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`RIGHTS GO WITH RESONSIBILITIES` – AN ANALYSIS OF THE EXTENDED ARM’S LENGTH POLICY IN SWEDISH SPORT

Selected subtopic: Sport policy

Key words: policy implementation, governance, mass participation

It is argued that the development of sport policy mirrors government efforts in other policy sectors. The “New Public Management” technologies of target setting, performance management, monitoring and sanctions have for some decades permeated also the earlier unregulated policy sphere of sport and the effects of earned autonomy and regulated freedom have been well documented by sport policy scholars. In Sweden too, albeit to a far lesser degree, the modernization agenda has been clearly observable in the policy areas of education, healthcare and social security as in the domain of sport. Recent examples are the sport policy programmes launched by the government aimed at steering the distribution of funds in organized club sport more towards underrepresented groups with the explicit aim of engaging more children and youth by developing the national sport federations (NSO). This paper is concerned with the governance structures deployed in the latest programme where some 50 million EURO per year 2007-2011 have been added to the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) budget to meet the government aim. More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to outline the modes of governance visible in the programme implementation and analyse how these have influenced the direction and organization of the programme and its capacity to realize its aim. Findings are based on data from programme policy documents, 2563 applications made by sports clubs for programme funding, 486 questionnaires filled out by the sports clubs representatives applying for funding, and 27 semi-structured interviews with key personnel involved in distributing the programme funds in 5 NSO’s. The analysis shows first and foremost how government interest in and concern for the conduct of organized club sport has increased in both range and detail. It is evident that the relationship between government and RF has changed insofar that elements of modernization are now more than earlier vital parts of the governance of sport. However and far from expected, the governance is also and still characterized by an arm’s length principle. In spite of the fact that each organization was expected to form specific policies, strategies and methods tailored for their specific needs and conditions, results reveal a remarkable stability in aims, strategies and expected results throughout the chain of command from government, via RF and NSO’s all the way down to the voluntary sports clubs. Together with weak monitoring of programme results and lack of sanctions these results suggest that the traditional arm’s length policy in Swedish sport has been extended in terms of trust and reliance. However, this is not to be confused with dispersal of power and weaker central control. On the contrary, it suggests that coercion and regulation merely has been replaced by responsibilization and accountability which has not resulted in the creativity and use of expertise hoped for in the design of programme activities.