Introduction

Sports organizations, such as leagues and federations, have to face the variety of meanings of the word « sport » as well as an ever-changing environment. They may be described as concrete systems of action elaborated by men in order to structure their action in a particular domain – in casu sports – that is part of a larger system, i.e. the society (Crozier – Friedberg, 1980). Due to a phenomenon of latency, many federations considered as systems are not adapted to the changes of their environments anymore.

The main topic of this communication is to understand whether they have the capacity, as an organization, to give an adapted answer to this evolution and to investigate whether they are able to anticipate the changes requested by this evolution. One can suggest that the men who should be able to manage the new contexts should also be able to conduct the transformation that is necessary for sports organizations by solving the new questions that arise. They should be able to deal with change.

1. The possible approaches

Social sciences as well as management sciences suggest that several methods can be used to answer the main question of this communication. Some of them are based on a structural approach, followed by approaches based on the contingency theory (Lawrence - Lorsch, 1973).

Other approaches have been centred on the actors within the organization (Crozier - Friedberg, 1980).

More recent approaches, based on the study of organizational configuration, were exploited in the analysis of private companies (Mintzberg, 1999), or public administrations and non-profit organizations (Nizet- Pichault, 2000) in the past ten years.

2. Method used

In this research, we have adapted the model of the configurational approach of organizations (Nizet – Pichault, 2000) to sports leagues and federations.

2.1. Description of the sample of sport federations

We took a sample, consisting of Belgian sports leagues and federations from both the Flemish and French speaking Communities.
According to the particularities of the Belgian sports system – sport is a competency of the Communities (Flemish, French and German speaking community governments) – we choose for two federation that were not divided into Community leagues – i.e. the Football and the Golf federations – and for four federations that were already divided – Fencing, Track and Field, Volleyball and Judo. During our research, the Royal Belgian Golf Federation choose for the model of Community leagues.

2.2. The configurational approach adapted to sport federations. Description of the model

For each of those leagues and their corresponding federations, we have taken into account the elements of the configurational approach. We thus studied the structures (Slack - Hinings, 1987), the relations between the actors of the organization (Slack,1997), the pertinent environment, the missions, the resources, the values and the strategies (Thibault – Slack - Hinings,1993) of these organizations .

By using this model, we were able to situate these organizations within their organizational life cycle. The model also reveals various factors – external as well as internal – that should stimulate the organizational changes.

2.3. Goals

Three goals were set up for this research: identifying a configurational typology (1), enlightening the change process (2) and presenting different proposals in order to deal with the organizational changes required by the evolution of the environment (3).

3. Results and discussion

Our research provides us with a framework through which we can formulate answers for the two first goals. However we are not able to classify all Belgian sports leagues and federations. Nevertheless, we provide a common framework of analysis to those who are in charge of the management of leagues and federations. In that way, our research allows them to make their analysis match together.

3.1. Identifying a configurational typology

As we mentioned earlier in this communication, we studied the structures (Slack - Hinings, 1987), the relations between the actors of the organization (Slack,1997), the pertinent environment, the missions, the resources, the values and the strategies (Thibault – Slack - Hinings,1993) of the leagues and federations of the sample.

We discerned three dominant configurational groups within our sample of leagues and federations, namely the professional bureaucracy, the configuration centred on the missions and the federal sports bureaucracy. Such typology should be considered in a dynamic approach according to the level of evolution of each league or federation related to its organizational life cycle.

The federal sports bureaucracy is a kind of « ideal type » specifically related to those sports leagues and federations that were part of the study. This bureaucracy has adapted itself to the interaction of structural, political and contextual variables that are specific to sports leagues and federations in Belgium.

This configuration can be described as a combination of entrepreneurial and mission oriented characteristics at both strategic and managerial level, and bureaucratic characteristics at managerial and operational level. Due to this combination, the federal sports bureaucracy increases its capacity to exploit signs of the pertinent environment to a
high extent. This especially counts for the signs coming from the major owner, i.e. the Communities. This exploitation supports mission oriented goals that are clearly defined and converted into operational goals.

As we mentioned that this typology has to be considered in a dynamic perspective we enhance this evolution by presenting for every league and federation of the sample a main characteristic and a tendance.

3.2. Enlightening the change process

The governance can be considered as one of the main factors for the change process related to the organisational configuration of leagues and federations. We will now briefly enlighten the external and internal factors that should support the governance of the change process.

3.2.1. External factors

The pertinent environment of a league or federation is one of the main factors to its development. However, it seems impossible to take all environmental parameters into account. The position occupied by the league or the federation in the economic stream of its sport \(^1\) and the control the government \(^2\) has on sport bodies seem to be the most important parameters within the pertinent environment.

Commercial partners (be it from the sports sector or not), the affiliated members and the Ministry responsible for Sport are the main actors of the economic stream within a sport. According to the part each of them takes into the financial wellness of the league or federation, they will have more or less influence on the organisational configuration and its change.

We have stressed that within our sample of leagues and federations, commercial partners have a limited input. However, their input is more important for the federations that did not split into leagues (up to 14%).

Community leagues get between 20,4\% and 66,5\% of their money from the Ministry of Sports (1998). Leagues from the French speaking Community get globally more money from the Ministry of Sports then league from the Flemish Community.

Subscriptions issued by affiliated members guarantee more or less 50\% of the budget of all leagues and federations. It is important to underline that a high financial input of the Ministries of Sports is associated with low financial input of the affiliated members, especially within the French speaking Community. Federations that did not split get 80\% or more of their incomes from the affiliated members \(^3\).

As we mentioned earlier, incomes from commercial partners were very low in Community leagues between 1990 and 2001. However, leagues that have been working on their change of configuration were able to build new partnerships with companies since 2000.

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\(^1\) « La filière économique doit être comprise dans son sens large : ce peut être la richesse économique créée, dans un secteur sportif particulier (le football), par les fabricants de matériel, par les structures professionnelles ou les éducateurs professionnels diffusant la discipline, les événements sportifs organisés. Les acteurs à l’origine de la création de richesse économique peuvent être à la fois des acteurs publics (état, collectivités locales), commerciaux (TV, fabricants d’articles de sport et d’équipement sportif, entreprise de service de loisirs sportifs) et associatif (le système fédéral : fédé, clubs …) ». in BAYLE Emmanuel (3 – 1999, p. 600).

\(^2\) Par les décrets et mesures d’exécution qui en découlent.

\(^3\) Ce chiffre monte à 88,2\% dans le cas de la Fédération Royale Belge de Golf (chiffres de 1998).
During the last 6 years, community leagues did face an impressive list of new laws related to their acknowledgment and their state grant. These laws had major influence on their change process.

As long as their environment remained unchanged, between 1960 and 1990, a vast majority of leagues and federations abandoned a management approach focused on their missions and adopted a management that should secure the system.

Since the end of the 90’, the new laws related to the acknowledgment and the state grant focus on the missions and the activity program more than on the number of affiliated members. These new laws and a changing environment are a major challenge for the Community leagues.

3.2.2. Internal factors

The association of statutes (volunteer or paid staff) and functions (strategic, managerial or operational) suggests various kinds of combinations in terms of governance. Those combinations will generate different kind of organisational change within leagues and sports federations.

A governance based on a clear separation between a strategic function allowed to the board and the president and a management function given to a executive director seems to be the best way to achieve an effective change process that should widely take into account the position of the league or federation in its pertinent environment. Such governance, based on a clear distinction between strategic, management and operational levels, allows to create a sustainable action on the four main topics of the configurational approach of organisations (structure, contingency, goals and actors).

One model of governance should be applied to the organisational change within very small structures (this is the case of the majority of our leagues and federations). Two, three or four employees are in charge of all managerial and operational functions and their relation to the president and the board should be more efficient if the president and the members of the board limit themselves to strategic functions. However, another problem will occur related to the professional qualifications of the paid staff and the quality of their job description.

Some leagues and federations are dominated by a president who tries to act at strategic, managerial and operational levels. Such a drift is mainly the result of a limited perception and analysis of the pertinent environment, of a naïve submission to the governments (Community, Region, Belgian State, European Union) and sports or economic authorities of the paid staff. Such a governance represents a major danger: in case of retirement of the president, the staff would not be capable of governing the league or federation.

3.3. Proposals in order to deal with the organizational changes required by the evolution of the environment

The proposals we make in order to conduct the change process are elaborated according to five topics (the missions, the organization, the relations between volunteers and wage-earners, the offer of support and the management of the relation of the organization to its environment). They are oriented to give support to the actors within the pertinent environment, to the ministers in charge of sports and to their administrations, and finally to those actors who are part of the structure of the league or federation.
We need to underline once more that the main characteristic of configurations is their capacity to enter a change process. Their pertinent environment (sport, socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economical) causes and / or requests evolutions that will influence the configurations. This is the reason why there is no typology that allows us to classify all sports federations and leagues from a sport system.

The laws related to the acknowledgment of Community leagues and their state grant have great influence on their capacity to support a change of configuration by engaging qualified and paid managers and specialised operational staff members. This is also the reason why some leagues, with poor financial resources, are unable to engage the necessary changes of configuration.

Despite this and according to the analyses we made, we suggest five majors proposals in order to deal with the organisational changes required by the evolution of the environment.

Those proposals are made to the public authorities, to the leagues and federations and also to the interfederal structures in both Communities. We organised these proposals in accordance with their pertinence related to the configurations analyses (1) and to the organisational change process. In the mean time, they will have great impact on the quality of governance in sports.

None of our proposals should be used in the same way within different leagues or federations.

The first group of proposals is related to the missions (i). The missions will define the way of governing a league or federation. The goal will be to choose for a strategic way, according to the pertinent environment and to a management related to human, material and financial resources that allows to have a clear definition of the mission statement. Three ways seem to be possible: the first one is the focus on the “core-business” (high level competition); a second way is to diversify the business; the third way is to manage all possible developments related to one sport.

The second group of proposals is related to the organisation of the leagues and federations (ii). Their capability to assume their basic missions is related to an adhoc organisation. Too often, this organisation requires adaptations. It seems to be an evidence that in many leagues and federations a flat organigram, instead of a vertical one, should enhance the relations between staff and missions. Such anew organigram will be more functional if the responsibilities of all staff members are clearly defined.

A third group of proposals concerns the management of human resources (iii). The elected board members and paid staff should be recruited in accordance to competences related to functions and job descriptions. Once elected or engaged, their motivation should be supported by different kinds of incentives. We consider this as a basic need in the change process.

According to the fact that many leagues and federations are very small, they need to be helped in the change process (iij). This support will include a range of services (professional training …) and strategies (job descriptions, functions, decision making tools, …) in order to help them with this change process. Their reduced capabilities related to their size, to their financial and logistical possibilities and other limitations impeach their complete professionalisation. Therefore, we suggest to develop a wide range of mutualized services at Community level.
A fifth group of proposals is related to the management of the relation between the league or federation and its pertinent environment (iii). Most of them are limited in these matters due to their incapacity to get the needed informations. We need to create effective information systems – by, for example, creating mutualized services at Community level. Internal and external audit tools should enhance the quality management. A labelling policy and agreements with the most important internal and external stakeholders should also enhance the efficiency of our sports leagues and federations.

4. Conclusions

This research has been conducted in the context of fragmentation of sports between very little leagues and federations in Belgium. The aim was to give support to those who are in charge of sports, at a strategic, managerial and operational level in order to make them able to manage the change process in their structure. Therefore, we tried to give a comprehensive framework and tools that should help the decision makers.

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