

## **Partnership opportunities for sport associations**

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## Preface

Hereby, we present our policy paper on partnerships between sport associations, written for the course Managing NGOs. We experienced the writing of this policy paper as challenging, but enjoyable. We gained different insights into sport association partnerships, and expanded our experience in writing a policy paper.

We would like to thank two parties for their inspiration and knowledge. First of all, we would like to thank Maaïke Hofmeijer from the department of 'S-PORT at the municipality 's-Hertogenbosch. Second, we would like to thank dr. Jan-Willem van der Roest from the University of Utrecht. Due to their inspiration and knowledge we were able to formulate and polish three policy proposals.

At last, we would like to thank prof. dr. Lucas Meijs and Philine van Overbeeke for their time, insights, and feedback during the several meetings throughout the course. Due to these meetings, we were able to evaluate and improve the policy paper.

We hope you enjoy reading our policy paper.

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### **Executive summary**

Sport associations have a hard time recruiting and retaining operational volunteers and board members. Therefore, this paper proposes three policy proposals for local government officials to support sport associations in their journey of filling all their positions with competent people.

First, local government officials are encouraged to create a yearly municipal sport conference. During this conference, relevant information needs to be provided, and formal and informal network opportunities need to be offered, by the municipality to board members of sport associations. Second, local government officials could stimulate sport associations to organise events to recruit new members and volunteers. As such, local government officials should act as a third-party facilitator for sport associations. Third, local government officials are urged to create municipal sport committees to encourage knowledge sharing between board members who are a subject matter expert of a specific category (e.g., treasuring) within their own sport association board. Knowledge sharing will likely result in a reduction of board members that are needed. Hence, sport associations will need to recruit and retain less volunteers. Local government officials are encouraged to initiate the first proposal, and, thereafter, carefully apply the formulated action plan in this paper to initiate policy proposal two and/or three, to reap most benefits for their municipal sport associations.

In conclusion, the information presented in this paper helps local government officials decide upon which partnership opportunities municipalities should invest in to have their sport associations flourish (that is; maintaining a solid volunteer base). In addition, members of sport associations were informed of the ongoing issues at sport associations and of possible workable partnership opportunities for sport associations. As a result, the barriers for sport associations to partner up with other associations were lowered, and, consequently, sport associations will be more likely to ascertain their continuity for years to come.

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Maintaining a volunteer base is one of the most important tasks that non-profit sport associations have (Bang, Ross, & Reio Jr, 2013). However, there is a limited number of people available to sport associations which they can recruit as volunteers. Moreover, people who are available to sport associations are not always willing to volunteer. As a result, many sport associations have unfilled positions and try to find ways to reduce this amount. Partnerships between sport associations have the potential to resolve this issue. However, the most viable partnership opportunities for sport associations to overcome this problem are yet to be made practically explicit.

At the moment, sport associations are suffering to attract and retain volunteers, such as coaches, referees, and trainers (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, n.d.; see Appendix A). Moreover, given that (most) sport associations have a small pool of volunteers, sport associations have even more trouble to attract and retain board members; volunteers who need to be competent enough to formulate and/or execute the association's strategy (see Appendix B). Those members need specific skills and qualifications, and are, like other volunteers, asked to invest a significant amount of time into an association that is, in many cases, not paying them. Thus, sport associations must focus on opportunities to enlarge their (potential) volunteer base, which could consequently help them fill their positions.

Fortunately, there are sport associations that have a lot of volunteers, and functioning boards. However, some of those functioning boards might govern a sport association which is very small (i.e., a very limited number of members). Given that other sport associations are under serious pressure to attract board members, it might seem straightforward to match functioning boards that govern small sport associations to other associations for which they can perform similar duties as well. This is one way in which sport associations can partner up to solve their problem. As such, it is not very efficient to let a complete and functioning board govern only one small association, as it may seem more efficient to find a group of qualified board members and let them govern multiple sport associations. However, that's easier said than done.

### Challenges

In executing any partnership form, two major challenges need to be taken into account. First, there can be a competitive argument (Byers, 2009; Van der Roest, 2015). It would be very understandable if sport associations that have a lot of volunteers, and functioning boards, are not enthusiastic about sharing their volunteers with other associations. 'Their' association is being led by competent volunteers, so why should they share those very valuable (and rare) volunteers with other associations (e.g., competitors)?

Second, there can be an emotional argument (Schlesinger, Egli, & Nagel, 2012). Volunteers that are active for a specific sport association might be reluctant to do the same work for (an)other association(s). As such, people might have started volunteering because they are emotionally connected (i.e., affectively committed) to a sport association (e.g., they have been a member for a very long time). This connection with the association might be one of the main reasons that someone is a member of an association's board, or let alone a

volunteer for the association. If someone is asked to do the same type of work for a different association, (s)he might not be willing to do this.

### **Specific problem definition**

Based on the aforementioned, it can be stated that even though sport associations have the opportunity to partner up with other associations to solve their problem, they did not yet find successful opportunities to increase their (potential) volunteer base and fill all their positions with competent people. Moreover, even though some sport associations have been successful in the recruitment of volunteers, and the formation of boards, most have struggled due to the (minimal) size of their (potential) volunteer base. Last, previous partnership initiatives between sport associations might have failed due to the competitive and/or emotional argument. Therefore, the problem definition of this paper is: *How can sport associations successfully partner up to fill their positions?*

### **Focus of this paper**

The main goal and focus of this paper is to present multiple policy proposals for local governments that promote partnerships between sport associations. Additionally, this paper will examine initiatives where sport associations can collaborate with third parties such as educational institutions and local governments to increase their (potential) volunteer base and fill all their positions. It is important to mention that this paper will solely focus on partnership opportunities for sport associations to enlarge their (potential) volunteer base, and not on initiatives and strategies that individual sport associations can use to recruit and retain more volunteers from their current membership base.

### **Relevance**

This paper aims to make managerial and practical contributions. From a managerial standpoint, this paper aims to help local government officials (or: the municipality) decide upon the ways in which sport associations could partner up to operate for many years to come. Moreover, the findings of this paper will help them decide upon which partnership options to invest in to have their sport associations flourish (that is; maintaining a solid volunteer base) (Bang et al., 2013). As such, through better understanding what potential workable partnership opportunities are at hand, they can spend government money in a way which harvests the highest return on investment. In addition, the results of this paper will help local government officials to identify the partnership option which will yield most benefit for sport associations within a municipality, given what is most urgent to be addressed.

Next to making managerial contributions, this paper also aims to make practical contributions. From a practical standpoint, members of sport associations will be informed of the ongoing issues at sport associations and of possible workable partnership opportunities. This information will help them address their competitive and/or emotional arguments. As a result, the barriers for sport associations to partner up with other associations will be lowered, and, consequently, sport associations will be more likely to ascertain their continuity for years to come.

## Chapter 2 - Definitions

### **Sport associations**

Sport associations can be non-profit sport clubs, community-based sport programmes, and commercial sports centres (Hermens, Verkooijen, & Koelen, 2019). This paper focuses on non-profit sport associations. These membership sport associations are an interesting type of non-profit organisation that evolve around social contracts between people with a common interest in a certain sport (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). Typically, these sport associations solely rely on local volunteers and resources to provide services (Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014). For some, these inputs are sufficient to manage the organisation and provide the necessary means for their members to practice the sport of their interest. However, a great deal of sport associations face difficulties to keep their heads financially and organisationally above water. Wicker and Breuer (2011) identified the scarcity of volunteers, access to sport facilities, and an increasing imbalance between expenses and revenues as the key problems of sport associations. Partnerships between sport associations could be a remedy to these difficulties.

### **Partnerships**

A partnership could be described as an active relationship between (different) actors, built on collectively agreed upon objectives, dividing labour with the understanding of each partners' comparative advantages (Brinkerhoff, 2002). Sport associations can establish various sorts of partnerships. Four main types are considered.

First, sport associations can look for partnerships with (local) businesses to secure sponsorship deals, or to get access to other (financial) resources. Partnerships with for-profit organisations are usually voluntarily formed partnerships. That is, both parties engage in a monetary relationship in order to provide operational means, instead of a, for instance, governmentally mandated partnership (Kenis & Provan, 2009). Examples could be beer contracts or office yoga sessions provided by a local association.

Second, sport associations can form partnerships with public health organisations (Hermens et al., 2019). These voluntary sport-for-health partnerships are formed in order to work towards a number of collectively determined health outcomes (Gillies, 1998). Public health organisations include social work, youth work, and primary, elder and residential care (Hermens et al., 2019). An example is FC Groningen, which through a foundation contributes to the reintegration of youth with minimal access to the labour market (FC Groningen, 2020).

Third, sport associations can partner up with educational institutions. Different to the two previous types, this partnership is not necessarily voluntary. Schools themselves could be looking to improve their curricular physical education by using sport coaches from local associations. However, in the past, governmental bodies have also been incentivising these sorts of partnerships under the rule of new health policies (Smith, 2015). Municipalities could also be forcing partnerships when sport facilities are state-owned.

Last, there can be partnerships between sport associations. These partnerships are sometimes sensitive due to emotional and competitive reasons (Byers, 2009; Schlesinger et al., 2012; Van der Roest, 2015): who wants to help a rival, while their own association needs assistance? Despite the resistance of some sport associations towards these collaborations,



there are many potential benefits. Especially, because both parties are from the same sector. Understanding of each other's operations is expected, and likely to contribute to the sharing of expertise. The next section will further elaborate on the potential benefits of this type of partnerships.

### **Motives for entering partnerships**

The paper will mostly focus on partnerships between sport associations. Babiak (2007) found that sport associations have several motives to partner up with other sport associations. Examples of motives are: stability (survival), reciprocity, resource security, efficiency of input-output ratios, and gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the external environment (Babiak, 2007). There are two theories which provide a theoretical framework to explain the motives of sport associations to partner up with other sport associations: resource dependency theory and transaction cost economics (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Williamson, 1991).

#### *Resource dependency theory*

Resource dependency theory states that resources can have an effect on the actions of organisations (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). It emphasises that organisations which control resources have power over other organisations that need resources (Pfeffer & Davis-Blake, 1987). This leads to a power imbalance and interdependence among the various organisations. Partnerships can help organisations to acquire resources which were normally not available to them. This is also true for sport associations. Partnerships can facilitate opportunities for sport associations to acquire resources which were normally not accessible to them (Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017). For example, these resources can be: equipment, venues, transportation infrastructure, and volunteers (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009). Moreover, partners can combine complementary resources such as a playing field, sport facilities, or equipment. This can lead to a common pool of resources for participating sport associations (Jones et al., 2017).

Partnerships between sport associations can also lead to a reduction of competition regarding resources (Provan & Kenis, 2008). When sport associations collaborate, they will not compete over resources, but rather work together to acquire them (Provan & Kenis, 2008). This leads to more stability and a higher probability of survival in a competing environment for those who have partnered up (Babiak, 2007). This is especially important for smaller and younger sport associations as they often do not have enough financial resources at their disposal. As soon as they gain access to a common pool of resources, costs are reduced compared to the situation where organisations acquire them on their own (Jones et al., 2017).

#### *Transaction costs economics*

Transaction costs economics is about the way in which organisations can minimise costs associated with production and transaction (Williamson, 1991). Moreover, it emphasises that costs can be reduced through partnerships (Williamson, 1991). Williamson (1991) distinguishes direct costs (e.g., equipment purchases, payments of staff, and acquisition of facilities (Jones et al., 2017)) and indirect costs (e.g., costs associated with planning, implementing and monitoring activities (Jones et al., 2017)). Partnerships allow actors to

share these costs or other costs that cannot be financed independently. Furthermore, when partners collaborate regarding resources and share large costs, they will reduce the opportunistic behaviour of the parties. In turn, this enhances the trust and reciprocity among them and creates efficient network exchanges.

### *Community*

Besides the two theories, there are also community motives for entering partnerships. One reason to enter partnerships is to gain legitimacy. As such, partnerships between sport associations help sport associations to be more visible and legitimate in communities. Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) found that linking sport associations, especially smaller ones to more established legitimate ones, leads to more legitimacy for all involved - with smaller ones benefiting most. When sport associations' legitimacy is enhanced, they are more likely to agree with norms, beliefs or expectations from their external environment (i.e., community).

There are also benefits for the community. Partnerships between sport associations can lead to social capital for the community (Tower, Jago, & Deery, 2006). Social capital is the connection between people in the community and the reciprocity and trust that rises among them (Sharpe, 2006). When individuals participate more in shared activities through partnerships, social ties are formed. These in turn can help solve community problems, help community members find common ground, and commitment to community. Thus, partnerships develop community networks which in turn lead to more community cohesion (Sharpe, 2006).

### **Third-party facilitator for partnerships**

“Building and maintaining effective partnerships is extremely difficult for managers and administrators” (Jones et al., 2017, p. 157). The environment in which sport associations operate is often times characterised as unstable regarding funding and resources (Jones et al., 2017). This unstable environment impacts the demarcation among sport associations. As such, this demarcation does not provide an incentive to partner up. Moreover, managers and administrators of sport associations often operate on a day-to-day operations focus. They do not have the time nor resources to strategically scan (long-term) potential partners in their external environment (Jones et al., 2017).

One way to create an efficient and effective partnership network is making use of a third-party facilitator. Third-party organisations can be, for example, local authorities or universities (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). They can have two important roles namely; enjoy being a third-party or a third-party who unites (Jones et al., 2017). A third-party who enjoys is focused on the benefits arising from a conflict among two other parties. This paper focuses on a third-party who unites. The third-party who unites leverages the social position of the other actors, mediates relations, and improves coordination (Obstfeld, 2005). Moreover, they can help selecting partners for sport associations with their specific expertise or ‘core competencies’ (Downling, Robinson & Washington, 2013). In addition, third-party facilitators can also help in facilitating information and resources between actors in a network, help with negotiating with other partners when there is power inequality, and also help in facilitating activities among the partners (Jones et al., 2017).

Concluding, whenever third parties help in conceiving, arranging and implementing partnerships, it is done more efficient and effective than without a third-party facilitator (Downling et al., 2013).

## Chapter 3 - Policy proposals

### Policy proposal one: Yearly municipal sport conference

As mentioned earlier, sport associations are reluctant to partner up with other sport associations (e.g., due to the competitive and emotional argument). As such, sport associations are not used to successfully collaborate with other sport organisations. However, since most sport associations are also struggling to find volunteers and board members, they should be interested in potential solutions and/or ideas. To make it possible for sport associations to approach each other, it is proposed that the municipality will organise a yearly sport conference where all municipal sport association board members will be invited. This municipal sport conference will serve two main purposes.

First, the yearly municipal sport conference will have an informative purpose. At this conference, a local government official (e.g., the sport councillor) needs to provide the board members of sport associations with relevant information for the coming year. This can be information about real or potential (municipal or national) policy changes regarding, e.g., the funding of sport associations. Additionally, the municipality needs to provide insights on how board members of sport associations could tackle a challenge they face. For instance, such a challenge could be the recruitment of volunteers or securing sponsorship fees. As a result, board members of sport associations will be triggered to attend the conference, as the information provided will help them run their sport association more effectively.

Second, the yearly municipal sport conference aims to initiate and/or strengthen relationships between the board members of the various associations. As such, the yearly conference needs to provide the board members of municipal sport associations with a formal and informal networking opportunity. This organised networking part of the conference can be a first and necessary step for board members of the sport associations to approach and discuss their challenges with each other (instead of only internally among their 'own' board members). Moreover, networking activities with people outside one's *inner circle* provides new insights to those participating (Clark, 2016). After a local government official has informed the board members of the various municipal sport associations, local government officials are encouraged to organise some sort of speed dating between the board members of the various associations. For instance, board members of tennis associations will be given ten minutes to discuss their challenges in running their sport associations with board members of volleyball, table tennis and football associations. After several speed dating rounds, municipal board members of sport associations will be more informed of the challenges other sport associations within their municipality face. Moreover, the speed dating will also offer the board members an opportunity to ask other board members to partner up with them to resolve challenges that are being faced. At the end of the conference, local government officials need provide an informal networking opportunity, by offering a chat over free food and drinks to those attending.

Even though organising a yearly municipal sport conference can be beneficial to local government officials and board members of sport associations (e.g., through discussions on challenges that are being faced), it has to be noted that such an event will be only be worth the costs and effort if there are multiple sport associations within a municipality. Moreover, depending on the available financial means and the number of sport associations within the

municipality, local government officials should decide on the number of delegates that can attend the conference. As a result, the specific program and length should be changed accordingly.

### **Policy proposal two: Event partnerships between sport associations using a third-party facilitator (municipality)**

Many sport associations encounter problems when operating alone. They face difficulties in finding a sufficient number of volunteers, (board) members, or (financial) resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Rijksinstituut Volksgezondheid en Milieu, n.d.). The second proposal focuses on establishing partnerships with educational institutions and sport associations, and is based on the resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Through a third-party facilitator, different sport associations are united through the organisation of sport events. The purpose of these events is for the collaborating associations to increase their talent/members and volunteer pool. Two types of partnership events can be organised. The first type will be combining different kind of sports associations to jointly host a small sport event. For example, this could be a rugby tournament hosted at a football club's facilities. These events will be focusing on primary schools. The primary schools are a major contributor here, bringing in participants, which are potential new members. The second type of events will be organised through the collaboration of multiple associations from the same type of sports. This second type of events will be hosted throughout the village/town/city. They will be focused on promoting the sport, pooling of resources, and gaining potential new members. This could be a large volleyball tournament at a beach or a water polo tournament at a swimming pool.

The third-party facilitator will operate on behalf of the municipality. Several municipalities have cross-discipline professionals employed. These employees work at a primary school for 60% of their time, hosting sport events in the other part. Because of various reasons, sport organisations are reluctant to collaborate. Therefore, the municipality has a major bridging function. Without solely providing financial means (which is a suboptimal solution), the local governmental bodies should deploy their cross-disciplinary professionals to stimulate the formation of partnerships between various local sport associations. Using a third-party facilitator, these partnerships are much more likely to succeed (Downling et al., 2013). The municipality should account for small costs associated to the organisation of an event (e.g., printing flyers).

#### *Advantages*

Sport associations face difficulties in maintaining a volunteer base (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, n.d.). Every association wants to present itself in the market in order to attract new talent. This is best done through the organisation of competitive events. Sports are exercised at the best of each contestant's performance at matches and tournaments. Participants will be activated to join a collaborating association after engaging in one the events. Thereby, events with a competitive element attract supporters which contribute to the associations' finances and club feeling/bonding.

Besides supporters and new talent, these events attract a new group of potential volunteers. Depending on the size of the event, a number of volunteers is required to manage that day's activities. These could be volunteers which are currently active for the sport association. Preferably, however, a new pool of volunteers is activated. Since schools are very likely to be incorporated in the events, they are expected to bring in a number of volunteers. This could be teachers, but also parents of the children who participate.

Introducing them to the sport associations, in a collaborative environment, should activate these parents to engage in more volunteer activities at one of the sport clubs. At the end, these existing and new volunteers result in a common pool of volunteering resources, available to every participating association. Creating such a pool is one of main goals of the events.

Collectively organising events provides a low entry level for sport associations to form partnerships. Sport associations are not obligated to combine their policies, rules and structures, finances, or other organisational aspects. Instead, the municipality provides a basic framework for setting up small and large-scale events. As such, the municipality has the role of being a broker within a new network, who eases the partnership by facilitating in activities, mediating the relations, resources, and information (Jones et al., 2017; Obstfeld, 2005). In other words, the municipality will act as a uniting third-party. This low entry level can provide the next step in future and more extensive partnerships. So, eventually, the partnerships will give way to more fruitful collaborations between sport organisations. A potential next step is elaborated on in proposal three.

### *Challenges*

At this moment, sport associations are reluctant to work together with other sport associations. For that reason, in the formation process, the municipality has a major role to play. In order to incentivise the individual sport associations to collaborate, the benefits of event partnering should clearly be communicated. To achieve this, the municipality should engage in conversations with potential partner associations. They need to manage the different goals, rules, and perceptions of each sport association. This is likely to be conflicting among different sport clubs. A way to overcome this challenge is through an identification-action approach. First, the needs of each potential participating association should be identified. Then, after having talked to multiple different organisations, the key problems of the municipal sport associations can be identified. Finally, when a good overview of all the problems, needs, and strengths is established, the municipality should be connecting the associations. These three steps require significant communication, analysis, and relationship building skills. Every individual step is challenging itself. However, through using experienced government officials and open conversations, a municipality should be able to initiate event partnerships for sport associations.

After the first events are organised, it's a major challenge to have sport associations continue organising such events adjacent to their own regular activities. Some partnerships might cease to exist if the municipality does not invest in sufficient follow-up activities. Reasons for partners to exit the established partnerships could be conflicts with the other parties, lack of beneficial results, or no need for new members or volunteers. Evaluation sessions should provide the municipality with a helpful overview on the partnership's performance. The decision to continue, terminate, or further expand the partnership mostly depends on the development of the associations' most urgent needs. If partners want to continue to increase their visibility through these events, it is important for the municipality to determine whether budget will be allocated for recurring events. Basically, first time events should be subsidised by the municipality, while recurring events require financing from the partners themselves.

For the municipality, as well as the partner associations it is valuable to maintain partnerships, possibly through organising events. However, the purpose of first-time events is to bring different sport associations closer together in order to enhance collaboration on a broader level. The ultimate goal would be for partners to share resources, knowledge, and costs without the municipality as a mediator. The next step towards this ultimate goal is that boards of associations work together. Long-term partnerships can only be initiated by bringing the boards from different associations together. By organising an event together, two or more organisations get introduced to each other's organisational capacities. This should be an excellent steppingstone to set up meetings between different board members to share knowledge, and develop stronger and more extensive partnerships. This subsequent partnership opportunity is explained in greater detail in the next policy proposal.



### **Policy proposal three: municipal sport committees**

It is difficult for sport associations to find enough volunteers, such as referees and coaches. However, an even larger challenge for these associations lies in finding enough volunteers for boards (see Chapter 1 for the argumentation). To overcome this problem, it is proposed that sport associations to commit themselves to the participation in overarching municipal sport committees (MSCs) - which need to be established by the local government and serve the purpose of empowering sport association's board members. Moreover, these committees aim at combining the strengths of the various sport association's subject matter expert board members. For instance, one such an MSC would be a committee in which all the treasurers of the municipal sport associations are a member. In the following sections, the advantages and challenges for setting up and taking part in MSCs are discussed.

#### *Advantages*

First, all sport associations that have entered the MSCs will profit from the committees. MSCs enjoy the advantage of shared knowledge and skills from board members from the various sport associations within a municipality. As such, during committee meetings, knowledge needs to be shared among the members, through which overall knowledge levels will rise. Consequently, this could improve decision making within individual sport association boards. Besides increasing the odds that good decisions are made by and for sport associations, enhanced knowledge sharing will increase the odds of successfully recruiting volunteers which would like to, e.g., become a board member. This is the case because the knowledge barrier to enter a board will be lowered - which might remove some sort of tension for people to volunteer.

Second, and related to the first advantage of the MSCs, is that given that the competencies and skills of individual members are pooled in the committee, members are also able to help each other out to save time and energy (which serves efficiency and effectiveness purposes). For instance, the subject matter experts could decide to appoint a couple of members which are particularly good at something (e.g., reaching out to companies for sponsoring) to do one thing, with the other members doing other things (e.g., contract negotiations with company representatives). Moreover, whenever there are multiple subject matter experts of one sport associations that, e.g., do the bookkeeping of the association, involvement in an MSC could also lead to a reduction of the amount of people needed to do the work of an individual sport association (given that knowledge levels of individuals rise, or are equalised). As such, participation could result in a decrease in the number of (board) members needed by a sport association to operate - reducing a sport association's volunteer recruitment problems.

Third, the municipal committees are able to formulate strategies and plans concerning sponsoring, events and the recruitment of volunteers or new members - without being directive to the sport associations involved. As sport associations, and its members, value autonomy, the MSCs are, unlike current 'omni' boards, only groups which formulate advice to individual members regarding possible beneficial avenues sport association boards could explore. Thus, given that a large, overarching committee that decides the complete direction of local and small sport associations could lead to discontent by sport association members (= related to the emotional argument), the individual MSCs will not be in charge of making

strategic decisions for municipal sport associations. Rather, this task will be the responsibility of the boards of the sport associations involved.

### *Challenges*

The creation of MSCs also has challenges attached to it for sport associations, board members of sport associations, and for local government officials.

First, the willingness of sport associations to collaborate and share knowledge and resources with other sport associations can be a challenge. While all affiliated sport associations can benefit from participating in MSCs, not all sport associations will necessarily be able to see this. Sport associations in the same area may be competing with each other for volunteers and members. Additionally, there may be rivalries between associations which can limit the willingness to collaborate. However, the strength of MSCs lies in the willingness of multiple associations to collaborate and share information.

Second, participation in MSCs is a challenge for the board members of the individual sport associations given that they will be asked to invest a significant amount of time in an MSC. As such, these board members will have to invest more time into this overarching committee (next to their 'ordinary' work for the association). As board members are likely to be motivated to improve the running of their sport association, municipalities should offer a financial reward to sport associations whenever their board members participate in MSCs. As a result, the willingness of board members to participate in MSCs could be boosted, as then benefits might outweigh the cons.

Last, the creation of MSCs is a challenge for local government officials as they need to invest time in the initiation phase of the MSCs. In this process, especially time needs to be devoted to explaining boards of sport associations the overarching need of all sport associations within the municipality, and whilst doing this, attention needs to be given to overcome the competitive and emotional argument of sport association boards. Moreover, given that the municipal committees will benefit multiple parties within one municipality, local government officials need to commit themselves to fund these committees, and especially the sport associations that are willing to invest time in MSCs (like suggested above). Thus, not only have local government officials a role to play in the initiation phase of the committee, but also for the period afterwards. In this way, sport associations as well as their board members will be less reluctant to buy into the idea as proposed, resulting in benefits for a whole municipality.

## **Chapter 4 - Action plan**

In order to help local government officials decide upon the ways in which sport associations will need to partner up to operate for many years to come, multiple policy proposals were proposed. This chapter will discuss the necessary steps that local government officials need to take in order to identify and enrol the second and third policy proposal. As such, the first policy proposal can be seen as a first step that needs to be taken before the second and third policy proposal will become viable options to undertake. The action plan for local government officials will now be discussed.

### **Step 1: Identify municipal sport association's challenges**

The first step is to identify all the sport associations in a municipality and analyse them. As mentioned, sport associations can struggle to find 'operational' volunteers or competent board members (or both). However, there can also be sport associations that have enough competent board members and/or volunteers, which can be useful for the municipality to know. This initial analysis of all the sport associations within a municipality can give the municipality insights in which associations need help in what areas and which associations are doing well on their own. Besides focusing on problems and challenges of these associations, it is important for the municipality to figure out what initiatives the associations already adopted to resolve issues they faced and/or are currently facing. By doing so, the municipality is better able to determine which initiatives are likely to succeed, and which are not. Additionally, the social composition of the sport associations should be examined and registered, since this could influence the potential success of partnerships. This information is critical for the municipality, since municipalities need to know what the possibilities and the limitations of sport associations, as well as any possible obstacles for partnerships, are. This information can be collected during meetings between individual sport associations and a municipality's employees. These meetings can give insight in the operational and the strategic challenges of the sport associations. This information can be (partially) presented and shared on the conference that will be held for all the municipality's sport associations, which improves the information that the individual sport associations have regarding the shortages of volunteers.

### **Step 2: Formulate solutions**

After the challenges of the municipal sport associations are identified, an extensive overview of the needs of each participating sport association should be available. The formulation of solutions to these needs depends on the composition of the municipality's sport sector and the problems faced by the various associations. The municipality can decide to take three different actions: initiate an event-based partnership, initiate MSCs, or to not form a partnership. Basically, an event-based partnership would be especially relevant to associations that are reluctant to collaborate, or where board members have minimal available time. Also, those organisations specifically looking to increase their number of members or operational volunteers are excellent partners to form collaborations with through events. Sport associations that are explicitly looking for board assistance, or those which have a well organised and operating board, would be more applicable to a direct MSC collaboration.

Usually, the latter would be associations with a solid base of members and (operational) volunteers. In these cases, a greater willingness to collaborate is expected as boards may have more time available, or the need for collaboration is higher. Last, municipalities can decide to leave associations outside of any partnership. Some sport organisations might explicitly withhold themselves from any collaboration. Others could be very small, or unique, which could make it difficult to find a relevant partner.

### **Step 3: Present proposal**

After analysing the sport associations and identifying possible matches for partnerships, the municipality should present their proposal to the sport associations. During this first session it is important to have all participants present, in order to solve possible problems and conflicts directly. Furthermore, the stakeholders have the possibility to hear their future partners' opinion, concerns, and expectations of the project and can adapt theirs accordingly. In this phase, the municipality should still allow for small changes, in order to come closer to a mutual agreement (e.g., number of times MSCs should meet). If the municipality decides to grant the collaborating associations a subsidy, it is important to determine the amounts depending on the size of the association. The proposal and potential negotiation of these subsidies should be done in private, to prevent conflict. If any association decides not to participate, this is the phase to think of replacement of, or advancement without, that association.

### **Step 4: Implementation of the proposed plan**

When the sport associations agree to the proposed partnership, the next step will be the implementation of the proposed plan. The implementation phase consists of several meetings between the municipality and the new partners. The municipality will coordinate these meetings and will be the mediator during those meetings.

The first meetings will be focused on providing information towards each other on their policies, structures, rules, interests, expectations, and ideas concerning the partnership. When this information is established, they can create their (long-term) vision and mission. When the vision and mission is clear for all the partners, the next step is to make concrete objectives for the parties. These objectives can be regarding sharing of resources, information sharing, meetings, deadlines, and more. If these steps are successful and both associations believe that a partnership will be fruitful, the sport association will sign a collaboration contract set up by the municipality regarding the partnership. In this contract, all the agreements and goals between the sport associations are written down. In this way, the accountability and trust can be monitored between the sport associations.

The next step is the implementation of the actual policies. The aim is that both policies are set up within one year. So, the (several) events are organised within this year. Moreover, the new committees with board members need to be established and running. After this year, goals will be monitored to see if the partnerships create positive outcomes and if they are on the right track towards a next level partnership. If they are on the right track, new goals can be established.

For the event partnerships, the next goal is to initiate one MSC. In this way, the partners will take the next step in sharing resources, namely their board members. These

partners will start at the beginning of the implementation of creating an overarching committee of board members within a one-year time span.

As stated before, one of the goals for the partnerships is to share information and resources. The next goal for the boards is to share indirect and direct costs. Partners can, for example, set up a financial plan within a two-year time span regarding costs associated with buying equipment, food and beverages, transportation costs, and planning, implementing and monitoring activities. When these costs are shared among the sport associations, this will lead to a reduction of transaction costs for them.

Eventually, the ultimate goal for the partnerships is to operate autonomously from the municipality with a long-term strategic financial partnership. However, given that the social composition of sport associations might be very different, it might take multiple years of collaboration to achieve this. Therefore, local government officials should up until that point coordinate meetings and act as a mediator during partnership meetings.

### **Step 5: Evaluate**

Sport associations should evaluate (the results of) each event, and after a certain period of participating in MSCs (e.g., after three months). They should do this during their own board meetings, during meetings with board members of other associations and local government officials, and during regular (individual) association check-ups with local government officials. During the evaluation of the events, sport associations need to discuss what went well and what did not go well. Additionally, during this evaluation, sport associations can decide if they are willing to partner up on a more frequent or more intensive level (e.g., more events or participating in multiple MSCs). For the sport associations that are participating in MSCs, it is also important to regularly have evaluations. These evaluations may prevent friction between sport associations and can improve the way the MSCs themselves are functioning.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion

This paper examined one of the most pressing challenges of sport associations, namely the shortage of operational volunteers and the struggle to find enough competent board members to lead their organisation. Even though these problems are present within sport associations, serious partnerships between those associations to (partially) tackle them are virtually non-existent. There are two main arguments for the absence of these partnerships, namely the competitive and the emotional argument. It is not common for sport associations to help other sport associations with their (volunteering) problems, since sport associations are often competing with each other (Byers, 2009; Van der Roest, 2015). According to the emotional argument, volunteers in sport associations are only willing to do their voluntary work for one specific association because of their emotional connection to this organisation (Schlesinger et al., 2012).

Three policy proposals for local government officials were formulated in this paper. The main goal of the first policy proposal is to create more willingness among sport associations to collaborate to tackle their volunteer- and board member related problems, and to show them *why* they should tackle these problems. Through the creation of a yearly municipal sport conference, where all board members of the sport associations within a municipality are invited, the municipality will provide information regarding relevant policy changes, and ways to tackle challenges that the sport associations face. Additionally, this conference can be used as a networking event for all the sport associations in the municipality, which could decrease the distance between those organisations.

The second and third policy proposals are more focused on *how* to tackle those problems. The second policy proposal is based around organising events with multiple sport associations and the municipality as third-party facilitator. Through these events, organisations can recruit not only new volunteers, but also new members (which in turn could become volunteers). Next to that, organising events with multiple organisations can be a first step for sport associations towards more serious and intensive collaboration with other associations. So, these events can also be seen as a method to make the third policy proposal more realistic.

Third, the creation of MSCs is proposed. These will be overarching committees where municipal board members who are responsible for one specific aspect (e.g., sponsoring) in their own sport association board will meet on a regular basis. Through MSCs, all sport associations can benefit from the knowledge of multiple board members. Additionally, these MSCs can be used to discuss problems that individual sport associations have to deal with. Last, the MSCs can give advice on specific subjects, but will not be directive in any way.

Hopefully, the proposed policy proposals and action plan offer local government officials workable tools to successfully support sport associations in their journey of filling all their positions with competent people.

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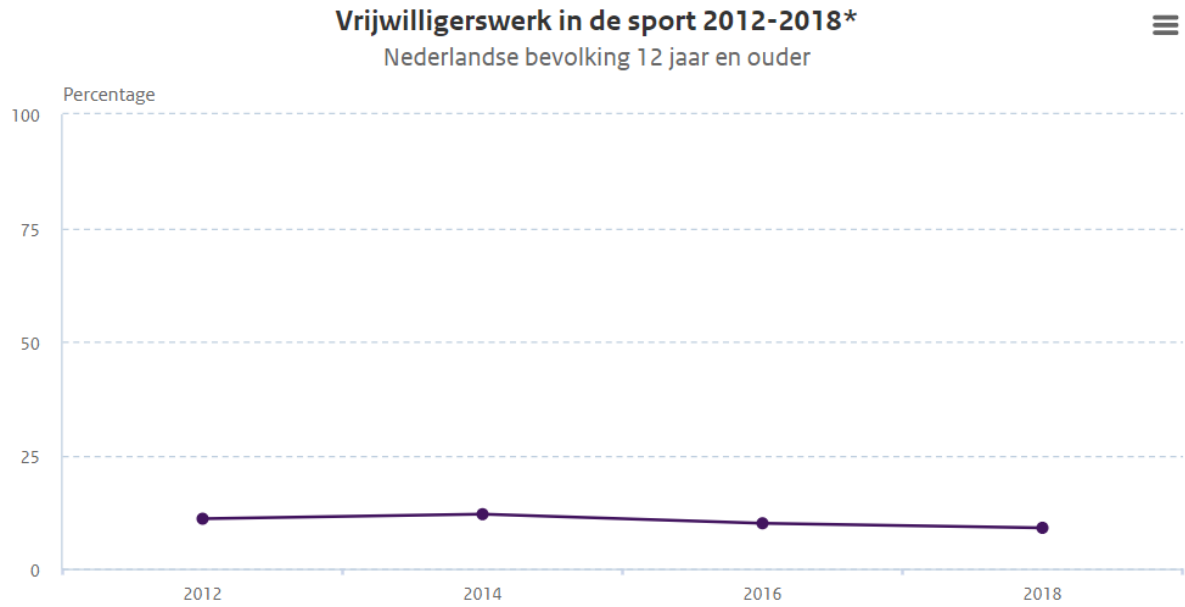
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## Appendix

### Appendix A

Percentage of volunteers in the sports sector between 2012 and 2018 in the Netherlands (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, n.d.).



## Appendix B

Share of volunteers per type of work in the sports sector in 2018 in the Netherlands (Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, n.d.).

