

MANAGING SPORT AS A WICKED PROBLEM

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Abstract

Introduction and aims

Houlihan (2005) pointed out that notwithstanding the increased interest of many governments in sport, 'sport policy remained on the margins' for a long time. In the early years 2000 other policy areas such as health care, frameworks and models were developed and revised, while only few academics did research in the analysis of sport policies (Houlihan, 2005). This was partly due to the fact that many academics in sport management questioned the relevance of their research for sport managers in the field (Weese, 1995). Another more essential aspect is that governments have different justifications for their support in sport. The five most common are health, economics, community development, social welfare and national pride (Chalip, 2006). The focus of most Western public sport policies can be summarized into two main objectives; the support of elite sport to enhance national performances and the encouragement of physic activity and competitive sport participation of the civilians, the so-called 'sport for all' movement (Hoye, Nicholson, & Houlihan, 2010). Taking these sometimes conflicting justifications and objectives in account, it is clear that problems associated with national sport policies are often complex and contested. To address these problems this paper wants to point out from a theoretical perspective what kind of sport policy approaches are advisable for sport as a public policy area. Using two different public management perspectives we want to build a rationale for governance in the field of sport management.

Theory

The first element in the theory building is that there are indications in the literature that sport could be a 'wicked problems'. Three broad characteristics of wicked problems can be synthesized from previous research: difficulties with problem definition; uncertainties about causal relations; and the propensity for remedies to result in new or unintended problems (Roberts, 2000; Van Bueren, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 2003). Sam (2009) concluded after his research that the sport policy problem can indeed be considered as 'wicked problems'. The management literature suggests two possible methods to deal with this type of problems, the network perspective approach (Edward & Anne, 2008; Roberts, 2000; Van Bueren et al., 2003) and, the more complex the wicked problems get, the more evidence-based policy-making comes into place (John, Irene, & Mavis, 2009). This paper supports the assumption that sport policy development and implementation can be best realized through the implementation of a sport policy network and the use of evidence-based policy-making to address the more complex issues. This theoretical viewpoint is illustrated and explained further in this paper through two different Flemish sport policy cases. The first case, Topsport Vlaanderen, offers an unique setting of a network-based approach to address the wicked problem of elite sport. Topsport Vlaanderen is a Flemish cycling team which has, besides regular private partners/sponsors also the elite sport department of the Flemish government as a partner and is accordingly also embedded in the elite sport network of the Flemish government. The second case, 'Flemish experimental garden' (Dutch: Vlaamse Proeftuinen), is an illustration of an evidence-based policy in the Flemish sport policy. The 'garden' contains different subsidized projects which address new developments within the field of sport, culture and youth. In the Flemish context this is a total new concept and an ideal case for this research.

Method

In this paper a literature review from the public management field is made. Using the gathered information a theoretical model for national sport policy implementation is build. Finally this model is illustrated by using Flemish policy actions.

Results

This paper brings some new insights from public management to sport management and wants to contribute to the theory-building in the research field of sport policy and sport governance.

*In Belgium, the three communities (the Dutch-speaking 'Flemish' Community, the French-speaking Community and the German-speaking Community) are authorized for the policy area sport. As a result each community has its own approach towards sport and in this paper we have chosen to use Flemish examples.

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