

# CHANGE

LITERATURE REVIEW

## Challenges and Change Readiness in Grassroot Sport

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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.

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## Introduction

It is well-documented among EU member-states that sports have the capacity to strengthen social inclusion and tackle various economic, social and environmental challenges (European Commission, 2018; Jane & Gibson, 2017; Powell, 2015; 2018). Moreover, sports can bind individuals and communities together and promote objectives such as health, education, climate action, sustainability and social development (Coalter, 2007; Koutrou & Kohe, 2021). Against this background, however, it is troublesome that organised sport at the grassroots level in Europe is facing severe challenges in the form of declining membership rates, reduced levels of physical activity among adolescents and difficulties in recruiting volunteers. All these challenges were amplified during the corona pandemic (Doherty et al., 2020; Koutrou & Kohe, 2021). Thus, for many local sports clubs, there is a need to build resilience and initiate sustainable and innovative ways to tackle present and future challenges. Findings in the Erasmus+ CHAMP project show a clear need to further explore, develop and operationalise innovative ideas and practices within the organised sport sector to improve operations (CHAMP, 2021). Sport organisations, in particular, those that operate in the non-profit sector through the time and commitment of their volunteers, and with limited resources, are struggling to find time and resources to create new and innovative ways to work.

The Erasmus + project *CHANGE – Cooperation for Change Management and Innovation in Sports* (below referred to as the CHANGE project or just CHANGE) was created with the ambition to equip sport's governing bodies, sport organisations, and sport leaders with new, innovative, and sustainable tools to support sport at the grassroots level. The CHANGE project consortium is coordinated by ENGSO and consists of eleven partners from nine countries. The partners are divided into three areas: 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 assigned to conduct background research regarding change management and innovation in contemporary grassroots sports in Europe. In this report, we summarize research activities carried out in 2023. The report begins with a review of current research on societal challenges for grassroots sport with a focus on the situation in the EU. This is followed by insights from three workshops that have been carried out with stakeholders from sport organisations and academia. The report ends with a discussion of the key learnings and outcomes of this background research.

The overarching research questions in this report are:

- What challenges are the grassroots sport movement/organisations facing today?
- Are the grassroots sport organisations equipped to handle the challenges? Do they have change readiness?

- How could we understand the results?

Based on this, the objectives of the CHANGE project are to 1) build a hub of experts on grassroots sport, innovation, and change management, 2) to develop and implement an interactive toolkit offering innovative management strategies to support grassroots sport and 3) create a network of CHANGE advocates within grassroots sport in Europe.

This is the first the report from the CHANGE project. The report is written by Karin Andersson, Karin Book and Johan R. Norberg, with valuable assistance from Niki Koutrou. We thank the participants of the workshops and valuable help and comments from Alessia De Iulis, Lovisa Broms, Hisham Shehabi and Ronald Režais.

## Contextual background: Grassroot sport in Europe and its Governance

To understand the challenges affecting grassroots sport clubs/organisations, we begin this section by outlining the bigger context in which European clubs navigate. For example, grassroots sport clubs, whose main task have been to organise sport competitions and activities, concurrently need to deal with increasingly complex challenges such as integration, inclusion, and governance (Waardenburg & Nagel, 2019). Other self-reported challenges by clubs are related to human resources (e.g., to recruit and retain members and volunteers), or regarding the availability of sports facilities and the financial situation of the club (Breuer et al., 2017). Although some of these challenges may simply mirror a changing society, new areas of responsibility for grassroots sport clubs also reach back to the European Sport Charter (2001) (formerly Sports for All Charter (1976)), which provides a framework for sport policy and legislation that all the Council of Europe's member states have ratified. Since the introduction of the Charter, social inclusion strategies have become a duty for Europe and sport clubs.

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.

The organisation of grassroots sport in Europe corresponds mainly to a pyramid model where non-profit clubs constitute the organisational base (Petry, Steinbach & Kotarksi, 2004). Importantly, sport governance is a backdrop to the grassroots sport movement. Sport governance can be divided into three large branches (Dowling et al., 2018). Firstly, systemic governance, which refers to the horizontal power relationships at work within sport policy where organisations, media, governing bodies (e.g., IOC, FIFA), sponsors, and further actors become influential depending on the issue at stake and the resources of the actors (Henry, 2021).

The second identified use of sport governance deals with good corporate governance. This concerns how sporting organizations manage their resources, how they conduct their practices, how they define their goals, which is an endeavour that is increasingly influenced by environmental and climate concerns (Dowling et al., 2018).

Lastly, a third way of using the term emerges, namely, 'political governance' (Henry 2021). This use of the term refers to processes where governing bodies attempt to influence the sport sector by financial, moral, regulating, and/or licensing incentives (Dowling et al., 2018). This type of governance has been pinpointed as soft power where powerful actors are "steering rather than rowing the sector" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1995).

The Council of Europe's member states have ratified the European Sport Charter (2001) (formerly Sports for All Charter (1976)), which provides a framework for sport policy and legislation. The charter requires grassroots sport in each country 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 (Theeboom et al., 2010). However, despite its ambitious inclusion goals, sport participation is not equally available to everyone (Collins & Kay, 2014).

The charter needs to be adopted in Europe disregarding the type of sport policy model that each country utilizes. EU countries' sport models are referred to as either interventionist or non-interventionist (Siekman & Souk, 2010). This categorization refers to how much a state decides within the sport sector. For example, in Sweden a non-interventionist model is used. The Swedish sport movement is organised by the non-profit organisation RF-SISU, which has taken on functions of a governmental agency. They are an umbrella organisation responsible for supporting, representing, leading, and coordinating the sport movement at all levels. They oversee 71 sport federations and over 20,000 sports clubs across the country. The sport movement in Sweden is decentralized, which rests on the principle that politics do not seek to meticulously govern public affairs but rather define results and benchmarks that recipients need to meet.

In contrast to Sweden, interventionist models are more common in Europe—for instance, in Spain sport is a constitutional embodiment, and France has an explicit sport legislation (Petri, Steinbach & Kotarski, 2004). Also, in England organised sport is managed by state governing bodies. It is the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) that is in charge of sports funding, promotion of physical activity, sports development, and sports policy (DCMS, 2021). As a rule, each sport has its own National Governing Body (NGB), who, in turn, take responsibility for the development of that particular sport (Sport England, 2021).

Apart from the sport governance that is executed at an EU level, grassroots sport clubs also need to comply with national regulations and policies. Taken together, the backdrop of grassroots sports in Europe is a complex combination of national and further policies, and it is important to consider the ways that governance and structural contingencies affect clubs differently, and, by extension, clubs' ability to be 'change ready'.

## Literature Review: Challenges for Sport Clubs

This literature review was conducted to explore what main challenges grassroots sport clubs experience. The purpose is to understand challenges working against change readiness as well as coping strategies that are used to work with challenges.

We began by consulting Scopus, which is the largest existing database of peer-reviewed academic texts, to establish which sport journals are listed. There are five sport management journals listed in Scopus<sup>1</sup> and two sport sociology journals<sup>2</sup>. However, to include a wider range of sources (book chapters and reports) some relevant texts were also found by using keywords in google scholar. Volunteering and sport governance do not have specific journals but are discussed in sports law journals, sport policy and political journals. Also, journals covering leisure and public health are platforms where sport related topics are published. Since peer-reviewed scientific journals may not be listed on Scopus, the authors used google scholar to search for relevant sources, using keywords. A qualitative selection of texts was made based on topical suitability. Fifteen selected texts were chosen to guide this review. Texts needed to be peer-reviewed, published after the year 2000, and published as articles, book chapters, or reports. Exceptions regarding peer-review were made for some reports that were published as PDF's. The chosen texts are deliberately geographically diverse to enable national comparisons. The selection of texts is not exhaustive but were selected to represent main trends of topics discussed within sport management.

The review points toward three overarching challenges for sport clubs: managerial challenges, issues concerning sport governance, the social role of a sport club, and volunteering. These trends that were found in the literature structure the review.

### Managerial Challenges

Sport management, which has been an academic field since the 1980s, navigates around management, marketing, human resources management, finance, sport law, data analytics, information systems, and organizational theory (Ciomaga, 2015). Our conducted review shows that many challenges fall under management, which motivates us to narrate these challenges in some depth. Overall, many of the included studies rely on quantitative surveys that provide insights into what sport clubs themselves define as their own challenges. However, these studies may not be able to shed light on and an in-depth perspective on the extent, how these challenges are experienced or why.

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Sport Management, Sport Management Review, European Sport Management Quarterly, International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing, Journal of Global Sport Marketing, Sport Management Education Journal

<sup>2</sup> Sociology of Sport, International Review for the Sociology of Sport



Based on an online survey with nine participating countries (Belgium, Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain), members, volunteers and board members of sports clubs pinpointed their main challenges. Seippel et al., (2023) report that problems related to human resources were highest in Denmark and Germany, while Belgium reported the least issues in human resources. Financial issues and problems related to facilities were highest in Spain, Poland and Hungary. Facility issues were least common in the Netherlands and Belgium. To interpret the results, the authors tried to find correlations between organizational capacities of the clubs and national policies. They conclude that some patterns can be seen although not always consistent. For instance, bigger clubs experience fewer financial issues but otherwise report more challenges than smaller clubs. Clubs with at least one employee have fewer issues in recruitment but more financial concerns. Resilient clubs generally reported a good economic balance, functioning internal social networks and planning capacity (Seippel et al., 2023, p. 218).

Exploring such challenges in detail, Champ (Clubs for Health-enhancement, Activation, Modernization and Participation), which was an Erasmus+ financed project led by ENGSO (2019), concludes that sports clubs in Sweden and Denmark experience a lack of facilities, have trouble integrating 3-6 years old and elderly into their clubs, have difficulty in integrating people with special needs, and perceive that they have too little sponsors and funding. The CHAMP project also convey that based on location, only people with cars can participate in the clubs' activities, young people are leaving the clubs, volunteers are increasingly hard to come by, the balance between recreational and elite sport is hard to find, and parents are either engaging too much or too little in the club.

Clubs also identify external threats. Due to the large number of new actors who offer similar services (e.g., gyms), sport scholars commonly agree that clubs need to develop new strategies to retain members (Waardenburg & Nagel, 2019), however, opinions differ regarding which strategies to use. Doherty et al., (2022) write about evidence-based challenges and solutions to grassroot sport clubs post Covid-19. They maintain that capacity building, innovation readiness, and adapting sport policies is the way forward for sport clubs.

To envision what could prevent managerial challenges, scholars' reason around strategies that clubs use, often with a special interest in digital tools. Ehnold et al., (2020) sent an online survey (n=787) to voluntary sport clubs in Austria and Germany to map their use of digital tools. Their data showed that digital tools were most commonly used for internal and external communication followed by reporting membership rates to federations. Obstacles in using digital tools were not having a strategy for digital tools, digital tools did not suit the club, the club did not have enough volunteers to perform such tasks and lacking financial means to invest in IT equipment.

Through a quantitative survey Delshab et al., (2022) investigates the attitude toward innovation, open innovation, and innovativeness in Iranian non-profit sport clubs. Delshab et al., (2022) consider knowledge management (e.g., knowledge sharing and knowledge creating) as essential drivers within non-profit sport. Results show that the clubs that used knowledge management showed "a positive

attitude toward newness among their board members and openness to new internal and external ideas, which helps their organization to innovate more and perform better” (p. 152). Also, clubs that had at least one administrative employee were more likely to be innovation ready (Delshab et al., 2022). Despite the positive outcomes of knowledge management for employees and the organisations the question remains which clubs have the organizational and economic capacities to adopt to this example of best practice.

Bradbury et al., (2021) argue that grassroots sport clubs can better cope with challenges if they engage in interorganizational relationships (IOR's). They interviewed representatives from five different sport clubs in New Zealand to explore how partnerships between clubs could create long-term sustainable changes to their business models. For example, clubs that cooperated could gain access to facilities, access to different types of facilities, or facilities they otherwise could not have afforded. Bradbury et al., (2021) also propose four success factors for IOR partnerships: “governance, communication, financial management and constitution creation and timing” (196). The IOR cooperations resulted in clubs becoming more appealing to diverse groups in society, it strengthened strategic focus, which resulted in increasing memberships, it fortified financial viability, enhanced connection to the local community, and more diversity.

Inspired by Ratten (2020), who argues that non-profit sport clubs need to be driven by an entrepreneurial orientation, Escamilla-Fajardo et al., (2021) explore through a survey how the resilience of Spanish sport clubs is affected by entrepreneurial behaviours like mitigating competition, redistributing resources, adding new products, and a passion for work. They conclude that risk-taking and innovation have a higher influence on performance, while a passion for work made employees more resourceful and prone to find solutions. Ratten (2020) also emphasises the links between sport and entrepreneurship, not least how COVID-19 has driven the opportunities for entrepreneurialism: *‘Sport and entrepreneurship share similar characteristics due to the need for innovation to drive change. This makes sport a catalyst for entrepreneurship as it necessitates new thinking to increase performance’* (2020, 1382).

In summary, the managerial challenges experienced by grassroots sport clubs are diverse, ranging from everyday issues to existential concerns. The review points toward some correlations between the size of clubs, their administrative capabilities and their national location. Scholars generally address these issues by suggesting potential solutions, often related to changing strategies (e.g., digital tools, partnerships) that require a certain amount of entrepreneurial engagement. This becomes a challenge due to the organizational capacities of most clubs—being voluntary based without employees. While different types of entrepreneurships may be efficient and empowering to sports clubs, scholars have also pointed out that sport management has moved toward focusing on increasing profits (Ciomaga, 2013) and labeled this a neoliberal development (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Coakley, 2011; Newman, 2014).

## Legitimacy Challenges

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 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). For example, Sport England, which is a political governing body, set high targets for clubs to create concrete strategies and activities for including hard to reach societal groups (e.g., elderly, disabled, individuals with a migration background), for funding allocation. Hence, increased expectations of sports clubs to do more for positive societal change is experienced as a clear challenge for clubs.

Sport clubs are considered suitable spaces for integration since participation is easy disregarding practical or cultural background (Österlund et al., 2019). However, 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).

Sweden is a country where organised sport has made some attempts at integrating refugees and new arrivals. The organising body RF-SISU has a programme called *Idrottslyftet* (elevated sport) that supports sport clubs in developing sustainable activities for children and youth aged seven to twenty-five (RF, 2019). Additionally, in 2015, following the large number of refugees who arrived in Sweden, RF initiated "sport for new arrivals", a project that set out to integrate refugees. To support social inclusion, RF has also produced "*Idrotten vill*" (what sport wants), which is a guide on how to organise activities in alignment with a 'sport for all' strategy. Blomqvist-Mikkelsen (2023) conducted semi-structured interviews with Swedish sports club representatives about their perceptions of integrating Ukrainian refugees into Swedish organized sports. The respondents convey that Ukrainian refugees are easier to include into activities in comparison to other refugee groups based on perceived cultural similarities. However, they also narrated that the approach toward sport participation is sometimes very competitive and therefore incompatible with the Swedish 'sport for all' strategy (Blomqvist-Mikkelsen, 2023).

With Sweden as main case in their study, Stenling and Sam (2019) discuss the changing role of (non-profit) sport organisations from passive custodians to active advocates in public policy processes. This shift is driven by the (relative) de-institutionalisation of organised sport's previous monopolistic position in Sweden and, as a consequence, 'sport's changing position in relation to government: from being an institutionalised monopoly (and autonomous extended arm of the government) to being viewed as one type of service provider among many operating within an increasingly fast policy cycle' (458). For instance, in order to secure funding streams and stability, sport organisations act as active advocates (Stenling and Sam 2019; Mosley 2010) or lobbyists on behalf of a collective interest (Jenkins 2006). Stenling and Sam (2019) identify different motives for the advocacy. One motive to influence the regional and local levels concerns 'in-order-to'. For example, sport organisations endeavour to make the decisions makers understand the importance of

investing in sport facilities and to include sport spaces when laws and regulations are rewritten. 'Desired outcomes thus relate to by-laws or policies related to the volume/structure of funding or the allocation of time in publicly owned sport facilities', explain Stenling and Sam (2019, 456).

Research shows that especially three aspects of a sport club are important to enhance social integration, namely, a clear definition of the clubs' sport focus (e.g., competitive focus vs. sport for all), orderly management (e.g., paid staff), and organizational structures (Seiberth & Thiel, 2010). Although studies show that having at least one paid employee results in more innovation readiness (Delshab et al., 2019), other studies show that less volunteers results in less opportunities for affiliates to partake in the organization of the club, which in turn reflects negatively on the sense of socio-affective integration (Nagel, 2006).

Buser et al., (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study of forty-two Swiss sport clubs (football, basketball, martial arts, gymnastics, mountain sport, skiing). They wish to explore the connections between social integration in the sport clubs and membership biography. Their survey (n=780) shows that first generation migrants have more issues with integration in a club. They also write that social inclusion is successful to a higher extent when more members also have a migration background.

Based on a survey (n=13.000) in Denmark and analysed through a regression analysis, Österlund et al., (2019) conclude that being a volunteer or a long-time affiliate of a Danish sports club increases the probability of social integration. Also, a higher frequency of participation, partaking in competitions, being a member of a single-sport sport club, being older (>40), and doing a team sport rather than an individual one contributes positively toward inclusion and the feeling of acceptance within a club (Österlund et al., 2019).

To understand which social responsibilities matter to grassroots sport clubs, Walzel et al., (2018) applied a three-wave Delphi study, which is a quantitative consensus-generating approach, on an international sample, consisting of different expert groups. The groups were composed worldwide online with academics and experts from the sport sector. 125 sport management scholars and sociologists were invited. The authors created the expert groups based on publicly available data from fourteen nations and twenty-four sports disciplines. According to their results, the priorities for the sport clubs began with having as many participants as possible followed by offering a safe and inclusive environment (Walzel et al., 2018). They also conclude that human rights and labour practice received a high endorsement.

In a special issue on the social role of sport clubs in the European Journal of Sport Science (EJSS), Waardenburg & Nagel (2019) focus on one challenge they see for EU sport clubs. Namely, legitimacy. Since clubs are exposed to increasingly complex issues such as inclusion, integration, and good governance, an identity issue has surfaced where clubs feel insecure regarding how they should operate. For example, participating Swedish and Danish clubs within the CHAMP project stated to not feel like sport is a priority in society. This may point toward a discrepancy between the grassroots sport clubs and policy, since Sweden is

one of the only countries in Europe that continuously increase state funding for community sport clubs even though sport club participation is not increasing (Bjärsholm & Norberg, 2021).

In sum, it is becoming increasingly important that sport clubs show how they are contributing toward positive societal change, a task that clubs are sometimes not ready to deal with due to lacking capacities (e.g., financial means, know-how). Accordingly, 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 a changing political and societal dynamics. Although social inclusion in sport clubs has positive potential, scholars shed light on challenges that prevent clubs from reaching more individuals. Also, although clubs may want to contribute toward social inclusion, studies show that it is not their highest priority. For example, 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.

### The Challenges of Volunteering

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). To clarify, volunteering is a distinctive aspect of most non-profit sport clubs, and volunteers often occupy more than one role in a club (e.g., practitioner, consumer, decision maker) (Horch, 1994). Volunteering in sport clubs has been studied to show how social capital may increase through participation in civil society (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Harvey et al., 2007). Research shows that the highest motivation for volunteers to be active in a club is altruism, followed by a motivation to develop their own sport skills (Busser & Carruthers, 2010).

Wicker (2017) wrote a literature review where she points toward how volunteerism in sport clubs have been studied so far, and recommendations for future research. She maintains that studies have been more concerned with individual volunteer narratives and less concerned with institutional aspects of volunteerism. She also states that the consequences of volunteerism are understudied.

The 2015–2017 project Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe (SVISCE) is a forerunner in collecting large-scale comparative data on sports clubs with a particular focus on social integration and volunteering. Their results consist of eleven reports based on data from ten European countries that were operationalized both quantitatively and qualitatively. They conclude that twenty-six percent of the participating clubs reported several different existential threats (e.g., recruitment/retention of volunteers/members, financial problems, public support, governmental requirements, access to sport facilities). Older clubs that were larger in size were less likely to report an existential threat (Nichols & James, 2017).

Nagel et al., (2020) present results concerning volunteer satisfaction based on a survey (n=8131) with 642 sport clubs from ten different countries. Determinants of satisfaction turned out to be: recognition for sacrifice, support, leadership and material incentives, and the workload of volunteers. Recognition has previously been presented as the most important factor (Dwiggins-Beeler et al., 2011; Farrell et al., 1998), which Nagel et al., (2020) also confirm with this study. They also show that volunteers with a workload beyond three-hundred hours per season are less satisfied while people younger than twenty-five and older than sixty-five are more satisfied than any other age group. The analysis showed no gender differences in relation to satisfaction.

Skirstad and Hanstad (2013) explore gender differences through a survey (n=659) among volunteers at the Nordic Skiing World Cup in 2010. They report that female volunteers tended to sign up as volunteers to build their social networks whereas men signed up for external reasons. Women were less likely to hold a sport club membership in comparison to the participating men. They conclude that sport events may be a gathering where traditional male volunteers coincide with novice or modern volunteers, who are more likely to be women. Accordingly, sport events can be used as a springboard to recruit more female volunteers to sport clubs.

Coleman (2002) investigated the characteristics of UK cricket volunteers to point toward their multiple functions within a club. The material is collected from the responses of 151 cricket volunteers who had defined positions in their clubs (e.g., manager, coach, treasurer). The majority of the volunteers were middle-aged men. The average duration of their volunteering lasted 9,4 years. Their stated motivation for volunteering was both rooted in altruism and self-interest. They reported that the tasks were challenging since they did not have enough volunteers, which means that several volunteers needed to take on multiple roles. For example, being treasurer and coach simultaneously.

Stacy Warner et al., (2010) caution that although there is research on volunteer satisfaction, the knowledge has not resulted in more volunteers in sport clubs, rather numbers are decreasing. They apply a quantitative Kano method to analyse volunteer perceptions by categorizing what volunteers consider important, must-haves, and dissatisfying. Their results show that a supportive club culture and clear club strategy received the highest scores.

Research on volunteering in sport clubs mainly focuses on the motivations to be a volunteer and on volunteer satisfaction. Accordingly, the research mirrors the challenges connected to volunteering: the retention and recruitment of volunteers. Overall, volunteers are seemingly driven by an altruistic purpose but also by a desire to improve their own sport skills. A lack of volunteers makes it necessary for volunteers to perform multiple roles within the clubs, such as being a coach and a 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.

## Is Grassroot Sport ready for the Future? Reflections from a Challenged Sector

### Introducing the workshops

In order to get input from different “experts” (stakeholders) in European grassroots sport, we have organised workshops at different locations and with partly different target groups (e.g., students of sport science, club representatives, scholars). The focus of the workshops was to identify the challenges and current state of grassroots sport. By inviting different categories of experts/stakeholders, we anticipated a diversity of perspectives. We are using the term “Experts” to refer to the stakeholders who are working or engaging in a sport federation or sport club, as well as students and researchers within the field of sport management. Most participants are active in grassroots sport, besides being categorized as experts.

The **first workshop** was carried out on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2023 and was hosted by the Department of Sport Sciences at **Malmö University**, together with **ENGSO** and the **National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark**. The workshop gathered representatives from the Swedish and Danish grassroots sport movements to reflect on the current state and future dreams of the sport movement. This creative step-wise workshop took place at STORM Innovation Lab at Malmö University. Altogether 32 representatives from sport federations in Sweden and Denmark participated. Some represented umbrella organisations, like regional and national sport confederations, while the majority represented special sport federations. Big sports like football, handball, gymnastics and swimming, as well as smaller sports like parachute, surfing/ SUP and fencing, were covered. Accordingly, we had a wide representation of different sports. By using sport federations as informants, the aim was to get a comprehensive picture of grassroots sport. As representatives of the members in a certain sport, federations have insights into the holistic situation of the clubs. Also, a multitude of the people working at the federation level have experiences from the club level as well, as active participants, volunteers or leaders.

Below are the main items of the programme of the first workshop in Malmö. The workshop lasted a whole working day, which allowed for long conversations and follow-ups in connection to each question. Workshop two followed a similar method, but was condensed timewise, while workshop three only focused on two specific questions (question one and two).

**Introduction** to CHANGE, the theme and aim of the day + presentation of all the participants.

**Workshop Question 1: What challenges are we (as an organization and sport) facing today?**

- Individually: Think and write on post its
- In small groups of approx. six: Discuss and cluster the challenges on the whiteboard
- In plenary: Present the discussions in your group
- Individually: Prioritize the most important individually
- All: Agree on the top challenges

**Workshop Question 2: What obstacles are standing in our way?**

- In small groups: Discuss and identify obstacles in relation to the top challenges.
- In plenary: Present the discussions in your group, put post its on the whiteboard

**Workshop Question 3: What are our (the grassroots sport's) strengths/super powers?**

- In small groups: Discuss and identify strengths, cluster on the whiteboard.
- In plenary: Present

**Workshop Question 4: What does a desirable future look like?**

- In small groups: Discuss and illustrate.
- In plenary: Present

**-Summing up the day.**



The **second workshop** was organised by the Social Action and international Departments of **UFEC** and took place in Barcelona on 5<sup>th</sup> of July. 35 representatives of Catalan sport organisations, both federations and clubs, participated.

The **third workshop** was held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September, in connection to the **European sport management** (EASM) conference in Belfast. The workshop, which was hosted by Malmö University, EASM and ENGSO, was attended by 27 people excluding the CHANGE team. The attendees were mainly students and researchers with theoretical knowledge of and practical experience from grassroot sport. Also, some practitioners from sport federations attended. This workshop was shorter than the previous workshops and lasted two hours, including some short inspirational presentations.



By gathering stakeholders with diverse insights, we were able to collect valuable information for the CHANGE project and provide a platform for exchange of knowledge and experiences for the participants. Just by bringing them together, the process started.

Below, we present a condensed version of the results from the three workshops, which we will look upon through the lens of the overall starting point of the CHANGE project as well as through the three topics of the literature review (managerial challenges, legitimacy challenge, volunteering). After summarizing the workshops, a fourth workshop has been organised in connection to the general assembly of the World Snowboard Federation in Switzerland. A short reflection from this is found in the following section: “Some final reflections and call-to-action”.

The starting point of the CHANGE project is, as stated in the introduction to this paper, that sport is expected to have the potential to link individuals and communities together and promote objectives such as health, education, climate action, sustainability, and social development. In other words, 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 struggling with other big challenges such as declining membership rates, reduced levels of physical activity among adolescents and lingering effects of the Corona pandemic. Due to this, there have been tensions and a gap between what society believes sport’s key role is versus what people who run sport identify as its priorities. These challenges could be considered external challenges, affecting sport in different ways.

The literature review presented above pointed towards several challenges for sport clubs: managerial challenges, issues concerning sport governance, the social role of a sport club, and volunteering. Contrary to the starting points of the CHANGE project, these challenges are more practical and internal.

Let us keep the starting points (focusing on the external challenges) and the challenges highlighted in the literature review in mind when moving on to the results of the workshops.

The things discussed during the three workshops displayed more similarities than differences, despite being conducted in different countries and with partly different target groups.

### **What challenges are the grassroots sport organisations facing today?**

In all three workshops a lot of different aspects were discussed in relation to the challenges faced by grassroots sport. Below these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Challenges faced by the grassroots sport organisations

Sweden/Denmark	Catalonia	EASM conference
-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.	-Support, administration and financial situation. -Participation, drop-outs and access. -Attitudes (e.g. racism and gender issues) -Other issues (e.g. different conditions based on geography, type of sport, etc)	-Relevance -Competence, know-how -Financing -Facilities -Inequalities -Inclusion, access, exclusivity of membership, recruitment -Drop-outs -Volunteer recruitment and retention -Bureaucracy -High requirements from the state, top-down pressures -Competition with other providers

In the Swedish/Danish and EASM workshops, the participants criticised the sport movement for not being relevant, modern and up-to date, while in Catalonia the critique rather focused pointed toward problematic and differing attitudes within the sport movement. The high expectations on grassroots sport and the top-down pressures from national level stakeholders were mentioned in several discussions in all three workshops.

Despite some differences between the workshops, some challenges were recurring despite being labelled a bit differently in the various workshops:

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

To use the themes of the literature review, it is possible to see managerial challenges, issues concerning sport governance, the social role of a sport club, and volunteering.

In the Swedish/Danish workshop and Catalonian workshops, differences between different sports and geographical contexts were discussed. For instance, minority sports were highlighted as having a more challenging situation. Also, some sports are having the challenge of attracting and sustaining members, while others had the problem of not being able to welcome all potential members because of lack of space, time or human resources. Another example was the discussion on whether traditional, established sports were less willing to make changes than new sports. The participants thought that in some cases also new sport just adapts to traditional patterns, but there are examples of more progressive and non-traditional solutions within, for example, parkour and skateboarding. Geographical contexts would include urban versus more rural environments, affecting for instance the provision of facilities and membership base.

Altogether, the challenges discussed in the three workshops were mainly linked to internal, practical, managerial issues rather than the wider, external challenges. For instance, sustainability and climate change were hardly mentioned. Neither were societal health issues. Naturally, the day-to-day reality of sport clubs, and to some extent the federations, is about handling practical issues. The larger issues were briefly mentioned in connection to competence development, but even that was rather about having the right competence to develop the core product and attract members.

### Obstacles standing in the way for tackling the challenges.

After identifying the challenges, the participants subsequently had to identify and discuss obstacles standing in the way of tackling the challenges. These reflect the readiness, or rather the lack of readiness, to change. In Table 2 below, the main obstacles are summarized.

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

Sweden/Denmark	Catalonia	EASM conference
-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.	-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.	-Competitive interests -Club culture -Lack of: Capacities Financial resources Time Volunteers Coaches Sponsors Education Communication, out-reach Partnerships Diversity Tech adaption

It became apparent that the resource situation seems to be the main obstacle. Obviously, the financial resources were discussed but also other types of resources. Some resources are linked to the financial resources, but also the whole structure of the sport movement, the following stood out as important barriers to change:

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

The obstacles could be understood from a couple of different perspectives: the way sport is organised, not least the voluntary-based structure as well as the traditional and even inert structure. Also, the lack of knowledge transfer, support and help from the higher levels of the sport systems to the grassroots level was discussed in all workshops. The financial resources were discussed in all three workshops but as discussions developed it seems like the resource situation was much more related to capacity than money.

The obstacles standing in the way for tackling the challenges could be related to three of the main themes of the literature review: managerial challenges, issues concerning sport governance, and volunteering.

### Strengths and opportunities

It goes without saying that sport organisations have several shortcomings in a world that requires adaptations, changes and creativity. At the same time, sport organisations are expected to deliver a lot of positive outcomes, which are considered plausible due to their perceived strengths and opportunities. Therefore, at the workshops in Malmö and Catalonia the next task for the participants was to point out the strengths, unique advantages, or even superpowers, of the sports movement:

Table 3. The strengths and superpowers of grassroots sport

Sweden/Denmark	Catalonia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Opportunity to influence and reach out globally.</li> <li>-The size of the movement.</li> <li>-Sport as a unifying force.</li> <li>-Pool of skills and experience.</li> <li>-Opportunity to reach out to young people/leaders.</li> <li>-Experience of innovative solutions from the pandemic.</li> <li>-<u>The solution!</u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-A very competitive and hard-working spirit.</li> <li>-Awareness and good will to develop and do good.</li> <li>-Sport as a tool for health, positive values, social cohesion and integration.</li> <li>-The tradition of volunteering, great human capital.</li> <li>-Strong traditions and favourable conditions in the region of Catalonia.</li> </ul>

There are strong powers to build and capitalize on. Used properly, sport is considered the solution to many grand challenges, which led us to the last theme of the day: to look ahead and think big about a desirable future. Below are the visions and ideas for future grassroots sports. On the one hand, a more accessible sports movement for all is desired. On the other hand, more efficient management and support for the sport clubs are requested.

From the Swedish/Danish workshop:

- ◆ Inclusive, accessible sport for all.
- ◆ That sport is valued more and gets more resources and a clearer voice in, for example, planning.
- ◆ Sharing: that clubs and even federations can exchange experiences and share resources, such as administrative staff.
- ◆ From the Catalonian workshop:
- ◆ Access for all to sport
- ◆ Democratization in the use of facilities and improvement of infrastructures.
- ◆ Sport is an integrative tool in practice.

- ◆ Strengthened support to small clubs.
- ◆ Better physical education in schools to follow physical activity and sports.
- ◆ Promotion values in sport.
- ◆ Develop a protocol for the federations to be more efficient.
- ◆ Good communication between athletes – club – federation and administration.
- ◆ Minimum of bureaucracy for providing better management for sport clubs and federations.
- ◆ Decentralization policies: equal support for sport clubs from big cities and small towns.

The Malmö workshop was also summarized graphically (see Appendix 1).

### Some final reflections and call-to-action

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.

Digitalisation and sustainability – two concepts that are highlighted as important in the CHANGE project – were hardly mentioned which perhaps shows that these are not priorities for clubs or that they don't recognize the need to innovate in order to ensure diversity of offer and perhaps long-term sustainability. However, the student group attending the third workshop mentioned about the lack of tech adaption from sport clubs, which might indicate that younger age groups prioritise digitalisation and see the gap between what is on offer by traditional sport clubs and their needs. In at least two of the workshops, participants stressed that clubs are not ready for innovation and change more generally. In general, a gap was identified between what we already know and how we can go about and facilitate change, i.e. help clubs change their operations.

When finalizing this report, results from yet another workshop were provided, namely with representatives from national snowboard federations. Hence, this workshop had a more homogenous target group although representing different countries. Most of the results from the "snowboard workshop" were similar to the previous workshops presented above. Issues in relation to funding, volunteers, communication, participation, infrastructure and other issues affecting the day-to-day operations, were highlighted. However, unlike the other workshops, "climate change" was a hot topic. In the case of snowboarding, climate change is a tangible phenomenon affecting the activities in a concrete way. So, it seems like if an issue is tangible in the day-to-day activities of the sport, it is identified as a challenge.

## Discussion

This WP is still in progress, making it difficult to establish definitive results or to formulate strategies for the future. With this reservation, we would like to end this report by highlighting a few questions and discussions that our work has so far given rise to.

### Mind the gap!

First: our research overview and workshops support the overarching hypothesis of the CHANGES project: grassroots sport in the EU faces many and varied challenges. However, it is also clear that the description of these challenges differs both among researchers and among the representatives of sport that we have met. For instance, in the research overview, researchers in the field of sport management are inclined to emphasize challenges linked to economics and governance, while sport sociologists instead tend to emphasize challenges linked to volunteering and the societal role of sport. In other words: the researchers' disciplinary background tends to affect how they describe the social role of sport and its societal challenges. Among the representatives of sport, a corresponding dividing line can be drawn with reference to respondents' position on the pyramidal organizational structure of sports. Here, our primary impression was that representatives of international or national federations accentuate broad societal challenges for sport, while representatives of grassroots sport tend to emphasize more practical and everyday problems for local clubs.

We interpret these differences as different stakeholders describe and operate in *different realities*. Moreover, among these differences, the gap between national sport federations and local sport clubs is the biggest and of greatest importance. The explanation is simple: 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.

An important question is of course: how can this gap be understood or explained? A first – empirically oriented – answer is that 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 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. From this perspective, local sport clubs find themselves in a very concrete and practical everyday life, with the consequence that the whole discussion about the social benefits and social challenges of sport becomes too abstract and without a direct connection to the conditions of existence for grassroots sport.

If the gap was primarily a result of different actors' different positions and starting points, the simplest solution would of course be for the national sport organisations to explain and

convince their local sport representatives that their everyday problems are linked to larger societal challenges. However, we believe that this would be a hasty conclusion and measure. Drawing inspiration from neo-institutional theory, and especially the researchers John W. Meyers and Brian Rowan's (1977) theory about "rationalized myths", we believe that the gap is the result of structural conflicts that must be made visible and problematized.

Meyers and Rowan's article "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony" was a pioneering work in neo-institutional theorizing. It is today considered a modern classic in the social sciences. In the article, Meyer and Rowan questioned the then-prevailing assumption that organizations are rational entities that develop the form and strategies that are most effective in relation to the organizations' goals. Instead, they argued that organizations 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 establish forms and strategies that promote legitimacy and societal acceptance. Moreover, 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.

However, since myth and reality do not always coincide, situations arise when organisations must deal with problems that lie outside their framework of rationalized myths. The result is called decoupling: the organisations' actions are being dissociated from their ideology. As an effect, an organisation might say one thing but will in practice do another.

From this theoretical perspective, the gap between national sport federations and local clubs appears in a new light. The gap does not become a matter of perspective or starting points. The gap is a result of the existence of rational myths about sports - assumptions and ideals about the social benefits of sport - which do not always correspond to real conditions. Maybe, the distance between the national and local levels can then only be reduced if we dare to challenge and problematize our ideas about the role of sport in society. Perhaps some descriptions of sport's societal challenges are based on unattainable premises?

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 the work with WP2 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". The sport representatives who take the position of "active agents" perceive themselves as acting subjects with the capacity to both meet and counteract various forms of challenges. The opposite position is to perceive sport as a victim of societal challenges beyond its own ability to remedy. Both positions are to be considered ideal types rather than descriptions of actual sport organisations. Most sport organisations are reasonably somewhere between these extremes. However, the 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. External refers to challenges that do indeed affect sport, but ultimately stem from events outside the care of sport. An illustrative example is the corona pandemic, which hit global sport hard. Correspondingly, internal challenges refer to elements in one's own sporting practice that in various ways prevent sport federations and clubs from reaching their goals.

In the continued work with WP2, it is a priority task to classify the many challenges that have been identified. Which challenges are external, and which are internal? Furthermore, we need to analyse sport organisations' approach to various challenges. Is there already today in European grassroots sport a strong belief in one's own capacity? Or do clubs rather perceive themselves as victims of circumstances beyond the sport's own control? 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 three workshops that have been carried out with stakeholders from sport organisations and academia. The results could be summarized in a number of gaps:

- ◆ The tensions and a gap between what society believes sport can deliver and what people who run grassroots sport identify as its priorities.
- ◆ The differences between what are identified as wider, societal challenges and the tangible day-to-day challenges experienced by grassroots sport.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ 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.

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## Appendix 1. Graphic summary



# CHANGE



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## PROJECT:

Change – cooperation for change management and innovation in sports

## PARTNERS:



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