

The significance of local context for volunteering in sports associations

Author: Bjarne Ibsen

Institution: Centre for Sports, Health and Civil Society, University of Southern Denmark

E-mail address of author: bibsen@health.sdu.dk

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Aim of the paper

On the one hand, the political expectations of volunteering are very high, and particularly so in sports. On the other hand, there is also a widespread perception that it is increasingly difficult for sports associations to cope with volunteers and to recruit new ones. Great attention is therefore placed onto how to promote voluntary work in associations.

Research on volunteering is dominated by an actor-oriented approach with focus on resources (education, work, etc.), attitudes and motives of the individual. Research on volunteering in sports associations, however, has shown that structural and cultural factors most typically affect volunteering - especially the association's size and specific characteristics of the sport. We have however very little knowledge about the significance of social, political and spatial context for the extent and characteristics of volunteering in sports associations.

The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the impact of local context on the extent – and ease of - voluntary work in sports associations in Denmark.

Theoretical background and research questions

Studies have shown that a number of community characteristics affect association density. Of particular importance is municipality size, degree of urbanization and distance from major cities, while it is less clear what significance population demographics and local political support hold (Thøgersen and Ibsen 2008; Lundåsen 2005). Inspired by these results, the analysis in this paper is based on the assumption that local context also affects the way associations operate as well as the extent and characteristics of volunteering. The analysis will elucidate the importance of the following three dimensions:

1. *Population demographic:* Many studies have shown that citizens' involvement in voluntary work depends on their age, education, economy, etc. (Koch-Nielsen et al 2005). We therefore assume that population demographic in the community also affects the extent of volunteering in associations.

2. *Conditions in the local area for sports associations:* Studies have shown that political and institutional opportunity structures affect the extent and characteristics of civil society (Kriesi 1995). In this context we therefore assume that municipal support for sports associations, and the number of

facilities the associations can use, affects voluntary work in sport associations.

3. *Urbanization degree and the area's distance from major cities:* Inspired by organization ecological theory (Hannan and Free Mann 1977) we assume that the prevalence of voluntary sports associations and the extent of volunteering in associations also is a result of a necessity to meet the citizens' wishes and needs. In local areas not located in close proximity to major cities, the need for sports associations and for volunteering in the associations, is greater than in areas near major cities, where citizens can meet their wants and needs in other ways

Methodology

The analysis is carried out on the municipal level, ie. average figures for the extent, significance and characteristics of volunteering in sports associations in each of the 98 municipalities in Denmark. The analysis is based on a comprehensive dataset from a large study of Danish sports associations, which was conducted in autumn of 2010. 5,203 sports associations answered a large questionnaire, which constituted 50.4 per cent. of all sports associations that received an invitation to answer the questionnaire. The questionnaire included questions about how many volunteers and paid workers the association has, the association's assessment of how easy or difficult it is to recruit and retain volunteers, and the association's attitudes to volunteering. Associations' responses to these questions constitute the study's dependent variables.

Data on demographics, political opportunity structures and degree of urbanization, municipality size, etc. constitute the independent variables and comes from Statistics Denmark and different databases containing information on public support for sports associations, number of facilities in each municipality, etc.

Results (preliminary)

When this abstract was submitted, the statistical analyses were not completed. Preliminary analyses show, however,

- a. that there are significant differences between municipalities on the extent and characteristics of volunteering in sports associations in Denmark,
- b. that this difference to a small degree is due to differences between the municipalities in
 - a. population demographic
 - b. municipal support for sports associations (including access to facilities),
- c. that this difference is, to a much larger degree, closely bound to geographic and spatial features of the municipality.

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