

# Strategic Development In Sport Federations — A Case Study Of Swiss Triathlon

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## Aim of the study and theoretical background

Sport federations face various challenges due to the expectations of their environment and the demands of their member organizations. Increasingly, federations are professionalizing to address these challenges (Dowling, Edwards, & Washington, 2014; Nagel, Schlesinger, Bayle, & Giauque, 2015). Strategic development is crucial to professionalization (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011), as this defines the future direction for any federation. In general, organizational strategy can be developed using one of two different approaches (Nagel & Schlesinger, 2012; Sontag, 2011). In a top-down approach, strategy is initiated, shaped and controlled by a federation's legitimate power (e.g. board, management), whereas a bottom-up approach sees strategy developed from the base level of the federation by involving various actors at different organizational levels. The aim of this study is to analyze the choice of strategic development approach by federations, and consider the associated reasons and consequences of this choice.

## Methodology and data analysis

The strategic development process was analyzed through a case study of Swiss Triathlon. The case study approach gives a holistic, in-depth analysis of complex phenomena (Skille, 2013), for this case study, identifying the approach, underlying reasons and leading consequences of strategic development. The case study of Swiss Triathlon is particularly appropriate, as over the past years the federation has developed strategy using both top-down and bottom-up approaches. Thus, this case provides a suitable comparison of the two approaches. The federation's strategic development process in 2013–2016 and 2017–2020 were reconstructed, and the procedure and contents, underlying reasons and objectives, and implementation were compared. Analysis of the two strategy concepts and accompanying documents (with a total of about 250 pages), as well as two guided interviews with the actors responsible for the strategy provided the data for the research. This data was analyzed using structuring qualitative content analysis.

## Results, discussion, and implications

The results show that the two strategies clearly differ from each other. The 2013–2016 strategy was developed using a top-down approach, where only a few actors from the management carried out the strategy concept in a short time. The strategy exclusively focused on high-performance sport and aimed to meet the external requirements of the umbrella organization in order to secure financial support. However, the implementation of the strategy failed due to resistance and disinterest of the member organizations. In contrast, the strategy 2017–2020 was executed as a bottom-up process where all stakeholders and units were involved (e.g., board, management, representatives of regional and local member organizations) in order to guarantee broad support. The strategy focused on internal interests and requirements and aimed to develop the overall organization. The elaboration of this strategy concept took considerably more time.

The results of this study illustrate the challenges for sport federations who are attempting to balance internal and external expectations and demands, and are uncertain about the choice of appropriate strategy for development. The results also indicate that a participatory, bottom-up strategy development approach seems more appropriate for federations, as this corresponds to their self-understanding as an interest organization. Although this is only a single case study, the results may yet be applicable to other federations that face similar challenges in negotiating internal and external demands.

## References

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