

## Challenges and approaches to ensuring good governance in grassroots sport

Mogens Kirkeby<sup>1</sup>

*'Grassroots sport' covers all sport disciplines practiced by non-professionals and organized on a national level through national sport. ... '[N]on-professionals]' are individuals who neither spend the bulk of their time practicing sport, nor who take the bulk of their revenue from the practice of sport.*

(Definition of 'grassroots sport' in recent European Union study)<sup>2</sup>

### Why grassroots sport matters

Governance is a topic that is high on the agendas of all sectors – public, private and non-profit. It is equally important for the grassroots sport sector to be part of this drive, as a prerequisite for organisational legitimacy, autonomy and – ultimately – survival. If grassroots sport is not governed in an appropriate and legitimate way, it will lose not only its good reputation but also the significant financial support from its members and from public authorities that it currently receives.

Clearly, the governing structure of grassroots sport differs radically in different countries and regions. In a number of countries grassroots sport is primarily an activity within the school system, but in most countries the basic governing structure for the sector comprises local associations, often connected nationally or regionally. In all cases, the good governance of these associations has implications not only for participants but for the economy as a whole, and for the health sector in particular.

For most people, it is quite obvious why good governance is a relevant issue for performance-oriented elite sport and highly commercialised sports entertainment. Often, however, it is not as

well understood why good governance of grassroots sport is also of importance, and increasingly so. This is probably based on two key myths about sport. The first is that the sport system is a pyramid, with grassroots sport at the bottom and elite sport/sports entertainment at the top, and with each tier strongly interconnected. This is still a prevalent view, particularly among organisations with an interest in painting a picture of themselves as covering and representing the whole ‘sport family’.<sup>3</sup> Grassroots sport, in its original meaning, is a popular phenomenon, and not something that lies at the bottom of a ‘pyramid’; this model fails to reflect today’s very diverse and pluralistic sport sectors, which encompass non-governmental, governmental and, not least, corporate actors as operating, governing and delivering bodies. Other recently developed models, such as the so-called ‘church’ model of sport,<sup>4</sup> depicted in figure 1.2, present a more accurate picture of today’s sport sectors, and show that the interdependence between mass grassroots sport participation and the comparatively small elite level no longer applies.

The second myth is that elite sport creates the most economic activity and impact. A study carried out across the European Union in 2011 and 2012 illustrates the significant economic impact of the sport sectors; together, they constitute a major industry, generating more than two per cent of EU gross domestic product.<sup>5</sup> The report also shows that the vast majority of this impact is created not by the relatively few sports stars’ astronomical salaries, sales of media rights and merchandise but by citizens’ individual spending in mass-participation sport.<sup>6</sup>

### **Why governance matters in grassroots sport**

There are at least four reasons why good governance of the grassroots sport sector is of huge and growing importance. First, grassroots sport has by far the highest level of popular participation and direct involvement. Citizens participate in grassroots sport or recreational physical exercise in various settings and in massive numbers. Second, the grassroots sport sector comprises the largest

number of governing bodies, primarily local associations or sports clubs, and the environment in which they govern has become more complicated and diverse. Third, as detailed above, the grassroots sport sector generates the greatest economic impact in the overall sport sector, with its most significant financial contributions coming from individual citizens and, to some extent, public authorities. Finally, the grassroots sport sector is the arena in which most people exercise their ‘right to participate in sport’,<sup>7</sup> and in which the ‘right to freedom and peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others’ are practised.<sup>8</sup>

The EU-supported ‘Good Governance in Grassroots Sport’ (GGGS) project of the International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA) shows how good governance can be introduced into the grassroots sport sector and how steps towards setting up good governance structures can be encouraged regardless of varying management structures, differences in staffing capacity, etc.

#### **Box 1.4 The ‘Good Governance in Grassroots Sport’ project**

‘Good Governance in Grassroots Sport’ is a transnational project led by ISCA in partnership with five universities and knowledge centres, 10 national grassroots sport organisations, four international sport organisations and three municipalities.<sup>9</sup>

The project has developed guidelines and an online self-assessment tool for governing bodies in grassroots sport based on the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability and the inclusion of stakeholders.<sup>10</sup> While it is hoped that other stakeholders might benefit from them as well, the principles and guidelines are meant primarily for organisations that (1) are non-governmental, not-for-profit and democratic, based on a membership structure; (2) organise sport and physical activities on a regular basis for purposes other than high-level performance; (3) operate on a basis of voluntary board leadership in cooperation with salaried staff and further volunteers (coaches, helpers, etc.); and (4) may be national-level (umbrella) organisations or regional-/local-level organisations/clubs.

The self-assessment tool had over 12,000 page views and 4,600 users worldwide from its launch in August 2013 to mid-October 2014. A further 190 users completed the self-assessment tool in preparation for the ISCA General Assembly, which was held in late October 2014.

The project has been supported financially by the EU 'Preparatory Actions' in the field of sport.

The GGGS project recognised that grassroots sport's governing bodies comprise a variety of stakeholders, from small local clubs to national and regional organisations, with a mix of elected voluntary leaders and contracted employed staff. Many of the local, regional and national bodies are governed by board members elected at general assemblies. They are often volunteers who offer their time and enthusiasm to the governing of the entity. Most of the people who provide grassroots sport and exercise activities, including trainers, instructors and coaches, also work as volunteers. This volunteerism does not lessen the responsibility given to the individual, but the conditions of employment and potential penalties, such as sanctions for not fulfilling tasks, are different from those for employees operating on a formal work contract.

Naturally, the cultural, economic and political contexts in which these grassroots sport volunteers operate in are also diverse. The number of citizens who their organisations reach, the scope of their activities and their economic turnover all vary considerably. What their organisations have in common, though, is that they are the delivery bodies located closest to and involving the most citizens in physical activity on a daily basis.

## **Key findings and lessons learnt**

**'If it ain't broke, don't fix it'**

When leaders of grassroots sport bodies are approached about good governance, often their first reaction is to say: ‘We are working as volunteers for a good cause; we are doing nothing wrong.’ For the most part, these leaders are creating and delivering positive services and activities for the benefit of people other than themselves, with no or very little material compensation, and the vast majority intend only to govern their organisations in a proper and appropriate way. GGGs’s aim in facilitating good governance in grassroots sport is therefore not to try to fix something that is not broken but, rather, to help grassroots sport leaders reflect on governance procedures and to assist them in keeping their systems intact. In other words, GGGs aims to create awareness and tools for handling potential governing issues.

How can this rationale be presented to leaders of the grassroots sport sector? First, it needs to be communicated that good governance is not about uncovering governance problems in individual grassroots sport entities but about preventing future governance problems in the increasingly complex sporting landscape. Second, practical examples can demonstrate that, despite the conviction in many organisations that they do not have any governing problems, the reality is that the leaders of any sport club or governing body can face situations and dilemmas every day that potentially involve risks, conflicts of interest and maybe even undue advantages (see box 1.5).

#### **Box 1.5 Examples of risks to grassroots good governance**

##### **Conflicts of interest**

- The board of a non-profit sports club has to decide on the awarding of a contract. The husband of the vice president of the club is employed by one of the bidding companies.
- The manager of a sport federation is going to employ a new coach. One of the people who applies for the job is the manager’s niece.

##### **Undue advantages**

- Two months after the conclusion of a sponsorship contract between a non-profit sports club and a company, the sponsor's manager presents high-quality sporting equipment to the president of the sports club.
- A sport equipment manufacturer invites the president of a sports club and his wife to sit in the VIP box of the local premier league football club. Some months later the president and his colleagues on the board decide on a large order of sporting equipment.

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that no single model will fit all circumstances, and therefore the GGS project principles and guidelines are flexible and can be adapted to each organisation's capacity and context.

### **Good governance: from the elite to everyday reality**

One of ISCA's overall concerns was the reception the GGS would get: how great would the interest and uptake be among the target organisations and leaders in the sector? When introducing a topic such as good governance, it is necessary to provide practical, simple tools and processes based on the everyday practical aspects of running clubs and organisations, which can initiate awareness, reflections and first steps towards practical solutions. In the event, the subject was well received by grassroots sport leaders at various levels, indicating that they have an organisational and personal interest in learning and using tools that can help them perform better and validate their decisions.

In general, the grassroots sport sector is doing reasonably well in terms of governance, but in an increasingly complex political and societal reality there is always room for improvement to allow for more open and transparent communication and decisions. This drive for self-improvement is in itself the essence of good governance in grassroots sport.

### **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> Mogens Kirkeby is President of the International Sport and Culture Association (ISCA). The article has been co-authored by Rachel Payne, Fundraising and Communications Officer at ISCA, and Saska Benedicic Tomat, Head of Projects.

<sup>2</sup> Source: European Commission, *Study on the Funding of Grassroots Sports in the EU: Final Report*, vol. I (Brussels: European Commission, 2011), [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/top\\_layer/docs/FinalReportVol1\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/top_layer/docs/FinalReportVol1_en.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> For example, from the European Commission: "In Europe, the governance of sport is traditionally organised along a pyramid structure... At the bottom of the pyramid one finds the sport clubs. One level above are the national federations, usually one per discipline. They cover both high-level (elite) and grassroots sport. Each national federation plays a leading role in implementing regulations and organizing championships... At the top of the pyramid one finds the International sport federations and/or Continental federations." Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'The European Model of Sport', 27 June 2011, [http://ec.europa.eu/internal\\_market/top\\_layer/docs/FinalReportVol1\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/top_layer/docs/FinalReportVol1_en.pdf), accessed 26 March 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Jeroen Scheerder, Hanne Vandermeerschen, Charlotte Van Tuyckom, Remco Hoekman, Koen Breedveld and Steven Vos, *Understanding the Game: Sport Participation in Europe: Facts, Reflections and Recommendations*, Sport Policy and Management Report no. 10 (Leuven: Research Unit of Social Kinesiology and Sport Management, Catholic University of Leuven, 2011), <http://faber.kuleuven.be/spm/download.php?f=SPM10.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> SportsEconAustria, *Study on the Contribution of Sport to Economic Growth and Employment in the EU: Final Report* (Vienna: SportsEconAustria, 2012), <http://ec.europa.eu/sport/library/studies/study-contribution-sports-economic-growth-final-rpt.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Sport England, 'Economic Value of Sport in England' (London: Sport England, 2013), [www.sportengland.org/media/177230/economic-value-of-sport.pdf](http://www.sportengland.org/media/177230/economic-value-of-sport.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Council of Europe, 'European Sport for All Charter', article 1, [www.coe.int/t/dg4/sport/resources/texts/spchart2\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/sport/resources/texts/spchart2_en.asp).

<sup>8</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights', articles 21 and 22, [www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx).

<sup>9</sup> International Sport and Culture Association, *Good Governance in Grassroots Sport: What Does Good Governance Mean to Grassroots Sport?* (Copenhagen: ISCA, 2014), [www.isca-web.org/files/GGGS\\_WEB/Files/GGGS\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](http://www.isca-web.org/files/GGGS_WEB/Files/GGGS_Final_Report.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4.2.