LOCAL SPORTS PROMOTION AT NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL IN FLANDERS

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Context

Since the 1960s, the primary task of local sports services in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, is to stimulate sports participation among its population and to compensate for voids in existing local sports provision. This has resulted in identifying several specific target groups for local sports promotion based on specific characteristics (e.g., youth, disabled persons, elderly, women, families, unemployed, ethnic minorities, socially deprived youth, drug users, asylum seekers). But other target groups have been distinguished coming from different segments of the sports sector, such as organised sport, unorganised sport, alternatively organised sport, elite sport, etc. In short, a wide variety of target groups in sports policy has been determined. However despite several promotional efforts by local government, to date a number of these groups are still not or only to a limited extent involved in sport (Scheerder, 2004).

In more recent years, an increasing number of local sports policy makers have become aware of the need to focus their attention on special groups in sports promotion. In general, two categories of these special groups can be distinguished: a) in relation to their (problematic) degree of sports involvement (i.e., sports inactives and sports 'underprivileged' with limited chances of involvement) and b) in relation to their (problematic) situation (specific problem groups such as socially deprived youth, juvenile delinquents, drug users). Specific policies can be characterised for each of these categories - for a) to increase the interest in sport (e.g., qualitative and demand-oriented offers, better communication and accessibility) and for b) to use sport as a means to ends (e.g., education, integration). This means that the approach as well as the aims of sports promotional policy can differ according to the characteristics of each group.

One of the key issues in reaching problem groups through sports promotion is to optimize accessibility to sports facilities and activities. Since the early 1990s, therefore, an increasing number of municipalities in Flanders have started to organise sports promotional initiatives at neighbourhood level (Theeboom, 2003). In 2000, these initiatives became known as 'Neighbourhood Sport', characterised by co-operation between a number of local structures (sport, education, youth and neighbourhood work, etc.) and co-ordinated, organised and/or supported by local authorities. Based on their study of several municipalities that provide neighbourhood sport in the Netherlands, Pouw and Daniels (2001) distinguished three distinct models:1) *sports participation,* 2) *target group,* and 3) *integrated.* An earlier study identified how far these models also can be found in Flanders (Theeboom & De Maesschalck, 2004). This paper describes the first phase of a study that analyses neighbourhood sport, and tries to determine its place in overall sports policy in Flanders. The aim of this first phase was to inventory this kind of local promotional initiatives.

Methods

After piloting, a questionnaire was sent to all (n=320) municipalities (to both their sports and youth services), and included topics such as aims, target group, organizational structure, activities, sports facilities, personnel, promotion, finances and evaluation). The co-ordinators of neighbourhood sport of the largest municipalities (Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent) were personally interviewed because their organisational structures are often more complex.

Results and discussion

Early findings indicate a variety of activities are regarded as neighbourhood sport, but is often not described as such. Also, sport services units are not always involved in providing neighbourhood sport activities. Sometimes, other structures (such as youth services, social services, schools) play a more important role. In general, results indicated local policy makers are increasingly focusing on working at neighbourhood level as a way of reaching specific groups, and that each requires a specific approach. Analysing these kinds of activities and organisational structures can bring more insight into a number of aspects of the role of municipalities in sports promotion, such as using sport as a part of a

social welfare policy, the shift from a segmented to an integrated approach (where a sports policy is developed in relation to other policy areas such as welfare, education, city and neighbourhood development), and an evolution from a central to a more territorial (local) approach. It also shows that, dependent on the model, there is a need for local authorities to encourage other partners to become more active themselves. Furthermore, the results provide more insight in the role sport can play in the social integration of specific problem groups (like underprivileged people). Finally, it is important that sports promotional initiatives are evaluated in consistently and qualitatively way and in measurable form.

References

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