Responding To Institutional Complexity. The Case Of Triathlon Australia

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Aim of the research

National Sport Federations (NFs) have a central position in organised sport in most nations. They typically interact with numerous private, public and non-profit organisations at different territorial levels (i.e. national, state and local) and frequently must deal with contradictory requirements (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Phillips & Newland, 2013). The majority of these bodies are engaged primarily in developing both high performance and participation sport. However, this dual mission can create competing agendas as NFs struggle to increase sport participation and improve elite performance. NFs are both dependent and vulnerable on their government's increasingly rationalised and targeted policies. As a consequence, the very existence of NFs can be threatened if their results do not meet funding linked key performance indicators (Houlihan & Green, 2008). By understanding the way NFs respond to these challenges this research explores questions of social legitimacy (Phillips & Newland, 2013) and resource access, within a context of organisational survival (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Washington & Patterson, 2011). The aim of this research was to investigate how one NF, namely Triathlon Australia, responded to institutional complexity in implementing its mission.

Theoretical framework

There is growing interest in how organisations respond to institutional complexity, (Greenwood et al., 2011). An institutional theory lens, namely institutional logics and complexity, provide a framework by which to explore the organisational behaviour of NFs, in particular how they respond to different and possibly logics in implementing their mission. Since organisations experience different degrees of complexity, they will also vary their responses to contradictory prescriptions prioritising certain interests at the expense of others (Greenwood et al., 2011). Early sport management research focused on dominant logics shifts and the move from amateurism to professionalism and from a 'sport logic' to a 'business logic' (corporate perspective). In a study of the Australian and Finish sport systems, Green and Collins (2008) treated elite and participation policies as two distinct institutional logics; they asserted that political agendas drive logics and are responsible for the establishment of a dominant logic. Philips and Newland's (2013) research on Triathlon explained how, due to their commercial ethos, event enterprises became more legitimate than NFs in delivering elite and participation sport. More recently, it has been shown that different and conflicting institutional logics — amateur, professional and commercial — can coexist within a multisport club. To date sport management research has focused mainly on clubs and examined the presence, change dynamics and effects of dominant logics. Sparse research exists on how NFs respond to the logics arising from their particularly complex institutional field.

Methodology

To understand organisational pressures and responses to institutional complexity over time, it was necessary to develop a longitudinal case study. Case selection was made through theoretical sampling based on its potential for theory building. Triathlon Australia was chosen as a case due to a combination of factors: level of government support, an Olympic sport, elite and participation performance, commercial background, financial autonomy, sport development innovation, event organising capacity, short history and access to data. The period under analysis is, 1997 to 2017. The data collection included: 18 interviews with the Australian government and Triathlon Australia key informants; document analysis from policy documents, annual reports, strategic plans, job descriptions and press releases.

Discussion

The following five themes have emerged from the on-going data analysis. (1) Mission enablers: the integration of both elite/participation dimensions in the same event reduces costs and increases revenue (from participation sport) and attracts two different sets of sponsors. (2) Mission tensions: the integration of different skill level athletes in the same competition creates logistic and safety problems. The different in budget between elite/participation sport. (3) Commercial logic: requirements arising from commercial partners are easily addressed by the NF due to their commercial debut background (i.e. IronMan), reducing complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011). NFs events are framed according to media and spectators' interests. (4) Government logic: the clarity of public funding policy reduces complexity. (5) Sport logic: The existence of sport state/regional level organisations increases complexity in governance. In summary, the findings suggest that

institutional complexity can be reduced when logics are not in conflict and through organisational responses. The theoretical and practical implications will be further expanded upon in the conference presentation.

References

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