

Chapter 1

Introduction



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Abstract Sports clubs claim to fulfil several important socio-political functions and therefore to play an important role in public welfare for European contemporary societies. This significance is mainly based on the considerable size and voluntary character of the club-organised sports sector. In almost all European countries, sports clubs are valuable sports providers, playing a crucial role in regular sports activity, particularly for youth and competitive sports. In the main, sports clubs offer a setting for regular and well-organised sports activities characterised by conviviality and togetherness. This book investigates the contribution of sports clubs to public welfare using the broad range of empirical data collected within the framework of a comparative study. The project “Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe” (SIVSCE) collected comparable data at various analytical levels across ten European countries. The overarching concern of this book is to analyse and compare the extent sports clubs can contribute to health promotion, social cohesion and democratic participation through volunteering and therefore promote public welfare in European societies. In the introduction, we provide a background and give an overview of the structure of the ten country-specific chapters and two comparative chapters contained in this book.

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S. Nagel et al. (eds.), *Functions of Sports Clubs in European Societies*,
Sports Economics, Management and Policy 13,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48535-1_1

1.1 Background and Aim

Sports clubs play an important role in public welfare for European contemporary societies. Sports policy for the European Union and other institutions recognise and even emphasise the wide importance of sports clubs (European Commission 2007, 2011). This is mainly based on the considerable size and the voluntary character of the club-organised sports sector. It is estimated that a total of 60 million Europeans are active in sports clubs (Breuer et al. 2015; European Commission 2014) – a figure that highlights the considerable potential of voluntary sports clubs. In almost all European countries, sports clubs are the most important sports providers and play a crucial role in regular sports activities, particularly in youth and competitive sports (Breuer et al. 2015; Hallmann and Petry 2013). In the main, sports clubs have high popularity compared to other voluntary associations (e.g. in the cultural or political sector). They usually offer a setting for well-organised sports activities characterised by conviviality and togetherness and the ability to convey social rules, norms and values to specific target groups (e.g. children and youth).

Since their establishment in the nineteenth century, sports clubs have claimed to fulfil several important social as well as political functions. Regular sports activities with clubs assumedly have health-related effects. As sports clubs have the ability to bring people together in social networks, there is also widespread belief that participation in sports clubs can promote social integration in society. Finally, voluntary associations in general and sports clubs in particular are often viewed as a foundation of civil society, purportedly schooling democracy and creating social trust (e.g. Münkler 1997; Putnam 2000). In particular, members who do voluntary work in a club can gain experience in active citizenship (Ibsen et al. 2019). As a consequence, public authorities in European countries usually and in various ways support sports clubs in order to promote their specific social and political assets. The EU recognises the central role of sports clubs in many European countries and aims to promote health-enhancing physical activity, social integration, democratic values and volunteering through membership in sports clubs. To this end they state: “The Commission believes that better use can be made of the potential of sport as an instrument for social inclusion in the policies, actions and programmes of the European Union and of Member States” (European Commission 2007: 7).

In this context, research on sports clubs has particularly focused on the following benefits to society (e.g. Jaitner and Körner 2018; Nagel et al. 2004; Rittner and Breuer 2004):

1. Contribution to *health promotion through regular sports activities* of their members (e.g. Kokko et al. 2018; Meganck et al. 2017; Thiel and Mayer 2018). This assumes that sports participation in a club is characterised by higher regularity compared to non-organised sports activities.

2. Bringing people together and therefore the opportunity to create social networks and to familiarise with social rules and values. Thus sports clubs have the potential to promote *social integration and social cohesion* (e.g. Nobis 2018; Østerlund 2014; Østerlund and Seippel 2013; Scheerder et al. 2004; Vandermeersch et al. 2017), particularly for specific target groups (e.g. people with a migration background, people with a disability, etc.).
3. Democratic decision-making structures, social activities and joint responsibility of members for the club's activities. These elements are believed to make a contribution to *democratic involvement and engagement* for the community (Ibsen et al. 2019; Jaitner 2018).
4. Volunteering in sports clubs can be viewed as a specific form of democratic involvement and a form of active citizenship based on reciprocal relations between members. This makes *voluntary work* relevant not only as a resource for sports clubs but also for society (e.g. Hallmann and Fairley 2018; Vos et al. 2012).

Besides these four crucial issues, research has also analysed other socio-political functions of sports clubs: for example, to what extent sports clubs promote the development and stabilisation of identity, values and norms, especially for children and adolescents. Furthermore, the economic relevance of sports clubs is discussed. However, we will not cover these topics within the framework of this book.

Sports policies across the EU member states are very diverse, which creates different conditions for the promotion of social welfare in sports clubs. Specific traditions and distinct historical roots of sports clubs have induced a variety of sports systems and policies in Europe (see, e.g. Hallmann and Petry 2013; Scheerder et al. 2017). It is feasible that the range of histories, policies and organisational structures have impacted on sports clubs and their potential to fulfil certain functions in society. However, there is a limited amount of up-to-date comparative knowledge on the socio-political functions of sports clubs and their potential to promote public health, social cohesion, democratic participation and volunteering and thus to contribute to public welfare across European societies. Most existing studies are country-specific and do not allow comparison from a cross-national perspective. For example, *Sport Clubs in Europe* by Breuer et al. (2015) provides a comparative and general overview of sports clubs in 20 different European countries and describes the historical and societal context as well as the main structural characteristics of sports clubs. However, the database for each country used in this volume is quite varied, and opportunities for comparison are rather limited.

The project, “Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe” (SIVSCE), collected and analysed comparable data and knowledge across ten European countries (see Elmoose-Østerlund et al. 2016). For the first time, data from sports clubs across different European countries was collected using the same instruments and standardised questionnaires. Furthermore, data was collected about structural characteristics of sports clubs as well as about the members and the volunteers in sports clubs.

This book aims to present the socio-political functions of sports clubs by using the broad range of empirical data collected within the framework of the comparative SIVSCE study. The overarching guide for this work is *the extent to which sports clubs contribute to health promotion, social cohesion and democratic participation through volunteering and therefore promote public welfare in European societies*. This book offers integrated insights into sports policies, sports clubs, their members and volunteers across ten different European countries and mainly focuses on social and political functions. Policy makers, board members and managers in sports federations and clubs will find this information valuable.

Another original contribution of the SIVSCE project is the multi-level approach (see Elmoose-Østerlund et al. 2016; Nagel et al. 2015). The data collected in the comparative project is analysed in a comprehensive way for each of the ten countries by combining the following three analytical levels:

1. At the *macro-level*, the historical roots and the embedding of sports clubs in society as a whole, and the sports policy system in particular
2. The *meso-level* comprehends the structural characteristics, goals, resources and management of sports clubs, particularly with regard to measurements for promoting social integration and volunteering
3. At the *micro-level*, the personal characteristics of the members and the volunteers as well as their sports activities, social integration and democratic and voluntary engagement.

1.2 Structure of the Book

Chapter 2 discusses theoretical concepts, such as the multi-level approach and existing knowledge of the different socio-political functions of sports clubs, in order to formulate research questions. Furthermore, methodological issues of the SIVSCE project are presented.

Results are then presented in ten country-specific case study chapters that take a closer look at the socio-political functions of sports clubs. In these chapters, different functions of sports clubs are analysed from various perspectives – based on club data as well as results from the member and volunteer survey – to depict the social and political role of sports clubs. Each chapter is structured as follows:

1. The first section clarifies the position and historical context of sports clubs in national and local sports policy programmes, with a particular focus on the expectations of the social role of clubs in society.
2. The structural characteristics and context of sports clubs are then presented to provide insight into the potential and capacity to fulfil socio-political functions.
3. Regular sports participation patterns of sports club members as an aspect of health promotion and public health are subsequently examined.

4. Different facets of social integration follow, analysing both specific target groups and general membership from the perspective of potential contribution of sports clubs to social cohesion.
5. The next section on democratic decision-making and involvement provides information about the extent to which sports clubs can be characterised as vibrant democratic associations.
6. The final section focuses on volunteering as a specific form of democratic participation and engagement for both the club and civil society.

In each of these chapters, the multi-level data from the SIVSCE project is combined. The data from clubs and member surveys provide in-depth information about the potential achievement of various socio-political functions of sports clubs. Compared to other existing studies that often only focus on the club level, this data also enables insight on the level of individual members and volunteers.

Following the chapters on each country, comparisons at the European level are made, using available Eurobarometer data to examine similarities and differences between European member states. The results of these analyses are discussed in the framework of the central analytical perspectives of the book, namely, the socio-political functions of sports clubs in Europe.

To conclude, cross-national comparisons are developed from the main findings. The chapter offers interpretations and potential explanations for similarities and differences in the contribution of sports clubs to public welfare with a particular focus on differences between countries seen as coherent cases. Points of awareness regarding how the contribution of sports clubs to public welfare can be enhanced will also be presented.

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