

The SATSport framework for effective governance in grassroots sports organisations

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Abstract. *This paper is based on a study that was initiated to better understand the dynamics of the grassroots sport landscape and establish a framework for effective governance practice in this important area of sport policy and management. Researchers had previously identified the value of exploring good governance specific to the non-profit sector and in particular the unique features of informal sports organisations and small community clubs. The research methodology blended a meta-analysis of relevant literature to identify key principles followed by primary data collection to evaluate and validate the emerging framework. The results of the study provided a typology of the sport governance landscape and clear evidence of the need to develop a framework for effective governance appropriate to the needs of grassroots sports organisations. Furthermore, it supported the construction of a flexible and dynamic self-regulatory instrument – known as SATSport- that organisations might consider for measuring and illustrating commitment to good governance.*

Keywords: SATSport, Governance, Grassroots Sport, Good Practice, Self-Assessment

Reikšminiai žodžiai: SATSport, valdymas, mėgėjų sportas, geroji patirtis, įsivertinimas

Introduction

The topic of good governance has high relevance in the complex and demanding context of organisational leadership and performance. It represents an issue that is debated in formal and informal organisations of any size and among public, voluntary, and private sector. Notwithstanding, sports organisations and small community clubs, arguably the true grassroots, appear not to be accounted for in the realistic and practical way in current governance arrangements [11].

In light of this the paper – as part of the action research study called Good Governance in Grassroots Sport and funded by the European Commission under the 2011 Preparatory Action in the Field of Sport – explores effective practice in this important area of sport policy and management. It explains and reflects on this action research project drawing implications for current academic knowledge and applied practice then concludes by identifying a practical and pragmatic framework for effective governance in grassroots sports organisations.

Short literature review and definition of governance

During the course of the literature review a number of notable organisational features and characteristics appeared to emerge. There are a number of models or frameworks and definitions that seek to make sense of organisational design and structure. Tricker [20] and Carver [2] define mainstream governance as a strategic enabling role and ethical process. In this definition the role of the board is to set direction and act fairly while allowing managers and staff to undertake day to day operational responsibilities. With regard to sport governance the European Commission [6] and Sport New Zealand [19] define the concept in more specific and detailed terms as a set of guiding principles (including accountability, democracy and transparency) and a disciplined process of policy making, risk management and performance evaluation.

Hoye *et al.* [11] suggests that the grassroots sport landscape appears to comprise both formally structured bodies that are governed by national boards but may also include more informal clubs that are managed by committees or even individual personalities. In the same vein, grassroots sport is considered by the European Commission [7] to cover all sport disciplines practised by non-professional participants and organised at a national level although enacted predominantly through a network of small local clubs. By implication, a definition – or interpretation – of grassroots sports needs to be appropriately broad or fluid so as to reflect the scope

and realities of the sector. Drawing on the various characterisations of governance and grassroots sport the authors propose the following working definition of governance as “the philosophy and practice of steering and shaping organisational life and performance”. The benefit of a sound approach to governance is the collaborative work between the strategic board and operational executive.

Beyond the process of defining sport governance and grassroots sport and the benefits of such an approach there are six contemporary theories that inform and underpin the understanding and practice of the discipline. Two of the theories (Agency and Stewardship) take a narrower, internal view on governance as a process and balance between the board exercising authoritative control and placing delegated trust in employees [3]. The remaining 4 theories (Institutional, Resource Dependence, Network and Stakeholder) take a broader, externally orientated perspective of governance as a contextual and relational issue mindful of wider expectations [3]. The theoretical explanation and framework for governance therefore suggests a blend of the following is required for effective practice – appropriate internal control, development of internal capabilities and active consideration of the external environment. With this regard, Henry and Lee [10] identified seven core principles of sound practice. They advocate that organisations should be governed in a way that is open (transparency), fair (democracy; equity) and effective (responsibility; accountability; efficiency; effectiveness). The extent to which these characteristics manifest and thrive are attributed to a range of mechanisms but most significantly to the presence of active and constructive leadership role modelling by the board, committee or club figurehead [17].

The method of the research

The main framework of the adopted methodology was based on two different, but interconnected, levels of action (See Figure 1). Firstly, the research aimed at increasing evidence and the knowledge base for good governance in grassroots sport. Secondly, it sought to define a system for understanding the typology of the sport governance landscape and a specific self-assessment tool designed to help grassroots sport organisations to determine a level of commitment to good governance. Extensive and systematic literature review of relevant scientific journals and studies concerning governance in grassroots sport (described above) was implemented as the first step. Results obtained with the literature review represented the ground for a theoretical framework and the construction of a self-assessment regulatory tool, known as SATSport (see annex 1). This tool was designed with the intention of offering a simple and effective tool relying on self-assessment and regulation to enable organisations to determine and measure their commitment to good governance. The construction of SATSport followed three principal steps:

- introductory focus-group and working sessions with Good Governance in Grassroots Sport (GGGS) partner and related organisations;
- wider and parallel collection of good experiences;
- action research and specific pilot-testing of the self-assessment tool.

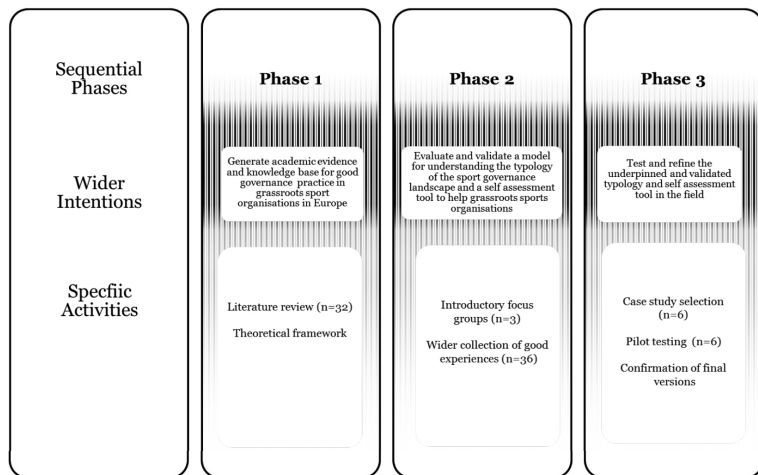


Figure 1. Research Methodology Framework

During the first phase, board members representative of the organisations involved in the GGGS project (n=18) were asked to join focus-groups (n=3) in which key analytical units concerning governance – problems, norms, roles, process and nodal points – were discussed and critically analysed. Three types of organisations were involved in the process: national federations, regional associations and local clubs. All organisations were invited to openly discuss typical organisational features and characteristics of governance in grassroots sport organisations, by adopting their own perspective. Following this step they were asked to map a range of potential actions which could be used to increase the quality of governance procedures in connection with the identified organisational features. From the data collected a matrix covering the main themes, the keywords and the analytical units that emerged, was developed.

At the end of the first step, good experiences of organisations, working at grassroots level, and showing relevant results in terms of commitment to good governance were collected and analysed (n=36). A relatively simple self-description questionnaire was adopted as the main research tool for the data collection. Interested organisations were required to complete the questionnaire to provide information about organisational features and approaches adopted in terms of governance in their activities/projects. The scope of the call was to identify good quality data from the key organisations operating at a grassroots level with the motivation firstly to gain a better understanding of the procedures that are adopted in terms of governance and, secondly, pilot-test the emerging self-assessment tool.

Thereafter six respondent organisations were considered as case studies, relevant for the project and its terms of reference, and useful for the develo-

ment and critical analysis of the self-assessment tool. The six respondent organisations were chosen on the basis of three main criteria: the quality and the relevance of the information provided; the representativeness of the three types of level of organization (National Federation, Regional Association and Local Club) taken into account in the theoretical framework; finally, they were also selected in terms of setting and geographic distribution, with the aim being to work across national, regional and local level and test finding across different contexts and sport systems.

SATSport was pilot-tested and evaluated in its accuracy with the selected case-studies. The first phase saw the organisations completing the self-assessment tool; it was followed by the second phase in which respondents were asked to take part in a follow-up interviews. The evidence collected was finally used to complete the construction of SATSport, reflect important governance issues and measure its capacity to illustrate the commitment of an organisation to good governance.

Main results

The collected data offered concrete evidence about specific organisational features and characteristics of governance in grassroots sport organisations. Although there are common patterns in terms of activity, grassroots organisation might differ significantly in the typology of services/activities provided. The proposed typology of the sport governance landscape emerging from the research process is proposed at Figure 2.

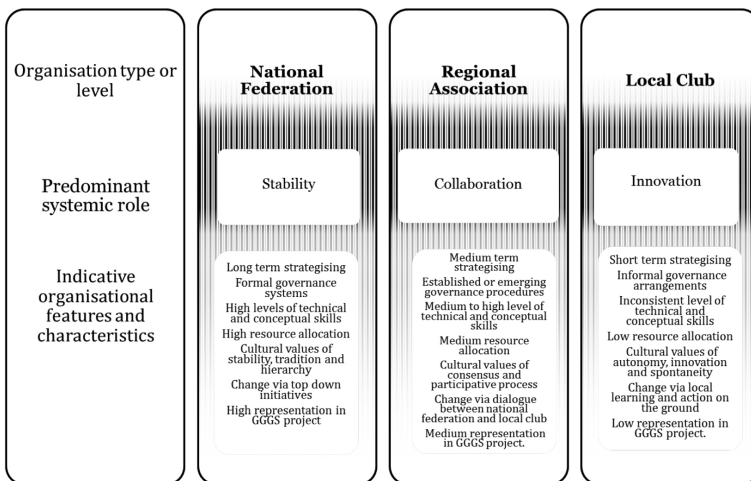


Figure 2. Sport Governance Organisational Typology

Good governance for grassroots sport organisation is a multifaceted issue that requires organisations to adopt a multidimensional approach. This approach must be contextual and flexible enough to evolve in different forms during the life cycle of an organisation. Clearly, the environment in which an organisation operates and the unique features that each organisation has in terms of organisational structures, purposes, human resources, target groups and services/activities provided influence the governance process. This is particularly evident for grassroots sport organisations that operate in a social context that tends to be more dynamic.

Generally, governance is influenced by external variables such as socio-economic conditions, public opinion, policy decisions and stakeholders' strategy. It must also be regarded as dynamic, flexible and adaptable. At a policy level, grassroots sport organisations are required to be inclusive enabling a broad range of groups to be involved in decision-making processes. This includes the involvement of underrepresented groups in decisions, the access of these groups to activities, and the inclusion of external stakeholders.

The participation of all stakeholders should also be regarded as a democratic process that offers an open and frequent access for people (members, target groups, paid staff, volunteers, etc.) of the organisation to influence the political and strategic direction and leadership. It entails both: the equal right of people to run and vote for political leadership functions, as well as the possibility to debate and influence the key decisions of the organisation. The inclusion of different stakeholders, as well as the direct participation of all the relevant parts, appears to be crucial to improve the impact that grassroots organisations have on the target population.

Data collected further showed the importance of accountability in grassroots organisations. It is seen as a way to define clear responsibilities for the different parts of the organisation, including the board, the management, staff and volunteers/voluntary committees. In particular, a systematic and clear definition of the responsibilities for the different parts of the organisations provide a useful means of overcoming some of the well-established barriers to effective implementation of the activity of the organisation. A common feature that involves all the processes implemented, both internal and external, transparency in grassroots sport organisations ensures that members as well as stakeholders know the way the organisation is operating and have a vehicle to address concerns. It includes organisations keeping accounts and ensuring policies and procedures are accessible for a wider audience.

Broadly, it can be maintained that the key principles of good governance are, generally speaking, identified within the grassroots organisation. Nevertheless, the engagement with concrete actions that might enhance the level of inclusion, accountability and transparency as previously presented are infrequently implemented. In addition, excluding a few examples, a well-established strategy conceived to improve organisational readiness in terms of good governance is rarely defined. This might be partially explained by issues regarding leadership competencies, individual motivation and team dynamics in the board and the management and finally, avai-

lable time (grassroots governance is essentially a voluntary endeavour - an addition to other professional and personal commitments).

The efficacy of SATSport

Above all, SATSport proved to be a flexible and dynamic self-regulatory instrument that organisations might use with the purpose of measuring and illustrating commitment to good governance. Furthermore it is intended to help organisations to develop autonomous and original systems and processes of good governance taking into account the external and internal variables influencing the strategy that an organisation might have put in place.

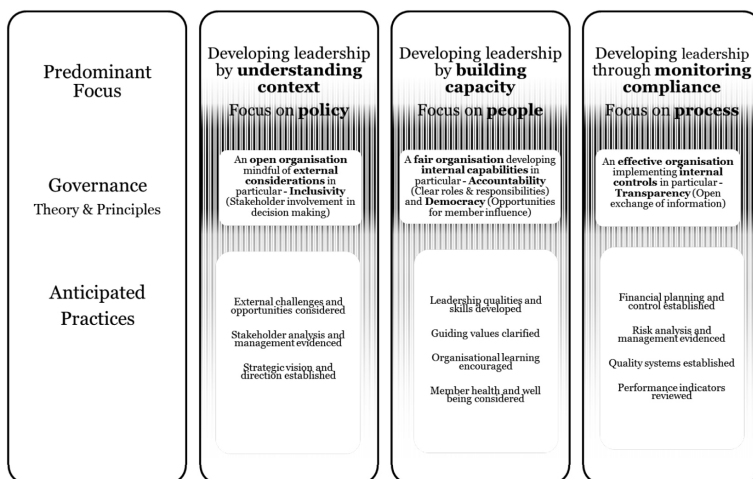


Figure 3. SATSport Framework for Effective Governance.

The theoretical framework underpinning the tool was based on the principle that grassroots sport organisations should enable a broad range of groups to be involved in the decision making process, by also including underrepresented groups and creating pathways for their involvement. It also refers to people, democracy and accountability and it is intended to measure the level of access for members of the organisation to influence the political and strategic direction and leadership of the organisation. Furthermore, in terms of accountability, the self-assessment tool was intended to help organisations to have a better insight for defining clear responsibilities for the different parts of the organisation. Finally, it refers to processes and transparency and offers information on how it is operating to the organisation, to ensure that members and stakeholders have clear and precise information about policy, internal and external processes, procedures and decisions adopted.

In this view, SATSport, while giving a direction and establishing the framework for effective governance, is able to fulfil specific criteria of flexibility and adaptability, helping organisations to identify the most appropriate approach. In fact, flexibility and adaptability are two of the key emerging themes from the analysis of the six case studies, with organisations putting emphasis on the need to put in place a dynamic adaptation to the processes of governance, to respond to the changes of the context in which they operate.

Implications for grassroots sport organisations

While there are clearly necessary minimum requirements around safety, prudence and ethics, good governance is not a simple linear progression but a more holistic and delicate system, that requires different complementary components held in balance. Each body or club, member or volunteer plays an important role in the health of the wider governance network.

Any definition of grassroots sports need to be appropriately dynamic or fluid so as to reflect the scope and realities of the sector as well as the demands and constraints facing those responsible for governance arrangements in grassroots sports [7,8,11,18,]. Johnson and Broms [12] suggested that in such a complex and interconnected system, as previously outlined, that there are three fundamental principles which should be evident in the broader community of practice namely authority, collaboration and innovation. Rather than trying to be everything to everybody it may be that a practical implication of the project is that each body, federation and club should acknowledge – mindful of minimum thresholds - their individual constraints and build on their unique operating strengths and contribution to the governance landscape. For a national body that may mean an emphasis (but not a reliance) on policy direction, for a regional association on facilitating consensus and for a grassroots clubs a focus on innovative practice.

The SATSport framework was considered to provide the community of practice with a clear, simple and balanced approach to both strategising and implementing effective governance practice. In particular the proposed framework was intended to be demonstrably appreciative [4] in tone encouraging the active participation and consideration of stakeholders, recognising good practice (and acknowledging individual constraints) while also providing a scoring matrix for quantitative evaluation. The literature review had previously identified that the scale and complexity of the existing guidance was a potential issue and that there was not enough emphasis in much of the documentation on “soft” issues such as people engagement, organisational culture and innovative practice [1]. As a consequence it could be argued that governance leadership is predominantly focused on authoritative conformance rather than a more contemporary facilitation of collaborative performance [11] as advocated by the SATSport framework. This collaborative style is perhaps particu-

larly relevant in today's increasingly competitive circumstances when organisations rely on the discretionary efforts of employees and volunteers [16]. A broader understanding of organisational change in conjunction with a sound grasp of specific governance theories has the potential to develop - or unearth - more contemporary, balanced and effective governing of bodies, associations and clubs. In this regard SATSport begins to challenge thinking and surface the importance of these issues through the themed sections on understanding context and building capacity. In addition to this initiative, practical steps to develop relevant knowledge and skills for board and committee members could be considered through induction, appraisals and training while also being reflected in the recruitment process.

Conclusion

1. The study has unearthed a number of useful principles and practices. As elements of the project continue to unfold it will be interesting to see how some of the issues identified are addressed and the practice of governance in grassroots clubs develops.

2. A practical limitation of the appreciative, simple and self-managing ethos of the SATSport model is the assumption that board members, officers and volunteers are both selflessly motivated [14] and fundamentally trustworthy [9]. Such a limitation is not a dark or cynical step into the shadow side of organisations (Egan, 1994) but rather a realistic sense of human nature [13]. Such risks could be managed through internal rules, standards and values as well as external exchange and benchmarking [15].

3. It may be that future research questions might seek to go broader, wider and deeper. By that it is meant broader to examine further a systemic, connected and balanced view of the governance landscape deeper into the roots of local clubs to continue learning about their constraints and possibilities (and as a consequence develop or challenge the proposed SATSport model) and finally, wider to explore further the implications of some of the relevant theoretical and conceptual issues identified (and as a consequence develop or challenge established explanations and assumptions and subsequent board effectiveness).

4. The value of SATSport as a flexible, dynamic and self-regulatory instrument must be further assessed in order to gather more robust evidence on its efficacy to illustrate and plot the commitment of an organisation to good governance and the potential effects that information gathered by an organisation using the tool might have on its performance. More concrete evidence on the benefits that the self-assessment tool might have for organisations operating in the grassroots sector needs to be produced and validated.

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Annex 1

SATSport

Please indicate your impression of the elements listed in the table on the next 3 pages by following the score key written here and tick the relevant number on the scale from 1 to 4:

we don't do this at the moment: score 1 it means: • No current evidence of Required Elements. • It is not a priority at the moment

we do this in some way: score 2 it means: • Some evidence of Required Elements, but this is either informal or not consistently reflected in practice.

we do this quite well: score 3 it means: • Evidence of established system with Required Elements present and generally reflected in practice. Some Good practice elements evident.

we do this very well: score 4 it means: • Score 3 plus evidence of on-going monitoring, review and reporting on the effectiveness of the various elements of the governance system leading to continuous improvement. Governance systems and related documentation have been well communicated among Board members staff, and are well understood and evident in practice.

“Developing leadership by understanding context – Focus on policy”

Topic	We don't do this at the moment: score 1	We do this in some way: score 2	We do this quite well: score 3	We do this very well: score 4
1. Our organisation has developed a clear long term organizational strategic vision.				
2. Our organisation has developed a clear short to medium direction that guides our work.				
3. Our organisation has considered the significant external challenges facing us and potential opportunities open to us.				
4. Our organisation has considered its ability to survive and prosper in the future.				
5. We know who our active and key members and stakeholders are, including possibly under-represented groups.				
6. We involve and have plans in place to include both established stakeholders and underrepresented groups in decision making.				

“Developing leadership by building capacity – Focus on people”

Topic	We don't do this at the moment: score 1	We do this in some way: score 2	We do this quite well: score 3	We do this very well: score 4
1. We, organisations leaders, have the strategic and interpersonal skills to guide, engage and develop the organisation.				
2. We have a set of clear values that guide our organisational purpose and activities that are documented in a Code of Ethics.				
3. We establish clear roles and responsibilities for the board, management, staff and volunteers.				
4. We create opportunities for organisation members to influence and shape both strategic policy and practical implementation through transparent and democratic procedures including open debates and fair elections.				
5. We facilitate organisational learning and personal development.				
6. We create a positive working environment and ensure the wellbeing of organisation members.				

“Developing leadership through monitoring compliance - Focus on process”

Topic	We don't do this at the moment: score 1	We do this in some way: score 2	We do this quite well: score 3	We do this very well: score 4
1. As organisational leaders, we are involved in the overall financial planning and general financial control.				
2. We know how to differentiate between regulatory and commercial functions, in our organisations.				
3. We review and assess organisational performance.				
4. We ensure open exchange and sharing of information and different views on organisational matters with members and stakeholders.				
5. We make key strategic and financial documents, board meetings agendas and reports publicly available.				
6. We are ethically responsible and treat everyone fairly and equally.				

7. We know what the routine operational risks are in our organisation and how these are assessed and subsequently managed.				
8. We ensure there is a conflicts of interest policy in place and that declarations of interest are updated at least once a year and declared in relation to agenda items at each board meeting.				

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SATSport struktūra veiksmingam mėgėjiškų sporto organizacijų valdymui

Anotacija

Šis straipsnis yra pagrįstas tyrimo, kuris buvo inicijuotas siekiant geriau suprasti mėgėjų sporto peizažo dinamiką ir sukurti struktūrą veiksmingai valdymo praktikai šioje svarbioje sporto politikos ir valdymo srityje. Mokslininkai jau anksčiau nustatė gero valdymo susijusio su ne pelno sektoriumi ir ypač unikalių savybių turinčių neformalių sporto organizacijų ir mažų bendruomenių klubų vertę. Tyrimo metodologija pagrįsta atitinkamos literatūros metaanalize nustatant pagrindinius principus, kurie taikomi pirminių duomenų rinkimui įvertinti ir patvirtinti besiformuojančią struktūrą. Tyrimo rezultatai pateikė sporto valdymo peizažo tipologiją ir aiškius įrodymus struktūros sukūrimo poreikiui dėl veiksmingo mėgėjų sporto organizacijų valdymo. Be to, rezultatai padėjo sukurti lanksčią ir dinamišką organizacijos savireguliacijos priemonę – žinomą kaip SATSport – kas padėtų apgalvoti gero valdymo nustatymą ir įsipareigojimą.

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