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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Which wider social roles? An analysis of social roles ascribed to voluntary sports clubs

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### ABSTRACT

It has long been established that voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) are ascribed a prominent social role by governments. Several scholars highlight the ascribed social values in sport policy to voluntary sports clubs and their possible implications for these voluntary organizations. Most of these studies focus on national sport policies. However, several studies signal a dominant role for local government in the public funding of sport. This discrepancy between local funding responsibility and scholarly attention to national sport policy legitimizes the following question: Which social roles do local governments ascribe to voluntary sports clubs? Further, the particularities of the social values of voluntary sports clubs have received only sparse attention. Using institutional theory as a theoretical lens, this paper addresses these lacunae through a systematic document analysis of the municipal sport policies of the twenty largest Dutch municipalities. These municipalities address four different social roles for voluntary sports clubs: (1) sports clubs as social infrastructure operators, (2) sports clubs as educational institutes, (3) sports clubs as service providers, and (4) sports clubs as project implementers. The article further elaborates on these four social roles and argues that these form a normative institutional framework for VSCs.

### KEYWORDS

Institutional logics; instrumentality; sport-for-all; sport policy; voluntary organizations

### Introduction

Voluntary sports clubs are seen by public institutions in diverse countries as important partners in tackling social issues. Sports clubs have been asked or pressured to contribute to such diverse issues as counteracting the obesity epidemic, promoting the social integration of minorities (Agergaard, 2011; Janssens & Verweel, 2014; Vermeulen & Verweel, 2009), tackling homophobia (Elling, Knoppers, & De Knop, 2003), encouraging good citizenship behaviour among refugees (Spaaij, 2015), improving social cohesion in neighbourhoods and activating the elderly. This relationship between sports clubs and public institutions is hardly new or surprising. The perceived positive functions that VSCs can play in society have long been described (see e.g. Coalter, 2007a; Østerlund & Seippel, 2013; Skille, 2009). As such, 'sport as a social good' is one of several institutional logics for voluntary sports clubs.

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In a range of countries, including the Netherlands, voluntary sports clubs are the main provider of sport activities (Breuer et al., 2015; Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013). This voluntary structure developed bottom up during the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Dutch citizens started to organise their sport activities in voluntary sports clubs (VSCs), which remain the most prominent sport organisations to date. In 2013, 30 % of Dutch citizens were members of a voluntary sports club (Tiessen-Raaphorst & den Dool, 2015). Due to a general rise in sport participation (for instance in unorganized sport activities, school sport activities and/or commercial sport activities), the total market share of voluntary sports clubs is decreasing (van der Roest, Vermeulen, & van Bottenburg, 2015), as it has been in other countries (Ibsen & Seipel, 2010). Still, the voluntary structure plays a crucial role in the organisation of sport in the Netherlands (Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013).

In total, just over 25,000 clubs are registered with the national sport umbrella organisation, the NOC\*NSF – the result of a merger in 1993 between the former Netherlands Olympic Committee (NOC) and the Netherlands Sports Federation (NSF). Most VSCs are members of one of the 76 national sport organisations (NSOs, e.g. the soccer federation and the hockey federation) registered to the NOC\*NSF. All national sport umbrella organisations are organised based on the principles of voluntary association. Members can weigh in on decisions during a bi-annual membership meeting. All local sports clubs and national umbrella organisations have a voluntary board and work with volunteers. The income of VSCs primarily comes from member fees (58%), canteen profits (13%) and sponsorship (11%). Government grants account for roughly 4% of their income (van Kalmthout, de Jong, & Lucassen, 2009).

National government plays an important role in the development of sport-for-all policies and the funding of elite-level sport. Through the national lottery, NOC\*NSF is provided with financial means for developing both elite-level sport and sport at the grassroots level. At the provincial level, Dutch provinces are responsible for such issues as regional planning and environmental matters. Some provinces also fund a quasi-autonomous non-governmental sport council to provide assistance to regional elite-level athletes and local voluntary sports clubs. Although the involvement of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in sport policy development has grown in recent decades, in terms of finances the most significant governmental actor in the Netherlands is still the 393 municipalities. Together, they account for ~87% of public spending on sport (Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013). Although direct public funding comprises only a small percentage of the total revenues of voluntary sports clubs, many VSCs receive a municipal rental discount on sport facilities of up to 50–80%. This makes local government a relevant actor in the organizational field of voluntary sports clubs.

Several scholars noted that in a diverse range of countries, including the Netherlands, local governments fund the majority of sport facilities (Houlihan, 2005; Tiessen-Raaphorst, Verbeek, & Roest, 2010; Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013). However, there is relatively little empirical research available on the content of local sport policies (an exception is King, 2009). When addressing the relationship between sport policy and VSCs, almost without exception scholars refer to the contents of national sport policies (e.g. Adams, 2011; Coalter, 2007a; Harris, Mori, & Collins, 2009; May, Harris, & Collins, 2013; Skille, 2009; Stenling & Fahlén, 2014). This discrepancy

between local governments' funding responsibility and scholarly focus on national sport policy suggests a need for further scrutiny of local sport policies.

Because of the attributed surplus social value of sport activities and the organizational dominance of VSCs, voluntary sports clubs are seen by governments as ideal partners for addressing diverse social issues. Analyses of the public benefits to which VSCs are perceived to contribute are often broad brush (e.g. Adams, 2011; May et al., 2013) or case specific (e.g. Skille, 2009), which results in a poor understanding of the plurality of social roles and the specific characteristics of these roles ascribed to voluntary sports clubs. There are some indications that governments value voluntary sports clubs for more than their role as a provider of sport activities. For instance, in the Netherlands, in recent years several municipalities started closing community buildings while simultaneously labelling VSCs' club houses as 'community centres of the future'. It could be argued that VSCs are perceived to serve a plurality of public benefits.

To get a better understanding of the particularities of the external normative pressures (Scott, 2008) placed upon VSCs by local governments, this paper addresses the following question: Which social roles do local governments ascribe to voluntary sports clubs? The next section provides an overview of the literature on the relationship between voluntary organizations and government. This is followed by a discussion on the perceived social roles of voluntary sports clubs, which is rooted in an institutional logics perspective. After a description of the methods, the results are presented and some issues for further discussion were raised.

### ***Governments and voluntary organizations***

Civil society has received substantial policy attention for its perceived contribution to a stable society (Edwards, 2014). Such labels as 'active citizenship' and 'Big Society' have kept the spotlights on voluntary organizations. There are many voluntary sectors in which governments around the world are intervening in the development of these organizations. Governments are interested in voluntary organizations – for example in the housing sector, health care and social welfare – and public policy has affected the actions of these organizations (see e.g. Waardenburg & van de Bovenkamp, 2014). As a result of this government interest, a vast amount of literature concerning the increasingly intertwined relations between governments and voluntary organizations has developed over the last two decades.

Some scholars offer a functionalist perspective on this relation, often focusing on distinguishing and describing types of relationships (e.g. Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005; Kuhnle & Selle, 1992; Mandell & Keast, 2008; Najam, 2003). Mandell and Keast (2008) distinguished between the political, economic and social roles of voluntary organizations and further argue that a new relationship is emerging: voluntary organizations as active collaborative partners of government. Others hold a critical perspective, focusing on the impact of the increased interconnectedness between government and voluntary organizations on the latter (e.g. Brandsen, Trommel, & Verschuere, 2014; Billis, 2010). Still others offer an institutional perspective, arguing that government's interest in the voluntary organizations' efforts regarding pressing social issues is one of many external pressures on the organizations.

What can be taken from studies on the relation between governments and voluntary organizations is that the latter have become increasingly involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy. If an increased interconnectedness between government institutions and voluntary organizations can be observed, it is important to determine why this is the case. Brandsen et al. (2014) offer two explanations. First they refer to the changing role of government, when the limits of 'big government' became apparent in the 1980s and 1990s. Elsewhere, this has been described as the governance narrative (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Grix, 2010). Recently, within this narrative, the term 'New Public Governance' has been used to refer to:

the assumption that government alone can no longer address social and societal problems, and that, for effective policymaking and service delivery, government should act together in networks with many other actors. Complex problems in a complex world can only be dealt with in cooperation (Brandsen et al., 2014, p. 4).

As a result, a variety of concepts have been developed in studies on public administration to describe the role of private organizations in the development and provision of public services, e.g. co-creation (Bason, 2010), co-governance (Ackerman, 2004; Head, 2005) and co-production (Alford, 1998; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Bovaird, 2007). While these concepts suggest a balanced relationship between government and voluntary organizations, an institutional perspective holds that such labels place at least normative pressures on voluntary organizations.

A second explanation for the interconnectedness between government institutions and voluntary organizations concerns the social fragmentation and decay of civil society. This is a paradox, as civil society is seen as both (part of) the problem and the solution to this social fragmentation. In line with observations made by Putnam (2000), many tend to see the decay of civil society as a major social problem that threatens the democratic functioning of Western states. The contemporary reaction of governments, according to Brandsen et al. (2014), is one of restoration and revitalisation of civil society. According to this line of reasoning, civil society organizations *have* to contribute more to society to generate more stability and prosperity.

### ***An institutional logics perspective***

Many studies on the relation between state and voluntary sport organizations make use of institutional theory. This body of literature took off with the work of Slack and others (e.g. Slack, 1985; Slack & Thibault, 1988; Slack & Hinings, 1994). In their research on Canadian sport organizations they highlight the influence of external developments, especially changes in government funding as regulative pressures, on internal organizational arrangements. In Europe, this body of literature has been developing steadily, most notably in the UK and Scandinavia (Nichols, Taylor, James, Holmes, King, & Garrett, 2005; O'Brien & Slack, 2003; Skille, 2011; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Stenling, 2014; Stenling & Fahlén, 2014). Most of these studies focus on the organizational field (Scott, 2008) as the level of analysis.

Skille (2011) and Skirstad and Chelladurai (2011) offer clear reviews on institutional theory and use it as a theoretical framework for empirical analysis. Skirstad and Chelladurai (2011) offer a detailed account of a Norwegian football club, concluding

that diverse institutional logics (amateur, professional, commercial) coexist within the studied sports club. They further argue that, as a result of the coexisting logics, the club belongs to different organizational fields (for the concept of organizational fields, see Scott, 2008). Skille (2011) studied the introduction of a logic of social goods in three Norwegian sports clubs, concluding that the logic of competitiveness is paramount and the logic of social goods mere rhetoric. This conclusion leads him to argue that it seems impossible for sports clubs to combine diverse logics. These contrasting observations highlight the need to further scrutinize which and how institutional logics affect voluntary (sport) organizations and the way in which these organizations deal with these logics.

Further, current literature on a public logic in VSCs mostly follows a case study design focusing on the implementation of specific policy programmes (e.g. Bennike, Wikman, & Ottesen, 2014; Skille, 2009; Stenling, 2014). This body of literature lacks a systematic policy analysis, which could provide useful insights on particular assumptions and the theorization process (Stenling, 2014; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012) behind the public logic. Theorization to Thornton et al. (2012) refers to a process 'through which the symbolic constructions (i.e., systems of meaning) of new practices are created' (Stenling, 2014, p. 509). Theories, however, 'need not reflect actual organizing practices, and may serve instead as political instruments mobilizing support for institutional change' (Thornton et al., 2012, p. 153).

This article contributes to the body of literature on institutional logics in VSCs, by focusing on the social roles ascribed to voluntary sports clubs by local governments as one of the major institutional actors. From a sociological vantage point, these roles can be described as: 'conceptions of appropriate goals and activities for particular individuals or specified social positions. These beliefs are not simply anticipations or predictions, but prescriptions – normative expectations – of how specified actors are supposed to behave' (Scott 2008, p. 55). Claims and objectives regarding the social role of sport, as found in policy documents for example, are often presented as outcomes and facts. Scholars have critiqued public sport policy intentions as 'great expectations' (Harris et al., 2009) or 'ill-defined interventions with hard-to-follow outcomes' (Coalter, 2007a). Yet, as argued by Adams (2011), such policy aspirations alter the structures and external expectations within which VSCs operate. This article uses the idea of a social role to understand the desired behaviours of voluntary sports clubs by Dutch local governments. These ascribed social roles can be understood as part of a theorization process of a public logic on voluntary sports clubs. This public logic may be considered as a normative system of control (Scott, 2008) in which VSCs are embedded as active agents (Thornton et al., 2012).

## Methods

This study is based on an extended policy document analysis. To research the social roles ascribed to VSCs by local governments, the policy documents on sport of the twenty largest Dutch municipalities were analysed (see Appendix). In total, these municipalities account for over 4.9 million inhabitants, out of a total of 16.6 million inhabitants in the Netherlands. Only the largest municipalities were selected for this study, as these municipalities all have a sport policy department, several policy advisors

specialized in sport, and an elaborated sport policy programme. A result of this choice is that an urban perspective is overrepresented in the data set. Therefore, the social roles identified in the next section should be interpreted as social roles ascribed to VSCs in an urban context. The way VSCs can contribute for instance to areas with shrinking population, of which there are several in rural parts of the Netherlands, is out of the scope of this article.

As the study aims to identify local governments' public stance towards the social role of voluntary sports clubs as institutional norms, only formal documents were analysed. These documents are generally written as action programmes for a period of four to six years. They stress political objectives and how to achieve them and address most notably local sport institutions, rather than individual citizens. All documents were obtained through the local governments' websites. For comparison purposes all documents had to be the active policy document for the year 2012. This resulted in some irregularity in the data collected because for some municipalities the plan covered the period up to 2012, while for others their new sport policy document had just started in 2012. However, the themes identified through the content analysis are central to both newer and older documents.

For the analysis, all documents were uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis Software (QSR International Pty Ltd. London, Version 10, 2012). All sections covering voluntary sports clubs were manually coded, using a qualitative content analysis (Boeije, 2010). Each section was initially coded with one or several codes. After coding the first four documents, a first axial coding process was conducted in order to generate more general categories by grouping several initial codes. In the initial coding process different functions of VSCs were identified. Several municipalities, for instance, stressed sports clubs' value for citizens to develop their democratic skills. This was coded as 'democratic function'. In addition, most municipalities emphasized talent development, which was initially coded as 'training function'. In the axial coding process, these two functions were grouped together as 'sports clubs as educational institute', as both functions emphasize the educational role sports clubs can play in society. Through the open and axial coding process, four overall themes concerning the social role of voluntary sports clubs were identified. After analysing twelve documents a saturation point seemed to be reached. The identified themes and subthemes were tested in the remaining eight documents. No new themes or subthemes were identified in these documents. Furthermore, to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, it was evaluated by discussing the coding on two occasions with two senior researchers in the author's department. The next section discusses the four social roles identified.

## Results

This section provides an overview of the results of the policy analysis. It starts with a description of the double-sided nature of VSCs, as observed by local governments. The section then introduces the four social roles that were identified. These social roles are the voluntary sports club as social infrastructure operator, as educational institute, as service provider of sport activities and as project implementer. Within these four roles several functions can be distinguished (see [Table 1](#)).

**Table 1:** Social roles ascribed to VSCs

Function	Social infrastructure operator	Education institute	Service provider	Policy implementer
Democratic skills		X		X
Neighbourhood liveability	X			X
Professional skills		X		X
Public health			X	X
Quality of life	X		X	X
Social welfare	X			X
Social inclusion			X	X
Social cohesion	X		X	X
Talent development		X		X

### ***The double-sided nature of voluntary sports clubs***

Many municipalities remark that taking part in sport activities is an important goal in and of itself as well as a vital means to address diverse social issues. This so-called double-sided nature of sport (Collins, 2010; Steenbergen & Tamboer, 1998) forms a focal starting point in all municipal sport policy documents. However, a much larger proportion of these documents focuses on the sport-for-good approach. This is readily visible in the titles and subtitles, such as ‘Participating through sport’ or ‘Strengthening the societal value of sport and movement’.

Some municipalities mention a similar double-sided nature for voluntary sports clubs:

The beauty of sport is that one can exercise it while having a lot of fun and that it is very healthy. In addition, sport offers a lot more. It is fun to watch, helps in developing social contacts, contributes to learning and helps in developing one’s talents. The many Utrecht-based sports clubs play an important role in this. They are not only the platform for the discovery of talents and talent development, but also have an important social role. This is why sports clubs are not only very valuable for their members, but also for the social cohesion in neighbourhoods and as a result for the municipality as a whole. (Utrecht municipality)

The municipalities of Enschede and Haarlemmermeer use the double-sided nature of sports clubs as an argument to value sport participation in voluntary sports clubs more than individual sport participation, or participation in informal or commercial organizations. According to the Haarlemmermeer municipality:

the trend may be that a growing number of people participate in sport outside the sports club (a very slow development), but municipalities still value voluntary sports clubs at the same level. First, this is because sports clubs offer additional value, next to the intrinsic value of sport, through social ties. People meet each other, know each other and pay attention to each other (for better or worse). In addition, sports clubs exist by the grace of strongly developed self-organizing capabilities. Activities are organized on a voluntary basis. That forms invaluable societal capital. For these reasons, sport participation in a sports club is privileged above individual, informal or commercial sport participation. (Haarlemmermeer municipality)

Not all municipalities are that outspoken about the social value of sport participation through voluntary sports clubs. The assumed changes in sport behaviour among the Dutch (see also van der Roest et al., 2015) lead government officials to value other sport providers as well (e.g. Nijmegen municipality). This is a striking change in comparison with previous municipal sport policy, although all municipalities still mention participation in VSCs more often in their sport policy as a significant means to promote sport participation.

In all the reviewed documents VSCs are mentioned as an important societal partner. In describing this relationship municipalities stress the equality between them and VSCs. Most municipalities label VSCs as important societal partners for the implementation of policy programmes and realizing governmental objectives. Several municipalities further stress that they are dependent on VSCs, such as Amersfoort municipality: 'The municipality cannot accomplish these societal objectives on its own. Voluntary sports clubs play an important part in this.' Through such statements municipalities try to induce VSCs to take up a diverse range of such social roles. Below four social roles are further described.

### ***Sports clubs as social infrastructure operators***

First, municipalities regard voluntary sports clubs as important locations for sport participation. According to these municipalities, people are more active sport participants when there are sport facilities in the surrounding area. In this social role it is not about what VSCs organize, but that there is a location *where* they organize their activities. Emphasis is placed on development of sport *in* communities (see Coalter, 2007a). From this perspective, sport facilities are seen as social infrastructure, as the following quotation emphasizes: 'Sports clubs and sport facilities are meeting places that stimulate the liveability of neighbourhoods.' (Zwolle municipality)

For many sport locations, sports clubs are the primary operators of the facilities available. Local governments value both clubs that rent public facilities as well as those VSCs that have their own facilities. The better a club's facilities meet local societal conditions, such as all-weather courts or artificial pitches to help decrease the number of youth on waiting lists, the more that club is perceived as helping to improve societal conditions. The municipality of Eindhoven offers the following example of this in their sport policy document, which states:

An Eindhoven-based football club has 700 members, 4 pitches and 1 training field. For the youth there is a waiting list, because the use of the pitches is limited. Once artificial turf pitches were constructed the play density was no longer weather dependent. [...] The waiting list could be eradicated and there is even the possibility of growth. In addition, on the artificial pitches out-of-school care can be offered to children who want to play football. (Eindhoven municipality)

Municipalities further emphasize the role of the sports club's location when talking about accommodating non-member informal sport groups. For example, one municipality states that:

Not all sport participants practice their sport in an organized setting. These participants are characterized by their autonomy in deciding when and where they want to practice their sport. That can be on their own, but also in a group of people. [...] The voluntary sports clubs can also play a role for these people, for instance they can function as the start and end location of the activity, or they can provide facilities without assistance. The municipality will promote this, so that voluntary sports clubs have the opportunity to cater for this group of people without mandatory membership. (Tilburg municipality)

Thus, this municipality has started to ask VSCs to make their facilities available to non-members and for more hours of the day, so that the sport location can be used to increase levels of sport participation in the surrounding area.

The sports location also has a neighbourhood function, according to local governments. Here, the development of communities *through* sport (Coalter, 2007a, b) is emphasized. Several documents (e.g. from the municipalities of Tilburg and The Hague) mention the role of clubhouses for the surrounding area:

Important partners, next to the education sector, are the sports clubs and their accommodations, because they are a meeting place in the neighbourhood. This central role in the neighbourhood will have to be strengthened further, for example by providing social work in sports clubs' accommodations. (The Hague municipality)

This function highlights a plus-sport perspective, which emphasizes the contribution VSCs can make with their accommodations to welfare policies. The transformation of a club-centred canteen into a neighbourhood-focussed community centre is described by some municipalities as a highly valued contribution that VSCs can make to local societies.

### ***Sports clubs as educational institutes***

A second social role of VSCs being emphasized in municipal sport policy documents is their training and educational contribution to society. This role emphasizes the ways VSCs contribute to the development of individual competences. Municipalities value the development of talented athletes, as well as the development of organizational skills and democratic capabilities among VSCs' members.

Voluntary sports clubs fulfil a training function for talented athletes which, according to these municipalities, helps to stimulate other citizens to participate in sport. For example, according to the Eindhoven municipality:

Regional talent centres and talented athletes function as role models. They stimulate the people of Eindhoven to practice sport, to exercise and to discover their talents, in sport and in other societal areas. Furthermore, Eindhoven based sports clubs hitch along on the sport technical contribution of umbrella organizations of sport to these talent centres. One can think of, for example, additional education of coaches, joint training sessions with talented athletes and the influx of these talents from the surrounding region into sports clubs in our municipality. (Eindhoven municipality)

Municipalities classically assume that there is a relation between elite sport and grass roots sport. Known as the double sports club pyramid (Anthonissen, 2006; van Bottenburg, 2003), the idea is that a broad membership base at the lower youth levels leads to elite level success. It then is assumed that this success leads to a rise in youth membership. The latter direction has been referred to as the inspirational function of elite performances and elite athletes (De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, & van Bottenburg, 2013). For several decades now, a large number of VSCs in the Netherlands are organized on the idea of this sports club pyramid (Boessenkool, Lucassen, Waardenburg, & Kemper, 2011). Local governments perceive the assumed relationships between elite sport and mass sports participation as a social value and describe it as one of the social roles VSCs can play for their municipality, although this policy discourse cannot be verified by academic evidence (De Bosscher et al., 2013).

In addition to this, more specific sport function VSCs are also experienced by several municipalities as accessible and popular locations for internships for students from

diverse study backgrounds. Through such internships VSCs functions as locations where citizens can develop professional skills.

A last theme on the social role as educator is rooted in the democratic and voluntary nature of VSCs. Voluntary sports clubs are identified by municipalities as real life field labs for getting familiar with and practicing good citizenship behaviour. According to municipalities, VSCs are an accessible democratic institution for a broad range of citizens. This is the classic 'civil society revivalist' argument in which associations are seen as micro-climates where important skills for democratic citizenship are learnt through practice (Edwards, 2014). However, although all municipalities mention this role as citizen educator, it should be noted that none of the documents mentioned specific policy programmes on this social role.

### ***Sports clubs as service providers***

Third, VSCs are valued in their social role as service provider. Sport activities are viewed by municipalities as services which have a valuable meaning for society. This role was mentioned most often and in all of the studied documents. By organizing sport activities clubs are perceived to help address several social issues. For example, the Rotterdam municipality states:

Our goal for 2016 is that 70% of our inhabitants exercise (compared to 52% in 2007), thanks in part to the vital sport- and exercise culture in neighbourhoods and voluntary sports clubs, and in part to the extra sportive attention to the following target groups: youth, elderly and disabled. (Rotterdam municipality).

Especially, shortcomings in the way sports clubs provide their services were stressed. Municipalities note that the participation of mentally and physically disabled people and of female immigrants lags behind. According to a majority of the studied documents, there are too many hurdles and VSCs offer too few sport activities aimed at these target groups. For example, the bulk of the sport activities organized by VSCs occur in the clubs' accommodations and as a result these activities are hardly visible for residents. As the main provider of sport activities VSCs should, according to these local governments, leave their accommodations and organize activities in the surrounding neighbourhood, in parks, at playgrounds and at schools.

Another point stressed in these policy documents is the contribution of VSCs as service providers to the quality of life. According to these municipalities, sport and voluntary sports clubs play an important part in developing and maintaining a certain level of quality of life for neighbourhoods. For example, one municipality mentions:

Diversity is a given in the city and especially in certain neighbourhoods. Sport can contribute to connecting different population groups and strengthen the cohesion between them. Sports clubs can accomplish this by organizing easily accessible activities where the encounter between these inhabitants is central. (Tilburg municipality)

As a service provider a sports club is perceived to be connecting people when it offers easily accessible sport activities. Such connections, it is suggested, help improve the level of social cohesion and quality of life in the area. The idea of sports clubs as

service providers is taken a step further when municipalities mention VSCs as policy implementers for municipal policy programmes.

### ***Sports clubs as project implementers***

Lastly, sports clubs are seen by municipalities as project implementers. In this function, street-level bureaucrats (i.e. volunteers) can help tackle certain social problems. An obvious point to make here is that this social role implies the previously mentioned roles of the VSC as a social infrastructure operator, service provider and educational institute. Specific policy programmes can be developed based on one or more of the other social roles. However, in its role as project implementer a VSC is primarily and directly addressed as a partner for policy implementation. The difference between this role and the previous three roles is that the other roles highlight how VSCs can be valuable to society in and of themselves, while in their role as project implementers VSCs are actively involved through policy programmes to contribute to society as a network partner. According to all municipalities in this study, sports clubs can aid in the integration of specific-target groups, such as immigrants, disabled persons or the elderly. The notion of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) is paramount, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

The municipality will formulate the goals. Societal organizations, sports clubs and also individual citizens or groups of citizens take the initiative and have the ability and the manpower to execute these goals. The starting point is not: 'What can the municipality do for us?' but instead 'What can we do to contribute to more inhabitants playing sport and exercising in Arnhem?' The municipality plays a facilitating and stimulating role. (Arnhem municipality)

To this end, some municipalities (e.g. Almere, Rotterdam) distinguish between strong (often perceived as related to the size of the club) and weak voluntary sports clubs, emphasizing that strong sports clubs are ideal partners for the implementation of social programmes.

Further, some municipalities want sports clubs to become more of a reflection of their surrounding neighbourhood. These municipalities use a more compelling tone. Tilburg municipality, for instance, wants VSCs to appoint more immigrants to board and volunteer positions. To that end the municipality announced that:

In the coming policy period, we are going to make a big deal, in word and deed, of the fact that local sports clubs in their board and member base should mirror the Tilburg society. When sports clubs ask for assistance, their compliance with this goal will be assessed. We will take into account the fact that the demographic composition of specific parts of the city shows an overrepresentation of certain population groups. (Tilburg municipality). Another topic in this role concerns the function sport clubs can play in providing activities specifically aimed at tackling public health issues, such as overweight and obesity. All municipalities try to realise these social objectives by involving local sport clubs in specific health or social projects.

## **Discussion**

This article set out to identify the social roles ascribed to voluntary sports clubs by Dutch local governments. Four social roles were identified: VSCs as owners of sport

facilities, as educational institutes, as sport providers, and as project implementers. Municipalities value VSCs for fulfilling a combination of these social roles. In most of the studied documents these roles are intertwined. For instance, municipalities refer to both the role of owner of a sport facility and of a sport provider when they say that a VSC can play a part in the liveability of the neighbourhood. The analytic distinction helps to clarify the plurality of the societal meanings of VSCs. In doing so it brings the intrinsic societal meaning of VSCs more to the fore. In addition, it shows that scholars and practitioners alike should be careful with typologies based on an apparent contradiction, e.g. intrinsic versus extrinsic societal values, or sport for sport's sake versus sport for the greater good (Collins, 2010). Such bipolar typologies fail to take into account the diversity of societal meanings of VSCs in municipal sport policies or any other context. The section on the double-sided nature of sports clubs shows that municipalities value both aspects of VSCs. Furthermore, the social roles of 'social infrastructure operator' and 'sport provider' stress both intrinsic and extrinsic societal values. It is suggested that the idea of a double-sided nature of sports clubs offers a potential concept for analysing VSCs and related policies on their own merits.

Going back to the institutional logics perspective, the challenges that VSCs are confronted with regarding the goals of municipalities, can be considered as normative institutional pressures. While the starting-point of governance arrangements may well be that the power to tackle difficult societal issues does not lie with the strength of a hierarchical government, but rather lies within the resilience of networks of public and private actors (Bason, 2010; Bradsen & Pestoff, 2006), the previous sections have shown that Dutch government tries to hierarchically intervene and compel voluntary sports clubs to improve the resilience of such networks. The four social roles identified are based in a public logic that emphasizes sport for all. A high level of sport participation among all citizens is considered to be a desirable situation. From the perspective of Dutch municipalities, VSCs should contribute to that public goal more actively, as the desired level of sport participation has not yet been reached. According to municipalities, this is mostly due to VSCs failing to develop an attractive sport programme for a broad range of target groups. In accordance, municipal sport documents point to the responsibility and opportunities of VSCs to change their activities. Municipalities formulated some organizational obstacles that hinder VSCs in fulfilling their societal roles in a better way, such as being too little oriented at alternative sports locations. Especially, the roles of service provider and project implementer are emphasized by municipalities in their sport policy documents.

The normative pressures arising from this framework become most explicit when municipalities financially reward VSCs for their societal efforts, or when VSCs are awarded an accreditation or certificate, such as the 'Sport Plus Club' (Rotterdam) or 'Community Centre of the Future' (The Hague). Such certification works as an indicator of legitimacy (Scott, 2008, 60). Suchman (1995, p. 574) regards legitimacy as a generalized perception or assumption that actions of a certain entity are desirable, fitted or perceived as good within a socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions. A Sport Plus Club is 'more than a club', which operates according to the norms, values and beliefs that are of importance to the broader society and is therefore a more legitimate organization from the perspective of local government. A similar development is observed in the UK, where accreditation such as Clubmark sets

standards for the desired quality of services provided (Harris et al., 2009). Along the same line, Adams (2011, p. 38) has argued that the modernization of VSCs 'may well change not only how a club functions, but more pertinently why it functions, who it functions for and what meaning it may have for those involved'.

Normative expectations do not only come from external actors. When the normative framework has been internalised, such pressures also come from targeted actors themselves. It could be possible that VSCs increasingly perceive societal roles ascribed to them as appropriate for their organization. If this is the case, the public logic has begun to compete with the dominant associational logic in sport that focuses on amateurism and competitiveness (Skille, 2011; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011). However, based on findings by Karp, Fahlén, & Löfgren, (2014) and Skille (2011) it remains to be seen if and how VSCs will internalise these externally identified social roles. Several authors have already identified inertia as a distinguishing organizational feature of VSCs (Karp et al., 2014; Thiel & Mayer, 2009), which would suggest that VSCs will be reluctant to internalize external logics. As voluntary sports clubs seem unwilling or unable to adopt this public logic (Stenling, 2014), it could well be that governments will increasingly turn their attention to other types of sport organizations to take up such social roles. However, the above analysis has shown that VSCs are still a prime partner for Dutch government in tackling diverse societal issues.

The analysis further shows that VSCs are only ascribed a social role for the implementation stage of policy making. While the involvement of other voluntary organizations is also valued in different stages of the policy cycle (Brandsen et al., 2014; Waardenburg & van de Bovenkamp, 2014), this option is lacking in sport policy documents. VSCs are perceived to part of the solution for tackling the fragmentation of society, but not part of the solution for developing a sport policy agenda or for better fitted policy formulation. This would suggest that local governments might be able to make more use of the campaigning role VSC could fulfil (Edwards, 2014).

This study has its limitations. First, the analysis focused only on formal policy documents. Interviews with government officials could deepen our understanding of the ascribed social roles. The study is part of a larger project on the instrumentalization of voluntary sports clubs. For this project interviews with government officials were held. However, these interviews are case specific for one municipality and discuss the officials' views on two voluntary sports clubs (Waardenburg, forthcoming). While they gave the researcher insights into the way government officials translate policy statements from documents to sports club members, the interviews were too case specific and therefore too narrow for the scope of this article. Another limitation concerns the selection of municipalities. The twenty largest Dutch municipalities were selected for this study. As a result, the findings reflect the roles ascribed to VSCs in *urban* sport policy. Sport policy documents from smaller municipalities might reveal other social roles that are emphasized in a rural context. A final limitation of the study is its focus on Dutch sport policy. It would be interesting to see if the four identified social roles are applicable in an international comparative analysis. Follow-up research would facilitate the development of a typology of ascribed social roles and strengthen the generalizability of the findings, especially if the previous limitations are corrected for in the research design. The findings of this study and future studies on this topic might also be used for analysing policy implementation processes to better understand whether and in

what way voluntary sports clubs attempt to fulfil the roles that are ascribed to them. The social roles which are identified in municipal sport policies stem from a public logic and form a normative framework for voluntary sports clubs' organizational actions. It remains to be seen if and in what way VSCs conform themselves to these institutional pressures.

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## Appendix

### Municipal sport policy documents

Municipality	Document title	Year of publication	Inhabitants (31-03-2015)
Almere	Passie voor Sport, 2009–2012	2009	197,318
Amersfoort	De kracht van sport. Kadernota voor het sportbeleid 2008–2015	2008	152,752
Amsterdam	Sportplan 2009–2012	2009	825,080
Apeldoorn	Sportnota. Op weg naar 2012	2006	158,226
Arnhem	Sportvisie. Arnhemse visie op sport en bewegen	2011	152,506
Breda	Klaar voor de start. Bouwstenen nieuw sportbeleid 2010–2014	2009	181,775
Eindhoven	Hé, ga je mee? Sportnota 2008–2015	2008	223,876
Enschede	Enschede beweegt! Sportnota 2008–2015	2008	158,308
Groningen	Meer ruimte voor sport en bewegen. Sportvisie 2010–2020	2009	200,210
Haarlem	Haarlem sport! Agenda voor de Sport 2010–2014	2010	157,058
Haarlemmermeer	Sport in beweeglijk perspectief. Sportnota Haarlemmermeer 2009–2012	2009	144,090
s-Hertogenbosch	Sportvisie 's-Hertogenbosch. De sportieve kracht van de stad	2008	150,954
Nijmegen	Startnotitie Sportnota 2012–2015 'In de startblokken'	2011	170,943
Rotterdam	Sportnota Rotterdam 2016	2009	625,472
The Hague	Den Haag naar Olympisch niveau. Sportnota gemeente Den Haag 2011–2014	2011	515,076
Tilburg	Samenspel. Kadernota sport 2011–2016	2011	211,726
Utrecht	Sportnota 2011–2016. In Utrecht staat jouw talent centraal!	2011	335,089
Zaanstad	Zaankanters in beweging. Beleidsnota sport 2008–2014	2008	151,495
Zoetermeer	Kadernota sport en bewegen 2009–2016. 'Mee(r) doen door sport'. Naar Olympisch sportklimaat in Zoetermeer.	2008	124,089
Zwolle	Sport in Zwolle. Samen beleven.	2006	124,032