

From welfare state to participation society? Dutch local sport policy in times of austerity and neoliberalist politics

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Aim and research questions

Földesi (2014) plausibly claims that the economic crisis led to a 'dramatic reduction' in governmental investments in sport. However, Földesi provides no sources or empirical data to back up his claim. This study seeks to find to which extent municipalities in the Netherlands cut back on their sport expenses. Furthermore, it aims to identify whether this is merely a matter of conjunctural economic development, whereby government spending are lowered due to lower income, or that policy changes regarding sport expenses are positioned within the change from classical welfare state to a participation society. Consequently our research questions are: (1) to what extent are municipalities in the Netherlands indeed cutting back on sport expenses? (2a) If cutbacks took place, whether this can be interpret as a pragmatic and temporary adjustment of expenditures to income, or as a permanent and structural shift away from welfare state to a participation society? Or (2b) if cutbacks did not take place, how then this apparent exclusion of sport both of the impact of the economic crisis and the shift from welfare state to participation society can be explained?

Theoretical background

The Netherlands is a country with aspects of corporatism and social democracy and, in the words of Esping-Andersen (1990), is a hybrid welfare state. However, the recent economic crisis and related austerity measures led to a growing popularity of neoliberalist politics and a call for a participation society. It is noted that the government brought in a wide range of efficiency measures and implemented structural changes in the way (social) services are provided for the citizens. This illustrates a broader change from a welfare state regime to a focus on increasing partnerships between state, market and civil society, redesigning the front line of public services (Gaster & Rutqvist, 2000). It remains unclear though how sport provision fits in the debate on austerity measures and the shift from welfare state to participation society.

Methodology

We have carried out a mixed methods research. First, we analysed the sport expenditures of all Dutch municipalities for the period 2010-2014 to identify whether municipalities did cutback on sport expenses. Second, we performed a content analyses on coalition agreements of 104 municipalities, coding text fragments related to sport focusing on dimensions of the welfare state and participation society and the relation with austerity measures. With this, we identified how sport policy is positioned in the shift from welfare state to participation society and within broader austerity measures.

Results and findings

Our study shows that contrast to Földesi's (2014) claim and despite growing popularity of neoliberalist politics, sport has not yet been confronted with serious austerity measures. Municipal sport expenses have remained stable in the years 2010-2014 while the share of sport in the total budget has risen slightly (2010=2,6%; 2014=2,8%). Only if we count in inflation we see a 3% decrease in spending power. The content analyses of the coalition agreements illustrated that broader austerity measures led to a more pragmatic approach in sport policy focussing on a more efficient and effective sport provision. Within their plans, local governments expect voluntary sport clubs (VSCs) to take up a central role in this 'efficiency turn', meaning that these VSCs should become more business-like in their approach.

Implications

The results could imply that sport is indeed a vital element and stronghold of the (remaining) welfare state. But it may also imply that sport was never really a vital element of the welfare state at all, but rather more a (vital) element of the 'participation society', not replacing the welfare state, but since long existing as a third (voluntary) sector alongside the state and the market. Moreover, in the Netherlands VSCs, and not civil servants, organize sport activities, run competitions, and to some extent already take care of the facilities. Obviously, an important issue here is the organizational capacity of VSCs to take up these issues. The increase in efficiency (and effectiveness) that municipalities seek to make may lead to a mismatch between municipal policy and VSCs' ambitions and abilities. To prevent this supporting VSCs to professionalize their operation and become more business-like in their approach seems useful.

References

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