

The consumerist turn in voluntary sports clubs

Authors: Jan-Willem van der Roest, Maarten van Bottenburg & Lucas Meijjs

Institutions: Utrecht University, the Netherlands & Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

E-mails: j.vanderroest@uu.nl / m.vanbottenburg@uu.nl / lmeijs@rsm.nl

Abstract keywords

consumerism, voluntary sports clubs, club management, volunteering, participation, citizenship

Aim

Since the end of the nineteenth century sports activities in the Netherlands as well as in other countries have been organized in voluntary clubs. The organizing principles of these clubs have gone largely unchanged ever since. Voluntary sports clubs typically are nonprofit organizations, organized around democratic decision-making and commitment of its members to govern the club (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010). However, since the end of the 1990s policy makers have made attempts to modernize clubs along a consumerist agenda. Because policy makers expect people to behave increasingly as consumers, they put emphasis on quality of service and flexibilization of the sports supply. However, these innovations seem to be contradictory to the foundations of voluntary sports clubs, where production and consumption of sporting goods go hand in hand. This research aims to explore the consequences of the consumerist turn on participation and commitment in voluntary sports clubs.

Theoretical background

The tendency of people to behave as consumers has received a lot of attention in academic literature, which mainly deals with paradoxes around consumption and production in shopping behaviour and the influence of advertising in modern society. This research focuses on the rise of the demanding and sceptical consumer in voluntary sports clubs. A similar trend has been observed in the creation of citizen-consumers in public services (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler & Westmarland, 2007). Clarke et al. (2007) describe the citizen-consumer as a figure that expects to exercise choice in public services just as the way he is used to in the 'consumer society'.

In order to increase the possibilities for exercising choice, voluntary sports clubs are pressured to make their supply more flexible. Clubs increasingly offer short-term memberships and introduce new forms of sports supply. Because large clubs have more opportunities to adapt to the

consumerist turn, they are expected to profit from this. As a consequence, the divide between small clubs and big clubs will increase.

It is yet unknown what consequences will follow from the attempts to modernize voluntary sports clubs. Functions that are ascribed to voluntary sports clubs, like those of 'schools in democracy' and builders of social capital (Putnam, 2000), may be put under pressure. Besides, the internal commitment that is necessary to govern the club might also suffer from these modernizing attempts. Enjolras (2002, p. 373) warns against changing attitudes of members of sports clubs as they might undermine the foundations of these organizations.

In this study, the attempts of voluntary sports clubs to address members in an increasingly consumerist way is explored and it is questioned whether such efforts change the participation and commitment of members.

Methods

This study relies on analysis of data collected in the Netherlands in 2007 and 2008. In 2007 online questionnaires were filled out by 870 (board members of) voluntary sports clubs (response rate = 65%) and in 2008 by 664 clubs (response rate = 51%). The questionnaire is part of a general monitor that provides a range of information about voluntary sports clubs in the Netherlands. Questions address demographic, organizational, and financial details about clubs, as well as information on volunteering. The monitor is carried out by the Mulier Institute, centre for research on sports in society. At this time, analyses are still being carried out, so the followed procedures are not fully available yet. These procedures will be ready to present at the EASM conference.

Results, discussion, implications

The first results of (regression) analysis on the data show that flexibilization of membership forms and the organizational size of the club have a negative impact on democratic participation in voluntary sports clubs. There is however no evidence of an effect of these variables on (emotional) commitment to voluntary sports clubs. Full results of the analyses are ready to present at the EASM conference.

References

- Clarke, J., Newman, J., Smith, N., Vidler, E. & Westmarland, L. (2007) *Creating citizens-consumers. Changing publics and changing public services*. London: Sage.
- Enjolras, B. (2002). The commercialization of voluntary sport organizations in Norway. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 31 (3), 352-376.
- Ibsen, B. & Seippel, Ø. (2010) Voluntary organized sport in Denmark and Norway. *Sport in Society*, 13 (4), 593-608.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster