

CHANGE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges and Change Readiness in Grassroot Sport

Popular summary

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2023



Co-funded by
the European Union

Change – cooperation for change management
and innovation in sports

ABOUT CHANGE PROJECT:

Change – cooperation for change management and innovation in sports

The CHANGE project will contribute to the promotion of integrity and values in sport by focusing on promoting and improving good governance in sport. The organised sport movement will be equipped to adopt innovative governance approaches, tailored for grassroots sports, to build sustainable and innovative ways to tackle present and future challenges.

The main aim of the project is to develop an educational programme on innovation and change management within the organised sports movement. The programme will focus on building resilience and environmental, economic and social sustainability by focusing on: Digitalisation, Inclusion/Engagement and Sustainability.

A group of experts will gather a comprehensive overview of best practices and create an interactive programme that will support the European grassroots sport movement in their work to build sustainable and innovative ways to tackle present and future challenges.

The logo for the CHANGE project, featuring the word "CHANGE" in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The letter "A" is replaced by a yellow triangle.

INDEX

Summary	1
Contextual background: Grassroot sport in Europe and its Governance	1
Literature Review: Challenges for Sport Clubs	2
Is Grassroot Sport ready for the Future? Reflections from a Challenged Sector....	3
Mind the gap!.....	5
External or internal challenges - and sport's capacity for action	6
Conclusions	6

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Summary

Sports can strengthen social inclusion and tackle various economic, social, and environmental challenges, bind individuals and communities together and promote objectives such as health, education, climate action, sustainability, and social development. Nonetheless, organised sport at the grassroots level in Europe is facing severe challenges: declining membership rates, reduced levels of physical activity among adolescents and difficulties in recruiting volunteers. Sport organisations, in particular in the non-profit sector and with limited resources, are struggling to find time and resources to create new sustainable, inclusive and innovative ways to work.

The Erasmus + project *CHANGE – Cooperation for Change Management and Innovation in Sports* (CHANGE) has been created to equip sport's governing bodies, sport organisations, and sport leaders with new, innovative, and sustainable tools to support sport at the grassroots level. Coordinated by ENGSO, it consists of **eleven partners from nine countries**: **1)** research (Malmö University & EASM), **2)** sport organisations (UFEC-Catalonia; Basics Sport Club, Belgium; World Snowboard Federation, Austria; Latvian Sports Federation Council; DIF, Denmark; and Opes, Italy) and **3)** experts in the field of sport and digitalization, inclusion/engagement and sustainability (SandSI, N3XT Sports and ENGSO).

Within CHANGE, the Department for Sport Sciences at Malmö University is responsible for background research regarding change management and innovation in contemporary grassroots sports in Europe. In this report, we summarise research activities carried out in 2023 and insights from 3 workshops with stakeholders from sport organisations and academia.

The overarching research questions in this report are: 1) What challenges are the grassroots sport movement/organisations facing today? 2) Are the grassroots sport organisations equipped to handle the challenges? Do they have *change readiness*? 3) How can we understand the results?

Contextual background: Grassroot sport in Europe and its Governance

Grassroot sport clubs in the EU are facing many challenges. As both the organisation of sport and its political structure differ between EU member states, the conditions of existence vary between local sports clubs. It is important to consider the ways that governance and structural contingencies affect clubs differently, and, by extension, clubs' ability to be '*change ready*'. There is certainly not a single challenge or a solution that suits everyone.

The Council of Europe's member states have ratified the European Sport Charter (2001), which provides a framework for sport policy and legislation. It requires countries to provide accessible sport to everybody (e.g., all age groups), environmental consciousness, fair play, and healthy and safe sport resting on high ethical values. The European Sport Charter is complemented by The Code of Sports Ethics (Council of Europe, 2023). Scholars have underlined the importance of the charter regarding the promotion of sport to hard-to-reach societal groups. However, despite its ambitious inclusion goals, sport participation is not still equally available to everyone.

Literature Review

We conducted a literature review to learn more about the challenges that grassroots sport clubs face in Europe. The review points toward 3 overarching challenges for sport clubs:

1) Managerial challenges, as in issues that the club need to deal with within their everyday setting: human resources, lack of facilities, problems with memberships or volunteers. The review shows some correlations between the size of clubs, their administrative capabilities and their national location. Larger clubs experience more managerial challenges than smaller clubs, but they are less likely to report existential threats than small clubs. Clubs that have paid employees report less issues with human resources but often have less volunteers in their clubs.

Scholars wish to remedy these issues by suggesting potential solutions, often related to changing strategies (e.g., digital tools, new partnerships). However, sport policies within Europe differ from country to country, which means that clubs have different structural possibilities to work from, making any “one solution fits all” difficult (Svisce, 2016). Additionally, society increasingly relies on digital technologies and other innovations (e.g., AI), which means that sport clubs need to be ready to integrate new technologies and methodologies into their club culture to remain efficient and competitive. Yet, these adaptations require a certain amount of entrepreneurial engagement. This becomes a challenge due to the organizational capacities of most clubs—being voluntary based without employees. Also, while different types of entrepreneurship may be efficient and empowering to sports clubs, scholars have also pointed out that the management of sport clubs has gradually moved toward focusing on increasing profits, which contradicts the non-profit structure (Ciomaga, 2013). Others have labelled this a neoliberal development (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Coakley, 2011; Newman, 2014).

2) The increased social responsibility of a sport club has led to what we term a **legitimacy challenge**. Sport clubs are associated with positive societal developments such as improving physical and social wellbeing for both individuals and societies by offering spaces that invite meaningful connections and democratic values (Waardenburg & Nagel, 2019). While these positive outcomes could be linked to participants simply participating in the activities, some sport policies across Europe now demand more, although sport clubs generally lack capacity to sufficiently deal with social issues (Tuchel et al., 2021).

Sport clubs are considered suitable spaces for integration since participation is easy disregarding practical or cultural background (Österlund et al., 2019). In practice, minority groups are underrepresented in sport clubs due to either lacking attempts toward inclusion on behalf of clubs or simply wanting organizational capacity such as insufficient financial means to increase or change activities (Wicker & Breuer, 2014; Jeanes et al., 2018). Some clubs are living through a legitimacy crisis where they need to change or adapt practices to remain eligible for funding. This reality leads to questions around how clubs' reason around themselves, as either passive or active agents within changing political and societal dynamics. Also, although clubs may want to contribute toward social inclusion, studies show that it is not their highest priority (having as many participants as possible generally has a higher level of endorsement). This suggests that in order for social inclusion to reach its fullest potential, it would need to be implemented into the primary goals of clubs.

3) Volunteering emerges as a clear challenge to sports clubs in regard to the recruitment of new volunteers and retaining existing ones (CHAMP, 2019; Nagel et al., 2020; Cuskelly et al., 2006). Motivation, satisfaction and recognition seem to be the keys. Overall, volunteers are seemingly driven by an altruistic purpose but also by a desire to improve their own sport skills.

Studies show that men are more likely to be volunteers than women. However, sport events have a more evenly distributed number between the sexes and could therefore be used as a springboard to recruit more female volunteers to sport clubs.

A lack of volunteers makes it necessary for volunteers to perform multiple roles within the clubs (coach, treasurer...) at the same time. Clubs that have hired employees may escape these issues but may also risk challenging the traditional role of the volunteer.

Some of the challenges that sport clubs experience may simply mirror a changing society, but we maintain that understanding the bigger context in which European clubs navigate is paramount.

Is grassroots sport ready for the future? Reflections from a challenged sector

In order to get input from different “experts” (stakeholders) in European grassroots sport, and identifying the challenges and current state of grassroots sport, we organised **workshops** at different locations and with partly different target groups and perspectives. “Experts” are those working or engaging in a sport federation or sport club, as well as students and researchers within the field of sport management and sport science. One common characteristic of the participants is a **personal experience from grassroots sport**, besides the more professional expert role. This summary is based on workshops involving representatives from sport federations in Sweden and Denmark; Catalan sport federations and clubs; and students, researchers and practitioners attending a European sport management conference.

From the CHANGE project’s point of view, sport is expected to have potential to link individuals and communities together and promote objectives such as health, education, climate action, sustainability, and social development. Sport (in this case in the form of grassroots sport organisations) is expected to be able to handle and provide solutions to big, external, societal issues and challenges. At the same time grassroots sport organisations are themselves struggling with big challenges of declining membership rates, reduced levels of physical activity among adolescents and lingering effects of the Corona pandemic. These challenges are all to be considered as external, affecting sport in different ways.

The literature review presented above pointed towards a number of challenges for sport clubs. Contrary to the starting points of the CHANGE project, these challenges are more practical and internal. When, during the workshops, asking the grassroots sport organisations, those were the main **challenges faced by the organisations**:

Table 1. Challenges faced by the grassroots sport organisations

Sweden/Denmark	Catalonia	EASM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Recruitment; competence development; the voluntary, non-profit structure of the movement. -Understanding the (potential) members. -Courage to change and develop; relevance. -Visibility and communication. -Modernization and digitalization. -Facilities. -Inclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Support, administration and financial situation. -Participation and access. -Attitudes (e.g. racism and gender issues) -Other issues (e.g. different conditions based on geography, type of sport, etc) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Relevance -Financing -Facilities -Inequalities -Inclusion, access -Drop-outs -Volunteers -High requirements from the state, top-down pressures

Despite some differences between the workshops, some challenges stand out as general despite being labelled a bit differently:

- ◆ Having enough resources and competence to operate and develop.
- ◆ Being inclusive, accessible and relevant to more people.

When having identified the challenges, the participants had to identify and discuss **obstacles standing in the way for tackling the challenges**. These reflect the readiness, or rather the lack of readiness, to change.

Table 2. Obstacles standing in the way for tackling the challenges of grassroots sport organisations.

Sweden/Denmark	Catalonia	EASM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lack of time and competence (mainly caused by the voluntary structure of the sport movement). -Lack of courage and resistance to change. -Lack of trust. -Lack of cooperation and exchange of knowledge between federation and club -Lack of resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Insufficient conditions for, and knowledge and promotion of, minority sports. -Lack of staff and non-professional volunteers. -Disconnection between decision makers in the sport field and grassroots sport. -High health insurances(=costs) of some sports -Lack of hours in PE. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Competitive interests -Club culture -Lack of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacities • Financial resources • Time • Volunteers • Coaches • Sponsors • Education • Communication, out-reach • Partnerships • Diversity • Tech adaptation

The resource situation seems to be the main obstacle. Primarily financial, but not only. The following stood out as important barriers to change:

- ◆ Human resources
- ◆ Traditional structure and hierarchy of sport

Obviously, sport organisations have several shortcomings in a world that requires adoptions, changes and creativity. But also, specific strengths and opportunities: size, outreach and traditions of the movement, beign support for health, positive values, social cohesion and integration. To conclude the **results** from the workshops, there are extensive similarities, and only a few contextual/national differences between the sports and countries. The fact that the grassroots sport movement is based on voluntary work was a recurring theme in the discussions. Attendees mainly identified challenges related to the day-to-day activities of sport clubs. The gap between the central/national strategies and visions

versus the practical reality of the sport federations and clubs emerged as a common thread. Most of the discussions, however, focused on the day-to-day activities of sport clubs without relating them to the bigger societal issues.

Mind the gap!

Our study verifies the hypothesis that grassroots sport in the EU faces many and varied challenges. We interpret these differences as different stakeholders describe and operate in *different realities*. Among these differences, the gap between national sport federations and local sport clubs is the biggest and of greatest importance: while representatives of international or national federations accentuate broad societal challenges for sport, representatives of grassroots sport tend to emphasize more practical and everyday problems for local clubs. A prerequisite for promoting change readiness and innovation in grassroots sport is that the various actors in the sport sector agree on the challenges they face. If there is a gap in perceived realities, it must be bridged.

How can this gap be understood or explained? First, the gap has arisen because local clubs are not equipped or able to take responsibility for sport's structural challenges at the societal level. For a club that struggles with problems such as weak finances, a lack of voluntary leaders, declining membership rates, etc., it can be hard and far-fetched to relate these everyday problems to vague and abstract ideals of the social benefit of sports in the form of social inclusion, democratic fostering of youth, the promotion of gender equality or environmental issues.

A second and more theoretically oriented answer can be given drawing inspiration from neo-institutional theory, and John W. Meyers and Brian Rowan's theory about "rationalized myths". According to them, organizations are not rational entities that develop the form and strategies that are most effective in relation to their goals. Instead, they are being shaped by their institutional environment with the aim to gain legitimacy and acceptance. Translated into the area of sports, new sports, new federations, and new clubs arise, form, and develop in accordance with traditions from earlier sports organizations. They inherit basic perspectives on the social role of sport and how a sport organisation is expected to behave. From this perspective, there is no objectively correct way of organising sport. However, a rationalized myth has been created stating that our prevailing system with non-profit clubs connected in national and international federations is the most natural and legitimate. Equally taken for granted is the idea of sport's societal role and benefits.

From this theoretical perspective, the gap between national sport federations and local clubs is not merely a matter of perspective or starting points. The gap is a result of rational myths about sports - assumptions and ideals about the social benefits of sport - which do not always correspond to real conditions. Considered in this way, it will be important in the continued work with CHANGE to both problematize our starting points - the societal challenges that are identified on an overall level - and at the same time show local sports clubs that their everyday life and reality can be linked to overarching societal challenges.

External or internal challenges – and sport's capacity for action

An additional theme that emerged in this study concerns the sport representatives' approach to the challenges that we identified and discussed. The extremes here go between the positions of "active agents" or "victims of circumstances". Representatives of the first position perceive themselves as acting subjects with the capacity to both meet and counteract various forms of challenges. The latter perceive themselves as victims of societal challenges beyond their ability to remedy. These differences in approach create an important distinction in a project that ultimately aims to promote "change readiness" and innovation. Closely linked to sport organisations' possible confidence in their own abilities to act is whether the societal challenges are perceived as external or internal.

In our continued work, it is a priority task to classify the many challenges that have been identified. Which challenges are external, and which are internal? How are we to understand the sport organisations' approach to various challenges? The answers to these questions are crucial if CHANGE is to succeed in its intention to promote change readiness and innovation in local sport in Europe.

It is also important to discuss how national sport federations can provide structures and support for local clubs to handle current challenges. This support must take into account the "gap" that we have identified. If grassroots sport is to feel committed, the support must have a close connection to their perceived reality and everyday challenges.

Conclusions

The CHANGE project aims at equipping sport's governing bodies, sport organisations, and sport leaders with new, innovative, and sustainable tools to support sport at the grassroots level. Three focus areas were specified: digitalization, inclusion/engagement, and sustainability. In this report we present the first results from Work Package 2, based on a review of current research on societal challenges for grassroots sport and insights from 3 workshops that have been carried out with stakeholders from sport organisations and academia. The results could be summarized in a number of gaps:

1. The tensions and a gap between what society believes sport can deliver and what people who run grassroots sport identify as its priorities.
2. The differences between what are identified as wider, societal challenges and the tangible day-to-day challenges experienced by grassroots sport.
3. The gap between strategies and visions developed at the national level and the need for functional hands-on strategies, solutions and practices at the grassroots level.
4. The gap between the lack of change readiness in many grassroots sport organisations and the expectations on flexibility and adaptability in today's society.

Bridging these gaps should be a priority for the CHANGE project, to equip grassroots sport for developing and using all types of resources in an efficient and sustainable way, towards greater inclusion, engagement and relevance. This includes clarifying the roles of different levels of sport.