

Succumbing to individualism or moving ahead in new directions? – The case of voluntarism in Danish sports clubs

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Aim of abstract/paper - research question

Are Danish sport clubs – relying heavily on volunteers – threatened on their existence as individualism gains ground in modern society? The study looks into this overarching question by asking further: What is the extent and characteristics of volunteering in Danish sports clubs and what are the challenges to recruiting and retaining a sufficient number of volunteers?

Theoretical background

The widespread notion of individualism dominating social interaction in modern society often fuels theory on the decay of altruism, volunteering and general participation in close communities, most notably in the works of American Robert Putnam (2001). However, this argumentation does not stand alone and in a Scandinavian context numerous scholars have argued, that volunteering is alive and well, though adapting to new social realities (Lorentzen 2001; Ibsen 2006; Torpe 2011).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

This study represents the largest ever Danish survey on volunteering in sports with 5.204 clubs having answered the ten-page questionnaire. This constitutes a response rate of 50.4 pct. and offers extensive insight into a number of different aspects of the clubs' membership base, activities, economy and facilities and how these relate to volunteering on different levels. Data analysis is done both by linear regression analysis and simpler statistics.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

A majority of the sport clubs in the study seem to support the notion of societal changes making it difficult to recruit

volunteers. 72 pct. say that 'People are too self-interested to take on volunteer tasks' and around half of the sports clubs agree that most members are unwilling to be volunteers and that there is a general lack of status in and appreciation of volunteering in society at large.

Nevertheless, the study still questions whether volunteering is in decline or, rather, undergoing changes towards new forms of volunteer engagement. A number of common denominators are identified in successful sports clubs, suggesting that to a large extent sports clubs can themselves shape their fate when it comes to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Regression analysis identifies club satisfaction with economy and facilities as two such denominators. Clubs size (number of members) and the level of members' participation social activities in the clubs are two other. Sports clubs engaged in different types of sport vary consistently on these parameters, suggesting that volunteering challenges are largely connected to the type of sport in the clubs. The study, therefore, looks further into the different basis for and challenges with recruiting and retaining volunteers in different types of sports. These types of sports are categorized in three groups: Team sports (such as football and handball), activity sports (such as rowing, boxing and cycling) and recreational sports (such as tennis, golf and swimming).

Lastly, formulating a general strategy on how to tackle the challenges of recruiting and retaining volunteers is found to have a very significant positive effect on the clubs' success in that area. Still, less than one in ten clubs do form and employ a formal strategy. This forms the outset for a number of recommendations on recruiting and retaining volunteers in sports clubs, supplementing the conclusions of the study: That volunteering in sport is not declining but changing, presenting the clubs with different challenges in the future.

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