

Exploring the Relationship Between Volunteerism, Inclusivity, and Democracy in Norwegian Sports

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ABSTRACT

The Norwegian sport model is widely recognized for its emphasis on inclusivity, democratic governance, and strong tradition of volunteerism. This article examines the sustainability of relying on volunteers in Norwegian sports and whether the high level of volunteerism affects democracy in sport organizations. Drawing on academic literature and national statistics, this article highlights the significant contributions of voluntary work to Norwegian organized sports. However, shifts toward more individualized and short-term volunteering may threaten the sustainability of this model. Moreover, while the structures within Norwegian sport organizations may offer opportunities for democratic learning, there are also some limitations. The article concludes that, while the Norwegian sport model remains a successful example of community-based sports, sport organizations must adapt to a changing societal landscape.

RÉSUMÉ

Le modèle sportif norvégien est largement reconnu pour l'importance qu'il accorde à l'inclusion, à la gouvernance démocratique et à une forte tradition de bénévolat. Cet article examine la durabilité du recours aux bénévoles dans les sports norvégiens et la question de savoir si le niveau élevé de bénévolat exerce une influence sur la démocratie dans les fédérations sportives. Cet article s'appuie sur la littérature académique et des statistiques nationales afin de mettre en lumière les contributions importantes du travail bénévole au sport organisé en Norvège. Il est important de souligner cependant que l'évolution vers un bénévolat plus individualisé et à court terme pourrait menacer la durabilité de ce modèle. En outre, si les structures des fédérations sportives norvégiennes peuvent offrir des possibilités d'apprentissage démocratique, elles présentent également certaines limites. L'article conclut que, même si le modèle sportif norvégien reste un exemple réussi de sports axés sur la communauté, la fédération sportive doit s'adapter à un contexte social en mutation.

Keywords / Mots clés : volunteerism, democracy, sport organizations, sport model / bénévolat, démocratie, fédérations sportives, modèle sportif

INTRODUCTION

The Scandinavian countries, and particularly Norway, have a strong tradition of volunteer work in general and especially within sport. Volunteer work within nonprofit, membership-based organizations contribute substantially to the region's national economies (Stende, Andreasson, & Skjold Frøshaug, 2020). In Norway, the total value of voluntary work in 2023 was more than 2 percent of the national gross domestic product (Norway Statistics, 2024).

Norway has a physically active population with a high participation in organized sport, combined with being one of the most successful nations in international elite sport, especially when it comes to results per capita (Greatest Sporting Nation, 2025). Voluntary sport organizations are the backbone of Norwegian sports, and volunteerism is fundamental for running these organizations (Seippel, 2010).

This article seeks to examine the sustainability of relying on volunteers in Norwegian sport and whether such a high level of volunteerism affects democracy in sports organizations.

CONTEXT

The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) is the largest voluntary organization in Norway with about 1.4 million members, and is an umbrella organization for all organized sport, including elite sport, mass sport, and para sport (NIF, 2024). The 55 national sport organizations are responsible for organizing their respective sports through the 9,045 local sports clubs, while 11 district sport associations have the general responsibility for all sports in each region.

The NIF's vision, "sports joy for all," emphasizes inclusivity in organized sports, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical or intellectual disabilities (NIF, 2023). The NIF has defined four organizational values, which are equality, loyalty, volunteerism, and democracy (NIF, 2024b). Being primarily an organization for children and youth, the statistics show that 92 percent of all children under 12 years old and 75 percent of youth between 13 and 18 years old have been active members of sports clubs during this period (Bakken & Strandbu, 2023).

Sport and physical activity are of public interest and the state provides substantial financial support to the sport sector, as with many other culture and leisure activities. Norwegian sport organizations receive funding from Norsk Tipping, a state-owned gambling operator that funded Norwegian sport with 4,25 billion NOKs (about €370 million) in 2025. While the white paper forms public guidelines for organized sport, the NIF has a high degree of autonomy when it comes to the spending of this public funding. This is based on the idea that the state regards the practical development of sport predominantly to be a task of the citizens themselves via the NIF as a democratic organization (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010). Regardless, the state's sport policies correspond well with the NIF's sport strategy plans.

VOLUNTEERISM AND SUSTAINABILITY

Norway has a strong volunteer tradition that is rooted in pre-modern farming communities, transferred to organizations (including sport organizations) in the first half of the nineteenth century. When Norway grew into an increasingly richer society and people had more time outside work

after World War II, volunteering in culture, sports, and leisure activities increased significantly (Goksøyr, 2022).

While the national and regional sport organizations have an administration of paid staff, most of the local sports clubs are fully run by volunteers serving as board members, administrators, coaches, event organizers, etc. State funding is an important source of income for the sport organizations and for building new sport venues; however, this funding only constitutes a minor contribution compared with the value of voluntary work. The value of voluntary work in the sport sector corresponds to over 19 billion NOKs or more than 35,000 full-time employees, which is significantly higher than in any other sector (Norway Statistics, 2024).

The strong volunteer efforts in Norwegian sport clubs have several benefits. For most young members, this generally means reduced participation costs. Other benefits include the establishment of networks across social, cultural, and economic boundaries. However, there are also some challenges. While membership and sport participation are voluntary, most members feel obliged to contribute and have a certain responsibility toward the aims of the organization and co-members of the organization (Seippel, 2010).

While the amount of voluntary work has not decreased, volunteering has become more fragile in sport organizations. According to Seippel (2010), those volunteering in sport are less committed and feel more social pressure to contribute than the volunteers in other organizations. He further adds that recruiting volunteers is the most important task the organizations face today, which seems to have become a bigger challenge after the pandemic. There has been a gradual transition from collective volunteerism to reflexive volunteerism (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). More specifically, there has been a change of motivation from a sense of duty to the local community or sports club, to more self-realization and personal development (Wollebæk & Sivesind, 2010). Volunteering at events fits well with reflexive volunteerism, and we can see that especially younger people choose to volunteer at events, mostly bigger well-known events. To adapt to the changed motivation for volunteer work, sports clubs need to find new ways to recruit members to volunteer; more specifically, to identify different volunteer groups' needs in order to customize some benefits beyond the obligations of the organization. This can include, for example, creating opportunities for new social networks, tangible benefits (e.g., food, clothes, free tickets), and employability (e.g., skills development, resume development), which is especially important for young people.

VOLUNTEERISM AND THE EFFECT ON DEMOCRACY

Sports are considered an integral part of the social democratic ideology that is the basis of the Scandinavian welfare policy (Skille, 2011). The governance of the NIF can be understood as a representative democracy, which resembles the region's national political systems. More specifically, local, regional, and national sport organizations are responsible for the implementation of the laws and policies approved at the general sport assembly held every two years. All sport organizations at every level of NIF are individual organizational entities with their own general assembly and democratic elected board. In total, 105,000 board members and 25,000 board leaders are elected to Norwegian voluntary sport organizations (NIF, 2024a).

The NIF's laws protect democratic processes, including independent electoral committees and a controlling committee. According to NIF's laws, all members must be heard before important decisions are made and given the opportunity to influence the development and management of the organization. In order to secure a certain representation of women and young people under 26 years old, quota regulations in regional and national boards have been established (NIF, 2024b). The NIF has a variety of courses for club members and board members at different levels, aimed to strengthen the governance of the organizations, such as practical board work, nominating committees, general assemblies, young leaders, etc. (NIF, 2025). Giving participants knowledge and tools to follow the rules of democratic governance are key elements in these courses.

Although the benefits of democratic sport organizations are evident, it is essential to understand the contexts where they fall short. In international sport organizations, such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), we have seen examples of failures to address corruption and embezzlement among elected officials (Jennings, 2015). Such cases challenge the assumption that sport is inherently democratic.

While democracy in Norwegian sport organizations scores well in an international good governance evaluation, some weaknesses were identified (Geeraert, 2018). There are no rules for how long a board member can serve (or upper age limit) and the representation of coaches, athletes, and referees are low in democratic bodies.

According to Peterson (2008), sports in Scandinavian countries contribute to the promotion of democratic values. Seippel (2010) identifies three advantages of organizational sport democracy: 1) a realization of autonomy of individuals in the society, 2) an arena for democratic learning, especially for young people, and 3) opportunities for gaining competences otherwise difficult to achieve such as social, organizational, and political learning.

Volunteering in Norwegian sport organizations creates opportunities for democratic learning through courses and practice. However, there are some practical challenges. First, considering the large number of boards in Norwegian sport organizations, there may be a challenge to recruit qualified and motivated board members (Hanstad & Hansen, 2024). Second, the organizations are easily dominated by a minority of the members and the power is often centred around a few people (Enjolras & Waldahl, 2009). Third, the more individualized motives for doing volunteer work (Wollebæk & Sivesind, 2011) may lead to less committed volunteers and to weaker democratic engagement in sport organizations. Finally, the high number of operative tasks that board members need to conduct may result in pragmatic decisions on behalf of democratic processes.

CONCLUSION

The Norwegian sport model has been recognized internationally as an ideal model for organized sport, considering its strong volunteer tradition, democratic organizations, "sport for all" values, and close connection with public authorities.

This article has identified both strengths and some weaknesses in the implementation of the sport model. The shift toward more individualized and short-term volunteering challenges the sustain-

ability of the volunteer-based sports organizations. Sports clubs need to adapt to these changes and find new ways to recruit volunteers by identifying different volunteer groups' needs.

The democratic structures within Norwegian sport organizations offer valuable opportunities for democratic learning; however, there are some practical challenges, such as recruiting qualified and motivated board members, concentration of power, more individualized motives for volunteering, and pressure on board members to engage in operative tasks.

To sustain success in both elite and mass sports and to remain an arena for democratic learning, Norwegian sport organizations must effectively tackle the challenges of volunteer recruitment and retention.

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