

Session: **Sport policy III.**

Abstract nr: **EASM-0067**

Athlete involvement in the governance of international sport

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A call for greater involvement from various stakeholders in the governance of sport organizations has been heard in recent years. Hindley (2007, p. 2) discussed stakeholders' involvement in the governance of organisations explaining that "within international sports federations and national governing bodies of sport the notion of stakeholding has raised a number of pertinent questions concerning how the interests of groups such as athletes, volunteers, and supporters are articulated." As well, Hindley called for the need to "evaluat[e] mechanisms for stakeholder participation – for example, coach / athlete associations, supporter groups – how are their views represented?" (p. 8). Along similar lines, Katwala (2000) contended that efforts to reform governance require inclusiveness where sport's key stakeholders maintain a central role in "the decision-making processes, seeking to reconcile their vital interests on the basis of the values of sport as a whole (p. 2). Katwala also questioned "how the business of sport can be governed effectively and accountably, how all those involved in sport can have a stake in the decisions that affect them, and how these objectives can be achieved in a market economy and increasingly democratic global society" (p. 7). Other scholars have argued that athletes' involvement in sport organisations has largely been token and their representation devoid of any real significant impact on policy and decision making (cf. Houlihan, 2004; Jackson & Ritchie, 2007).

The purpose of our study was to investigate the level of change in involvement of one group of stakeholders – athletes – in the governance of international sport federations (IFs). Specifically, using deliberative democratic theory (Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996) and the principle of representation (Birch, 1971; Parkinson, 2006), we examined the deliberative role athletes are playing in policy and decision making in their respective IF. We assessed the type of athlete representation and how athlete representatives participate in the policy- and decision-making processes that affect them. To showcase athletes' representation and participation in the governance of IFs, we examined all IFs responsible for Olympic summer and winter sport (N=33) and then focused on three cases (i.e., Badminton World Federation, International Triathlon Union, and the Fédération internationale de ski). We selected these cases because leaders of these IFs have strategically adopted athlete-centred practices that appear to have favoured greater involvement from athletes in the governance of their organization and some athletes have taken the lead in facilitating their peers' involvement in the governance of their IF. In investigating these cases, we discussed issues surrounding the legitimacy of athlete representation and the impact on the policy- and decision-making processes of these IFs. Data were collected through various sources: initial assessment of the IFs' websites, communication with staff or Athletes' Committee members, and organisational documents accessed through these individuals.

Data revealed that an increasing number of IFs have Athletes' Committees as part of their governance structure. The extent to which members of these committees affect policy and decision making however is not always clear. In our analysis of the three cases, we found that athletes had a greater role and impact in the governance of their IF (e.g., Members of the Athletes' Commission of the Badminton World Federation were able to change prize money awarded at competition to be equal in men's and women's events; International Triathlon Union and the integration of athletes on its executive board with full voting privileges; Fédération internationale de ski and the involvement of its Athletes' Commission in downhill racing safety issues). A number of challenges however, remain in their deliberations of organisational policy and decision making. Issues regarding representation and accountability, the nature of athletes' involvement, and their ability to truly impact the policies and decisions of their IF are addressed. Other factors affecting athletes' active participation in policy and decision making involves structural/processual (e.g., mechanisms in place to ensure issues are heard (and acted upon) by members of the executive committee of the IFs, resources to facilitate athletes' input on issues that affect them, ability to include all athlete voices) and personal elements (e.g., time needed to devote to representation of peer athletes while training and competing, language, level of experience and years involved in the sport). Even though the Badminton World Federation, the International Triathlon Union, and the Fédération internationale de ski have demonstrated leadership in including athletes in the governance of their organization, there are still challenges to ensure effective athlete participation in the governance of their IF. These challenges will be highlighted and the implications for sport governance discussed.

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