The Issues and Challenges Associated with Becoming Sports Governance Compliant: Insights from Ireland

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Previous research finds that national and international sports organisations uphold shockingly poor standards of governance (Geeraert, Alm and Groll, 2013; Pielke, Harris, Alder, Sutherland, House and McCabe, 2019; Geeraert, 2018 & Alms, 2019). Geeraert et al. (2013) found that high-profile corruption scandals have been institutionally induced. The far-stretching autonomy of sport has harmed the quality of the self-regulation of sports organisations. Up until recent years, a standard checklist for good governance in national and international sports organisations was hard to come by (Geeraert et al. 2013). This deficit precluded the benchmarking of the governance of sports organisations. Nevertheless, since then, an abundance of sports governance codes have been developed (Mrkonjic, 2016).

However, a problem lies in the implementation of these codes. No studies examine the impact of the adoption of a comprehensive set of governance principles on the performance of a sports organisation (Parent, Hoye and Girginov, 2018). Little knowledge exists on the specific issues and challenges experienced by sports organisations when they are implementing a sports governance code. Moreover, little research exists on the resources and support that these organisations need during the implementation process. Geeraert (2018) asserts that it is essential to involve the sports organisations in the discussions on appropriate elements of good governance. He also highlighted that sports governance policies should aim to enable willing organisations to implement acceptable governance standards. Sport Ireland adopted and enforced the Community, Voluntary and Charitable governance code on Irish sports organisations in 2018. However, Sport Ireland did not take the above considerations into account.

Sports governance researchers have been calling for studies to explore sports governance issues in greater depth whilst also presenting cases for best practice. Thus, this study used a three-fold mixed methods design to address the above gap in both literature and practice. Two Key-Informant interviews were conducted with representatives from Sport Ireland. Subsequently, a national survey of all National Governing Bodies of Sport and Local Sports Partnerships in Ireland was launched. It received a response rate of n=44 organisations. Finally, fifteen in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with a representative sample of survey respondents.

The issues and challenges experienced by the respondents on their journey to governance compliance include work overload, a lack of resources and a lack of sports governance skills, knowledge, and expertise. The results find that the structure, scale, and size of the organisations was also an inhibiting factor. The lack of resources is most noteworthy, however. The key informant interviews revealed that Sport Ireland believed they had provided more than enough resources to help the organisations become compliant.

Much research examines the difficulties of governing sports organisations. However, little data exists on the difficulties that sports organisations experience on their journey to compliance with a sports governance code. This research can serve as a basis for policymakers by enlightening them on the issues and challenges but also the resources and support that are needed to overcome such challenges. This study provides a new perspective on the process of implementing a sports governance code.