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SHORT COMMUNICATION

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VOLUNTARY SPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Voluntarism, Economy and Facilities

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Abstract Current social shifts pose challenges for voluntary sport organizations. Various discourses present volunteering, facilities and economics as critical obstacles to the future of these organizations. In this article, I ask how voluntary sport organizations themselves see the situation. What are the most pressing obstacles to their future development? How do they actually meet these challenges in their daily life? I also see how various kinds of sport organizations vary with respect to their answers on these questions. The study is based on a survey of Norwegian sport organizations.

Key words • economy • facilities • obstacles • sport • tasks • voluntary organizations

Introduction

Both within the social sciences and in the media we regularly read about the problems, or even crises, facing modern sport: doping, eating disorders, cheating, decline of values, increased professionalization and commercialization. Among the more pressing challenges, apparently, is the problem of mobilizing volunteers: ‘The difficulties in recruiting volunteers are enormous, and the organizations are increasingly losing their “self-help characteristics”’ (Rittner, 1995: 36; my trans.). Even though several of these problems are evidently pressing, all these proclamations of a crisis should not be taken at face value, and empirical facts, if there are any, do not always support such claims. By way of example, a recent Norwegian study showed very clearly that the level of sport activity (number of clubs and athletes) is higher than ever and that voluntary work is still the absolute basis of the sport associations organizing these activities (Seippel, 2002). In a German context, it was found that voluntary work is not decreasing but increasing (Dierker and Wadsack, 2000: 14), and that between 1986 and 1991 there was a significant decrease in the proportion of professionals (paid work) to the total number of workers in the sport organizations (Pitsch and Emrich, 2000: 16). In the Flemish case, findings are less ‘promising’ and the conclusion is, in short, that ‘a crisis does exist’ (De Knop et al., 1996: 49–50). These examples show that, even though there are severe problems with respect to voluntarism in

some cases, the situation is certainly not always as precarious as publicly communicated.

Against this background the intention of this article is neither to reveal final facts of the crisis within sport nor to study the public discourse on the topic, but more modestly, to consider: (1) which problems and obstacles voluntary sport organizations themselves actually consider most important; (2) how the organizations try to respond to such challenges. The topic is the world — problems, challenges and possibilities — according to the voluntary organizations themselves.

Data and the Norwegian Case

The data utilized in this article originate from 'The Sport Club Study 2002' and is based on a random sample of Norwegian sport clubs. Some 534 clubs responded to a questionnaire, giving a very satisfactory response rate of 77 percent. Norwegian sport shares many characteristics with that in other western nations (Enjolras and Seippel, 2001; Hargreaves, 1986; Heinemann, 1999; Olstad, 1987; Skirstad, 1999). But two features of Norwegian sport clubs should be noted. First, a large proportion of the Norwegian population — around 30 percent — are members of a voluntary sport organization, and these organizations are small: 36 percent have less than 50 members, and no more than 3 percent have more than 1000 members (Seippel, 2002). Second, it seems important to point out how geography and climate have made certain sport disciplines more popular in Norway than in southern countries, such as skiing and skating. More recently, sport as a cultural carrier has been influenced just as much by global processes (Maguire, 1999), and some of the traditional national characteristics have probably lost their impact. The most popular sport — based on the number of organizations having the sport on their agenda — is soccer (34 percent of clubs), followed by skiing and 'exercising groups' (18 percent), handball (14 percent), track and field (11 percent), shooting (10 percent) and gymnastics (8 percent).

Perceived Obstacles and Factual Tasks: Descriptive Analyses

In this section the following will be discussed: (1) what the voluntary sport organizations themselves consider the most important obstacles to offering their members a better 'supply' of activities in the future, and (2) what they see as the most important tasks for the boards of their clubs. The survey on which the findings are based contains a questionnaire listing 15 different problems which voluntary sport clubs may encounter, and where each club was asked to state which topic it considered as the most important obstacle (Table 1).

A first impression emerging from Table 1 is the wide spectre of problems facing voluntary sport clubs. But when asked to indicate the area of greatest concern, problems relating to human resources are clearly the most pressing: 15 percent report a lack of volunteers, and 13 percent mention a lack of leaders and trainers. Fourteen percent also complain about the lack of commitment among

Table 1 Most Important Obstacles

Lack of volunteers	15.1
Lack of leaders	12.6
Lack of trainers	12.6
Lack of commitment among members	14.3
High turn-over	3.1
Lack of knowledge on and ideas for new activities	1.8
General lack of money	12.4
Lack of money for equipment	2.6
Lack of money for facilities	7.1
Lack of money for new activities	0.2
Difficult relations to public authorities	0.2
Difficult relations to regional sport federation	0.2
Difficult relation to the sport federations	0.4
Lack of appropriate facilities in the local environment	9.8
Problematic availability of existing facilities	3.9
Other	3.7

N = 491.

members of their association. On aggregate, 55 percent of the organizations emphasize human resources in some variant as the most important obstacle for a better-run organization. At the same time it is worth noting the fact that a lack of money (22 percent) and lack of available facilities (14 percent) are also perceived as major problems. One should also be aware of the interdependence between these issues: voluntary work is often used to create income which in turn is spent on, or to provide access to, facilities. A minority of clubs refer to other problems related to institutional relations and knowledge/ideas.

Consequently, it is interesting to see how the clubs actually operate. What kinds of task do they focus upon? In order to obtain a reliable view of how the clubs actually prioritize their time and resources, we asked them: (1) what did they spend most time and effort upon during the last year, and (2) what would they have spent more time and effort upon given the opportunity (Table 2).

Regarding the former — use of time and effort — the most important issue is clearly ‘securing income’ (26.7 percent), whereas only half as many emphasize the more activity-oriented ‘prepare conditions for training’. Thereafter, the priorities are more evenly distributed between financial matters, volunteering/recruitment and facilities.

The most popular tasks— what most clubs would have preferred to spend more time and effort on — reflect what are considered to be the most pressing obstacles: ‘recruitment of members’ (19.6 percent) followed by ‘securing income’. What is perhaps most interesting, though, is to note how few clubs would prefer to work more with activity-oriented challenges, and that instead they prioritize recruitment of members and improvement of the club’s financial situation. Seeing what are perceived as obstacles in the light of what one would prefer to spend more resources on, it seems timely to ask what comes first, the

Table 2 Priority of Tasks for the Board of the Organization (%)

	Spent most time and effort last year	Spend more time and effort if possible
Accounting	4.1	0.8
Provide incomes	26.7	12.8
Personnel policies	1.0	0.6
Marketing	1.4	5.8
Keep in touch with the members	8.1	9.8
Organizing voluntary activities to provide money (flea markets, etc.)	5.5	1.8
Recruit members	5.7	21.6
Recruit leaders	4.3	7.2
Recruit trainers	4.7	6.0
Recruit representatives (for boards, etc.)	0.8	3.8
Building facilities	6.6	8.1
Running facilities	5.3	2.0
Have a good relation to local councils (municipal level)	0.0	0.4
Have a good relation to regional sport federation	0.2	0.0
Have a good relation to the National Sport Federation	0.0	0.0
Have a good relation to public authorities	0.0	0.2
Have a good relation to specific sport federation	0.2	0.0
Have a good relation to regional specific sport federations	0.2	0.4
Prepare conditions for exercise and training	13.2	8.0
Prepare conditions for competitions	7.1	3.6
Organize commercial activities	0.8	1.6
Organize non-sportive activities (parties, tours, etc.)	1.4	2.6
Other	2.8	3.0

N = 460–507.

desire to expand (or at least, not to lose members) and recruit members, or the situation of not having sufficient members. There is the possibility that the ambition of growth, instead of focusing on activity, is what makes human resources such an important issue. Our data, nonetheless, do not allow for conclusions to this question.

In sum, clearly the most important obstacle to the improvement of activities of Norwegian voluntary sport clubs is, according to the clubs themselves, human resources: volunteers, in general, but also as leaders and as trainers. Thereafter, financial matters and the need for appropriate facilities are seen as central obstacles. When it comes to how the clubs actually spend their time, financial matters stand out as the most important. Comparing what is conceived as troublesome and what is in fact in focus for action, there is, on the one hand, a certain correspondence between economy, facilities and training. On the other hand, there is also a lack of correspondence concerning 'voluntarism and recruitment' which is the most pressing obstacle but to which, apparently, relatively little time is

Table 3a Factor Analyses of Obstacles to Improve the Sport Organization. Varimax, rotation

	Factor 1: volunteers	Factor 2: inst. relations	Factor 3: economy	Factor 4: facilities
Lack of volunteers	.746	.063	.031	.040
Lack of leaders	.821	.034	.043	.074
Lack of trainers	.723	-.039	-.009	.118
Lack of commitment among members	.602	.077	.102	.039
High turn-over	.591	.121	.134	.034
Lack of knowledge on and ideas for new activities	.383	.269	.154	-.092
General lack of money	.005	.563	.272	.020
Lack of money for equipment	.134	.817	.046	.062
Lack of money for facilities	.024	.691	.019	.411
Lack of money for new activities	.156	.721	.215	.086
Difficult relations to public authorities	.112	.240	.548	.346
Difficult relations to regional sport federation	.122	.151	.870	.073
Difficult relation to the sport federations	.123	.158	.854	.064
Lack of appropriate facilities in the local environment	.088	.234	.057	.823
Problematic availability of existing facilities	.078	.022	.190	.812
% of variance explained	27.1	13.9	8.7	7.9

devoted. This lack of correspondence could indicate that the clubs are somehow constrained in giving priority to financial matters and facilities rather than activity, members and volunteers.

Perceived Obstacles and Factual Tasks: Explanations

In this section an examination is made of the relationships of various characteristics of sport clubs to what representatives of the clubs considered to be obstacles and tasks. To reduce the many obstacles and task items to more composite indices, two factor-analyses were carried out (Tables 3a and 3b).

The results show that thematically the various dimensions cluster as one might have expected. For obstacles, the many items are reduced to four dimensions: 'economy', 'volunteers', 'institutional relations' and 'facilities'. For tasks, the result is, again, four dimensions: 'institutional relations', 'recruitment and administration', 'economy and activity' and 'facilities'. The selection of independent variables is based on existing studies of sport organizations, pointing out many characteristics of importance for the questions addressed in this article: organizational structure (size, multi- vs single-sport clubs), economy (revenues, commercialization), voluntarism, facilities, geographical location and membership structures (homogeneity of gender and age). (De Knop et al., 1996;

Table 3b Factor Analyses of Importance of Tasks for the Boards of the Sport Organizations

	Factor 1: inst. relations	Factor 2: recruitment and administration	Factor 3: economy and activity	Factor 4: facilities
Accounting	.089	.173	.558	-.072
Provide incomes	.048	.355	.535	.213
Personnel policies	.161	.469	.211	.103
Marketing	.243	.472	.291	.088
Keep in touch with the members	.251	.204	.611	-.008
Organizing voluntary activities to provide money	.092	.139	.410	.511
Recruit members	.274	.439	.378	-.001
Recruit leaders	.140	.835	.129	.133
Recruit trainers	.162	.765	.223	.088
Recruit representatives (for boards etc.)	.171	.730	.040	.190
Building facilities	.151	.120	.027	.835
Running facilities	.141	.199	.145	.771
Have a good relation to local councils (municipal level)	.746	.243	.138	.198
Have a good relation to regional sport federation	.834	.092	.229	.105
Have a good relation to the National Sport Federation	.825	.112	.117	.109
Have a good relation to public authorities	.701	.192	.235	.205
Have a good relation to specific sport federation	.792	.189	.199	.046
Have a good relation to regional specific sport federations	.763	.222	.134	-.008
Prepare conditions for exercise and training	.140	.236	.647	.071
Prepare conditions for competitions	.144	.092	.561	.228
Organize commercial activities	.107	.211	.422	.275
Organize non-sportive activities (parties, tours etc.)	.161	-.052	.458	.098
% of variance explained	32.9	9.1	6.1	5.7

Hartmann-Tews, 1999; Heinemann, 1999; Heinemann and Schubert, 1992, 1994; Horch, 1994; Horch and Heydel, 1999; Ibsen, 1992; Seippel, 2002; Slack, 1997). The results of the multivariate regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

The first noticeable observation in Table 4 is the complexity of the results. First, there are crucial differences with respect to how much of the variance in the various factors actually is explained — from 1 to 31 percent. Second, there also seem to be significant differences when it comes to which club characteristics

(variables) matter for the various obstacles and tasks. For obstacles, *institutional relations* and *economy* are poorly explained. Next, it is interesting to note that multisport clubs with a high proportion of members under the age of 13 consider *volunteers* a problem. The best explained obstacle is *facilities*, and the most decisive variable seems to be urbanity (a well-known problem resulting from a 'successful' regional policy in Norway) followed by, naturally, whether the club owns facilities or not. Moreover, two variables representing structural characteristics are of importance concerning facilities: commercial incomes and professionalization (low level of volunteers), indicating that the most 'modernized clubs' have fewer problems with facilities. Finally, membership composition, both gender and age, probably reflecting different patterns of activity, is of importance.

Among tasks, *institutional relations*, and *economy and activity* are not very well explained by the chosen variables. Yet, having *recruitment and administration* as a central task is important for large clubs with a high proportion of younger members. Finally, the task-dimension explained best is *facilities*: for plural clubs owning facilities, with commercial incomes, paid employees (instead of volunteers), and with a high proportion of male members.

Summary and Discussion

From the public debate on sport the impression is easily obtained that modern voluntary sport organizations are under heavy pressure, first and foremost with respect to volunteers, financial affairs and sport facilities. However, empirical studies do not unanimously support this negative verdict. German, Danish and Norwegian studies show, for instance, that voluntary work still has a very strong position within sport organizations, and there are also findings indicating that the situation is not deteriorating at the present time. The purpose of this article has been to take a closer look at how sport organizations themselves understand their situation seen against this background: What do they see as obstacles to developing their organizations in a positive manner? Where do they actually put their time and efforts? In summarizing the findings a number of interesting research questions are suggested as the basis for future studies.

When they were asked in a rather non-obligatory way, four sets of obstacles stand out as important for sport clubs: volunteers, economy, institutional relations and facilities. When clubs were forced to determine which of these obstacles they consider to be most pressing, problems with recruiting people — both volunteers, leaders and trainers — were clearly most important.

The challenge then is how to interpret this finding. First, one should try to explain the widespread concern with volunteers. In spite of research indicating a very high level of volunteering, is there really a serious lack of volunteers? Or does the existence of volunteers (as an obstacle) simply reflect the fact that it is an especially unpleasant task to mobilize volunteers compared to other tasks? Or is there a higher turnover among the volunteers than previously, making it necessary to mobilize new volunteers more frequently (i.e. the amount of voluntary work is relatively stable, but a higher number of people is involved). Or do the

Table 4 Multivariate Regression. Obstacles and Tasks Regressed on Characteristics of Voluntary Sport Clubs. Unstandardized regression coefficients

	Obstacle 1: Volunteers	Obstacle 2: Inst. Relations	Obstacle 3: Economy	Obstacle 4: Facilities	Task 1: Inst. Relations	Task 2: Recruitment and Administration	Task 3: Economy and Activity	Task 4: Facilities
Constant	-.74*	.04	.07	.54	.24	-.62*	.67*	1.40***
Size	.009	-.02	-.01	.003	.05*	.05**	-.07***	.02
Uni vs multi-sport clubs	.331***	.09	-.07	.02	-.23*	.05	.04	.25**
Urban-Rural	.039	-.03	.07*	-.09**	.03	.02	-.07**	.06
Owner of Facilities (yes-no)	-.077	-.08	.22*	.26**	.24**	.06	-.01	-.86***
Commercial incomes (sponsor)	.134	.16	.21	-.67*	-.63	.48	.05	.70**
Volunteers	.033	.04	-.10*	-.10**	-.12**	-.01	-.02	-.10**
Female proportion	.001	-.41	-.06	-.97***	-.01	-.06	-.06	-.80***
Under age of 13, proportion	.670**	.29	-.36	.91***	.06	1.24***	.06	.04
R ²	0.08	0.01	0.03	0.12	0.05	0.13	0.04	0.31

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

new challenges facing the clubs demand more of those volunteering than hitherto, making it, again, more demanding to find the right persons? Or does, almost in a tautological fashion, the aim of the clubs — more human resources — simply lead to human resources being the main problem? Our data do not enable us to draw conclusions from these questions, but there is, possibly, something in all these hypotheses, which, together, indicates the need for further studies in this field, not only how much volunteering or who the volunteers are, but how the process of mobilizing volunteers proceeds; why is it actually experienced as an obstacle, when, by most means, it is also solved successfully?

Second, on a societal level, an implicit background for the analyses has been an assumption that modern sport organizations have to respond to new needs and interests in the population, and, in light of this, our study indicates that human resources are what are needed to respond to these challenges in a satisfactory manner. At the same time, the analyses also show that there is a kind of differentiation characterizing the field. Although volunteers are the main problem, other problems are also experienced as important by many of the clubs. Thus, one should look more in detail at these challenges — what do they consist of, and what kind of resources do they actually require? One should also look more in detail at the relations between the various obstacles and tasks. Third, one should also go into more detail when it comes to the relation between obstacle and tasks. When we see that recruitment is the task where the clubs actually want to invest more effort, volunteers as an obstacle could simply result from an ambition to expand the number of members in the organization. Finally, these analyses show that, even though the situation with respect to volunteering is probably not too bad, it is nevertheless regarded as a serious problem; recruiting people is what concerns the sport organizations themselves. This is a practical problem that should be faced by the organizations themselves, the sport institutions, politicians and all others interested in sport.

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