

COMMUNITY WORK OF BELGIAN FOOTBALL CLUBS IN THE FIRST AND SECOND DIVISION

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1. Aim of paper

This paper discusses the results of a study by order of the Belgian Federal Government on the community work of football clubs in first and second division. It aims at providing more insight into the functioning of community involvement of professional and semi-professional football clubs in Belgium.

2. Theoretical background

A number of broad societal developments have led to the fact that community involvement of professional football clubs is a current topic in many European countries. For example, there is the growing interest of the industry for corporate social responsibility (Breitbarth & Harris, 2008; Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Hamil & Morrow, 2011) and the fact that since the mid 90's sport has increasingly been regarded as a means to contribute to wider societal issues (Boessenkool, Van Eekeren & Lucassen, 2007; Theeboom, 2011). A third development is situated within football itself. Traditionally, professional football clubs have always played an important role within their local community. In the past decades however, football has changed drastically (Koning, 2010). Through the introduction of the Champions League (1992) and the 'market pool' (1999), television money has become more important in European football. In addition, the Bosman case (1995) had an important effect on the situation of today's football, which is further characterised by distinct differences on financial and sport technical level between big competitions for example in England, Spain and Italy and smaller ones in Belgium and The Netherlands. But despite these differences, there is a growing interest in most of the European countries with a 'football history' to become involved in community work on the club level.

This paper focuses on Belgium as a 'small' football nation. Its first distinct social engagement dates back to the 1986 Mexico World Cup when the Belgian Football Association initiated 'Casa Hogar' a humanitarian project. As the story goes, the players were struck by the grinding poverty and decided to give up a part of their competition bonuses to the street children of Toluca. The project continued until 2011. From 2006 onwards, a number of actors, among others the Belgian and Flemish Government, the Belgian Football Association and the Pro League, provide structural funding to encourage professional football clubs to become more involved in community work.

3. Methodology

A study was set up to investigate the extent to which this structural support has resulted in an increased community work in first and second division football clubs in Belgium. Data were collected by means of two

questionnaires. The first was sent to all clubs and the second to (potential) partners (social organisations, local authorities and sponsors). Additional data were collected through four case studies and in-depth interviews with four national actors (Belgian Ministry of Internal Affairs, Open Stadion, Pro League, Belgian Football Association).

4. Results, discussion and implications

Among other things, the data showed that in the 2010-2011 season all first division clubs (16) were involved in community work and have a community manager. This was less clear for second division as not all of these clubs replied (only 11 out of 18), which might have been caused by a lesser involvement in community work in general or lower administrative capacities. In total, the Belgian clubs were involved in 125 social projects including various topics such as increased participation and integration of specific target groups, as well as health promotion, education and employment. Findings further indicated that there was a consensus among the respondents that community involvement provides an added value for all stakeholders. Interestingly, benefits were primarily regarded in terms of symbolic and social capital and were only to a lesser extent situated on an economic level. Clubs also stressed the importance community work has for them with regard to increased visibility. For the organisation of social activities, clubs most often work with local authorities and schools. Challenges that clubs face with regard to their community work relate to finding structural partners, co-ordinating with other local (sport) initiatives and involving players in the social activities. Clubs further indicated that they feel dependent on government support for their community activities.

Because of the important role of the involvement of social organisations in the community activities of the clubs, data were also collected among (potential) partner organisations. Findings showed that although these external partners reported positive experiences from their community work involvement (e.g., in reaching specific target groups), they indicated to expect a more active role of the clubs. Finally, it is also noteworthy to mention that perceptions among all respondents regarding the added value of community work were considered to be very high. And while most of them indicated to monitor and evaluate their activities, they feel the need for more support and knowledge development regarding systematic monitoring and evaluation techniques.

5. References

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