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## FACILITATING ACCESS TO SPORTS FOR PEOPLE IN POVERTY? A STUDY ON LOCAL SOCIAL SPORTS POLICY

### SAMENVATTING

#### **Mensen in armoede toegang bieden tot sport? Een studie naar lokaal sociaal sportbeleid**

Onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat armoede een impact heeft op de kansen voor sportdeelname. Mensen in armoede participeren minder in sport in vergelijking met mensen die gemakkelijk(er) rondkomen. Op Vlaams beleidsniveau werden initiatieven genomen om lokale besturen aan te moedigen tot het promoten en faciliteren van sportdeelname voor mensen in armoede. Het is echter nog onduidelijk in welke mate dit ingang vond op lokaal niveau. In deze studie wordt onderzocht in welke mate lokale sportdiensten momenteel initiatieven nemen om sportdeelname

bij mensen in armoede te faciliteren, met welke moeilijkheden sportdiensten worden geconfronteerd om dit doel te bereiken, en in welke mate lokaal sociaal sportbeleid tot stand komt door middel van samenwerkingsverbanden tussen de sportsector enerzijds, en de sociale sector anderzijds. De data zijn afkomstig van het Vlaamse Sportdiensten Panel (2014). De resultaten geven onder meer aan dat de publieke sportsector en de sociale sector nog in grote mate twee "gescheiden" werelden zijn. Het blijkt een uitdaging om de afstand tussen beiden te overbruggen. Aanbevelingen voor verder onderzoek en voor de ontwikkeling van een sociaal sportbeleid worden aangereikt.

### **Trefwoorden**

Armoede, publiek sportbeleid, sociaal beleid, inclusie, lokale samenwerkingsverbanden, lokale sportdienst

### **ABSTRACT**

#### **Facilitating access to sports for people in poverty? A study on local social sports policy**

Research has shown that living in poverty affects the opportunities for engaging in practicing sports. People in poverty participate less in sports than people who have no (or fewer) difficulties making ends meet. At the Flemish policy level, initiatives have been undertaken to ensure that more local sports authorities promote and facilitate participation in sports for people in poverty. However, it remains unclear how these concerns are being translated at the local level. In this study, we investigate the extent to which local sports authorities are currently undertaking initiatives to facilitate participation in sports for people in poverty, which difficulties local sports authorities encounter in trying to reach this goal, and the extent to which local social sports policy results from partnerships between sports and the social sector. The data used in this study originate from the Flemish Panel study on Local Sports Authorities (2014). The results indicate that the sports sector and the social sector are still, to a large extent, two separate worlds and bridging the gap between them remains a challenge. Suggestions are offered for further research and for the development of social sports policy.

### **Keywords**

Poverty, sports policy, social policy, inclusion, local partnerships, local sports authorities

## INTRODUCTION

In both academic as well as policy discourses, the dominant conception of poverty has changed, the emphasis shifting from material deprivation towards the inability to fully exercise social, economic and political rights as citizens (Geddes, 2000, p. 782; Muffels & Tsakoglou, 2002, p. 4). This conceptualization of poverty as a multidimensional problem affecting participation in society is also reflected in the definition of Vranken (2004, p. 753), who defines poverty as “a network of instances of social exclusion that stretches across several areas of individual and collective existence”. Vranken (2004, p. 753) adds that “it separates the poor from society’s generally accepted patterns of life” and “people in poverty are unable to bridge this gap on their own”. In other words, the idea of poverty as a simple lack of resources has been complemented with a focus on social exclusion (Room, 1999). In terms of policy, this has been translated into the proposition that social inclusion should be a fundamental policy goal (see Atkinson, Cantillon, Marlier & Nolan, 2002; Ferrera, Matsaganis & Sacchi, 2002), implying the potential for positive policy action within an inclusive society (Geddes, 2005; Giddens, 1998). Consequently, poverty and social inclusion, as policy issues, are not limited to “poverty policy” but cover a wide array of policy domains and actors. Tackling poverty requires a multi-dimensional and multi-actor approach (Geddes & Benington, 2001). This is reflected in poverty policy in Belgium, including in Flanders. The region of Flanders forms the context for this particular study.

In Flanders, at the start of each term of office, policies to address poverty are summarized in one document called the “Vlaams Actieplan Armoedebestrijding” (Flemish Action Plan for Combatting Poverty). This Action Plan includes all policy objectives with regard to poverty and social exclusion and results from a partnership between actors from all the relevant policy fields. The guiding principle in formulating these objectives is that combating poverty must aim for full social participation, so that all citizens can benefit fully from their social rights (Flemish Government, 2010, 2015).

This study focuses on the realization of one of these basic social rights, namely participation in leisure, and more particularly sports. Sports as a policy domain has undergone significant changes over recent decades, as sports has come to occupy a more central place in society (Crum, 1991). Sports has become a generally accepted pattern of life, a widespread activity (Collins, 2004), and often even a normative behaviour (Leemans, 1964; MacDonald, Pang, Knez, Nelson & McCuaig, 2012). As a consequence, the field of sports cannot be overlooked as a means of tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Poverty was included in the sports policy agenda<sup>1</sup> relatively recently in Flanders.<sup>2</sup> At the Flemish policy level, initiatives have been taken that strongly incentivize local sports authorities<sup>3</sup> to promote and facilitate participation in sports for people living in poverty. However, in Flanders, a move towards further decentralization is also currently taking place. The municipal policy level is being granted more autonomy in various areas, including in the field of sports. As a result, the ability of the Flemish policy level to determine policies is being eroded. This is a cause for concern among those who represent the interests of people in poverty, because they fear that poverty and social exclusion will not be included in the local (sports) agenda if there is no top-down pressure to do so (see Network against Poverty, 2015). In this study, therefore, we will evaluate the extent to which social sports policy has found its way into the local level at this stage.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, we will explain the aim of the study in more detail. In the subsequent section, the broader policy context is described, after which the data are presented. Then, the empirical results are explored. The last section includes a discussion of the implications of our findings and a conclusion.

## **RESEARCH AIM**

The aim of this study is threefold. First, since people living in poverty are a relatively “new” target group in terms of sports policy, we explore the extent to which local sports authorities are currently taking the initiative to include people in poverty in sports, and how access for people in poverty is being facilitated in the field. As argued by Young (2000), inclusion does not always simply “happen” of its own accord, but requires specific policy attention:

inclusion ought not to mean simply the formal and abstract equality of all members of the polity as citizens. It means explicitly acknowledging social differentiations and divisions and encouraging differently situated groups to give voice to their needs, interests, and perspectives (Young, 2000, p. 119).

Our aim is to explore the extent to which social diversity is actively taken into account in sports policy, and more specifically poverty. Secondly, and closely related to this, we investigate which difficulties local policy actors are encountering in the implementation of local social sports policies. Our third research aim relates to cooperation with partners. The role of local sports authorities has changed considerably over the years, with an increased emphasis on networking and partnerships (cf. *infra*). Policies are to be made and implemented in cooperation with the relevant partners, such

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as other municipal services or non-governmental actors. The staff of local sports authorities can now be viewed as “boundary spanners”, i.e. individuals who have a dedicated role or responsibility to work in collaborative environments (Williams, 2013, p. 19). However, Williams (2013) observes that boundary spanners are confronted with complex problems that require specific skills and experience, and that paradox, ambiguity and tension are part of the daily reality of their work. Moreover, the fields of poverty and social welfare on the one hand, and sports on the other, are very distinct fields, and there is often little tradition of cooperation between the two. Therefore, the third aim of this study is to explore the extent to which positive cooperation between both these sectors – the sports sector and the social sector – is actually occurring.

## POLICY CONTEXT

The current study is not only of interest to Flanders, but is also of wider international relevance because it focuses on a social challenge that many countries face. Although the right to practise sports has been recognized since 1975 in the European Sport for All charter (Council of Europe, 1975, 1980), social disparities in participation in sports are a widespread problem in Europe and beyond (see Hartmann-Tews, 2006; Van Bottenburg, Rijnen & Sterkenburg, 2005; Van Tuyckom & Scheerder, 2010). Specifically with regard to poverty, the results of the Eurobarometer indicate a participation rate of 28 percent among those who have difficulty paying their bills most of the time. Among European citizens who do not have difficulty paying their bills, weekly participation in sports is higher, at 45 percent (European Commission, 2014). Opportunities to participate in sports are important for people in poverty: research has shown that leisure has a distinct added value for people in poverty. It gives them the chance to forget about daily problems, cope with stress, or establish and experience social connections (Bowling, 2002; Scott & McCarville, 2008). Specifically with regard to sports, the literature attributes a large number of benefits to participation, even though scholars also warn that sports should not be seen as a “panacea”, and that the context of participation is a crucial determinant (see Coalter, 2007). In addition, regardless of the potential benefits, providing actual sports opportunities to all citizens is also a matter of social justice.

In Flanders, too, there is still a poverty gap in relation to participation in sports. Specific figures are fairly scarce, but the available evidence shows a considerable division. For example, results from a survey conducted by the Flemish government indicate that 57 percent of people in the lowest income quintile never practise sports, as compared to 44 percent in the third quintile, and 29 percent in the highest quintile (Research Department of the Flemish Government, 2014). When

taking subjective poverty as a measure,<sup>4</sup> calculations based on the Participation Survey indicate an even larger gap (Scheerder, Borgers & Willem, 2015). Participation in sports is to be understood in a broad sense here. An activity is considered as sports if it takes place during leisure time, involves some degree of physical activity, and is not purely done for utilitarian purposes. No specific level or intensity is required in this approach (Scheerder *et al.*, 2015). Walking or cycling may therefore count as sports, as long as the activity itself is the central aim (as opposed to walking or cycling to a shop to buy groceries, for example).

While poverty itself is an “old” problem, people in poverty can be seen as a relatively “new” target group for sports policy. A “Sports for All” decree issued by the Flemish Government in 2007 represented a turning point in sports policy in Flanders, both for local sports policy in general and with regard to “social” local sports policy specifically. Concerning the latter, the decree compels local sports authorities to spend at least 10 percent of the subsidies they receive on improving the accessibility and diversity of their sports provision. This implies a stronger focus on policy initiatives for disadvantaged groups, including those living in poverty. The choice of a particular target group was left to the local authorities. However, the target group of people in poverty was brought to the attention of local sports authorities and they were encouraged to bring citizens experiencing hardship on board. Since 2007, the legal framework has changed considerably, introducing greater autonomy at the local level, but people in poverty are still considered a target group for sports policy.

Local sports authorities are responsible for sports administration at the local level. Traditionally, their core responsibility is the management of sports infrastructure and sports activities. However, in addition to sports provisions, they also have a role as the regulator and coordinator of sports at the local level. For example, they manage and support sports clubs, and also support other sports initiatives and facilitate informal forms of participation in sports (by providing park running tracks, for example). The implementation of policies to facilitate and/or encourage the participation of people in socially disadvantaged situations is also part of local authorities’ coordinating and regulating role. Over the last decade, the emphasis on the role of local authorities as regulators and coordinators has gradually been strengthened (Vos, Vandermeersch & Scheerder, 2015).

Cooperation with partners is necessary for local sports authorities to fulfil this role (Vos *et al.*, 2015). The expectation of working together with partners to achieve policy objectives has become much stronger compared with previous decades. The evolution in Flemish sports policy

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corresponds to a wider, international shift towards local governance and increasing reliance on local partnerships (see Geddes, 2005; Sorrentino & Simonetta, 2012; Williams, 2013). Accordingly, in terms of local social sports policy, local sports authorities are explicitly expected to develop their policies and initiatives in cooperation with relevant partners.

## DATA AND METHODS

To answer the research questions of our study, we drew on data from the Flemish Panel study on Local Sports Authorities (Van Poppel, Scheerder & Vandermeersch, 2016), and more particularly on the second wave of data collection. The survey was held between June and October 2014. All local sports authorities (i.e. municipalities) in Flanders (n=308) and Brussels (n=19) were invited to complete an online questionnaire on six themes: i) general background information (size, statute, structure, etc.), ii) developments caused by changes in the legal framework, iii) sports provisions (the activities provided, sports for specific target groups, changes in the number of participants, etc.), iv) organization and human resources management, v) accommodation, and vi) cooperation with partners. In this study, we focus on the data with regard to local social sports policies. The respondents were civil servants in charge of sports. In the case of smaller municipalities, this is usually only one person. In larger municipalities, the questionnaire was sent to the head of the unit. In total, 202 municipalities took part, which corresponds to a response ratio of 62 percent. A comparison with the total population shows that our sample is representative in terms of its size (number of inhabitants), socio-economic profile, and regional spread. In the current study we rely on bivariate analyses, which were performed in STATA 12. The findings are presented in the following section.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL SOCIAL SPORTS POLICY

Almost six in ten local sports authorities (57.7%) organize targeted sports activities for people in poverty, or have launched initiatives specifically for this group. In 2010, this figure was only two in ten (21.0%) (Scheerder, Vandermeersch & Van Poppel, 2014). This indicates that the policy impetus initiated in Flanders has caused significant changes at the local level. However, the results depend largely on the size of the municipality. In smaller municipalities (fewer than 15,000 inhabitants) the share of municipalities that have organized specific activities is 46 percent, against 68 and 69 percent in medium-sized (15,000 to 30,000 inhabitants) and large municipalities (over 30,000 inhabitants) respectively. The association between the development of activities/initiatives and size of municipality is statistically significant ( $p=0.008$ ).

Local sports authorities were also asked whether they were undertaking initiatives to make general, non-targeted sports activities more accessible for people in poverty. Seven in ten local sports authorities (70.3%) responded affirmatively. On the other hand, this implies that this is not the case in three in ten municipalities. In one in five local sports authorities (19.5%), policy initiatives to increase sports opportunities for people in poverty – either through targeted activities, or by facilitating access to non-targeted activities – are completely absent.

Local sports authorities that reported investing in the accessibility of non-targeted initiatives were then asked how they were doing this. Respondents were able to mark several answers at a time. The results are shown in Table 1. The most common method was a partnership with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, a public sector welfare organization that exists in every municipality. The second and third most common methods were systems of discounts and providing guidance towards activities organized by local sports authorities.

The findings indicate that the implementation of local social sports policy occurs largely outside the framework of club-organized sports. Clubs are rarely “activated” by local sports authorities as agents of change. Information or training about people living in poverty is provided only in a small minority of municipalities for clubs (7.5%), and encouragement through subsidies is also rather uncommon (15.1%).

**Table 1: Ways of facilitating access to non-targeted sports activities for people in poverty**

Method	Total % (n=186)	% among “yes”* (n=141)	n
Cooperation with Public Centre for Social Welfare	66.1	87.2	123
Systems of discounts on sports activities provided by local sports authorities	43.0	56.7	80
Providing guidance towards sports activities provided by local sports authorities	34.9	46.1	65
Systems of discounts on club participation	31.7	41.8	59
Providing guidance towards club-organized sports	26.9	35.5	50
Cooperation with a poverty association	18.3	24.1	34
Specific subsidization for sports clubs	15.1	19.9	28
Training or informing sports clubs	7.5	9.9	14
Other	5.4	7.1	10

\*Local sports authorities that indicated that they facilitate access to non-targeted sports activities

**DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY LOCAL SPORTS AUTHORITIES**

In order to improve policies and provide adequate support for local sports authorities where this is needed, it is vital to know which difficulties sports authorities encounter that may hinder the implementation of local social sports policy for people in poverty. To evaluate this, a number of potential difficulties were listed in our survey, and respondents were asked to rate these on a scale from 1 to 5 (ranging from totally disagree to totally agree). In Table 2 below, the mean and standard deviation are given.

The largest problem with regard to the implementation of policies for people in poverty is a lack of knowledge and expertise. Over half the local sports authorities (52.1%) agreed or totally agreed with the statement that there was not enough knowledge in this area. However, fewer than a quarter of the local sports authorities (23.4%) disagreed or totally disagreed. Knowing how to find people in poverty emerged as a large problem as well. Over four in ten local sports authorities (43.9%) (totally) agreed with the statement concerning this problem. Based on the mean scores, “no interest from the target group” was the third largest difficulty for local sports authorities. However, for this item, over half of the respondents (52.1%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Approximately one in four (22.9%) local sports authorities (totally) agreed with this statement.

**Table 2: Difficulties in implementing local social sports policy, on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree) (n=186)**

<i>We experience difficulties in improving the accessibility of sports for people in poverty because...</i>	Mean	SD
...we do not have enough knowledge about dealing with this target group	3.3	1.0
...we do not know how to locate the people concerned	3.1	1.1
...there is no interest among this target group	3.0	0.8
...we can achieve more with people in other groups using the same resources	2.8	0.9
...we cannot rely on other partners sufficiently	2.7	0.9
...this area is not a priority	2.7	1.0
...we have insufficient budget to enable this	2.5	0.9

The other items also yielded a mean score above 2.5, indicating that all the items mentioned are relevant to at least some of the local sports authorities.

Due to the diversity of local sports authorities, in Table 3, a distinction is made between local sports authorities that reported initiatives to facilitate access for people in poverty (either by organizing targeted activities or by facilitating access to non-targeted initiatives, or both) and local sports authorities which did not report any such measures. Mean scores for the different barriers are compared between the two groups in order to see which obstacles are most likely to impede the implementation of a poverty policy. The results show that local sports authorities without a poverty policy consider this a lower priority. This item yields the largest difference between the two groups. In other words, the absence of measures for facilitating sports for people in poverty is partly a matter of choice. Lower priority for poverty policy was most frequently reported in smaller municipalities.

For both groups of sports authorities – with and without a poverty policy – knowledge about dealing with people in poverty and knowing how to locate these people ranked highest as the obstacles.

**Table 3: Difficulties in implementing local social sports policy, in mean scores on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree), categorized by presence or absence of policy initiatives for people in poverty**

<i>We experience difficulties in improving the accessibility of sports for people in poverty because...</i>	Poverty policy		Sign.
	Yes (n=157)	No (n=36)	
...we do not have enough knowledge about dealing with this target group	3.3	3.5	NS
...we do not know how to locate the people concerned	3.1	3.5	*
...there is no interest among this target group	2.9	3.0	NS
... we can achieve more with people in other groups using the same resources	2.7	2.9	NS
...we cannot rely on other partners sufficiently	2.7	3.1	*
...this area is not a priority	2.6	3.3	***
...we have insufficient budget to enable this	2.5	2.9	*

**PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE SOCIAL SECTOR**

As we have explained, local sports authorities are expected to establish a local social sports policy in cooperation with other partners. Our third question was the extent to which this occurs in practice. With regard to local social sports policy, and more specifically regarding poverty there are two evident types of partners: the Public Centre for Social Welfare on the one hand and poverty associations on the other hand. Both these partnerships were investigated further in the survey.

Starting with (potential) partnerships with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, local sports authorities were asked to agree or disagree with two statements, the findings of which are displayed in Table 4. With a mean score of 3.9, we observe a relatively high willingness on behalf of the local sports authorities to set up cooperation agreements with the Public Centre for Social Welfare. Over three-quarters of the local sports authorities (76.3%) (totally) agree with the statement that they are in favour of setting up cooperation agreements. Less than four percent of local sports authorities (totally) disagreed. Yet cooperation is not always easy. Only a little over half of local sports authorities (51.9%) reported good cooperation with the Public Centre for Social Welfare.

In addition to the Public Centre for Social Welfare, in many municipalities there is also a (or several) third sector organization(s) that supports people in poverty. Four in ten local sports authorities (38.3%; n=74) stated that they cooperate with a third sector poverty association. In the remaining 62 percent of the municipalities, this was not the case. Local sports authorities that mentioned cooperation with a poverty association were subsequently asked about the nature of that cooperation. The results are shown in Table 5. Since the number of cases was small here (with only 74 local sports authorities reporting a cooperation), we mention the exact numbers in addition to the percentages. The most common type of cooperation is the joint promotion of the sports

**Table 4: Partnership with the local Public Centre for Social Welfare on a 5-point scale (from totally disagree to totally agree) (n=186)**

Item	Mean	SD
The local sports authorities favour setting up cooperation agreements with the Public Centre for Social Welfare	3.9	0.7
The local sports authorities cooperate well with the Public Centre for Social Welfare in their municipality	3.4	0.9

**Table 5: Nature of cooperation with third-sector poverty associations**

Item	Total % (n=193)	% Among partner-ships (n=74)	n
Joint promotion of the sports on offer	20.7	54.1	40
Joint organization of sports activities	18.7	48.6	36
Exchange of information	16.1	41.9	31
Financial support	14.0	36.5	27
Making municipal sports facilities available	12.4	32.4	24
Organizing joint sports events	11.4	29.7	22
Providing free material/logistic support	10.4	27.0	20
Fine-tuning the sports on offer	7.8	20.3	15
Use of the accommodation of the poverty association	5.2	13.5	10
Exchange of staff and/or volunteers	2.1	5.4	4
Organizing workshops/trainings for volunteers (e.g. trainers)	1.0	2.7	2
Providing material/logistic support, remunerated	0.5	1.4	1

on offer, which occurs in one in five municipalities (20.7%), followed by the joint organization of sports activities (18.7%) and the exchange of information (16.1%). Overall, we observe that the level of cooperation with poverty associations is fairly limited.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

As mentioned at the start of this report, inclusive policies require acknowledgement of social differences (Young, 2000). This means going beyond an “open access approach”, i.e. beyond stating that “everybody is welcome” (Waring & Mason, 2010). This study has shown that, compared to the previous measurement in 2010, there has been a large increase in the policy focus on people in poverty in the field of sports. The share of local sports authorities that organize targeted activities for people in poverty has almost tripled. The initiatives undertaken at the Flemish policy level to encourage local sports authorities to invest in this group have been effective. Yet there is also another side to the story, because in one in five municipalities there is still no local social sports policy for people in poverty, while each municipality in Flanders does contend with poverty to at least some extent (Marissal, May & Mesa Lombillo, 2013). The results have shown

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that a lack of knowledge and expertise in the field of poverty is the main barrier that prevents local sports authorities from investing in local social sports policy for the benefit of people in poverty. One main reason for not developing a poverty policy in sports was also simply not considering this to be a priority.

Unless a stronger impetus is provided, this situation is unlikely to change in the near future. The development of further decentralization implies that the Flemish policy level will no longer be able to determine or directly affect the policies of local municipalities. However, they can still exert an influence by providing information and raising awareness. If the opportunities for people in poverty to participate in sports are to be enhanced, the Flemish government still has a vital role to play in this regard. Policy incentives are needed to increase awareness and improve understanding with regard to the complexity of poverty at the local level. A concrete example of a policy strategy in this respect is the integration of the issue of poverty, and social vulnerability more generally, into both initial and follow-up training courses for the employees of local sports authorities and, more generally, into educational programmes for those involved in sports management and sports provision. In addition, it is important to continue to provide support to municipalities who are willing to invest in social inclusion.

Our results also indicate that local sports authorities only rely on sports clubs to a very limited extent in order to facilitate participation in sports for people in poverty. Local sports authorities are more likely to cooperate with the Public Centre for Social Welfare, to organize specific activities, or to facilitate access to their own non-targeted activities (financially or otherwise), but only a small minority of the local sports authorities invest in specific subsidies for clubs to encourage a "social" sports policy, or provide training or information to clubs. Inclusion is a process that involves a complex interplay among a variety of actors (Ponic & Frisby, 2010). From this perspective, it is important to involve sports clubs and other sports providers as well, together with partners who have expertise in working with people in poverty. However, if local sports authorities experience barriers in addressing the smaller number of opportunities for people in poverty in their own policy and provision, because they feel they lack the necessary knowledge and expertise for example, then encouraging other actors (such as sports clubs) to do this may be one step too far. This brings us back to the argument that some local sports authorities still need guidance and support in terms of their equality and inclusion policies.

A third aim of this study was to investigate whether there is a general expectation of achieving a local social sports policy with the aid of partnerships. We found that the largest barrier to

facilitating greater access to sports for people in poverty is a lack of knowledge, which means that this question is still more relevant, because partners from the social sector, more particularly the Public Centres for Social Welfare and third-sector poverty organizations do have this expertise. Yet “only” around half of the local sports authorities stated that they cooperate well with the Public Centre for Social Welfare in their municipality. In addition, “only” one in five local sports authorities cooperates with a local third-sector poverty association to promote the sports on offer, even though this could be considered a very basic, even minimal level of cooperation. This is remarkable since our findings also indicated that “not knowing how to locate the people concerned” is the second largest barrier that prevents local sports authorities from facilitating sports opportunities for people in poverty. In sum, these findings suggest that the sports sector and the social sector are still two separate worlds to a large extent, and bridging the gap between them remains a major challenge.

As Vettenburg, Brondeel, Gavray and Pauwels (2014) have argued, socially vulnerable people are often confronted with control and sanctions in their contact with social institutions (i.e. the negative side), and this may be true of their contact with the Public Centre for Social Welfare as well. As clients of a Public Centre for Social Welfare, people in poverty are often in a dependent position because they receive social assistance, debt mediation, and so on. This is likely to affect the extent to which the Public Centre for Social Welfare can facilitate and/or promote participation in sports. Membership of a third-sector association, on the other hand, is of a very different nature. It is purely voluntary, and organizations take a participatory approach. It is therefore essential that third-sector associations are also involved in facilitating and/or promoting sports. They represent an additional asset, because they have a different kind of relationship with potential participants than that of public welfare institutions.

Our study has some limitations. We did not ask local sports authorities about their main motivations for investing in the inclusion of people in poverty. This could be integrated into subsequent research. Secondly, this research has quantified the relationships between local sports authorities and the Public Centres for Social Welfare or third-sector poverty organizations on the basis of the responses of local sports authorities. To establish a complete picture of this type of cooperation, it would be instructive to complement this information and ask similar questions to the Public Centres for Social Welfare, as well as to poverty associations. In addition, the data from our survey do not allow a deeper understanding of the difficulties involved. Furthermore, qualitative research could be carried out to investigate the main challenges in organizing lasting and effective cooperation, and especially, how this can be facilitated. Once more, this may also be

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influenced by policy developments. The mindset and context for cooperation could, for instance, be affected by the ongoing plans of the Flemish government to integrate the Public Centres for Social Welfare with the municipalities, which are currently still two distinct institutions.

In his research on partnerships in the field of social exclusion, Geddes (2000) concludes that “the dominant practice of local partnership – as opposed to some of its rhetoric – enshrines elitist, neocorporatist or neopluralist principles, and excludes or marginalizes more radical egalitarian and solidaristic possibilities” (p. 797). Based on their study on race equality and leisure policy discourses in Scottish local authorities, Swinney and Horne (2005) conclude that the extent to which the “ethos of equality” had permeated the local authorities (beyond paying lip service) remained variable and inconsistent. This brings us to a third limitation of this study. This research has investigated the extent to which local sports authorities currently undertake initiatives to target those living in poverty, and the extent to which they achieve this by cooperating with partners from the social sector. However, we did not delve deeper into the type of initiatives undertaken, or into the broader approach adopted. This could not be evaluated based on our data. Further research should focus on the underlying assumptions of current inclusion policies towards people in poverty, and their validity, for example concerning the reasons for non-participation.

As a final remark, therefore, we would like to stress the importance of the exact content of the policy. In order to create fair opportunities in sports, it is necessary to adapt the initiatives undertaken to the needs of the people concerned. As Geldof and Driessens (2006) have also argued, it is not enough to encourage people in poverty – or more generally, people in a socially disadvantaged situation – to take part in the current sports offer, or to facilitate access, and take the current organization of sports opportunities for granted. A more socially “just” sports sector requires local sports authorities and their partners to actively listen to the people who currently stay on the sidelines, and wherever necessary, to rethink sports opportunities in response to their actual needs.

## NOTEN

- 1 When we use the term “sports policy”, in this paper, we refer to leisure sports (as opposed to elite sports).
- 2 In Belgium, sports is a responsibility of the communities (i.e. the Flemish-, French- and German-speaking communities) and not a matter for the national level of government.
- 3 The “lokale sportdienst”.
- 4 Based on whether respondents have difficulty making ends meet.

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