

# **“You Cannot Tell Every League in the Country How to Organise Their Leagues” – The Implementation of a National Football Development Plan for the Republic of Ireland**

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## **Aim**

The researchers examined the process by which the Football Association of Ireland instigated proceedings within a network governance system to dictate policy regarding youth player development practices. The primary aim of this study was to examine the reaction of its stakeholders to the initial proposal and implementation process.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is the UEFA recognised governing body for football in the Republic of Ireland. It is the parent body to the Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland (SFAI) who are the governing and administrative body for players' aged under 16. In 2015, the FAI produced a 'Player Development Plan' which attempted to create uniformity in how young players experience football across the 32 leagues that comprise youth football (FAI, 2015). This plan has been met with varying levels of buy-in from the stakeholders. The fundamental task of a National Governing Body (NGB) is to ensure that member organisations follow established rules and regulations (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015), thus the management of stakeholders is an essential part of football governance. The 'top-down' system has given way to a complex system of inter-relationships between stakeholders, each looking to exert power and draw on alliances (Henry & Lee, 2004, p. 28). Contemporary stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of mutual enrichment and nurturing rather than control or domination, which requires the primary organisation (i.e., FAI) to internalise the unique perspectives of its stakeholders (i.e. SFAI) to facilitate and promote growth within the organisation (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2005). Whilst this governance system seeks to be a collaborative process it can often exacerbate patterns of historically derived interactions between actors (Shilbury et al., 2013), for example FAI and SFAI interactive patterns and dimensions.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

A single case, qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate as it allowed the researcher to go beyond descriptions and attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex relationships being explored in a context-specific setting. Eleven interviews were conducted with primary stakeholders in youth football governance in the Republic of Ireland. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy based on their role within the FAI and SFAI strategic apex. This approach supports the use of smaller sample size numbers as it ensures richness of data in terms of the diversity and characteristics of views that the sample represents (Ritchie et al., 2014). Participants included Executive Council members (4), League Secretaries (4) and Grassroots Development Committee members (3). Thematic analysis used both a deductive and inductive process, which saw the incorporation of contextual analysis after theoretical data had been collected and analysed. Initial coding was based on constructs related to stakeholder and network theory. Along with these conceptual codes, relationship codes, participant perspectives and characteristics code types (age,

geographic location, paid/unpaid position) were also utilised which facilitated analysis within and across the cases and allowed for greater insights and overall contextual analysis.

### **Results and Discussion**

The key findings of this study were that acceptance of the development plan was related to historical experiences of SFAI members with the FAI. Concepts of trust, fairness, communication style and power dynamics were key in influencing this relationship and subsequent initiative acceptance. Sense of player ‘ownership’ by the SFAI remains a key tension point between the two governing organisations related to player development. Historical tensions also impacted on the FAI engagement process with the SFAI, with the FAI being ‘fed up of their behaviour’ thus taking a ‘really strong hand’, which was seen as being ‘very dictatorial’ by SFAI members. A lack of congruence throughout the governance system was identified, which resulted from ineffective stakeholder management by the FAI (i.e. poor communication practices leading to perceptions of inaccurate disclosures and a perceived lack of inclusion in the decision-making process). Expectations of behaviours by the FAI varied between members of the SFAI, with some welcoming the dictation of policy at national level while others preferred to continue to independently determine policy within the network system of ‘our players and our leagues’.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The response of primary stakeholders to their own player development guidelines being superseded provides insights into operational practices and difficulties for a NGB in relation to stakeholder management. Cultural incongruence within the network football governance system is exacerbated by historical patterns of interaction which influence prospective policy implementation. Stakeholder management and governance is complicated by a multitude of preferred communication approaches and procedural expectations by stakeholders, often from within the same organisation (i.e. SFAI). Structures of football in the Republic of Ireland demonstrate some of the challenges of multilevel, network governance to develop and instil a coherent approach to policy formation.

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