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Balancing between coordination, cooperation and competition? A mixed-method approach for assessing the role ambiguity of local sports authorities

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the subsidiarity principle has been underlined in Sport-for-All policies in countries such as Germany, Austria and Belgium. According to this organising principle, issues need to be handled by the lowest possible political and administrative level, and as close to the citizens as possible. The 2007 decree concerning Sport-for-All policies at the local level in Flanders (Belgium) clearly referred to this. It emphasised the decentralisation of the Sport for All policy, and highlighted the regulatory and coordinating role of local sports authorities. As a consequence, they may face conflicting roles of being coordinator, regulator and provider of mass sport at the local level. In this paper, a mixed-method approach is used to give a closer insight in the role perceptions of local sports authorities in Flanders, and their position towards private sport providers. The results show that local sports authorities consider the coordination and regulation of mass sport in their municipality as their primary task. Yet, it appears that private sport providers also perceive competition from local sports authorities. Moreover, a considerable number of the local sports authorities believe they can combine the roles of provider and coordinator. As there appears to be considerable goal ambiguity, it is necessary for local sports authorities to formulate clear goals. Referring to the principle of subsidiarity, it is argued that sports authorities should only intervene when (non-)profit sport providers are not able to achieve the desirable outcomes with regard to sport and the welfare agenda.

KEYWORDS

Local sports authority; sport for all policy; goal ambiguity; coordination; sport provider

Introduction

In the period after the Second World War, an active sport policy was gradually established in many European countries, as central and local governments became more and more aware of the benefits of sport (e.g. Heinemann 1999, 2005, Bergsgard and Rommetvedt 2006, Scheerder and Vos 2013). Initially, the national governments were mainly involved in constructing and managing public sport facilities, such as sport infrastructure. Later on, however, the interest grew to accept sport as an area of public policy. More emphasis was put on policies regarding the promotion of sport and physical activity via large-scale promotion campaigns (e.g. Gratton and Taylor 2000, Houlihan 2001, 2006, Vanreusel *et al.* 2002, Heinemann 2005, Van Bottenburg *et al.* 2005, Bloyce and Smith 2010, van Tuyckom and Scheerder 2010). This was inspired by the Sport for All idea, which was launched in 1966 by the Council of Europe, and was to be translated in the European

Sport for All Charter in 1975 (Council of Europe 1975, Scheerder *et al.* 2011a, 2011b). Inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this Charter endorses the right to active sport participation for every citizen and was signed by all Council of Europe member country ministers responsible for sport (van Tuyckom and Scheerder 2010). Democratisation of sports is the main idea involved. At the same time, the welfare state has expanded in most Western countries, characterised by a stepwise expansion of governmental responsibilities from basic tasks over core competences to more secondary issues (Bergsgard *et al.* 2007). Sport can be related to each of these responsibility levels, depending on the interpretation and the goal orientation. For example, sport and physical fitness as a prerequisite for defending the state (i.e. basic task), the public health benefits of sport (i.e. core task) and sport as a leisure-time activity (i.e. secondary task; Bergsgard *et al.* 2007).

In recent years, the subsidiarity principle has been underlined in Sport for All policies in many countries, laying down that matters need to be handled by the least centralised competent authority (Bergsgard *et al.* 2007). As a consequence local governments, which were also involved in the development of active sport policies some decades ago, were strengthened in their (regulatory) role in mass sport (policies) at the local level. A number of scholars have addressed this local dimension in sport policies (e.g. Nichols *et al.* 1998, Bergsgard *et al.* 2007, Houlihan and Lindsey 2008, Lindsey 2009, Numerato 2009). This is also where the present paper wants to contribute to the state of research. More precisely, the aim is to give a closer insight into the role perceptions of local sports authorities in relation to the decentralisation of the Sport for All policy. Moreover, the relationship of local sports authorities in Flanders (Belgium) with private sport providers, such as non-profit sport clubs, and for-profit sports organisations, such as fitness and health clubs, is analysed. Indeed, there is a blurring of boundaries between public, voluntary and commercial sport providers deriving from a number of features, such as policy imperative and the reduction of government power in the sport sector, etc. (Vos and Scheerder 2014). Because of these features, sport providers at the local level interact more and inter-organisational relationships (IORs) arise. This paper contributes to the state of research on the decentralisation of the Sport for All policy, and its impact on IORs between public sport providers and private sport providers at the local level. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to give a closer insight into local sport authorities' role perceptions in the sports landscape. The three types of IORs, distinguished by Robinson *et al.* (2000), that is, coordination, cooperation and competition, will be used as a framework for the analysis.

The region of Flanders is selected as a case for this study for two main reasons. First, in recent years, sport policy-making has been decentralised in Flanders, and more emphasis is put on the role of local sports authorities as regulators of mass sport policies. This was emphasised in the 2007 decree concerning Sport for All policies at the local level. As a consequence, local sports authorities may be faced with potentially conflicting objectives of being both implementer and regulator of the Sport for All policy at the local level (Vos and Scheerder 2014). Indeed, until 2007 local sport authorities were used to operate as public sport providers. Hence, Flanders is an interesting case to study role perceptions in relation to IORs. Second, because in Belgium regulation and policy in the field of sport are the separate responsibilities of the community governments (Scheerder and Vos 2013), the Flemish Community is selected as the research context. The structural arrangements and the organisation of sport in Flanders are elaborated upon further in this paper. This contribution deals with two general research questions: (1) How do local sports authorities perceive their role in mass sport at the local level? and (2) how do local sports authorities see their position towards non-profit and for-profit sport providers in their municipality? These research questions will be elaborated upon in the literature review.

In the next sections of this paper, first, the organisation of sport in Flanders is presented. Here, the 2007 decree concerning Sport for All policy, emphasising the role of sports authorities as regulators of mass sport policies at the municipal level, will be elucidated. Second, the different roles of the civic, public and for-profit sectors will be discussed, referring to economic welfare principles. An overview is provided of (empirical) literature regarding IORs in terms of coordination,

cooperation and competition. These concepts serve as a framework for the analysis of the local policy implementation, and help to shed some light on possible goal ambiguity and conflict of interest. Different concepts will be linked to the research focus of the paper. Next, the material and methods are put forward. A mixed-method approach was adopted to study the role perceptions of local sport authorities, using a classic triangulation approach of questionnaire and interview data. Finally, the results are discussed and research issues and policy implications are raised.

Mass sport policy in Flanders

The organisation of sport in Flanders at the local level

In Belgium, governmental competences with regard to sport are the separate responsibilities of the community governments (the Flemish community, the French community and the German-speaking community). As a part of the cultural sphere, governmental competences with regard to sport, such as the organisation of sport, the sport policy planning, sport legislation and the subsidisation of sport federations, are the exclusive responsibility of the three communities (Scheerder *et al.* 2011a). As the process of federalisation has been gradually implemented from the 1970s onwards, sports policies to a large extent differ between the three communities. The Flemish Community (i.e. the Dutch-speaking, northern part of Belgium) is selected in this paper. Flanders is characterised by a strong civic involvement in sport and commitment to the Sport for All ideology. At the end of the 1960s, Flanders was, together with the Nordic countries, one of the pioneering regions in Europe to launch large-scale Sport for All campaigns (Vanreusel *et al.* 2002). In line with Camy *et al.* (2004), the Flemish sports policy system has characteristics that are pertinent to the German (i.e. missionary configuration) and the Netherland's policy configurations (i.e. social configuration) (Vos *et al.* 2013).

Like in most Western European countries, in Flanders (Belgium) leisure-time sport has traditionally been dominated by voluntary sport clubs, driven by voluntary work. During the last two decades, however, the monopoly of sport clubs has dwindled. As a consequence, the actual provision of mass sport is characterised by a complex mixture of three main types of providers: non-profit sport clubs as a prototype of the voluntary or civic sector, local sport authorities as a prototype of the public or state sector, and for-profit fitness and health clubs as a prototype of the commercial or market sector (Vos and Scheerder 2014). Since the present study focuses on the IORs of local sports authorities with non-profit sport clubs at one side and fitness and health clubs at the other, in terms of coordination and regulation, some facts and figures on these three groups of sport organisations are provided below (see Table 1).

Flanders is subdivided in 308 municipalities. Almost all of these municipalities have a local sports authority, either as an independent administration agency or in conjunction with another leisure-related policy domain, such as culture, youth or tourism (Vos and Scheerder 2014). Within

Table 1. Three main types of sport providers in Flanders and their features.

	Non-profit sport clubs	For-profit fitness and health clubs	Local sports authorities
Number of organisations			
Total number	23,861	510	308
Number per 100,000 inhabitants	387.2	8.3	5.0
Number of workers			
Total number	417,000 ^a	3,085	4,189
Number of workers per 100,000 inhabitants	6767.3	50.1	68.0
Year of foundation			
Before 1980	50.5	2.6	29.6
1980–1989	18.8	19.8	32.5
1990–1999	15.9	35.3	22.6
2000 and later	14.8	42.3	15.3

^aVolunteer workers.

the municipalities, local sport authorities are responsible for the development, implementation and inspection of the Sport for All policy. Hence, they are a prototype of the public or state sector. The support and subsidising of voluntary sport clubs is the main competence of local sport authorities (i.e. municipalities). Thus, central policy objectives are built into conditioned subsidies that are used by the local authorities for their Sport for All policy programmes towards, amongst others, the sport clubs. In contrast, the central Flemish government is responsible for the recognition and subsidising of community sport federations.

The average age of local sports authorities is 23 years. Almost one-third of the local sports authorities were founded before the 1980s (30%). Fifteen percent were founded in the last decade (Scheerder *et al.* 2014). However, the majority of the local sports authorities were recognised and subsidised by the central Flemish government only in the last three decades (see further in the elaboration of the 2007 decree). For every 100,000 inhabitants, there are five local sports authorities in Flanders (Vos and Scheerder 2014).

Like in most Western European countries, also in Flanders sport has been traditionally dominated by non-profit sport clubs, driven by voluntary work. There are 23,861 sport clubs, with an average of 77 per municipality. The Flemish region has, compared with other (Western) European countries, a dense network of sport clubs: for every 100,000 inhabitants there are 387 clubs. Half of the Flemish sport clubs were founded in the period before the 1980s (51%). Fifteen percent were founded in the last decade (Vos *et al.* 2012).

The third group of providers which are of interest here, besides non-profit sport clubs and local sports authorities, are for-profit fitness and health clubs. In Flanders, fitness and health clubs are the main commercial sport providers at the local level. There are 510 fitness and health clubs with an average of eight clubs per 100,000 inhabitants. Since the late 1980s, the fitness industry has become a significant player in the provision of sport at the local level in Flanders. Over 70% of the fitness and health clubs were founded in 1990 or later, 42% started its activities in the last 10 years (Vos *et al.* 2012).

The 2007 decree concerning sport for all policy at the local level

In 2007, a new decree was issued by the Flemish government concerning Sport for All policy at the local level (Vlaamse Overheid 2007). According to this decree, local authorities in Flanders had to develop a sport policy plan for the 2008–2013 period, including strategic and operational goals, as well as budget allocation. Four different domains needed to be addressed in the sport policy plans for the 2008–2013 period: (1) club-organised sport, (2) non-organised sport, (3) diversity and accessibility and (4) sport facilities. With regard to the domain of club-organised sports, besides other aspects, specific attention was paid to the support of non-profit sport clubs by means of conditional subsidies for clubs (Vos *et al.* 2011). Local sports authorities, meeting these legal stipulations, receive funds from the central Flemish government to develop Sport for All policies. The municipalities were expected to provide co-funding. In total, an annual financial support of about €14 million for the period 2008–2013 was allocated by the Flemish government (Scheerder and Vos 2009).

Crucial in this 2007 decree, is the decentralisation of the sport policy-making process and the emphasis on the role of local sports authorities as regulators of mass sport policies at the local level (De Knop *et al.* 2006, Vos *et al.* 2011). An evaluation of the policy planning process, done by Vos and Scheerder in 2010, revealed that a participative, bottom-up approach was followed in the development of the sport policy plans. This was found to be essential for an effective policy implementation (Vos and Scheerder 2010). The 2007 decree, concerning Sport for All policy at the local level, gave a boost to the number of municipal sports authorities receiving funds from the central Flemish government. As a consequence of this decree, the number of subsidised sports authorities has risen from 60% to 98% of the municipalities in Flanders (Scheerder and Vos 2013). Indeed, local sport authorities who were able to meet certain conditions could already receive

subsidies before 2007. However, these subsidies were limited and intended to finance staff and operating costs. In the 2007 decree, the focus was on the development of Sport for All policies, and municipalities had to develop sport policy plans and take up a coordinative and regulatory role.

Objectives of sport providers

Mass sport is characterised by a complex mixture of organisations across the civic, public and for-profit sectors. The provision of sport has evolved from a monopoly position of voluntary sport clubs to one where competition between providers is widespread (Heinemann 1999, 2005, Houlihan 2001, 2006, Vos and Scheerder 2014). A rationale for the different roles of these providers can be found in economic welfare principles (e.g. Hansmann 1980, Weisbrod 1986, 1988, Gratton and Taylor 2000). Non-profit sport clubs, for-profit fitness and health clubs and local sports authorities are guided by different objectives and principles (e.g. Ibsen and Jørgensen 2002, Scheerder *et al.* 2011b, Vos *et al.* 2012). Local sports authorities are driven by the public's welfare. This is different for sport clubs. Due to the central role of voluntary work, the latter are mainly focused on their members and their members' interests (Nagel 2008, Van Bottenburg and De Bosscher 2011, Reid 2012). In addition, the fact that competitiveness remains a basic rationale in sport clubs limits the possibilities for the realisation of social goods (Skille 2011). However, sport clubs are assumed to generate social profit (e.g. social capital), which is beneficial for society (Scheerder and Vos 2013).

Fitness and health clubs, as a prototype of commercial sport providers, are driven by economic profit to be distributed to their shareholders. Maximisation of (financial) profits is not the primary goal of voluntary sport clubs (Heinemann 1999) and public sport providers (Thiel and Mayer 2009).

Sport is generally considered as a merit good that provides benefits beyond the awareness of the individual. Among other aspects, equity principles and externalities can cause a failure of the market in the supply of sport. Indeed, positive externalities such as the improvement of health, the enhancement of social cohesion, the creation of employment, etc., legitimise governmental intervention (e.g. Késenne 2007, Westerbeek *et al.* 2007, Downward *et al.* 2009). Because of these externalities governments feel the need to provide equal opportunities and subsidise sport initiatives so that participation does not depend primarily on people's ability to pay for it. Besides externalities, public intervention may also be justified because the sport sector has some characteristics of a decreasing cost industry (Késenne 2007). For example, the cost of sports infrastructure is very high. A profit maximising commercial provider will raise his tariffs, which will exclude specific target groups.

Literature review: IORs and conflicting objectives

The literature review focuses on studies dealing with IORs in general, determinants of IORs and conflicting objectives.

According to Oliver (1990, p. 241), IORs 'are the relatively enduring transactions, flows and linkages that occur among or between an organization and one or more organizations in its environment'. Six determinants are considered to be important for the formation of IORs: asymmetry, reciprocity, necessity, legitimacy, efficiency and stability. Often, a combination of these motives determines the relationship building of organisations (Oliver 1990). In the last 40 years, increased academic attention is paid to IORs (for an overview see Oliver 1990, Barringer and Harrison 2000, Wicker *et al.* 2013). However, to a great extent, the necessity of IORs has only been recognised in the sport system in recent years (e.g. Babiak and Thibault 2009, Misener and Doherty 2009, Parent and Harvey 2009, Wicker *et al.* 2013).

Robinson *et al.* (2000) have identified three ideal types of IORs: coordination, cooperation and competition. These modes are generally associated with respectively, the state, the voluntary sector and the market. According to Robinson *et al.* (2000), competition refers to both the competition for scarce resources as well as competition over ideas, constituencies, values and definitions of needs.

Coordination is ‘... the description of relationships which are ordered by the exercise of authority through hierarchy and rules, rather than by the hidden hand of competition or by solidarity based on trust and reciprocity’ (Robinson *et al.* 2000, p. 7–8). With regard to cooperation, there are immense differences in the philosophy and practices of cooperation. Nevertheless, it is clear that equality is a key issue: ‘Co-operation assumes power based on knowledge, expertise, and/or contribution, rather than power derived from role or function in a hierarchy’ (Robinson *et al.* 2000, p. 8).

The concepts of coordination and cooperation ((Robinson *et al.* 2000), can be related to the concepts of co-production, co-management and co-governance in the delivery of services, which were developed in the area of studies of public management (e.g. Brandsen and Pestoff 2006, Pestoff 2006, Pestoff *et al.* 2006, Groeneveld 2009). According to Brandsen and Pestoff (2006), co-production, co-management and co-governance are three core types of relationships which can be considered as a typology for overlaps in service delivery between the third sector, citizens and the state. These three types can co-exist. Co-production is defined as ‘the delivery of a public service by citizens and national governmental organisations (NGOs), acting at arm’s length from the state’ (Groeneveld 2009, p. 426). Co-management ‘features managerial co-ordination between the NGO and the State in the development and implementation of the service itself’ (Groeneveld 2009, p. 426). The concept of co-governance is related to ‘the active co-involvement in the internal public sector policy development and implementation, processes jointly between the NGO, citizens and the state’ (Groeneveld 2009, p. 426). Although these types of relationships cover similar concepts as the three modes of IORs defined by Robinson *et al.* (2000), there are also differences. For example, Robinson *et al.* (2000) focus on relationships with the market, whereas Brandsen and Pestoff (2006) have a central role for citizens. Moreover, concepts such as co-production and co-management relate to a type of inter-organisational interaction which is not about regulation in the sense of control, but instead is very much about cooperative sustainability. However, non-profit sport organisations are still being made subject to increased public scrutiny (Groeneveld 2009) and coercive pressure (Vos *et al.* 2011).

From a (economic) welfare perspective (see *supra*), it is logical to assume that local authorities take up a coordination role in sport at the municipal level. Indeed, inter-organisational coordination is considered as a key factor for an effective and efficient policy implementation (Panday and Jamil 2011). Coordination is linked to aspects such as regulation and coercion (Robinson *et al.* 2000), assuming a relation between a principal and an agent (i.e. principal-agent theory; e.g. Pratt and Zeckhauser 1991, Verhoest 2005). Coercive pressure or coercive isomorphism often emanates from the government. It refers to the normative and/or regulative pressures, related to regulations, ethical and/or cultural considerations, dependency on financial resources, etc., put on organisations to adopt prescribed expectations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These organisations operate in a politically controlled environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 1983, DiMaggio and Powell 1983). However, also other mechanisms, such as social responsibility and dominant logics, may explain the achievement of Sport for All goals. The concept of dominant logic refers to the manifestation of shared values (history, culture, norms) among actors in an organisational field (Stenling and Fahlén 2009). According to Stenling and Fahlén (2009), the dominant logics of an institutional context constitute the aggregated information carried by the isomorphic processes.

Local authorities also can take up a cooperative or competitive role. Cooperation can be both formal and informal, short term and long term belonging to the same (i.e. within-sector) and to different sectors (i.e. cross-sector). In recent years, sport scholars have become more interested in partnerships in sport and recreation, regarding aspects such as the formation, the management and the effectiveness of cooperation. A number of studies deal with cooperation between public and private organisations (e.g. Allison 2001, Babiak 2007, Robson 2008, Lindsey 2009, Ytting 2009, Vos and Scheerder 2014).

According to Christensen and Lægreid (2010), public organisations are becoming more complex and hybrid. Moreover, many scholars have argued that public organisations, compared to private

organisations, are more likely to have vaguer goals and hence, goals ambiguity is more probable (e.g. Allison 1983, Heinrich 1999, Chun and Rainey 2005, Jung 2011). Jung (2011) considers organisational goal ambiguity in the public sector as an unavoidable consequence of the political process. Regarding the research focus of this paper, the emphasis on the regulatory role of local sports authorities in Flanders (see supra) suggests that the key role of local sports authorities is the coordination and facilitation of mass sport policies at the local level. Nevertheless, apart from the development and implementation of policy, local sports authorities in Flanders also act as providers of mass sport, such as summer camps, sport courses, and Zumba activities (Vos *et al.* 2011). If the services provided by the local sports authorities are in competition with the services provided by non-profit or for-profit sport providers, there are conflicting goals or objectives. A conflict of roles exists if local sports authorities act both as (market) player as well as regulator or coordinator of its competitors in the private sector (both non-profit and for-profit organisations). Indeed, the role of coordinator entails the regulation of the local field of sport, subsidising local providers of sport, etc. It is considered a basic principle not to be both judge and judged. Hence, we assume that the 2007 decree concerning Sport for All policy at the local level, issued by the Flemish government, has resulted in goal ambiguity among local sports authorities.

Methodology

Research design

A combination of complementary quantitative and qualitative data (i.e. a *triangulation mixed-method design*) is used in the present paper to strengthen the validity and reliability of the research findings (Green 1994). This paper employs both within-methods and between-methods triangulation approaches (Creswell 2003, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, Johnson *et al.* 2007). The quantitative data for this paper are retrieved from the Flemish Local Sports authorities Panel 2010 (VSDP10, Scheerder *et al.* 2014).

The qualitative data are gathered via semi-structured interviews with civil servants, of local sports authorities, responsible for sport policy.

Material

VSDP10

From Autumn 2010 through Spring 2011, local sports authorities (i.e. municipalities; $N = 308$) in Flanders were contacted by e-mail and postal mail to participate in a web-based survey. The data were gathered by means of a standardised questionnaire. The data set consists of information about aspects such as organisational characteristics, sport facilities and initiatives, human resources management, finances and funds and IORs. For the present paper, information regarding IORs is of importance. In total, 234 local sports authorities have participated in the survey (i.e. a response rate of 76%). The sample has been found to be representative for the population regarding size (number of inhabitants) and socio-economic profile (Scheerder *et al.* 2014).

Local sports authorities were asked about cooperation, with voluntary sport clubs, fitness and health clubs and other local sports authorities (i.e. *Does your organisation cooperate with one or more (other) sport clubs/fitness and health clubs/local sport authorities?*; dummy variable (0 = no, 1 = yes). A five-point scale was used (from 1 = *definitely disagree* to 5 = *definitely agree*) to get an insight in the perceptions of local sports authorities towards IORs and their role in mass sport at a local level (see Tables 2 and 5).

We expect that organisational characteristics of local sports authorities determine their perceptions towards IORs. Young (or less mature) organisations are expected to be less constrained with tradition and values. Hence, they are supposed to be more likely to favour IORs with other sport organisations. We also presume that large sport organisations are more positive towards IORs,

Table 2. Percentage agreement, mean scores and standard deviations of local sports authorities' perceptions of coordination (min = 1, max = 5).

	% Agree	Mean	SD
The local sports authority counts on non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs to provide sporting opportunities. The local sports authority only interferes where necessary.	73.0	3.7	1.0
The main concern of the local sports authority is the creation of opportunities to sport, not the provision of sport.	30.1	3.0	0.9
The local sports authority should stimulate cooperation between non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs.	73.6	3.9	0.8
The local sports authority is able to fulfil the sport policy via the subsidy conditions non-profit sport clubs have to meet.	42.5	3.3	0.8
The local sports authority can use subsidy conditions to make sport clubs meet their demands.	72.3	3.8	0.8

because they have more organisational capacity and experience in managing stakeholders (Esteve *et al.* 2011). For example, large organisations are likely to have staff or board members with responsibilities regarding external management (cf. partnerships). Hence, age and size are selected as possible determinants of the local sports authorities' cooperation and perception towards IORs. For the size and the age, three categories were calculated: (1) <10,000 (*small*; 25.4%), 10,000–20,000 (*medium sized*; 43.6%), >20,000 (*large*; 31.0%) and (2) *established after 1990* (*young*; 38.7%), *established between 1980 and 1990* (*middle-aged*; 31.8%) and *established before 1980* (*older*; 29.5%). In contrast with sport clubs and fitness and health clubs, local sports authorities do not have a membership structure. Hence, the number of inhabitants of the municipalities is used to operationalise their size. One-way analyses of variances (ANOVA) are carried out.

Semi-structured interviews

In total 38 interviews with representatives of local sports authorities, that is, civil servants responsible for sport policy-making (in 38 separate organisations), have been conducted. The respondents were selected based on a distribution in size (small, medium, large) and socio-economic location (rural and residential versus urban) of the municipality. A semi-structured format with an interview guide¹ was used. The interviews lasted from 35 to 60 min. The first interviewing period took place between February and April 2011; second interviewing period, with different interviewees, was completed between November 2011 and March 2012. The interviews are part of a larger research project,² which mainly focuses on local sport authorities' sport policies towards more vulnerable groups in society. However, since the role of local sports authorities and the relationship between sport providers in their municipality is also discussed more generally, the interviews provide a rich source of secondary information. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was used. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed verbatim. NVivo 10 has been used for data analysis. Whereas in the VSDP10, a five-point scale was used to get an insight in the IORs of local sports authorities and their role in mass sport at a local level, the participants in the semi-structured interviews were asked to describe the goals and the role of the local sports authority as they experienced it. Hence, the qualitative data provide information of the perception of the local sports authority's role in mass sport.

Results

Coordination

As shown in Table 2, local sports authorities consider the regulation and coordination of mass sport in their municipality as their primary task. The majority of the local sports authorities in the VSDP10 are counting on private organisations to provide mass sport. State intervention is considered as only desirable when necessary (73%, $M = 3.7$ on a five-point scale). Moreover, local sports authorities are convinced that they should stimulate cooperation between the non-profit sport

Table 3. Results of the ANOVAs for sports authorities' perceptions of coordination in relation to size^a and age^b (displayed are the means).

	Small	Medium sized	Large	Significance
The local sports authority counts on non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs to provide sporting opportunities. The local sports authority only interferes where necessary.	3.53	3.84	3.78	NS
The main concern of the local sports authority is the creation of opportunities to sport, not the provision of sport.	2.71	3.06	3.23	**
The local sports authority should stimulate cooperation between non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs.	3.82	3.93	3.96	NS
The local sports authority is able to fulfil the sport policy via the subsidy conditions non-profit sport clubs have to meet.	3.19	3.33	3.28	NS
The local sports authority can use subsidy conditions to make sport clubs meet their demands.	3.78	3.76	3.94	NS
	Young	Middle-aged	Older	
The local sports authority counts on non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs to provide sporting opportunities. The local sports authority only interferes where necessary.	3.83	3.71	3.93	NS
The main concern of the local sports authority is the creation of opportunities to sport, not the provision of sport.	3.10	2.79	3.19	*
The local sports authority should stimulate cooperation between non-profit sport clubs and fitness and health clubs.	3.92	3.96	3.91	NS
The local sports authority is able to fulfil the sport policy via the subsidy conditions non-profit sport clubs have to meet.	3.25	3.25	3.24	NS
The local sports authority can use subsidy conditions to make sport clubs meet their demands.	3.72	3.91	3.98	NS

NS, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

^a<10,000 (small), 10,000–20,000 (medium sized), >20,000 (large).

^bEstablished after 1990 (young), established between 1980 and 1990 (middle-aged), established before 1980 (older).

clubs and the for-profit sport providers in their municipality (74%). With regard to the possible combination of provision and coordination of mass sport, proposed in a separate statement, the opinions differ. About one-third agrees that the main concern of a local sports authority should be the creation of opportunities to sport, not the provision of sport. Nevertheless, the same proportion disagrees with this statement or are in doubt (figures not displayed in the table). This results in a mean score of 3.0, which is at the middle point of the scale. The results of the ANOVA's (see Table 3) show a significant effect for both size and age with regard to the latter statement. Larger and older sports authorities are more likely to agree that the main concern of a local sports authority should be the creation of opportunities to sport, not the provision of sport.

The semi-structured interviews allowed to identify two key responsibilities of public authorities, as perceived by the respondents, corresponding to their role as coordinators. The first responsibility regards facilitating and supporting sports practice; the second consists of complementing the existing sports offer where lacks occur ('filling the gaps'). The relative emphasis on both responsibilities, however, differs between municipalities, as well as the way in which these responsibilities are handled.

The first responsibility relates the idea that it is the core task of municipalities to support sporting opportunities by creating the necessary conditions, in order for initiatives to develop or be sustained. This can either be done by providing infrastructure or by giving support to non-profit clubs, or both. The latter varies according to the priorities of the municipality. Some civil servants mainly stress the importance of infrastructure – either for clubs, for non-organised sports or both – as appears from the following extracts:

The two cornerstones for a sport policy are sport infrastructure and the support of sport clubs. Those remain... Actually, it all starts with sport infrastructure. If that [the infrastructure] isn't there, there's not much you can do.

And I am convinced local sports authorities should focus on the infrastructure. If you make sure you have a swimming pools and halls or appropriate playing fields people can use, then people will do sports. And if the

municipality doesn't organise it themselves, a club will come into being. But if the basic infrastructure isn't there, then nothing will originate.

Other civil servants put more emphasis on the central role of the clubs that hence need to be given the necessary support. However, part of that support is also related to the provision of infrastructure.

With regard to the second responsibility, complementing the existing offer, civil servants indicate that they overview the landscape and step in where clubs fall short. This is an important motivation for providing some activities themselves, as expressed in the following extracts:

The municipality strongly support social life, the full socio-cultural offer, because it is in fact the motor of society, the associational life. That's why we support it and next to the associational life, like I said, we try to work in a complementary way, what is not done by the clubs, we try to organise ourselves. In our municipality, the associational life is strongly emphasized.

The others are mainly working towards youth, or adults, they are not really on elderly people, so that's why we say, yes, sport for the elderly largely is on the shoulders of the municipality, so that's why we try to compensate this lack of offer ourselves.

Yet, in line with the quantitative research results, also the semi-structured interviews confirm that there is a large variation with regard to the importance attached to sport provision by the municipalities. Some give more weight to it than others. While many municipalities offer some sport activities 'because no one else would do so otherwise', a minority consider the gaps in the current offer rather as opportunities for their own. However, almost all municipalities do agree on the fact that they will not provide an offer that would get in the way of clubs (see *infra*). 'Filling in the gaps' can also be done in cooperation with clubs. Furthermore, a few municipalities also mentioned launching new initiatives, which could then be taken over by clubs (or more informal groups). However, it is also quite possible that local sport authorities may not pursue this strategy, because they may be aware that clubs would not necessarily take over these initiatives.

In sum, the findings from the semi-structured interviews confirm that coordination is a central task in the views of the respondents, and it appears that this is concretely given shape by providing the necessary conditions and supporting new or existing sporting opportunities, as well as stepping in where (if) the third sector fails.

The results in [Table 2](#) also provide evidence for coordination in terms of coercion. Via two statements the local authorities were asked about the possibility to use subsidy regulations as an instrument of policy. The majority of the authorities confirmed that subsidy regulations can be used to make sport clubs meet their demands (72%, $M = 3.8$ on a five-point scale). Regarding the instrumental role of subsidy conditions, the mean score is lower (43%, $M = 3.3$ on a five-point scale). Four out of ten sports authorities agree that they are able to realise their mass sport policies via subsidy regulations sport clubs have to meet. The same share neither agree nor disagree. The remaining one-fifth disagree (figures not displayed in the table). However, no significant differences could be found with regard to size and age.

Cooperation

From [Table 4](#), it can be seen that almost all local sports authorities (98.6%) cooperate with non-profit sport clubs. This cooperation mainly involves resource provision, sharing sport facilities and

Table 4. Cooperation of local sports authorities with non-profit sport clubs, for-profit fitness and health clubs, and other local sports authorities.

	Cooperation
Non-profit sport clubs	98.6
For-profit fitness and health clubs	28.4
Local sports authorities	89.8

combined services and promotions. About 90% of the local sports authorities collaborate with other local sports authorities, through collective promotion efforts and service provision, and pooling and training of staff. Cooperation with for-profit fitness and health, however, is less likely. Only 28% of the local sport providers have a cooperation with one or more fitness and health clubs. This mostly involves combined promotions and offers.

With regard to the quality of the relationship with non-profit and for-profit sport providers, huge differences occur (see Table 5). Nine out of ten of the local sports authorities in the VSDP10 state that they have a good relationship with the non-profit sport clubs in their area, resulting in a mean score of 4.2 on a five-point scale. Especially older sports authorities (established before 1980) are more likely (significant) to endorse this statement. The mean score regarding the relationship with for-profit fitness and health clubs is considerably lower (25%, $M = 2.8$).

The semi-structured interviews showed that in most municipalities, the clubs are considered as key players for providing sport opportunities. The findings from the interviews with the civil servants responsible for the sport policy in their municipality hence also confirm the rather strong relationship between the local sports authority and the non-profit sport clubs. The following extracts describe this view:

I think for sure the relationship with your sport clubs, that this is the basis in order to be able to bring a sports policy to advance. Cooperating with the clubs, communication towards the clubs, [I think] a lot can fail or succeed by it.

We have around 320 sport clubs in [name of the city]. These or all partners, or that is to say, they are all organizations in which you can find a partner in.

In other words, sport clubs are considered as crucial partners for providing sports policy by the municipalities. This is somewhat different, however, with regard to for-profit providers. While some civil servants make mention of a cooperation with for-profit providers, this only holds for a minority and cooperation seems to be rather limited. Yet, it should be mentioned that still other partnerships exist, with other municipal services, but also with non-sport related non-profit associations (e.g. associations for the elderly, an agency for people with a disability,...). Such cooperations are also encouraged by the Flemish sports policy. The number and intensity of these partnerships, however, vary largely between municipalities.

Competition

The third mode of IORs, which is of interest in this study, is competition. A minority of the local sports authorities postulate that their sport offers can be in competition with the offers of other sport providers (see Table 5). Only 10% of the local sports authorities in the VSP10 agrees that their sport offers can (unintentionally) be in competition with the services offered by the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality (figures not displayed in the table). In contrast, eight out of ten of

Table 5. Percentage agreement, mean scores and standard deviations of local sports authorities' perceptions towards the relationships and competition with non-profit sport clubs and for-profit fitness and health clubs (min = 1, max = 5).

	% Agree	Mean	SD
Relationship in general			
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	89.9	4.2	0.6
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	25.2	2.8	1.1
Competition			
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	9.2	2.0	0.9
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	10.5	2.1	1.0

Table 6. Results of the ANOVAs for sports authorities' perceptions towards the relationships and competition with non-profit sport clubs and for-profit fitness and health clubs in relation to size^a and age^b (displayed are the means).

	Small	Medium sized	Large	Significance
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	4.05	4.22	4.28	NS
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	2.38	2.82	3.09	**
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	1.93	2.18	1.77	*
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	2.09	2.20	1.86	NS
	Young	Middle-aged	Older	
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	4.05	4.34	4.34	*
Our local sports authority has a good relationship with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	2.74	2.83	3.06	NS
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the non-profit sport clubs in the municipality.	1.96	2.02	1.98	NS
The local sports authority's sport offers can be in competition with the fitness and health clubs in the municipality.	2.11	2.05	2.02	NS

NS, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$.

^a<10,000 (small), 10,000–20,000 (medium sized), >20,000 (large).

^bEstablished after 1990 (young), established between 1980 and 1990 (middle-aged), established before 1980 (older).

the surveyed local sports authorities are convinced that they are not in competition with non-profit sport clubs. A significant difference was found regarding the size of the local sports authorities: medium-sized sports authorities were more likely to underline the (unintentionally) competition with the services offered by the non-profit sport clubs (see Table 6). No difference could be found for the age of the sports authorities.

The perceptions regarding competition offered to for-profit sport providers are quite similar. Eleven percent of the sports authorities see a possible conflict between their offers and the services of for-profit fitness and health clubs. Seven out of ten are convinced not to give competition to for-profit sport providers (figures not displayed in the table).

The findings from the semi-structured interviews suggest that competition is not a major issue. More precisely, the respondents who make mention of it (9 interviews) mainly indicate that competition should be avoided, with sport clubs as well as any other associations or services. One civil servant, however, indicated that there is a competition in sport provision between the local sport authority and (non-)profit sport providers. Still, overall, rather than competition, cooperation will be preferred, as appears from the following statements:

We try to get one or two athletics clubs involved in our organisation, in order to make one organisation. So in that respect we manage. And we should not compete against our own existing clubs. But we do want to either be frontrunner or mentor in such a project.

We are organising these sport camps but we will transport children sometimes to a watersports club for example, in order to practice watersports in light of that sport camp. So co-operation in stead of competition.

Of course, you should not snatch each other's initiatives. If that is for them [local community service] an activity they want to develop, we can support it, without having to compete against it or anything.

The idea of non-competition is also confirmed by the fact that civil servants state to provide information on the full sports offer (and not merely the own activities). In other words, the role of sports promoter comes first, as described in the following statements:

We list the existing offer and if we organize something ourselves, we also take this existing offer into account. When we want to organize a course or set something up, we check: doesn't it already exist? If it does, then we certainly won't organize it. So in that sense we promote, also if someone comes here saying 'I want to do something', a course, then we promote the existing offer.

So first we have an offer ourselves. Secondly if an older person asks information with us, so that we can give a total offer. That means saying, 'look this is what the sports service does, but there are also sport clubs where you can go to.' So also give the information.

Apart from facilitating and complementing, 'informing and promoting' can be considered as an additional key responsibility of the civil servants, further defining their role. The responsibility of promotion can be attached to the role of coordinator. As shown by the statements above, coordination generally will prevail, at the expense of competition.

Discussion

In recent years, the subsidiarity principle has been underlined in Sport for All policy in Flanders (Belgium), as is the case in many other European countries. The decree concerning Sport for All policy at the local level, issued by the Flemish government in 2007, encouraged the decentralisation of the Sport for All policy, and highlighted the regulatory and coordination role of sports authorities at the local level in Flanders. As a consequence, local sports authorities may be faced with goal ambiguity and conflicting objectives: the coordination and provision of mass sport. The aim was to give a closer insight into the role perceptions of local sports authorities in Flanders, and their position towards private sport providers, such as non-profit sport clubs, and for-profit fitness and health clubs.

The results show that local sports authorities consider the coordination of mass sport in the municipality as their primary task. However, they differ in their opinion regarding the combination of the roles of regulator and provider of mass sport. About one-third believe that the creation of opportunities and the coordination of sport is their main task. Another third however are convinced that they should also focus on the provision of sport. According to the perceptions of the local sports authorities there seems to be no problem with regard to the conflict of interest that may result from operating as market player, while simultaneously regulating and coordinating the private sport providers. Indeed, also from the interviews it appears that the civil servants put their role as a coordinator first. Whereas the role of provider could involve competition, the role of coordinator demands promoting the general interest. Since the coordinator role is prioritised by the local sports authorities, the general interest is set first.

Local sports authorities are convinced that they should only intervene when they perceive a necessity, such as in the matter of a failure of the market in the supply of sport opportunities for specific target groups. In that case, positive externalities such as the improvement of health and the enhancement of social cohesion legitimise governmental intervention (Késenne 2007, Downward *et al.* 2009). In the interviews, this was identified as the 'complementing' responsibility of local sports authorities, which implied filling the gaps where clubs or other organisations fall short. In the survey, only a small number of the local sports authorities postulated that other sport providers suffer competition from them. However, these perceptions are not in line with the competition perceived by private sport providers in Flanders. A considerable number of for-profit sport providers have stated to face competition from both non-profit and public sport providers (Vos and Scheerder 2014). The majority of the local sports authorities (partially) delegate the implementation of the sport policy to non-public sport providers, especially to non-profit sport clubs via subsidy conditions. In Flanders, there is more or less a tradition at the local level in subsidising non-profit sport clubs. Subsidies could be seen as a policy instrument, as policy objectives are built into conditional subsidies and therefore influence sport clubs. However, previous studies regarding subsidies to non-profit sport clubs indicate that state incentives alone do not result in the achievement of Sport for All objectives (e.g. Vos *et al.* 2011).

Other mechanisms, such as social responsibility and dominant logics, may also explain the government's coercion on non-profit sport clubs (Stenling and Fahlén 2009, Vos *et al.* 2011). Non-profit organisations are not only influenced by demands of resource providers, but they

are powerfully guided by their history, culture, norms and leadership (Froelich 1999). However, the empirical data in this study give little explanation to the reasons behind the social context that have helped create an environment whereby Sport for All policies have shifted to the local level.

The significance of partnerships at the local level is considered as important for sport policy by a number of scholars (e.g. Henry 2001, Houlihan and White 2002, Lindsey 2009). Our results show that local sports authorities are more likely to cooperate with non-profit sport clubs and other public providers, compared to for-profit sport providers. Moreover, they are also more positive regarding their relationships with non-profit sport providers, compared to for-profit providers. This is in line with the literature regarding the importance of conformity of organisational cultures and trust for the success of IORs (Thibault and Harvey 1997, Lindsey 2009, Parent and Harvey 2009). Apparently many public (and non-profit) organisations still experience relationships with the for-profit sector as counter-cultural (Leat 2009). Moreover, the relationship between non-profit sport clubs and local sports authorities is historical (see supra). A rationale for the positive relationship between local sport authorities and non-profit sport providers can also be found in a study by Vos and Scheerder (2014). In their study, voluntary sport clubs preferred cooperation with organisations within the same type of business (i.e. other non-profit organisations), and public sport providers that also focus on social and intangible benefits. Local sports authorities cooperated more with other local sports authorities and voluntary sport clubs, compared to for-profit fitness and health clubs (Vos and Scheerder 2014).

The results of this paper suggest that local sports authorities should focus on the coordination of mass sport. Inter-organisational coordination is a key factor for an effective and efficient policy implementation (Panday and Jamil 2011). Moreover, the findings from the interviews suggest that cooperation is crucial for fulfilling the local authorities' role as coordinator. Rather than an alternative to coordination, cooperation is a necessary strategy to be able to coordinate. Indeed, in order to accomplish their coordinating responsibilities – 'filling the gaps', but also facilitating (the creation of) sport opportunities – local sports authorities develop partnerships, including outside the sports sector. Local sports authorities should only intervene when non-profit and for-profit sport providers are not able to achieve the desirable outcomes with regard to Sport for All, and the health and welfare agenda more in general. This also indicates that governance (see e.g. Rhodes 2007) seems the way forward, including at the local level. Governing is increasingly done from a network perspective, in which non-state actors and actors from other policy sectors are involved as well. This evolution is also strongly encouraged by the Flemish sports government, who sets out the headlines for the local level.

Obviously, this study has its limitations. With regard to methodological issues, a mixed-method approach was applied using data gathered via a quantitative survey, and semi-structured interviews. The mixed-method approach, used in this article, proved to be useful to get more insight into the role perceptions of local sports authorities in Flanders. Nevertheless, the data retrieved from the survey and the interviews lack information about the actual behaviour of the local sports authorities, and the strength, the stability, and the time scale of the IORs and the processes involved. Another significant limitation is that this study does only provide information on the role perception of local sport authorities. It does not provide a view on other populations who may think very differently about the role of local sport authorities. This information would have given a fuller perspective on what local sport authorities should focus on. The qualitative data were collected in two interview periods. This is a methodological limitation. The perceptions of the interviewees could be biased due to the time of the year. One group of people was interviewed in spring, the other in winter.

The 2007 decree concerning Sport for All policy at the local level obviously has consequences for the IOR between local sports authorities and private sport providers, and has created goal ambiguity and hybridisation (Christensen and Lægheid 2010, Jung 2011). Nevertheless, the 2007

decree is probably not the sole cause of the role ambiguity. Although limited evidence was found for perceptions of role conflict among civil servants, perceptions of competition from local sports authorities were noticed among private sport providers. Moreover, the local sports authorities differed in their opinion regarding the combination of the roles of provider and coordinator of mass sport. Hence, there is a need for local sports authorities to clarify their position in the sports landscape.

Notes

1. The interview guide and the questionnaire are available upon request to the corresponding author.
2. More information about this project is available upon request to the corresponding author.

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