of collective structures through regional cooperation in sports tourism.

The main challenge in managing RST is the intersectoral integration of a very heterogeneous group of actors. As a basic prerequisite for cooperation, Ritchie and Adair (2004) point out the need for an integrating policy to support the formation of organisational structures between sports and tourism. Despite the need for a functional cooperation of sports and tourism, there are almost no empirical findings about the conditions of the management of RST.

To analyse the management of RST, a theoretical framework which considers RST as an interorganisational network (ION) (Powell, 1990) was developed. IONs are characterised by three functional mechanisms: cooperation (based on trust), emergence and innovation (Weyer, 2000). A conceptual model for managing RST networks was developed, which served as the basis for an empirical analysis aiming to identify and explain specific processes of managing RST networks.

Methods

This analysis was part of a larger study on sports tourism structures and their management by the tourism organisations (TO) of Baden-Wuerttemberg (N=277), a federal state in South-Western Germany. For data collection, a standardised questionnaire was sent to all TOs, as focal actors of RST networks (response rate 35.7 %). Based on this data, an index of cooperation in sports tourism (intensity of cooperation in a network of 20 alteri) was calculated to identify substantial RST networks. Ten TOs were selected for a qualitative network analysis. Based on semi-structured interviews with the heads of the TOs, individual management actions were examined

using systematic and rule-guided, qualitative content analysis. The recorded and transcribed interviews were analysed by applying eight deductive categories (communication, cooperation, conflicts, consensus, strategy, knowledge, projects, evaluation), and relevant passages were coded and interpreted.

Results

It became evident that the function of a RST network corresponds to an ION. The basic functional mechanisms cooperation, emergence and innovation could be found within different management orientations and processes. However, processes of innovation (knowledge management, evaluation) were underdeveloped. Innovation seems to be a latent rather than a systematic process in the investigated networks. Furthermore, strategic elements of cooperation and the strategic development of emergent network structures were not well-planned in most cases.

The interviews also revealed the outstanding significance of communication processes. It is not only the fundamental process of cooperation, but the central management process within a highly flexible, dynamic and rather informal RST network. The development of a RST product and its marketing, network coordination and the sustainability of cooperation are based on different instruments of communication (e.g. face-to-face, emails, workshops, informal exchange). Moreover, the emergence of RST network structures (development and maintenance), conflict solving, consensus building, strategic action and knowledge creation and processing are based on these as well. Finally, a trustful atmosphere, as prerequisite for horizontal cooperation, is created through intensive processes of communication. In turn, reciprocal trust is the foundation for flexibility and the synergetic use of decentralised competencies and resources.

Conclusion

Normative elements like trust and a strategic planning of cooperation, product development and marketing of RST are essential for managing RST networks successfully. While the operational management of RST is well established, strategic and normative elements are deficient. To manage a RST network, the focal actor has to apply different means of communication. Another essential instrument is the establishment of an integrative strategy. However, the most important factor in making RST networks work is the building of trust within the networks of RST.

References

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