How to Increase Youth Governance in Organized Sport?

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INTRODUCTION

93 percent of all children and 75 of all young people in Norway participate in organized sports (Bakken, 2019). This makes the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NOC) the largest youth organization in Norway. Yet, there is a skewed age distribution in representation at all organizational levels where young people make up a clear minority. The involvement of young people in decision-making processes that greatly affect themselves is a policy goal by the NOC and important part of good governance. Without this involvement, sport systems will miss the opportunity to benefit from young people's potential of being agents of change in the management of sport organizations. The aim of the study is to examine the challenges and needs in order to increase youth governance in the NOC, National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and Regional Sport Confederations (RSCs).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis is based on organizational legitimacy (Suchmann, 1995) defined as the conceived "appropriateness of an organisation to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions" (Deephouse et al., 2016, p.32). Sport organizations gain their legitimacy from the public and government by incorporating governance structures and processes that enhance democracy in the organization (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). The underrepresentation of a social category (here the youth) is democratic problematic for sport policy makers and sport managers. Sport governance literature with focus on board composition and representation complements the analytical framework as they help to understand the access to the right to govern (Hoyle & Cuskelly, 2007).

METHODS

Two rounds of data collection were conducted including 1) a survey with 65 youth representatives of Norwegian NSOs and RCSs and 2) semi-structured interviews with 10 representatives (aged 23-59) from organizations within and outside the NOC. Open-ended questions were posed about how the informants experience youth governance in their organization, and in the NOC.

RESULTS

Generational conflict was identified as catalyst for discrimination of young people as they have to a large extent symbolic participation versus real participation in decision-making arenas as a consequence of the lack of legitimacy from more experienced leaders. Uncertainty about the role and tasks, lack of follow-up and life situation makes it difficult for young people to participate in decision-making matters. In order to increase youth governance, young people in leading positions should not only be representatives of other young people, but have an equal stand with other leaders in sports. In order to increase young people's opportunity to govern, they must have equal participation in all matters, not just in matters that experienced leaders consider less important. Creating security among young people, increasing competence among young and experienced leaders and breaking up traditional information and communication patterns are suggested measures. In addition to the need for resources, it is important that leaders in sports increasingly interact across generations. Further measures are suggested which aim at including young people in arenas where decisions are made, feeling confident in their roles as decision-makers, and opportunities to develop their competencies on and within organization of sports.