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# Developing an elite sports' public value proposition in Northern Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

**Research question:** The societal impact of elite sports attracts increasing attention in academia and sport policy. In this paper, we show how public value management theory enhances the understanding of the way social impacts can be created and supported. We answer the research question: how do policy makers in the Northern Netherlands develop a public value proposition in order to legitimise investments in the elite sports management environment?

**Research methods:** Data for this article were gathered from January 2019 to February 2020 using a qualitative fieldwork approach and from the study of policy documents. The first fieldwork phase entailed an exploratory study using focus groups and one-to-one meetings ( $n = 24$ ). In the second research phase, the focus shifted towards an action-based design, employing four focus group sessions ( $n = 22$ ). For the final phase, a group of civil servants and decision makers convened in four working sessions.

**Results and Findings:** We show that (1) the funding of elite sport in the Northern Netherlands incorporated within broader talent development opportunities legitimises investments, (2) these investments need to go hand in hand with active stakeholder management and (3) these investments hold particular significance in regions with peripheral characteristics.

**Implications:** This study provides public sector sports managers with a framework in which they can increase the societal impact of elite sports by developing public value propositions. This article contributes to the concretisation of public value theory by detailing how public value propositions are drafted and re-drafted to engage a coalition of supporters in the authorising environment.

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Elite sport policy; talent development; public value management; societal impact; regional sport policy

## Introduction

The societal impact of elite sport has attracted growing attention in recent years. Many nations have made elite sport a policy priority, as the feel-good factor and 'mythopoeic status' of sporting success is compelling to many politicians and policy makers (Coalter, 2007, p. 24; Green, 2009). However, if governments want to keep up with the intensifying

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global sporting arms race, they are forced to increase public funding in elite sports (De Bosscher et al., 2008, 2015; Houlihan & Green, 2008). At the same time, the resistance to invest more money in the medal race is growing as well (Van der Roest et al., 2019). This contradiction inevitably leads to questions from the public about the outcomes and social values of elite sports.

In academia, the focus on the outputs of elite sports (i.e. the number of medals or championships) is also gradually shifting towards questions about the outcomes or perceived outcomes of elite sports (De Rycke et al., 2019; De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2020; Funahashi et al., 2015). These outcomes can be defined as the social and psychological values attached to sporting success (output). Outcomes of international sporting success include, among other values: economic development, international and diplomatic recognition, international image, mass participation effect, national identity and belonging, social cohesion, national pride and happiness, feel-good factor, and utility (Funahashi et al., 2015, pp. 480–481). Yet, scholars have encountered difficulties in showing empirical evidence of the societal impact of elite sport. Using logic models or theories of change, previous studies have suggested linear processes, in which impacts were created and in which outputs and outcomes were measured separately from broader societal processes (cf. Lee et al., 2013). At the output level, sport performance can be indeed successfully isolated by measuring the number of medals or championships won, but the social outcome level is much harder to measure. First, causal relations between elite sport successes and societal outcomes are generally difficult to identify because of methodological shortcomings (Frick & Wicker, 2016). Second, the way elite sports success is valued by society depends on many contextual factors and is inherently subjective (De Rycke et al., 2019; De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019, 2020).

The lack of empirical evidence on societal outcomes of elite sports often leads policy makers to skim the topic at hand (Grix & Carmichael, 2012), even though public support for elite sports policies is deemed important (Funahashi et al., 2015). Thus, the objective of this paper is to provide an alternative framework for ways in which ‘policy-makers can enhance the public’s attitude of acceptance towards elite sport policy’ (Funahashi et al., 2015, p. 480). Using a public value management perspective (Moore, 1995, 2013), we show that legitimising elite sports expenditure is an active process, in which stakeholder management plays a pivotal role and in which ‘policy makers could also consider other – less self-evident – impact spheres when assessing the value of elite sport in their nation’ (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2020, p. 14).

In this paper, we investigate the way in which local and regional policy makers and sports officials in the Northern Netherlands develop a strategy for elite sports and talent development in cooperation with a network of different actors. The focus of the research is on the organisation ‘Topsport NOORD’ (Elite Sports North). This agency is the key organisation responsible for the development of elite sports and sport talent in the Northern Netherlands. We answer the research question: how do policy makers in the Northern Netherlands develop a public value proposition in order to legitimise investments in the current elite sports management environment? We use public value management theory to explain the way in which Topsport NOORD developed and backed the proposition for a strategy for elite sports and talent development transcending provincial boundaries.

The article first proceeds with a theoretical elaboration of the public value concept. We show that legitimacy is obtainable by actively paying attention to stakeholder

management. Next, we outline the context of the sports policy environment in the Northern Netherlands. The methods section shows how we conducted our research in that region. The results section describes the process through which Topsport NOORD has linked its elite sports strategy to a broader public value proposition, ensuring strategy legitimacy to all the different stakeholders. We conclude with a discussion in which we reflect on the significance of the public value perspective in the societal impact of elite sport.

## Creating public value

The concept of public value creation has drawn growing interest in the public administration and public management literature. The concept of public value creation is rooted in the scholarly work of Mark Moore. In his 1995 book 'Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government', Moore sheds light on how public managers can adopt a more strategic approach towards the social environment of their organisation. The concept of what public value entails, however, is rather unclear, or even 'frustratingly vague, muddled by the term's similarity to concepts such as the "public good", "public benefit" and "public interest"' (Sam, 2011, p. 760). In Moore's view, public value creation is not only about producing outcomes that benefit the public. It is 'more than a summation of individual preferences of the users or producers of public services' (Stoker, 2006, p. 42). Moore argued that the processes in which outcomes are produced are all equally important (O'Flynn, 2007), and that public agencies should demonstrate how the results they produce contribute to valued outcomes (Sam, 2011, p. 758).

Moore's (1995) ideas have become quite popular in the fields of public administration and public management in recent years, but his book 'was not much noted when it came out' (Alford et al., 2017, p. 1). During a time dominated by *new public management*, the idea that government should be run as a business had gained a prominent place in public administration literature. Moore, although definitely inspired by corporate strategy-making and strategic management, had different ideas about how *public* managers should create public strategy (Alford et al., 2017). Moore's intention was to assist public managers in their day-to-day operations and strategy-making within the political marketplace by giving them the assignment to seek for 'what is valued', and whether existing programmes 'deliver public value' (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009; Sam, 2011, p. 760). Yet, the lack of practical guidance has impeded public managers to use Moore's framework (Bryson et al., 2014). Therefore, in this article we aim to concretise public value theory by showing how Topsport NOORD has drafted and re-drafted a public value proposition to engage a growing coalition of supporters.

A public value proposition could be seen as the public counterpart of a business case (cf. Alford et al., 2017; Horner & Hazel, 2005), in which public managers' ideas should pass three tests. First, the value created should encompass 'something substantively valuable' (Alford & O'Flynn, 2009, p. 173). Second, public managers should actively search for legitimacy and support, which is possibly the most important factor in Moore's public value framework. Third, the proposition must be 'operationally and administratively feasible' (Moore, 1995, p. 71). Considered together, these three elements form the 'strategic triangle' (see Figure 1), that help public managers in their quest for public value. In public sports management, the strategic triangle can also assist managers

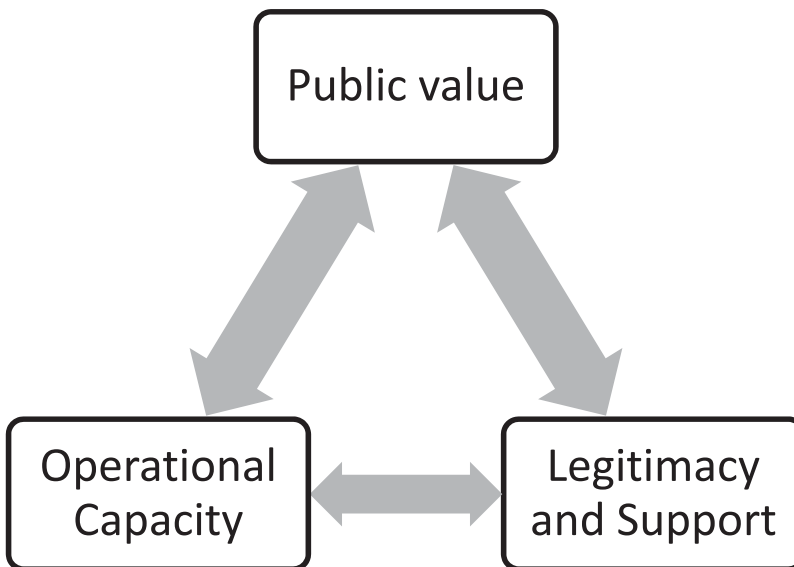
within elite sports in developing public value propositions. In the next sections, we reflect on how elite sports relate to the strategic triangle.

### **Public value**

The starting point in public value proposition is that the agency or organisation delivering the public value must determine whether they are creating something substantively valuable. Within the sports sector, the value of sport participation for one's health and well-being has been well-documented (Seippel, 2006), but is a trickier proposition in elite sport because 'intrinsically, elite sport is neither beneficial nor harmful' (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019, p. 486). In this respect, the similarity between the elite sports sector and the arts sector is striking. The difficulties in identifying and measuring public value within arts and culture have been noted by Mark Moore himself (Moore & Moore, 2005, p. 32)

The discussion of the public value of the arts is confusing at least in part because there are different arguments about what constitutes the objective, true public value of the arts, and there are different audiences being addressed and persuaded by these arguments.

In elite sports, there are also different audiences and arguments on the value of the sport activity. Moreover, the attitudes towards elite sports vary over time and geographically. A prominent example is in the contested connotation of elite cycling over the last decades. Derom and VanWynsberghe (2015) showed that what defines elite cycling has varied from a deeply commercial sport, to something 'sacred' or liminal, to a strategic vehicle for governments to boost tourism or promote active cycling. At the same time, the sport has obviously struggled with doping issues. For example, German public broadcasters ARD and ZDF retracted most of their staff in the 2007 Tour de France after German cyclist Patrick Sinkewitz tested positive for testosterone (Scheerder & Snoeck, 2009). It



**Figure 1.** The strategic triangle of public value management. Source: Moore, 2013, p. 103.

could be argued that the public value attached to elite cycling in Germany, in this case, changed from expressions of national superiority (Jutel, 2002) to feelings of deep disappointment and disillusionment.

The ever-changing definitions attached to elite sports have made it difficult for governments to determine allocation priority for elite sports and the values created through them (cf. Green, 2009). Mapping the positive and negative values connected to elite sports can help public managers in elite sports to determine public value strategies in a more focused way. The MESSI framework developed by De Rycke and De Bosscher and colleagues (De Rycke et al., 2019; De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019, 2020) can broaden the often narrowly defined values of elite sports policies by providing multiple extra values to pursue (De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019, p. 487). A better understanding of the public's perception of the value (or impact) of elite sports can therefore help build the public value proposition. To ensure feasibility, this proposition should be solidly backed by finding legitimacy and support within the political authorising environment (Moore, 2013; Sam, 2011). Furthermore, the value that is to be created from elite sport needs sufficient operational capacity to be delivered.

### ***Operational capacity***

The second corner in the strategic triangle is the operational capacity dimension. Any agency or organisation that is involved in public value creation needs to make sure they control the resources to deliver the value. It is important to note that, increasingly, public value is created through cooperation. In the words of Alford et al. (2017, p. 3): '[m]any public service and policy interventions rely on distributed operational capacity, in other words coordination and collaboration between a range of organisations and groups both within and beyond government'. The sports policy sector has a long history of cooperation between different organisations from both public and private sectors. Elite sport development relies in many Northern and Western European countries on a model in which the network of sports clubs provides a flow of talent to elite sport organisations (Elling & Reijgersberg, 2017). In the elite sports provision, it is then up to the many different national sports federations to manage the programmes (cf. Ronglan, 2015) and to create public value. This has resulted in a system in which elite sports and the voluntary sports sector are mutually dependent.

From the mid-2000s onwards, the Dutch elite sports system has tended to centralise development of elite sport talent facilities. With the establishment of national sports centres, the Netherlands has benefited from a system with both centralised and decentralised characteristics that has been quite effective in terms of elite sports success (Dijk et al., 2014; Van Bottenburg, 2013). However, in order to maintain this elite sport system, the central actor in this system (NOC\*NSF) relies heavily on the central government for financial support. In turn, to receive funding, it is important to stress the public value of elite sports and to legitimise its actions (Sam & Ronglan, 2018; Strittmatter, 2016). As Van Bottenburg (2013, p. 140) stated

This endorsement has been legitimized by reconceptualizing elite sport as a collective good and a policy tool that can strengthen public values such as social cohesion, national pride and international prestige. However, to achieve these goals, policy-makers needed the capacity of the network of autonomous voluntary non-profit sports organizations.

In short, the organisational capacity dimension in Dutch elite sport relies on the conceptualisation of public value of elite sports on the one hand and the support of the voluntary sport sector on the other hand. It underlines how the three corners of the strategic triangle in Dutch elite sports are interwoven. Elite sports strategies must take this into account in order to carry sufficient legitimacy in creating and delivering public value.

### ***Legitimacy and support***

As we stated in the introduction, one corner of Moore's (1995) strategic triangle that is considered most important is 'legitimacy and support'. The idea that public managers should *actively* engage in finding authorisation for their public value proposition lies at the heart of Moore's conception of public value creation. Moore stressed that obtaining authorisation does not solely mean getting the consent of a political superior (Alford et al., 2017). Instead, Moore urged public managers to attract a much wider *authorising environment* involving several actors. This way, public managers become more engaged in a process of listening to public demand, while also having to 'put issues onto the agenda, work actively with ministers and legislators to get them to adopt particular positions, and make strategic calls when political imperatives remain ambiguous or absent and yet action on an issue has to be taken' (Alford et al., 2017, p. 7).

Within the sports policy sector, legitimacy has become an important concept as well (Brookes & Wiggan, 2009; Ronglan, 2015; Sam, 2011; Sam & Ronglan, 2018; Stenling & Sam, 2017). Sport policy has become closely linked to other domains such as health, welfare and economy. For elite sports, it has also been increasingly important to connect policy to these themes (De Rycke et al., 2019). Sam and Ronglan (2018) have shown that in countries where elite sports policy always relied on input-based legitimacy (that is: countries with systems building on democratic principles and interactive policy making), connecting to these values has become even more vital. As the democratic principles of sports organisations have come under threat, Sam and Ronglan argued that connecting to these might strengthen the input-based legitimacy base of elite sports.

Sam and Ronglan (2018) also indicate that actively engaging in stakeholder relationships is a staple of the legitimacy building process. Following Black (2008), they define stakeholders as 'any combination of politicians, corporate partners, member organisations and government Ministries' (Sam & Ronglan, 2018, p. 553). Managing these stakeholders means that the agency needs to assure that participating organisations are allocated sufficient value from the proposition in order to prevent them from choosing alternatives (Cabral et al., 2019). It is thus important that the organisation responsible for stakeholder management pays the right amount of attention to the different stakeholders in the process, estimating the power and sense of urgency of all stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997). For organisations like Topsport NOORD, it can be difficult to assess the salience of different stakeholders, because public value outcomes are less tangible than private value ones. In the empirical examination part of the paper, we show how the Topsport NOORD agency has engaged in stakeholder management to ensure wider legitimacy for its public value proposition.



## Context of sports in the Northern Netherlands

The Netherlands is a densely populated country in the heart of Europe. Compared to other European countries, the Netherlands is quite affluent. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country lies well above the average of the combined member states of the European Union (Eurostat, 2020). The focus of this research is on three of the twelve Dutch provinces. These three northern provinces of Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen are sparsely populated in comparison to the other Dutch provinces, with population figures below the national average. Moreover, the Gross Regional Product (GRP) of these provinces is also lower than the national average (see Table 1). To some extent, one might characterise the region as a peripheral region within the Netherlands (Dühr, 2009). In this region, elite sports development is concentrated in the town of Heerenveen (Friesland), where the iconic Thialf speed skating stadium and the hub for elite sports (Centre for Elite Sports and Education – CTO) in the north are located. The regional talent centres are more dispersed over the three provinces, while the city of Groningen hosts 7 of the 19 regional talent centres.

In the Netherlands, the structure and organisation of elite sport is divided into 7 regional elite sports entities (registered training organisations or RTOs) that all have their own CTO centre. Topsport NOORD (Elite Sports North) is the entity responsible for organising facilities for 19 talent development programmes and four elite sport programmes in three provinces in the Northern Netherlands. The sports agency facilitates management of around 450 talents and 125 elite athletes as of January 2020. The funding of elite sport programmes and the CTO mainly stems from NOC\*NSF and sport governing bodies, and is assured for a period of four years. The talent development programmes are funded by local and provincial governments and sport governing bodies. This funding is not always guaranteed and annual subsidies must be requested from local and provincial governments. This causes uncertainty for the talent development structure of the 19 talent development programmes in the north of the Netherlands.

Regarding the talent development structure in the north, Topsport NOORD is not only dependent on the local and provincial governments, they also have to maintain relationships with other elite sports organisations like professional football clubs, with amateur sports clubs, and with schools and universities. Until 2019 Topsport NOORD had established relationships with five local governments and three provincial governments where they applied for subsidies for the talent development programmes. The only focus was on talent development within elite sports, and the connection with amateur clubs did not exist. The amateur clubs are provided with services by provincial sport service organisations and there has been very little exchange of information about

**Table 1.** Population, population density and GRP in the Northern Netherlands.

	Total population	Population density (people per km <sup>2</sup> )	GRP (million €)	GRP per capita (€)
Netherlands	17,407,585	527	774,039	44,920
Northern Netherlands	1,729,505	209	59,890	34,758
Drenthe	493,682	188	15,090	30,662
Friesland	649,957	195	19,837	30,638
Groningen	585,866	252	24,963	42,784

Note: Data from CBS (2020a, 2020b).



the flow of talents from the amateur level towards talent development programmes. In the field of education, Topsport NOORD has had a good relationship with three 'talent schools'. These are secondary schools that adjust the speed of their curriculum to the sport-specific needs of talented athletes. However, the relationship with higher vocational schools and universities, including those offering sporting programmes, was not very well established.

As a result, Topsport NOORD was struggling to create value at a local level by means of elite sport success and talent development. They found themselves between the national elite sports strategy aimed at reaching a top ten position in the global sporting arms race and the grassroots interests of local organisations. In order to overcome the tensions between these objectives, Topsport NOORD started a strategic process using a stakeholder approach to develop a supported and programmatic design transcending provincial boundaries, focused on raising the level of the elite sports management environment, especially the quality of the talent development structure. The results section of this paper elaborates further on the way Topsport NOORD shaped this process, with an emphasis on the organisation's attempts to create public value.

## Methods

In January 2019, Topsport Noord initiated the process for developing a supported and programmatic design focused on raising the level of the elite sports management in the Northern Netherlands. As mentioned before, Topsport Noord was the driving force behind this process. The project team consisted of the general manager of Topsport Noord, a consultant who was a prior employee at NOC\*NSF, and a researcher from Hanze University of Applied Sciences, also second author of this article.

An exploratory study was conducted in the first half of 2019, using a stakeholder approach to value creation (Kujala et al., 2019). In the period between January 2019 and June 2019, four focus group sessions and several one-to-one meetings took place with 24 people in total. The participants were employed at provincial or local governments, provincial sport service organisations or knowledge institutions (e.g. universities, sport labs). During the summer, opportunities for collaboration were examined with all stakeholders involved. The role of the project team can be described as directing. The role of the involved researcher can be described as an expert in the field of research on the elite sports management environment. Notes were taken from the focus groups and one-on-one meetings and similarities and differences were analysed in terms of the value per stakeholder given to elite sports and talent development. In September 2019, the results of this exploratory study were presented in a workshop on the societal impact of elite sports at the European Association for Sport Management (EASM) conference in Seville, Spain. During this session, the first author of this article presented theoretical insights on public value creation in elite sport management, which sparked the idea to combine public value management theory with stakeholder management in developing the elite sports programme for the Northern Netherlands.

From September to November 2019 four focus group sessions took place, mostly with the same stakeholders as in the first half of 2019. The focus in these sessions was to obtain the most important public values by the stakeholders, but also to explore the levels of legitimacy and support by the stakeholders. The operational capacity was also discussed.

In these four sessions, 22 people participated in the process. During this period, the role of the researcher changed from not only being an expert in the field of elite sport management to also conducting action research in developing an overarching public value proposition. The project team and all session participants were informed of this additional role. Data were gathered by writing down field notes and discussing them with the other team project members the first author of this article.

This period was followed by a series of four group sessions with civil servants and decision makers from the three provincial governments to apply for a grant for the elite sports programme. During these sessions, the public values of the elite sport programme were discussed and the implementation of the programme was scheduled for 2020. Fieldwork lasted until February 2020, when the financial close of the programme was discussed.

Subsequently, the first and second author of this article shared and analysed their field notes and processed them into different themes. Concurrently, the first author also analysed the coalition agreements of the three provinces (Provincie Drenthe, 2019; Provincie Fryslân, 2019; Provincie Groningen, 2019) and the final Elite sports agenda that was written by Topsport NOORD (2019). In the next results section of the paper we elaborate on these themes, which are presented in a chronological timeline to capture the process dimensions involved in the research. In order to prevent subjectivity bias as much as possible, the first author was responsible for writing the results section, based on the notes taken by the second author and by the analysed coalition agreements. The second author commented on the results section by outlining any factual inaccuracies.

## Results

### ***November 2018 – May 2019: setting the agendas***

The first step towards a new strategy for elite sports in the Northern Netherlands was taken in November 2018, when civil servants from the three provinces of Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen met with Topsport NOORD for the first time. Until then, the three provinces had separate elite sports agendas and cooperation between them around elite sports was scarce. However, the prospect of provincial elections and the subsequent formation of new political coalitions created a sense of urgency for Topsport NOORD to host a meeting. The goal of Topsport NOORD was to obtain a more univocal financing and accounting structure to reduce the financial risks of the organisation. During the November meeting, the provinces responded by asking Topsport NOORD to develop a joint strategy for elite sports in the Northern Netherlands. It became their responsibility to bring different stakeholders together and to write a new elite sports policy document for the three joint provinces. In order to do so, they needed to create support for this policy among the stakeholders that had been only loosely connected until then. After the provincial elections of March 2019, a window of opportunity opened for such a strategy, as the coalition agreements of all three provinces stressed the aim to augment collaborative efforts between the northern provinces: ‘Traditionally, we work together with our northern neighbours, among others in the Partnership Northern Netherlands and in lobbying’ (Provincie Fryslân, 2019, p. 50).

While there is a joint interest in increasing the collaboration, the three provinces hold different positions concerning elite sports development. All coalition agreements mention elite sports, but the outlook on the importance of elite sports is quite diverse. The province of Friesland is the most outspoken in its positioning towards elite sports. The CTO for the northern provinces is located in Friesland, a significant and obvious display of the importance of elite sports for the province. The coalition agreement of Friesland describes the importance of elite sports for international exposure of the province as follows:

Elite sports, especially speed skating, is a worldwide trademark for *Fryslân*. *Fryslân* is one of the (northern) Dutch regions with an international sporting infrastructure. We want to expand on that by supporting the CTO in Heerenveen permanently. Thialf is a world class speed skating temple: the best, the fastest and the most sustainable. (Provincie Fryslân, 2019, p. 35, authors' translation)

The other two provinces are more modest in their positioning towards elite sports. The province of Groningen mentions the importance of extra support for youths pursuing an elite sports career, while the province of Drenthe only indicates that elite sporting events are welcome in the province. A more important theme in all agreements turned out to be personal development and the quality of life in the northern provinces. As these provinces are economically less developed and sparsely populated, they deal with issues of depopulation and economic shrinkage. To combat these issues, the provinces focused on having sufficient opportunities for personal development and quality of life. The focus on such themes had implications for Topsport NOORD, which the organisation needed to take into consideration. Thus, Topsport NOORD faced a challenging task of aligning the diverging political interest in elite sports of the three provinces and linking them to the new theme of personal development. While this proved already challenging, other stakeholders disrupted the effort of Topsport NOORD even further in the spring and summer of 2019.

### **May 2019 – September 2019: a problematic view on public value**

In May 2019, Topsport NOORD organised its first sessions with the stakeholders. Their support for a strategy transcending provincial boundaries was necessary to gain political authorisation from the three provinces. The first session gathered the provincial sports service organisations. These fulfil the role of maintaining an optimal sports management environment at the grassroots level without paying much attention to talent development or elite sports. Provincial sports organisations are for a large part subsidised by provincial and local governments tasked to support amateur sports, with no particular emphasis on talent development. One of their main concerns during the first meeting was that more subsidies provided by the provincial or local government for elite sports would be at the expense of subsidies granted to grassroots sports, and thus to the provincial sports organisations. However, the sports service organisations also saw the benefits of a elite sports programme transcending provincial boundaries. They pointed out that to develop an overarching, joint sports programme for three provinces was unparalleled and stressed the need for cooperation: 'A strength of the strategy is its size and scope, an initiative like this does not exist yet. Moreover, the attention provided to cooperation with the diverse partners is a stronghold' (Representative sports service organisation Drenthe).

Sport service organisations contended that they could support elite sports programmes if positioned on top of the services for amateur sports clubs, not as ‘the bottom of the elite sports pyramid’. They also stressed that businesses could provide resources for the elite sports programme or that the department of Economic Affairs within the local or provincial government could be consulted about subsidies. Sport service organisations considered that practical support could consist of better training of top amateur coaches to further their self-development and to strengthen the amateur clubs. A positive side-effect of such a strategy would be the proper transfer of knowledge about talent development to amateur clubs who want to offer a greater perspective to their best athletes of developing into great talents.

For the second group session in May 2019 Topsport Noord met with the educational partners, including universities, universities of applied sciences, vocational schools and talent schools. At an operational level the educational institutions work together with professional sports clubs, or talent development programmes. But these cooperation efforts are not coordinated but could create more impact if they did. During the May session and the one-to-one discussions the representatives of the institutions stressed that the overarching aim of the elite sports programme was a positive prospect, but that the strengths of the local stakeholders could be used even more. However, institution representatives also noted that it is important not to focus only on the elite and talent sports programmes in Heerenveen where the CTO is located. They worried about the value of the strategy for Groningen and Drenthe, as these provinces do not benefit from the reputation of a world class facility such as the CTO in Heerenveen. Furthermore, they indicated that the ultimate goal for the strategy remained unclear. For educational institutions, it was important to have the elite sport programme divided into parts and to formulate clear goals so that other stakeholders also propagate the information. The value of overarching elite sports programmes for the knowledge institutions consisted mainly of the opportunity to conduct more research on talent development and the elite sport programmes as well as create more internships for students in these programmes. And as a derivative of their role in the elite sports environment, they would also be able to profile themselves as ‘elite sport friendly schools’ where talents and elite athletes can optimally combine their sportive and educational career.

In a third group session in July 2019, civil servants from the three provinces and the five municipalities where the CTO and RTCs are located, met to discuss the priorities from the provincial and local level. According to a number of civil servants, the aim of the overarching elite sports programme could be broadened. They stressed the importance that the programme also focuses on sports, athletes and talents not yet supported by Topsport NOORD. They especially sought support for talents and elite athletes who do not receive any backing from NOC\*NSF or other professional sports organisations and who would also benefit from an overarching programme. It was also important for them to focus on talent development and not strictly on elite sports. Local governments in the Northern Netherlands did not simply want to be associated with funding elite sport (clubs) and are not allowed to subsidise professional sport clubs, such as football clubs. They also underscored the importance of getting good insight into generating additional social value through the overarching programme. The value for the local governments is that cooperating with several stakeholders on elite sports and talent

development, including outside their own municipality, could benefit the local elite sports and talent development programmes.

Based on the varying output from the first period, it was now Topsport NOORD's responsibility to devise an elite sports agenda. Clearly, the priorities set by the different stakeholders were quite diverse and sometimes even conflicting in nature. On top of that, apart from the input from the local stakeholders, Topsport NOORD also had to explicitly link these priorities to the national policies developed by NOC\*NSF. To complicate matters even further, national sport policies were two-sided: one with a focus on winning more medals in more Olympic/Paralympic disciplines, the other on creating social impact by means of elite sports successes (NOC\*NSF, 2016). In this sense, the organisation was faced with handling multiple conflicting sets of values.

### ***September 2019: the elite sports agenda***

The elite sports agenda advanced by Topsport NOORD was presented as a joint strategy, developed as a product by all stakeholders involved. The document was a 'work in progress' and thereby open for modifications by the stakeholders. For Topsport NOORD, the focus in November 2018 had been on creating a set of shared agreements with the provinces and municipalities. However, during the process the focus widened and more stakeholders became involved. As a result, the focus shifted from focusing on improving the elite sports management environment towards broader public value(s) like 'personal development' and 'inequality of opportunities'. For Topsport NOORD, this also meant that they could no longer position themselves as programme owner, but merely as programme 'director'. As a sports organisation they cannot be solely held accountable for raising levels of equality in the Northern Netherlands. So, a cooperation with all the involved stakeholders turned out to be necessary for executing the elite sports agenda. This is reflected in the following quote from the Elite Sports Agenda document:

The document is in development and it provides room for further enrichment. It has been created with Topsport NOORD, civil servants of the three provincial governments and a few municipal governments, educational institutions and provincial sports service organisations. In the coming period it will be further supplemented with the input of elite athletes, coaches, business partners and other related elite sports initiatives. (Topsport NOORD, 2019, p. 2)

Apart from a number of topics regarding elite sports development, the document devotes particular attention to the societal impact of elite sports. The potential meaning of elite sports for the northern region is stressed, along with an emphasis on personal development. A personal development that one can achieve in elite sports is compared to sectors such as music, dance, science or entrepreneurship. Next, the inspirational value of elite sports is underlined.

The inspirational value of elite sports and its socially binding potential (integration, cohesion) is an important value that can hardly be created in other ways in the local context. Especially important is the local, regional and national binding force of elite sports that stems from the competitive element and the emotions that are involved ('them versus us') (Topsport NOORD, 2019, p. 7)

Finally, the document combines these values into an all-encompassing value proposition for elite sports development in the Northern Netherlands. Elite sports should, in the notion taken up in the Elite Sports Agenda, be part of a broader strategy for the north that puts emphasis on personal development and attractiveness of the region.

Elite athletes and talents are also cultural symbols for the fact that Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen are provinces where you can develop yourselves optimally. We profile the Northern Netherlands as an attractive region for living, working and for personal development. (Topsport NOORD, 2019, p. 7)

After finishing the document in September 2019, the process leading to the new strategy transcending provincial boundaries was not yet completed for Topsport NOORD, as they still needed to find financial support for their newly developed ideas. The final authorisation from the three province deputies was conditioned on the wider legitimisation of these ideas.

### ***September 2019 – January 2020: finding legitimacy and support***

The first challenge for Topsport NOORD was to rally support from sports organisations for such a broad strategy, aimed at personal development. In the first meeting after publication of the Elite Sports Agenda, Topsport NOORD organised a working session with sports clubs and representatives of talent development programmes. As mentioned before, the relationship between Topsport NOORD and organisations managing the 19 talent development programmes and four elite sport programmes in the region was minimal. For this reason, gathering support from these programmes/coaches for the overarching elite sports programme had not been given much consideration in the past. The relationship with other professional sports clubs, like professional football, basketball, volleyball, (ice) hockey and korfbal was also weak. Yet, to make the overarching elite sports programme work, and to fulfil an all-embracing purpose, the programme had to receive explicit support from (most of) the professional sport clubs as well. Representatives of the professional sport clubs expressed that more cooperation between sports clubs has always been challenging. With regard to business and sponsoring, they were each other's rivals at times because they all needed to sponsor their own club. In light of an overarching elite sports management environment, the sports clubs asked that an independent coordinator be tasked with the implementation of the programme. They also stressed the importance of making the social value of elite sports and talent development visible. But more visibility also required more cooperation and sharing knowledge. The last topic addressed was the many elite sports clubs, talent development programmes and knowledge institutions focusing on sports (research) in the north. The consensus was that the region could better capitalise on this concentration of resources.

In the last phase of this research, the focus shifted towards the representatives of the provincial governments. They were the stakeholders that could provide ultimate authorisation of the strategy proposed by Topsport NOORD. During the process to create the overarching elite sports programme Topsport NOORD had several (one-to-one) discussions with civil servants from the three provinces. In the final phase of the process there were two sessions with the three deputies (the decision makers) of the province of Groningen, Drenthe and Friesland. These provinces were in 2019 approaching the end of their policy programmes regarding sports. Therefore 2019 was an optimal year to



discuss the potential value of an overarching elite sports programme for the provinces. When the sessions with the deputies took place, it became clear that they had a positive stance towards an overarching approach of the elite sports programme. The deputies were willing to cooperate on this subject because they observed that in sparsely populated areas a government has to play a bigger role regarding themes like sports and the arts, compared to highly developed and populated areas with more businesses:

Governments in the North have a bigger role than governments in other provinces in the country. This is also the case because there are relatively few big businesses headquarters located in the Northern Netherlands. That is a role we fulfil as governments. (Deputy Groningen)

The deputies saw an advantage in an overarching programme for talent development to pay close attention to unequal opportunities for talented athletes and the scarcity of facilities. On the other hand they asked for a more specific elaboration on the added value of the elite sports programme, on what could be improved or added to the existing context. In other words, what would be the return on investment of this programme? The deputies also stressed this point because of their political accountability: ‘this process shows that you have coordinated a very thorough approach. But I also have to make sure that the investments do not cause a hassle in provincial politics or in the media’ (Deputy Friesland).

After several sessions with the deputies it was decided to see 2020 as a bridging year, from all having their own policy programme regarding (elite) sports towards a more collaborative policy as of 2021. Provincial governments decided to subsidise the execution of the overarching elite sports programme with funds for a coordinator and a focus on amateur coach development. Two of the three provinces were in the lead in making the decision in subsidising the programme. They agreed to subsidise on the condition that all three provinces participate in the programme and provide a (comparable) amount of subsidy. In their view, only a joint approach can lead to success in combating unequal opportunities for talents in the entire region.

## Discussion

The growing emphasis on the societal outcomes of elite sports helped Topsport NOORD find legitimacy for their new strategy for elite sports and talent development in the Northern Netherlands. However, this support was not easily obtained. Topsport NOORD had to go on a quest of finding out which values were deemed important within the northern regional context of the Netherlands. To some extent, this process can be seen as an example of developing a public value proposition, an idea that is ‘inspired by the notion of a “business case” that business managers have to make to their senior management or to investors and shareholders’ (Alford et al., 2017, p. 2). Topsport NOORD found a public value proposition in providing a perspective on personal development and fighting impoverishment in the region. This idea connected well to the perspective of the political authorising environment in the region. However, Topsport NOORD also had to clarify what the ‘return on investment’ could be for the provinces and that their organisation’s ideas were backed by other stakeholders as well.



In the writings by Moore (2013) this is precisely what any public agency should do when seeking support for their public value proposition. Moore encouraged public officials not only to *manage up* [i.e. ‘attention to *compliance* with policies and procedures than to the achievement of desired social outcomes’ (Moore, 2013, p. 32 emphasis in original)], but also to *manage out* (‘actively garnering authorization for their value propositions’ [Alford et al., 2017, p. 2]). This case has shown the importance of applying both perspectives alternately. Topsport NOORD was able to create support for the strategy only by finding joint interests among different stakeholders. While the political authorising environment was clearly interested in providing broad personal development opportunities in the region, the strategy connected well to sports organisations’ interest in better structures for talent development.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to note that Topsport NOORD engaged in dialogues with their stakeholders, but was still able to effectively explicate their value proposition. Public value literature often lacks clear guidance on how public value can be used in practice. Often, the values that are described are too vague and only aimed at society at large, as is the case with Moore’s conception (Bryson et al., 2014, p. 449). Other approaches are too particularistic (Bryson et al. (2014) point at Meynhardt’s (2009) psychologically-based approach), ignoring the role of institutions and processes in the creation of public value (Bryson et al., 2014, p. 454).

Our study contributes to public value literature by emphasising that the process and institutional environment in which public value is created, is a significant feature of public value creation. We have shown that it is important to move beyond public value *management* within a single organisation (as proposed by Moore (1995)) towards public value *governance*, paying attention to collaboration and networks (cf. Bryson et al., 2014; Stoker, 2006). Topsport NOORD’s drafting and re-drafting of the public value proposition engaged a growing coalition of supporters in the authorising environment, emphasising the connectedness of the corners in Moore’s strategic triangle. Alterations in one of the corners (the public value proposition) had direct consequences for the legitimacy of Topsport NOORD’s elite sports strategy (authorising environment). In this sense, the corners in the strategic triangle are communicating vessels.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have shown how public value management theory can assist (public) sports managers in developing a public value proposition. The need for such propositions is increasing, as the societal impact of elite sports is increasingly scrutinised. Sports organisations increasingly face having to find broader support for their elite sport strategies. The legitimacy of the strategy developed by Topsport NOORD was established by different stakeholders in the northern provinces of the Netherlands, because the agency was able to connect its elite sports strategy to other public values in the region. The strategy of broad talent development and fighting impoverishment in the region fitted both the political environment as well as sports organisations in the region, which saw an opportunity to improve their own talent development possibilities.

The strategy Topsport NOORD developed is by no means a blueprint for other organisations that face challenges in legitimising their elite sports strategies. Sports organisations that are to develop a public value proposition should connect to values that are

significant in their own context. In the case of Topsport NOORD, these values were found by connecting to themes that were provided by the political authorising environment in their coalition agreements. Alternatively, the MESSI framework (De Rycke et al., 2019; De Rycke & De Bosscher, 2019, 2020) that sets out to map the potential positive and negative values of elite sports could help public managers to find which themes are valued by the public. On the basis of these values, they should be able to develop public value propositions that can increase the societal impact of their elite sport strategies.

Our involvement in the process of developing a public value proposition in the Northern Netherlands has given us the opportunity to write this empirical paper. However, our involvement also comes with limitations. As the second author of this article was associated with Topsport NOORD, the outlook in this article emphasises the positive outcome for this organisation. Moreover, we did not gain insight in the opinions of other stakeholders on the process. Yet, we believe that our study contributes to practice and theory concerning public value creation in elite sports.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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