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Environmental sustainability in sport federations: a Swiss case study of environmental policy genesis

Introduction

Nonprofit sport organisations are valuable sport providers in most European countries. In 2017, over 60 million people were active sport club members in Europe (Nagel, Elmose-Østerlund, Ibsen, & Scheerder, 2020). Through this large number of participants, sport not only has positive impacts but can have negative impacts on the environment, e.g. the destruction of natural habitats or travel impacts (Collins, Jones, & Munday, 2009; McCullough, Orr, & Watanabe, 2020). In Germany, sport travel has an average annual carbon footprint of 844 kg of CO_2-equivalent emissions per person (Wicker, 2019). However, sport is also influenced by environmental changes (e.g. shorter, warmer winters in snow sports; Orr, 2020). Therefore, to promote an environmentally sustainable sport development and take societal responsibility on the one hand and to contribute to the long-term practicability of sport on the other hand, environmental engagement from organised sport might be essential (IPCC, 2022). Thereby, the implementation of environmental sustainability in national sport federations (NSFs), which represent sport clubs and engage in sport policy issues, could be crucial. Among Swiss NSFs, 74% have declared that addressing environmental challenges is important (Swiss Olympic, 2020). Several NSFs have launched environmental sustainability programmes (e.g. Swiss Alpine Club, 2021; Swiss Golf, 2020). However, because NSFs are corporate actors (Nagel, 2008; Schimank, 2005), they are primarily committed to the shared interests and preferences of their members (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). This raises the question of why NSFs engage in environmental sustainability.

The social sustainability (e.g. Nagel et al., 2020), corporate social responsibility (e.g. Zeimers et al., 2021) and governance (e.g. Parent & Hoye, 2018; Stenling, Fahlén, Strittmatter, & Skille, 2022) of nonprofit sport organisations have been extensively studied. Research on environmental sustainability in sport has also increased in the last decade (Cury, Kennelly, & Howes, 2022). Thereby, the focus has primarily been on professional sport (e.g., Trendafilova, McCullough, Nguyen, Casper, & Picariello, 2014) and individual club members' behaviour (e.g. Thormann & Wicker, 2021). In the nonprofit and organisational context however, there has been little analysis of environmental sustainability (Cury et al., 2022). McCullough, Pfahl and Nguyen (2016) provided a conceptual framework for the typology of environmental sustainability practiced by sport organisations. They identified three stages in which an organisation engages with environmental sustainability. During these stages, awareness develops into knowledge and strategy; education is established and spreads, leading to the development of outreach programmes; and activities become more sophisticated. Hugaerts et al. (2022) found that whereas the majority of Belgian NSFs showed no commitment to environmental sustainability at all, the few NSFs with an environmental commitment pursued rather low-intensity initiatives (e.g. equipment recycling), than comprehensive strategic approaches. In the Scandinavian context, Sandvik and Seippel (2022) explained this partly by the absence of NSFs' perceived urgency of environmental problems with direct consequences for the NSFs' activities and the lack of institutional pressures. They found that NSFs with a strong commitment to environmental sustainability framed environmental issues either as sport-specific technological problems, growth-oriented opportunities or a crisis for their sport.

The implementation of policies in sport organisations has been analysed in various contexts (e.g. Fahlén, 2017; May, Harris, & Collins, 2013; Stenling & Fahlén, 2021). However, there is a limited understanding of the genesis of policies. Understanding the emergence of environmental policies is important because it is prerequisite for their implementation and effectiveness (Cairney, 2012). Without understanding the factors relevant to policy genesis, implementation measures might not achieve the desired output. Therefore, this study tries to fill this current gap in literature by investigating to what extent environmental policies exist within NSFs and which factors are relevant for their genesis.

Environmental policies in the Swiss sport system

The Swiss national sport policy builds on the principles of subsidiarity and autonomy (Weber, Güntensperger, Licht-

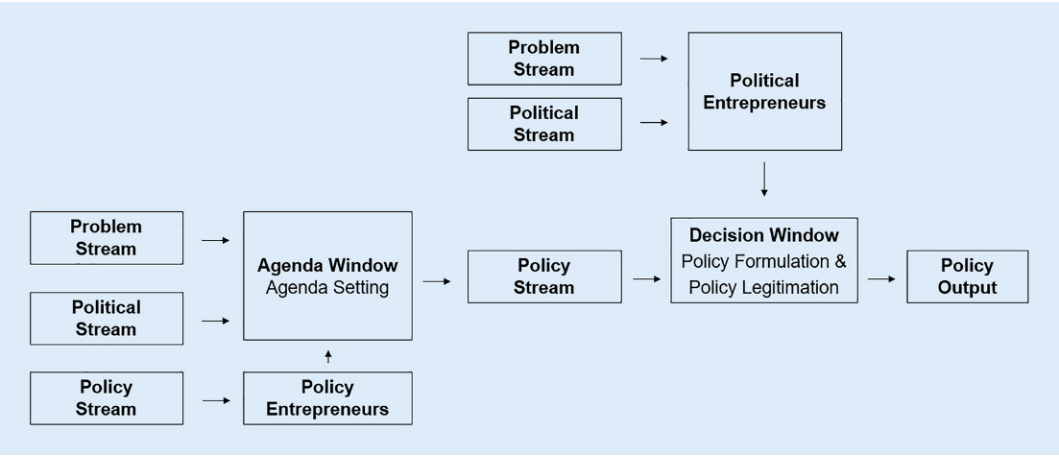

Fig. 1 ◀ The modified multiple streams approach (MSA) by Herweg et al. (2015, p. 445)

steiner, Stopper, & Renaud, 2015). Therefore, an NSFs' environmental policies are not mainly mandated by the Swiss sport system. Swiss Olympic (SO), the umbrella organisation of the Swiss sport system, is assigned by the Federal Office for Sport to distribute government funds to NSFs. To become a member of SO, NSFs need to sign the *ethics charta* as a compulsory part of their statutes. Education for environmental responsibility is one principle of this charta. In 2022, SO initiated the voluntary NSF commitment *Sport Protects the Environment*, which consists of seven commitments, including net-zero emissions for the organisations by 2050 (Swiss Olympic, 2021). However, NSFs are not obligated to have any environmental policies to receive further funds (Swiss Olympic, 2018). Thus, especially in the Swiss context, the question arises as to which other factors are relevant for environmental policy genesis. For an in-depth understanding of this issue, a case study of a Swiss NSF was conducted.

Theoretical framework

The policies of NSFs are manifested in both the goals and contents of programmes, regulations, decisions and measures. They attempt to solve problems and are inherently value and goal oriented (Böhret, Kronenwett, & Jann, 1988). The policy process can be divided into three phases: *genesis, implementation* and *unfolding of effects* (Sager & Hinterleitner, 2014). The focus of this study, the *genesis* process, can be further divided into three stages. A problem must first be perceived and ideas placed on an agenda (*agenda setting*). In the *policy formulation* process, objectives are set and different solutions are developed and assessed in terms of their costs and estimated impacts (Cairney, 2012). In the subsequent *legitimation* phase, favourable policies receive support (Cairney, 2012). In NSFs, this support can include the approval of the general assembly and the board of management (BoM), and consent through consultation with the executive office and interest groups (e.g. commissions). Necessary decisions are then taken for or against measures that were concretised in the policy formulation process (Sager, Ingold, & Balthasar, 2017).

Multiple streams approach

To explain policy genesis, different policy analysis frameworks have been used in sport management (Jedlicka, Harris, & Houlihan, 2022). The multiple streams approach (MSA) developed by Kingdon (1984) considers progress and the resistance to policy changes and takes into account structures, institutionalised power and individual agency (Houlihan, 2005; Jedlicka et al., 2022). It is a further development of the garbage can model of organisational choice (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), which has been previously used in the context of nonprofit sport clubs (Nagel, 2006; Schlesinger, Klenk, & Nagel, 2015). The MSA has been widely applied in several policy areas, including sport (Jedlicka et al., 2022), and has mainly been used to analyse policymaking by a national government (e.g. Camargo, Piggin, & Mezzadri, 2020; Chalip, 1996; Houlihan & Green, 2006). However, Poulton (2020) demonstrated that the MSA can also be applied to a complex network of organisations (i.e. the network of English football, e.g. The Football Association). It was originally designed to investigate the agenda setting process. Herweg, Huss, and Zohlnhöfer (2015) adapted it for the assessment of policy formulation and legitimation processes (**Fig. 1**). This expanded version has mainly been applied to parliamentary democratic processes. Although it is suitable for democratic systems (Houlihan, 2005; Münkler, 2021), the model was modified slightly for this study as follows.

For agenda setting, the MSA ensures the coupling of three different processes. Policies arise when issues are perceived as problematic (*problem stream*; e.g. safety issues). Thus, whether an issue is actually problematic is less important than whether policy makers see it as problematic. The *political stream* is the institutional and cultural context of the policy and agenda. It consists of the national mood (general orientation of the public), organised political forces (e.g. interest groups) and the balance of interests (aggregate positions of relevant interests; Jones et al., 2016). Because NSFs are corporate actors that represent the interests of their members (Thiel & Mayer, 2009), member interests and their orientation towards issues, values, or solutions relevant to the policy problem can

Abstract

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Abstract

Since national sport federations (NSFs) represent sport clubs and engage in sport policy issues, they could play a crucial role in establishing measures to ensure the environmental sustainability of sport. Several Swiss sport federations have already launched such programmes. However, sport federations are primarily committed to the interests of their member clubs and the sport as their core business and environmental sustainability is generally not their primary issue. With regard to the usually limited resources, their environmental engagement does not appear to be evident. Therefore, this study investigated the extent to which environmental policies are generated by NSFs and which factors are relevant for policy genesis (agenda setting and decision coupling). We conducted an in-depth case study of the Swiss Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association based on the multiple streams approach with two coupling phases. The findings showed that whereas agenda setting of policies regarding biodiversity and access to nature primarily occurs through national regulations, climate protection policies are mainly pushed by engaged policy entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, member interests, functional issues (as opposed to normative arguments) and the practices of similar federations were found to be crucial for all environmental policies. Because decisions regarding environmental policies require knowledge that does not necessarily belong to the core topics of the board of management, the support of environmental officers is key for the decision coupling of such. An understanding of environmental policy genesis is essential because it is prerequisite for the subsequent implementation of such policies and their effects.

Keywords

Sport ecology · Sport associations · Agenda setting · Decision coupling · Multiple streams approach

be considered part of the national mood and therefore the political stream of the NSFs. In comparison to parliamentary democratic systems, organised political forces are less important for NSFs due to the structure of the Swiss sport system and the legal form of NSFs (Pachmann, 2007). The aggregate position of committees or interest groups with ideologies concerning a particular problem can inhibit or facilitate options. Furthermore, NSFs are subject to state legislation, SO regulations, and international sport federations. Therefore, top-down pressures might be relevant in the political environment concerning policy processes in NSFs. The long-term political culture (within the NSFs or at a larger scale) can further influence the agenda setting of policies. The *policy stream* contains a complex collection of existing ideas and enables certain ideas to persist depending on specific criteria. If these three streams are coupled (e.g. a policy idea matches the political environment of the agenda or is a potential solution to a perceived problem), an *agenda window* opens, which allows ideas to be placed on the NSF's agenda (i.e. the list of subjects that are receiving attention from the NSF). *Policy entrepreneurs'* agency is necessary for the coupling of streams (e.g. presentation of policy ideas as solutions to a problem). Entrepreneurs are actors from inside or outside the NSF who are willing to invest their resources in policy ideas in their favour.

Herweg et al. (2015) suggested a second phase. When a proposal from the first coupling phase is ready for *decision coupling*, actors from the political stream negotiate the concrete design of the policy proposal (e.g. members of committees, environmental officers and nongovernmental organisations). *Political entrepreneurs* (officials who hold an elected leadership position) can couple the same three streams. While this process is characterised by negotiation, exchange processes and influences from several actors, formal decisions in NSFs are primarily made by the BoM. Although the general assembly approves amendments and the management of the BoM, the latter issues directives, makes strategic decisions and makes or controls operational decisions (McLeod, 2020). However, it can be assumed that these processes are not only dependent on formal decision-making structures and are not always made in a controlled and linear way (Jann & Wegrich, 2014). Therefore, it can be assumed that decision coupling in NSFs is not always a product of rational decisions or based on thoroughly elaborated alternatives but might rely on coincidences. Based on their understanding of the decision coupling process, Herweg et al. (2015) suggested an intertwining of the processes of policy formulation and legitimation.

Whereas the MSA emphasises the dynamic processes of progress and resistance to policy change, institutional theory could be useful for considering more stable and enduring contexts to shape policy genesis (Houlihan, 2005). By adding the lens of institutional isomorphism to the MSA, the understanding of the broader organisational and cultural structures that influence policy genesis can be extended. The concept of normative and mimetic isomorphism can help to understand how policy and political entrepreneurs gain support and legitimacy for their ideas through professional networks or the imitation of other organisations. Furthermore, coercive isomorphism can explain how policy genesis responds to formal and informal pressures from more powerful organisations than the NSFs, such as regulations from authorities or financial pressures from umbrella organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Against the backdrop of this theoretical framework, this study addressed the following questions through a case study of the Swiss Hang Gliding and Paragliding Association (SHV):

- To what extent are environmental policies generated in the SHV?
- What driving factors, particularly problems, political environments, policy ideas and policy entrepreneurs, are relevant for the agenda setting of such policies in the SHV?

Table 1 Details of the interview participants

Pseudonym	Function	Period active
SHV1	BoM president	2000–2018
SHV2	BoM, responsible for environment & paragliding	Since 2017
SHV3	EO environmental officer	2017–2022
SHV4	EO environmental officer	2019–2022
SHV5	EO administration and information technology officer	Since 2014
SHV6	Paragliding sport manager	Since 1995

EO executive office, *BoM* board of management

- What driving factors, particularly problems, political environments, policy ideas and political entrepreneurs, are relevant for the decision coupling of such policies in the SHV?

Methods

To gain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of these questions, we conducted a qualitative case study. Case studies can provide a holistic understanding of a phenomenon (the how and why) in its real-world context (Geertz, 1973). Purposive sampling, a close relationship with the phenomenon and the triangulation of methods allow for strong internal validity in such studies (Skille, 2013; Yin, 2018).

Selection of the study object

In Switzerland, 83 NSFs are members of SO (Swiss Olympic, 2020) and were therefore considered for this study. Outdoor sport interacts more with and is naturally more dependent on an intact environment than indoor sport (e.g. Mourey, Perrin-Malterre, & Ravanel, 2020), but outdoor sport has a higher carbon footprint due to travel requirements than indoor sport (Wicker, 2019). It was therefore expected that outdoor sport federations could have a strong incentive to consider environmental policies. The history of environmental policies in individual NSFs was also a selection consideration. Preliminary conversations with experts in SO led to the selection of the SHV, which already had various environmental policies at different stages of development.

The SHV is committed to the interests and sustainable practice of free flight (e.g. paragliding or fixed-wing flying with electric motors). Free flying occurs in nature, which sometimes consists of vulnerable ecosystems (e.g. the Alps). The SHV therefore relies on access to the outdoors and is bound by different legal regulations than other NSFs (e.g. indoor sports). Furthermore, it is partly dependent on facilities such as mountain railways (Kleinhans, 2001). Due to the infrastructure and equipment requirements, the SHV might use environmental resources differently than other sports. The SHV is committed to high-performance sport, promotes grassroot sport and safety, and makes provision for meaningful leisure time activities. It maintains a hang glider register, conducts pilot examinations and issues official Swiss pilot's licences. However, it is not mandatory for pilots to become members of the SHV (e.g. to get their licences). The SHV has no sponsorship income. It has 20,000 individual members and 112 member clubs. Its executive office has 14 employees, and it is headed by the BoM, which has seven voluntary members. The SHV itself is a member of the European Hang Gliding and Paragliding Union (EHPU) and SO. Being one of the eight NSFs to have signed the commitment *sport protects the environment*, the SHV has access to networking support and other tools.

Data collection

For an initial overview of the SHV's environmental policies, we analysed strategy papers, statutes, annual reports and membership magazines (32 documents). We then conducted six semi-structured interviews (**Table 1**) oriented towards the MSA (Herweg et al., 2015). We chose interviewees based on information arising from the document analyses and preliminary conversations with the environmental officer. The inclusion requirement for interviewees was their involvement in environmental policy genesis (successful or not) in the SHV. The different research participants covered a timespan as broad as possible, and we interviewed BoM and administrative office officials. Interviewing different officials active in the same timespan or with the same responsibility served as a validation. With respect to the circularity of qualitative research, we adapted the guidelines to each interviewee and adjusted them on the basis of the experiences gained with previous interviews (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Due to geographical distance and COVID restrictions, we conducted one face-to-face interview and five online interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 and 95 min and were recorded digitally, pseudonymised and transcribed verbatim. We shared the transcripts with the interviewees for any necessary amendments.

Data analysis

We used the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA (VERBI Software GmbH; Berlin, Germany) for data analysis. For an overview of environmental policies, we applied descriptive coding in the first cycle of the coding process. Causation coding was used to examine which factors were relevant for environmental policy genesis. This heuristic coding method is used for considering plausible causes of particular outcomes by identifying antecedent conditions and mediating variables and outcomes (Miles et al., 2020; Stratton et al., 1986). We developed deductive codes using the MSA as the theoretical framework (Herweg et al., 2015), and also used inductive codes that emerged from the data and did not match our theoretical framework (Miles et al., 2020). Considering the context-specific nature of qualitative research, we used a codeset adapted to the individual research participants. After condensing the codes to categories (Saldaña, 2021), we applied visual mapping to chart the policy genesis processes. This allowed for the representation of

large amounts of data while displaying parallel processes, priorities and time courses (Langley, 1999). Finally, we triangulated the analysis outcomes of the interview, document and analytic memo data to assess whether there was contradicting information or to confirm information (Yin, 2018). For further validation, we consulted research participants and officials of the SHV during the analysis to check the findings and relevant interviewees to proofread their translated (German to English) quotes (i.e. member checking; Ezzy, 2002).

Findings

Environmental policies

The SHV's environmental policies were based primarily on two pillars: (1) the protection of biodiversity and access to nature and (2) climate commitments. Whereas the former has been on the agenda of the SHV since the 1990s via statements on planned environmental protection zones, the latter has been broadly discussed as part of the strategy and implemented on an operative basis in different departments since 2017. Environmental policies in the SHV can furthermore be separated into strategies, structures and measures. Since 2017, the SHV has employed an environmental officer. One BoM member has been responsible for environmental issues since 2016, and the environment has been an integral part of their annual conference since 2019. Strengthening environmentally friendly flights and advocating for free access were part of the *Strategy 2020+*: "The SHV advocates for using and protecting. The main environmental impacts of hang gliding are structured and reduced proportionately" (SHV, 2020). Additionally, engagement against climate change was addressed in their *Position Statement Climate 2022+* (SHV, 2022). This engagement was based on reducing and accounting for greenhouse gas emissions, adapting to climate change, cooperating with knowledge providers and providing awareness to members. Reduction of and accounting for greenhouse gas emissions were prioritised to 2027. In 2022, the SHV signed the SO commitment *Sport Protects the Environment*. In terms of specific measures, the SHV has worked together with authorities and environmental organisations and made voluntary agreements on wildlife conservation areas since the mid-1990s. It supported environmental projects (e.g. ecological upgrades on take-off and landing sites) through an ecological fund. Several research projects were initiated in cooperation with nongovernmental organisations and research institutes. Since 2020, an environmental module has been part of the flight instructor training programme. Ideas for environmentally friendly practices in the sport were published in the membership magazine.

Agenda setting

Whereas the agenda setting of policies regarding biodiversity and access to nature were primarily the result of national regulations, climate protection policies were mainly pushed by engaged policy entrepreneurs. Member interests, functional problems and the practices of other federations were crucial for all environmental policies.

Top-down pressures

National regulations prohibit take-off and landing in protected areas. These legislations have become stricter, and it was difficult for the SHV to constantly monitor developments because they were not integrated into the process from the start:

"What was perhaps also a trigger for the existence of our (environmental) office, was the external landing ordinance that regulates where one may or may not land. From 2014, we were not allowed to take off or land in areas protected under federal law, such as hunting and bird reserves. It took some time before we even noticed this because we were not included in policy formulation. That has enormous consequences for us because we have had flying areas in hunting reserves. We had to say that we need people involved in the process to ensure that there are no further flight bans in these areas, otherwise you really could start to forget about cross-country flights" (SHV4).

From SO on the other hand, SHV officials mainly felt pressure concerning the SHV's success in competitive sport. Although they were not obligated to implement environmental policies beyond the *Ethics Charta*, officials reported a sense that "something might be coming", and therefore precautionary action seemed reasonable:

"SO is an important source of financial support, especially for competitive sport. However, SO seems to have tightened up the funding requirements, which could affect the area of environmental sustainability. That was also the impetus for our climate paper. We are already thinking about this, and we will do the groundwork so that we don't get cut off from SO" (SHV2).

They indicated that the process could be advanced by SO connecting funding to environmental policies to enable personnel support.

At the European level, the EHPU neither exerted pressure on the SHV nor encouraged them to integrate environmental policies. The SHV and the German Hang Gliding Association shared their know-how with NSFs from other nations that had less expertise with environmental policies: "To be honest, Switzerland and Germany are the donor nations because they have more experience and know-how than the others" (SHV1).

Engagement of policy entrepreneurs

If not forced by external political pressure, the agenda setting of environmental policies (mainly climate policies) was primarily pushed by the engagement of policy entrepreneurs. Because environmental sustainability is a cross-cutting issue, employees in different areas in the SHV attempted to promote environmental sustainability within their field or on a larger scale in the federation:

"Our statements on climate protection were developed through the initiative of a member in the office. He was very committed to this issue and brought it to the

BoM. The BoM then asked us to develop a strategy in a position paper" (SHV4).

Their engagement was based on their personal values and specific knowledge they could bring to the federation. Through perseverance, they promoted environmental policies that were in their favour. One policy entrepreneur explained the need to create a constant "background noise" through regular discussions with officials to set environmental issues on the federation's agenda:

"I have repeatedly tried to point out facts, during breaks and at every opportunity when it was appropriate. Several times, I also offered to provide a summary or a short presentation on climate protection. When you create a background noise, the topic is there, and it is tangible" (SHV5).

The entrepreneur's position in the SHV influenced their impact on the agenda setting of the policy proposal: "Yes, of course it is critical that these people are in decision-making positions. I would say that I have a certain key function at the office" (SHV5). Several people who supported the same policy idea were able to promote agenda setting:

"It certainly helped that there were several people, not one person who was employed 100% in the environmental office, but that there were two people who were employed 50%. And they were happy to raise the issue repeatedly and we had several people who might have commented positively on this" (SHV5).

Members, however, were not the main actors promoting environmental policies. Although club representatives did contact the association if they had a specific issue (e.g. land use), engagement from members to expedite environmental policies in the federation occurred only occasionally. Officials explained that this was due to the voluntary character of their involvement in the club: "because they are all volunteers who do this after their regular work and just enjoy their sport, their priority is not on the politics" (SHV3). The isolated inputs of individual members regarding environmental issues were explained by the generally low engagement of members in the federation: "From the moment they take the exam, they no longer have much to do with the association" (SHV2).

Member interests

Although members were not the main policy entrepreneurs, perceived member interests could facilitate or impede agenda setting. Thereby, officials perceived the development of an increased environmental awareness among their members:

"I am quite active in the scene. I meet many pilots and the environmental attitude has changed in the last five or ten years. There is a certain amount of learning going on, they see that they cannot just carry on as before" (SHV2).

This development of members' interests was not independent of cultural developments in society as a whole:

"I think that in recent years environmental concerns have increased, politically speaking. It has now become clear that more protected areas are needed and that the Alps contain valuable ecosystems that need to be actively protected, also from tourism and nature sports" (SHV4).

Nevertheless, consistent with the role of the SHV as a sport association, officials felt that sport took priority for most members: "Environmental sensitivity still seems to be more of a marginal issue for the pilots. Flying and training seem to be more important to most of them" (SHV6).

Functional problems

If they succeeded with the agenda setting of policies in their favour (e.g. climate engagement), policy entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of addressing the issue to ensure the long-term survival of the sport and the NSF. The SHV officials considered that climate change led to more demanding flight conditions and therefore affected the safety of their sport. One policy entrepreneur, who described himself as a climate activist, shared an example of him presenting climate policies to the BoM as solutions to problems that threatened the federation: "I said explicitly that it was not about missionary work, but about a strategic view, because I assume that the climate crisis will have a significant effect on our association" (SHV5).

Policies regarding biodiversity or access to nature were mainly brought up to address functional problems. Members were dependent on the goodwill of landowners because take-off and landing sites did not belong to the clubs. Furthermore, federal authorities gave cantonal authorities a remit to negotiate voluntary agreements on overflight bans to protect nature. Therefore, to ensure the long-term practicability of the sport, the SHV was forced to actively cooperate with these actors to maintain its credibility in such agreements.

While these conflicts were pressing issues, functional problems due to climate change were rather described as future matters: "The climate paper is directed towards the future. The current restrictions on our sport through access restrictions and wildlife conservation areas are the daily business of SHV3 and, to a lesser extent, me" (SHV2). However, these problems seemed to reinforce each other: "Climate change will exacerbate land use conflicts in the mountains. It would be beneficial for hang glider pilots if this challenge was addressed proactively enabling the best possible conditions for practising the sport to be maintained" (SHV, 2022). These functional problems have intensified due to societal developments. The popularity of the sport, the technical development of the equipment (which makes longer flights possible) and new trends such as hike and fly have intensified land use conflicts:

"Currently, hike and fly is a trend. You hike to a location and choose a meadow or pasture where you can take off. There is always the question of where am I allowed, where do I have to ask the farmer and where am I not allowed? The land use conflict in the mountains is increasing because more people are using the mountains for recreation" (SHV4).

Good practice in other federations

Policy ideas were often derived from similar NSFs. Programmes from other federations with similar challenges were registered and placed on the SHV's agenda:

"The Swiss Alpine Club is larger than us and has been working on this topic professionally for much longer than we have. I think we can learn a lot from them. We have already adopted some of their campaigns, e.g. the #nohashtag campaign. We have similar interests. We want to protect nature, because we depend on nature for our sport. But of course we also want to maintain accessibility" (SHV4).

Occasionally, nature conservation organisations approached the association with ideas for new studies.

Spillover effects

There were opportunities for spillover effects from agenda setting. The agenda setting of one policy might facilitate the agenda setting of another. For example, the agenda setting of wildlife protection promoted the agenda setting of ideas about climate engagement: "To have an environmental commitment today without considering the climate is becoming increasingly difficult" (SHV3). Another example was an upcoming association strategy that would enable the environmental officer to address a climate strategy.

Decision coupling

The importance of the BoM in decision coupling was structurally implied in the SHV statutes. Although the general assembly approved amendments and the management of the BoM, the BoM issued directives. Since decisions on environmental policies required knowledge that did not necessarily belong to the core topics of the BoM, thorough information provided by the environmental officers was important. They had a major influence on policy formulation: "Ultimately, we [environmental officers] formulated policy proposals that were later presented to the BoM' for a decision" (SHV4). Environmental officers wanted to base the estimated policy effects on empirical knowledge. Although some limited study results were available (e.g. the reactions of wildlife to paragliders), there was a lack of scientific data to base decisions on: "It is extremely difficult to find scientifically verifiable data. There's a lot of talk about restrictions and regulations, but there's not a lot of scientific work on it" (SHV4). Feasibility (e.g. of regulations, monitoring and sanctions), resource adequacy (e.g. employees still needed sufficient resources for their core business) and the anticipated leverage (which was expected to be larger in grassroots than competitive sport due to the number of athletes) were further considerations.

Generally, the streams outlined above for agenda setting played a part in decision coupling. The focus on functional problems and member interests were important arguments in the shaping of specific policies. Policies of other NSFs were also highlighted as good practice: "Different types of communication are needed. I don't know exactly what it needs, but we are learning. It also helps to look at what other associations are doing" (SHV4).

Officials described policy formulation as an ongoing process. Because environmental sustainability is normally not a core topic for the members of the BoM, it took time to develop the necessary knowledge base for legitimation:

"It is most demanding for the BoM because they are only very selectively involved in the whole process whenever they have to decide something. I firmly feel that they have a hard time making decisions in my area, probably because they still have to develop the necessary background knowledge. They are specialists in sport, but it is more difficult for them to decide on environmental sustainability" (SHV3).

Nevertheless, after obtaining enough information, suggestions from the executive office were mostly accepted by the BoM and thus legitimated:

"Since SHV3 and SHV4 joined, I don't think they have ever put forward a proposal that was not eventually accepted by the BoM. That also speaks for the fact that the topic is very new for us (the BoM), and that there is a lot of catching up to do" (SHV2).

However, if the club presidents' conference was integrated into the decision coupling, legitimation could be controversial depending on the topic (e.g. voluntary agreements on no-fly zones). The early inclusion of club presidents could increase the acceptance of policy drafts and facilitate the legitimation process, even if it sometimes proved difficult to find people who wanted to become involved:

"If you take people with you early on, you will have more acceptance. The only problem is how to reach them. Of course we have certain working groups, and we have various committees in elite sport. But you can't reach every single club president. This is a big challenge for us" (SHV4).

Discussion

Policies regarding biodiversity and access to nature have been on the SHV's agenda since the 1990s, and climate protection policies have been broadly discussed as part of the strategy and implemented on an operative basis since 2017. Relevant factors for the agenda setting and decision coupling of these environmental policies were therefore identified.

Due to the embedding of the SHV in the EHPU and SO, top-down pressures for the agenda setting of environmental policies could be expected. However, except for coercive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the form of national legislation concerning protected areas, this was not the case. For climate policies, *policy entrepreneurs* tended to promote agenda setting. They engaged with environmental policies in their area and in the federation in general. The structural implications of positions connected to environmental developments could additionally promote the agenda setting of such policies.

Because NSFs are interest organisations, bottom-up processes in the form of demands or encouragements from clubs or individual members could be expected. However, SHV members were not the main policy entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, consistent with the role of NSFs as interest organisations (Nagel, 2008; Schimank, 2005), perceived member interests were central (*political stream*). Therefore, functional objectives (e.g. enabling sport) dominated normative reasons (e.g. environmental responsibility; *problem stream*). These findings

were consistent with Sandvik and Seippel (2022), who found that sport organisations that felt responsible for environmental problems framed them as either sport-specific technical problems, growth-oriented opportunities or existential crises for the sport. To overcome such uncertainty, the SHV had processes that could be explained by mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), i.e. an orientation towards practices of similar NSFs to gain legitimacy (*policy stream*).

Perceived member interests, functional arguments and mimetic processes were also important for decision coupling. Due to the knowledge required to make decisions on environmental policies, BoM support from environmental officers was crucial (*political entrepreneurs*). The understanding of decision coupling as an intertwined process of formulation and legitimation could be supported in the context of the SHV. It was an ongoing process of revising ideas and finding consensus between the executive office and BoM. The club presidents' early inclusion in the decision coupling process increased their acceptance of policy proposals.

Although problems, political conditions and policy ideas develop independently, it is possible that they partially depend on each other. For example, the motivation of policy entrepreneurs for their engagement or the perception of problems may also have developed from political and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the MSA's concept of *policy windows* was a suitable description for environmental policy genesis in the SHV. The coupling of the streams created opportunities for change. The mere perception of a problem could not drive policy genesis to the same extent as when a policy entrepreneur presented a policy idea as a possible solution to that problem, or when the political environment was perceived to be sensitive to environmental problems. In all three streams, factors were identified that promoted the emergence of such windows of opportunity and environmental policy genesis.

Implications

This case study identified crucial factors for environmental policy genesis in an NSF. The MSA of Herweg et al. (2015) was applied and its application in the context of NSFs was reviewed. It was shown that the MSA could be applied to NSFs when making minor adaptions, i.e. regarding the political stream. Nevertheless, for decision coupling, the role of the environmental officers in relation to political entrepreneurs (e.g. BoM) might be underrepresented when applying this model to NSFs. Furthermore, the analysis of policy entrepreneurs was critical in the MSA. However, by analysing recordings of board meetings in sport clubs, Fahlén and Stenling (2019) found that in contrast to actor-centred explanations, institutional change can occur through the unintended consequences of "muddling through". This does not entirely concur with the results of this study. Although the engagement of policy entrepreneurs was central for the agenda setting of climate policies, matching policy ideas to the NSF's problems was important to give policy entrepreneurs the chance to open an agenda window. Furthermore, spillover effects from stronger to weaker policy areas were drivers for the agenda setting of environmental policies.

The research findings at hand have implications for managerial practice. This in-depth case study offered a holistic understanding of environmental policy genesis in the SHV. If the agenda setting and decision coupling of environmental policies in NSFs is to be promoted, it could be done by providing adequate resources to support the engagement of policy entrepreneurs and the structural implication of positions in connection with environmental developments. This might be relevant for other NSFs in similar settings, where there is no dependency on or pressure from other actors, e.g. sponsors or international federations. Furthermore, the findings imply that officials could engage with other NSFs that have successfully implemented environmental policies to gain legitimacy. In nature sports, engagement with other NSFs with similar dependencies on nature and therefore similar functional problems might be fruitful. It has been shown that the early inclusion of club presidents can increase their acceptance of environmental policies. However, this was a single case study, and therefore the transfer of the findings to other NSFs, nonprofit sport organisations or countries must be made with caution.

Limitations and future research

According to the particularities of the SHV and the Swiss sport system, the driving factors for the genesis of policies in other NSFs or sport systems could differ. Multiple case studies should therefore be conducted, considering other sizes, types of professionalisation, and design archetypes (Parent et al., 2021) and sports with different dependencies and materialities (Sandvik & Seippel, 2022). Through the purposive sampling and analysis of other types of NSFs, external validity can be increased (Skille, 2013). To use the potential leverage of NSFs in society to improve environmental sustainability, after their genesis, policies must be implemented, evaluated and maintained. Therefore, studies of the later stages of the policy cycle are needed. Because an NSF was the focus of this study, conclusions can only be made about the role of the clubs and individual members from the perspective of the association. To further assess their demands and actions, club officials and members must be analysed.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest. S. Piller and S. Nagel declare that they have no competing interests.

All procedures performed involving human participants have been approved by the ethics committee

of the University of Bern (ethics application no. 2022-03-00001) and have therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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