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In Troubled Water? European Sports Clubs: Their Problems, Capacities and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

We study problems experienced by sports clubs from nine European countries – Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Spain – and factors – national characteristics and organizational capacities – explaining variation in problem perceptions. Data is surveys of more than 30,000 sport clubs. We investigate five types of club problems: recruitment/retention of members, recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level, recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors, financial situation of clubs and availability of sport facilities. We found that human resource problems were widespread in Denmark and Germany and least common in Belgium. In Hungary, Poland, and Spain, finances and facilities stood out as the most reported problems. Some capacities – negative financial balance, planning capacity and social climate – have systematic and direct implications for those involved, whereas others – size and professionalization – are more difficult to interpret systematically and harder to link to strategic policy actions.

置身混乱？欧洲体育俱乐部：问题，能力与机遇

本文主要研究比利时（佛兰德斯）、丹麦、英国、德国、匈牙利、荷兰、挪威、波兰、西班牙九个欧洲国家的体育俱乐部所面临的问题，从民族特性和组织能力这两个因素来解释问题观点的多样性。我们调查三万多个体育俱乐部的数据，划分了五大类俱乐部可能面临的问题：会员招募/保留、董事会志愿者招募/留用、教练/教员招募/留用、俱乐部资金状况以及运动设备可用性。研究发现，人力资源在丹麦和德国普遍存在，在比利时最为少见。报

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告显示, 在匈牙利、波兰和西班牙, 财务和设备问题最为突出。对于俱乐部容量带来的影响, 模式是复合的。人力资源（包括会员, 志愿者和雇员）方面无法保证不出现问题。大规模俱乐部能够吸引会员, 而且财政问题也更少, 但和小规模俱乐部相比, 却面临更多问题。人手充足的俱乐部在招聘教练方面的问题较少, 但在资金状况及设备可用性方面问题更多。高额的税收不会影响会员的招募, 但会引发其他各种各样的问题。经济形式好（无逆差）有助于解决体育俱乐部可能面临的一切问题；有运动设备的俱乐部可以让会员更好地使用设备, 但却增加了其他问题出现的可能性；俱乐部容量规划对解决人力资源问题特别有效；功能完善的内部社交网络能防范各种问题。我们进一步提出了上述发现与政策行动及体育俱乐部发展之间的关系问题。

1. Introduction

Sports play an important part in the life of many European citizens, and of all Europeans aged 15 and over, 41 percent participates in sporting activities for at least once a week (European Commission, 2018). Sports clubs are an important arena for sports: in Europe, there are about 700,000 sports clubs, with an estimated 60 million members (Steinbach & Elmose-Østerlund, 2017). Consequently, there are huge expectations towards what these sports clubs might offer. When successful, the clubs provide health-enhancing physical activities, create a setting to have fun and build social relationships, and foster democratic learning (Burrmann, 2011; Burrmann et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2003; Schüttoff et al., 2017; Ulseth, 2004). Because clubs are expected to fulfill such expectancies, public authorities support them; many people partake and volunteer, and funding is provided by commercial sponsors (Lamprecht et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, we regularly hear that sports clubs are, if not in crisis, at least in troubled water. Clubs are struggling to recruit and retain their members because a growing number of people prefer commercial fitness locations or exercise by themselves. Volunteers can be scarce or busy, the clubs' financial situations tend to be precarious, and several clubs lack proper facilities (Cuskelly & O'Brien, 2013; Hall et al., 2003; Lamprecht et al., 2017; Swierzy et al., 2018; Vos et al., 2013; Wicker et al., 2014). Given this ambiguous picture with, on the one side, high activity levels and high expectations, and, on the other side, more gloomy everyday experiences and research findings, it is pertinent to ask to what extent European sports clubs experience problems, and, if so, what it is that makes it difficult for clubs to provide a good supply of services to their members. In this study, we survey a sample of sports clubs in nine European countries and ask what kind of problems they perceive as serious.

A social problem reflects a misfit between visions and facts: something is not as we want it to be. Neither visions nor perceptions of 'the here and now' are, however, neutral or given, so problems are inherently socially constructed (Alexander, 2018; Seippel et al., 2018; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). To understand why something is perceived as a problem and how to address it properly, we have to grasp the institutional context of the emergence of problems, the characteristics of the processes producing the problems and the interests and values of the actors involved (Klein et al., 2016;

North, 1990; Swierzy et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to investigate (i) what types of problems European sports clubs perceive, (ii) how these problems and perceptions reflect national contexts, and (iii) which organizational capacities that matter for the perception of problems.

Even though there are interesting studies on sports clubs and their problems, sports clubs in various countries, and sports clubs and their organizational capacities, this study is the first to bring all these perspectives together in one study. With unique data, we provide a broad overview of the situation of European sports clubs and a thorough interpretation of how the problems clubs perceive depend on national and organizational characteristics.

To answer these three questions, we next present the European sports club system, national contexts, a theoretical framework, and what we see as potential problems for the clubs. After that, we review research on organizational capacities and develop a set of hypotheses to guide our empirical investigations. We then present our data and methodological strategies. Empirical results come in two parts. First, we ask which problems European sports clubs are reporting. Second, we will look into which nations and what types of clubs having which sorts of problems. We wind up the article by a summary and discuss how the actors involved in club sports might contribute to the development of sports clubs in Europe. The empirical analyses are based on data from the European research project 'Social Inclusion and Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe' (SIVSCE; see the section on data and methods).

2. The European Sports Club System, National Contexts and Potential Problems

In the SIVSCE study, we apply a multilevel framework built on the premise that the strategies the clubs choose to provide sports for their members depend on the clubs' characteristics and national contexts. In sport management studies, club resource situations are mostly addressed as organizational capacities (Hall et al., 2003). We find this framework useful for our investigation. Since the variation in national contexts represents different opportunities for organized sports, we study these contexts as national 'opportunity structures' (McAdam et al., 1996).

First, most European sports clubs operate as voluntary organizations, where each club is part of a larger national organizational system (Breuer et al., 2017; Nagel et al., 2015). We assume that the different traditions of volunteering in Europe matter for the opportunities to join sports clubs. Based on the European Social Survey and the Third Sector Impact Project, we know that Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Norway have relatively strong civil society sectors, whereas Eastern and Southern European countries have weaker civil society traditions (OECD, 2015; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2016).

Second, European nations' public sports policies all adhere to some type of 'sport-for-all' policy when supporting sport clubs, yet the characteristics of these policies vary cross-nationally and affect the opportunity to organize club sports (European Commission, 1999; Ibsen et al., 2016). For all nations, a sport-for-all-policy is simply a call for the more the people are physically active in sport clubs, the better. Beyond

such catch-all sport club policies, we find variations when it comes to how nations direct their policies at specific groups based on gender, age, socio-economic class, minority status and physical or mental disabilities. There are also differences when it comes to how many resources nations have to spend on such policies and the policy tools sport authorities apply to reach these goals (Breuer et al., 2015). Some of the most widespread tools are the public funding of sports facilities, organizational infrastructure, and, in some cases, the direct funding of clubs. Previous research has used two criteria to differentiate between countries' sport policies. First, Elmose-Østerlund et al. (2017) distinguish between countries according to historical traditions where, for SIVSCE countries, Spain, Poland, and Hungary have more recent and less established sport policies than most Western European countries. Second, researchers differentiate between countries according to types of welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Here, the idea is that universal welfare states (Denmark, Norway) have more inclusive sports policies than conservative welfare states (Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands) which in turn is less exclusive than liberal welfare states (UK) (Bergsgard et al., 2007; Elmose-Østerlund et al., 2017).

Third, from a global perspective, the European countries involved in the SIVSCE project are wealthy nations, but there is nevertheless a significant variation in the prosperity of the nations involved. Our assumption is straight forward that it is less problematic to establish and run sports clubs in wealthy than poor countries for two reasons. First, because the overall organizational and material infrastructures are better developed in more prosperous countries. Second, we assume that an economically well-off population has more resources (time and money) for leisure, which result in more members, more volunteers, and more money to spend on leisure.

Fourth, there are several opportunities for physical activity in European nations. We lack systematic overviews of these opportunities, but, besides sports clubs, two seem especially important. First, a growing fitness sector – mostly organized by commercial actors without public funding – and, second, self-organized activities (jogging, cycling, swimming, etc.), which in many countries probably are the most popular form of physical exercise. An ongoing and yet not settled debate is the relation between these exercise arenas: The extent to which they are competing or complementary – for whom, where and when? The more opportunities for non-club physical activity, the harder the competition for recruiting and retaining members in sports clubs.

What is needed to run a sports club in various nations, and what are potential problems for such clubs? Having members is a prerequisite for running a sports club. Next, previous research shows that most clubs rely on volunteers (Emrich et al., 2014; Gumulka et al., 2005; Lasby & Sperling, 2007; Thieme, 2012; Vos et al., 2012), but also that several clubs have problems in recruiting and retaining volunteers (Balduck et al., 2015; Cuskelly, 2004; Gumulka et al., 2005; Koski, 2012; Scheerder et al., 2015; Seippel, 2004; Wicker, 2017). Financial resources are an obvious problem for many non-profit organizations (Hall et al., 2003), and the diversity of sports clubs and national contexts makes it relevant to assume that some clubs might experience financial problems. For most sports clubs, proper sports facilities are a prerequisite for organizing sports activities. Previous studies have found that many clubs face

difficulties with access to facilities (Allison, 2001; Balduck et al., 2015; Breuer et al., 2015; Perényi & Bodnár, 2015). Based on earlier research, we chose to focus on five tasks that clubs must fulfill to provide sports successfully and might be experienced as problematic, namely, recruiting and retaining (i) members, (ii) board members and (iii) coaches/instructors; (iv) dealing with clubs' financial situation, and (v) availability of sports facilities (Cuskelly et al., 2006; Hoye et al., 2012).

3. National Contexts and Organizational Capacities

We assume that all clubs want to provide sports for their members and that the perception of problems depends on the task at hand and clubs' organizational capacities when interacting with a national opportunity structure. Clubs with a lower capacity are more vulnerable to challenges in their contexts and, accordingly, will perceive and react differently than more resourceful clubs (Eisinger, 2002). A seminal contribution to the weighty literature of organizational capacities is the report *The Capacity to Serve* (Hall et al., 2003). In this report, five capacities imperative for non-profit organizations are presented: (i) human resource capacities, (ii) financial capacities and structural capacities, which includes (iii) planning, (iv) networking, and (v) infrastructural capacities (Balduck et al., 2015; Burrmann, 2011; Gumulka et al., 2005; Lasby & Sperling, 2007; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Smit & Wandel, 2006; Swierzy et al., 2018; Vos et al., 2013; Wicker & Breuer, 2013, 2014; Wicker et al., 2013). This set of capacities serves our research purposes well and we will, based on theoretical discussions and previous empirical research, suggest how these types of organizational capacities might matter for sports clubs' perceptions of the five problems included in this study.

3.1. National Contexts

In the previous section, we argued that clubs in richer nations are, in general, better positioned to provide sports than clubs in poorer nations. Accordingly, we include national prosperity, measured as the gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, as a variable in our regression analyses. We hypothesize (H_{GDP}) a negative effect of GDP on the perception of problems, and we think this is especially relevant for the financial situation for clubs and problems with availability of sports facilities.

3.2. Human Resource Capacities

We consider two types of human resources to be especially useful for discussions of sports clubs' perceptions of problems: number of members (size of the club) and number of employees (level of professionalization).

A large club consists of a structure that provides opportunities: more sports and more diverse groups for each sport than in smaller clubs. This structure could make it more convenient to become or remain a member of large clubs and points toward such clubs having fewer problems with members' recruitment and retention than smaller clubs. Previous research supports this assumption (Wicker & Breuer, 2010).

Large clubs are more complex than smaller clubs, implying more division of labor and more formal requirements, higher economic responsibilities, and demands for individual competencies. In this way, large clubs and their complexity could be more demanding and less attractive for volunteers. We assume that these demands and this complexity especially affects recruitment of board volunteers, whereas coaches/instructors are probably less inclined to take the overall size and complexity of a club into consideration. Wicker and Breuer (2010) show that club size has an impact on clubs' perceived problems in terms of volunteers and coaches, while other studies find no significant effect of club size on volunteering (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2013; Swierzy et al., 2018).

For financial issues, we first assume that bigger clubs have larger budgets, which means there is more at stake and higher risks. On the one hand, high revenues could cause larger clubs to be more concerned with their financial situation. On the other hand, we assume that large clubs also have more competencies on financial issues and hence, should experience fewer financial problems. Together, this gives only a few indications of why the size of the club matters and how size eventually has repercussions for how it controls its financial situation. We would expect larger clubs to have a higher need for facilities, even though we could also expect large clubs to possess their facilities. Ownership of facilities is controlled for in the multivariate analyses, so we assume that the higher needs of the larger clubs create more problems with facilities than smaller clubs. Previous research from Germany also shows that larger clubs report more problems with access to sports facilities (Breuer et al., 2013).

Having employees is an indicator of professionalization and indicates ambitions and capacities. For members, a professional club can look more orderly and predictable, and professional clubs should, accordingly, have less trouble with recruitment of members than less professionalized clubs. For recruitment of board volunteers, the signals seem contradictory. On the one hand, professional ambitions could be demanding and overwhelming; on the other hand, the presence of professionals could be helpful. Taken together, we do not expect the effects of professionals – high number of paid staff – to be strong when it comes to recruitment of board volunteers. Earlier studies support this assumption (e.g. Wicker & Breuer, 2014). For recruitment of voluntary coaches, we assume a similar situation as for board volunteers, but it could also be that professional ambitions related to sports could be more attractive than frightening for coaches, so, if there is an effect, it would probably be positive: the more professionals, the smaller the problem of volunteer coaches.

For the financial situation of clubs, the whole idea of professionalization points toward such issues being taking better care of than in clubs without employees. At the same time, employees imply needs for funding, which puts extra pressure on the financial situations in clubs with employees (Seippel, 2010). All in all, we assume that professional clubs (with more paid staff) have fewer financial problems than other clubs. For availability of facilities, we imagine a similar logic: professionals with competencies ease (other explanatory factors being controlled for) access to facilities.

Summing up, the first set of hypotheses examining the influences of human resource capacities measured by club size (number of members) and professionalization (number of paid staff), we proposed as follows: H_{size}: Larger club size by the

numbers of members will lead to weaker perceptions of problems with (1) recruitment/retention of members and stronger perceptions of problems with (2) recruitment/retention of board members, (3) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors, and (4) access to facilities. We do not see strong arguments or previous research pointing toward specific effects of club size by the number of members on the financial situation of clubs. $H_{\text{PaidStaff}}$: Number of paid staff will lead to weaker perceptions of problems with (1) recruitment/retention of members, (2) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors, (3) financial situations of the clubs and (4) availability of sport facilities. We leave the question of how professionalization matters for recruitment of board members as an open question.

3.3. Financial Capacities

We have included two measures for financial capacity: revenues and (negative) balance. Clubs with high revenues are in many ways similar to large and professional clubs, and we assume that the effects on problem perception also is reminiscent: High revenue-clubs are attractive to members, demanding to board volunteers, and inviting to coaches. To understand how revenues affect finances, the decisive question becomes what is behind high revenues (when controlled for clubs' size). Possible answers are organizing expensive sports, using expensive facilities, or simply providing sports for people paying higher fees. The outcome could be an economy with more at risk, which could give more concern and worries for the financial situation of clubs with lower revenues. High revenues might reflect expenses related to availability of facilities and hence, come with better access to facilities.

For hypotheses on financial capacities, including revenues and negative balance, we first hypothesize (H_{Revenues}) that clubs with high revenues perceive fewer problems with (1) recruitment/retention of members, (2) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors and (3) availability of facilities, but that clubs with high revenues experience more problems with (4) recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level and (5) the financial situation of the club. For clubs having a negative balance, we hypothesize ($H_{\text{NegativeBalance}}$) that they should, all in all, make clubs receptive to all five types of problems included in this study: (1) Recruitment/retention of members, (2) volunteers at board level and (3) coaches/instructors; and (4) financial situation and (5) availability of sport facilities.

3.4. Structural Capacities

When it comes to structural capacities, we investigate the effect of possession of facilities, planning capacities and quality of social relations within the club. The most direct effect of ownership of facilities for perceptions of problems should be that clubs owning facilities have fewer problems with the availability of facilities than other clubs. Possession of facilities is a type of good that should make a club attractive to members and coach volunteers, but it also represents a version of the complexity-logic which could heighten the threshold for volunteering at boards. Even though owning facilities is an obvious advantage for members' participation, it could be a

financial burden, so we suggest that clubs possessing facilities perceive the economy as more of a problem than other clubs.

Structural opportunities and material and administrative resources are fine, but the attraction of sports clubs also depends on the quality of *social relations* within clubs. We assume that vibrant social relations are helpful for all types of problems, but as for planning capacities, it could be more so for human resources than material and structural resources. Previous research is mainly in line with these assumptions and shows that what matters for volunteer satisfaction are non-material and social issues (Schlesinger & Nagel, 2016), and that participation of members in convivial gatherings is a significant determinant also of lower financial problems (Coates et al., 2014).

The effect of a sports club having *planning capacity* looks like an obvious case: good planners should have fewer problems. Prior studies also show that having strategic competencies make clubs having fewer problems with recruitment of members, volunteers and coaches, and finances (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). We assume that some problems are more in the hands of the clubs than others: It is mostly possible to put more effort into recruitment or do more for members and volunteers. Other problems, such as finances and facilities, tend to depend more on external political and commercial actors. Taken together, this would probably make clubs with higher planning capacity having fewer human resource problems (members and volunteers) than the more context dependent problems related to finances and facilities.

For structural capacities, we have three measures – possession of facilities, networks and planning capacity – and hypothesize ($H_{\text{Facilities}}$) that clubs possessing facilities have fewer problems with (1) availability of sport facilities, (2) recruitment/retention of members and (3) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors. Owning facilities could give more problems with (4) recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level and (5) the financial situation of the club. We further assume ($H_{\text{SocialNetwork}}$) that *strong networks* – strong companionships and conviviality – matter for human resources and lead to clubs having fewer problems with (1) recruitment/retention of members, (2) recruitment/retention of volunteers at board level and (3) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors. We have no specific assumptions regarding how social networks are consequential for clubs' financial situations and availability of facilities. Finally, we suggest ($H_{\text{PlanningCapacity}}$) that having stronger *planning capacities* leads to less problems with (1) recruitment/retention of members, (2) recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board and (3) recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors. We leave it as an open question how planning capacities might help for the financial situation for the clubs and for clubs' availability of sport facilities.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Data Collection

Ten countries participated in the 'Social Inclusion in Volunteering in Sports Clubs in Europe' project (SIVSCE): Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Spain, and Switzerland. This is the first large-scale study in which cross-national, comparative data on sports clubs in Europe

are collected (Breuer et al., 2017). Because the Swiss data was collected in connection to an existing sports club survey, we do not have access to the data from Switzerland, and they are not included in the analyses. SIVSCE is an EU-funded project (Erasmus + Sport). The countries included represent a diversity of European nations and the selection is a result of cooperation within the European Association for the Sociology of Sport (www.eass-sportsociology.eu). Data were collected on three levels: individuals (members and volunteers), clubs, and countries. In this study, we use data on the club level and interpret them in light of information on the national level in a multilevel model.

We collected data on clubs through an online survey in the fall of 2015. In most cases this involved the chairperson of the club. The questionnaire included questions on structural characteristics of sports clubs, management issues, and questions about attitudes, activities and goals for social integration and volunteering. The survey study was conducted using national translations completed by members of the research group from an English questionnaire developed in the research group.

Sports clubs were sampled to be as representative of the population of sports clubs in each country as possible. In four of the countries, databases from national sports organizations were applied (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway), which means that clubs that were members of a sports organization were included. In Belgium (Flanders), half of the municipalities in Flanders agreed to contact clubs, and in Spain, six of the seventeen autonomous communities agreed to provide contact information on clubs. In Hungary and Poland, data from statistical offices on the population of sports clubs were applied, but due to a shortage of email addresses, desk research was needed to gather the necessary contact information. In England, it was only possible to collect data within a selection of sports, which means that some sports are underrepresented or even absent in the English survey data (see Table 1 for an estimated population of clubs).

The general criteria for samples from each country included at least 2,000 sports clubs. Most of the data collection took place through an online survey conducted by the German Sport University. Two countries, Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands carried out their own data collection. As Table 1 shows, a total number of 30,455 clubs replied to the survey, ranging from about 600 in Norway and Poland to about 20,000 in Germany.

The overall response rate for the survey was 24%, but, as Table 1 shows, not only the number of responses but also the response rates vary between countries. In the low end, we find Poland with a response rate of 8%, while in the Netherlands, 54% of the clubs replied to the survey. This should be taken into account when comparing countries and interpreting similarities and differences since the club samples are likely to be more selected in some countries. For countries where it was possible to compare the clubs that replied to the non-responding clubs, we found that especially larger clubs were more inclined to reply to the survey than smaller clubs.

4.2. Operationalization

The clubs in our study report the extent to which they perceive a selection of issues as problematic on a 5-point scale ranging from 'No problems' to 'A very big

Table 1. Estimated Population of Clubs, Sample Sizes, Realised Interviews and Response Rates.

Country	Estimated Population of Clubs	Sample Sizes	Realized Interviews	Response Rates (%)
Belgium (Flanders)	23,460[a]	9,906	1,002	10
Denmark	11,857[a]	11,554	3,631	31
England	62,398[a]	2,677	812	30
Germany	90,240[a]	75,845	20,546	27
Hungary	12,000[b]	5,670	1,222	22
The Netherlands	28,870[b]	2,027	1,103	54
Norway	8,072[a]	1,958	601	31
Poland	14,009[b]	8,895	668	8
Spain	65,458[a]	6,045	870	14
Total	316,364	124,577	30,455	24

[a]The estimated number of clubs represent the number of clubs registered with a sports federation.
[b]The estimated number of clubs stem from national databases of clubs.

Table 2. Perceptions of Problems in Percentages.

	No Problem	A Small Problem	A Medium Problem	A Big Problem	A Very Big Problem	A Big Problem + A Very Big Problem
Recruitment/retention of members	24.8	23.3	30.7	15.7	5.5	21.2
Recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level	23.5	23.5	26.1	19.0	7.8	26.9
Recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors	29.0	22.6	24.2	17.2	7.0	24.2
Financial situation of the club	34.2	19.9	21.7	14.1	10.2	24.3
Availability of sport facilities	36.4	18.3	17.7	13.8	13.8	27.6

Note: Survey question: 'How serious are certain problems in your club at the moment?' Average across nations where each nation counts the same. *N*: min = 20,417, max = 21,925.

problem'. We present the exact wording of problem issues, response categories and the distribution of clubs' responses to each category in the next section (Table 2). When we in later analyses point to clubs perceiving issues as problematic, we include both the clubs reporting an issue as 'A big problem' (Table 2, column 4) and those reporting it as a 'A very big problem' (Table 2, column 5). The proportions of clubs perceiving issues as problematic – that is, the proportion reporting 'A big problem' added to the proportion reporting 'A very big problem' – is reported in the rightmost column in Table 2. Taking the first issue – 'Recruitment/retention of members' – as an example, we find that 15.7 percent report this as 'A big problem' and 5.5 percent as a 'A very big problem' which together gives 21.2 (15.7 + 5.5) percent of the clubs reporting "recruitment/retention of members» as a problem in our analyses.

For independent variables (see Table 3), we first have a measure on the national level – GDP, 2016 – from the World Bank (2019). Next, we have two measures of *human resource capacities*. We first ask for club size: 'How many members does your club have at the moment?' Next, we pose a large single question about both volunteers and paid staff on a selection of tasks, such as 'Please fill in below how many volunteers and paid staff work in your club in fixed positions or roles in the areas of administration and management, sport and training, and sport and competition, as well as in other areas.' Our variable 'Paid staff" is the sum of paid staff across these categories. *Financial capacity* is operationalized using two variables: The first is the clubs' revenues, the second is whether the club has a negative balance or not.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Variables.

	Range	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	*N*
National level					
GDP per capita (2016, $)	12,414:70,867	38420	41272	18814	9
Human resource capacities					
Club size (number of members)	1:73,731	339	143	1042	28,512
Paid staff (number of …)	0:1,235	3.74	0	14.99	22,440
Financial capacities					
Revenues (€)	0:40,640,583	78786	17978	539408	14,680
Negative balance	0:1	0.23	1		14,677
Structural capacities					
Possess own facilities	0:1	0.43	0		22,171
Network: Companionship and conviviality	1:5	4.17	4	0.87	22,768
Planning capacity: Index	1:5	3.70	4	0.87	21,870
Dependent variables					
Recruitment/retention of members	1:5	2.70	3	1.17	21925
Recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level	1:5	3.21	3	1.25	21903
Recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors	1:5	2.90	3	1.25	21689
Financial situation of the club	1:5	2.18	2	1.21	20417
Availability of sport facilities	1:5	2.19	2	1.34	21914

Structural capacities first addresses *planning capacity* being an index based on the level of agreement among sports club representatives with two statements: 'Our club engages in long-term planning' and 'Our club monitors the degree of implementation of its plans' on a four-point scale. Responses: Totally agree, Agree, Undecided, Don't agree, Don't agree at all. The two variables are added and divided by two to keep the original scale. Cronbach's alpha for the two variables is 0.84, and the correlation is 0.71.

To measure *social relations and networks*, we asked for the level of agreement with one statement: 'Our club sets a high value on companionship and conviviality'. Response categories same as for planning-questions. Finally, for *infrastructure capacity*, the question used was whether clubs possess (some of the) facilities they use or not. Some independent variables were recoded to avoid outliers and wide specters of values, (size: 0:25 = 1, 26:50 = 2, 51:150 = 3, 151:400 = 4, 401:1000 = 5, 1001 + = 6; paid employees: 0 = 1, 1:2 = 2, 3:10 = 3, 11+ =4; revenue: 0:1250 = 1, 1251:5000 = 2, 5001:20,000 = 3, 20.001:60,000 = 4, 60,001:150,000 = 5, 150.001+ =6). The new recoded variables are all, based on our best judgement, chosen to reflect an interpretable (for the regression analyses) logic, e.g. the re-scaling of size of sport clubs is thought to correspond to a distinction between very small, small, medium, large and very large clubs. All continuous independent variables are centralized and standardized.

4.3. Data Analysis

We do two sorts of statistical analyses. First, we describe percentages of clubs perceiving each problem as 'big' or 'very big,' and we also see how these responses vary by nation. Second, we investigate how sports clubs' perception of problems depends on national and club characteristics. For substantive (the effects of club variables are

expected to differ between countries) and statistical (correlated residuals) reasons, the best way to analyze these data is by using ordinary multilevel OLS-regression models (Gelman & Hill, 2007; Snijders & Bosker, 1999): clubs on the lower level, and countries at the higher level. We keep our models simple and only include one country-level variable because of the low number of level two units (countries) is not suit for more complex patterns (Stegmueller, 2013).

5. Results

The first question we want to answer is the extent to which European sports clubs experience problems and what these problems are. The SIVSCE study asked clubs, 'How serious are certain problems in your club at the moment?'. We have chosen to focus on five of these problems (see Section 2). Table 2 presents the proportions of European sports clubs experiencing these problems to be 'big' or 'very big.'

Table 2 shows that the five problems we have chosen to focus upon are pertinent for a relatively large proportion of clubs, yet no specific problem-type appears dominant. A little more than one quarter of the clubs report that availability of facilities (27.6%) and recruitment/retention of volunteers for board seats (26.9%) represent 'big' or 'very big' problems for the club. Next, just below one quarter of the clubs reported troubles with finances (24.3%) and recruitment and retention of coaches and instructors (24.2%). Third, the recruitment and retention of members (21.2%) is described as important by roughly one-fifth of the clubs.

From our discussion on national contexts, we expected to find differences between the nine countries when it comes to the problems their sports clubs perceive as significant. Figure 1 shows the variations in how each of the problems is seen as 'big' or 'very big' in the nine countries. We suggest that there are three types of country–problem profiles. First, there are two countries for which human resources are pressing, i.e., Denmark and Germany. Second, Hungarian, Polish and Spanish clubs have more problems with material resources than clubs in other countries. Finally, clubs, especially from Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands, but also England and Norway, face fewer problems than other clubs overall.

We next investigate how the problems reported by European sports clubs depend on the nation's prosperity and the characteristics of the clubs through a set of multilevel regression analyses.

The intra class coefficients for the empty (only intercept) models (Table 4, ICC empty) tell us the proportion of the variation in the five outcome variables coming from differences between countries (and not reflecting differences in clubs' capacities), and we see that the problems where the national differences are largest are finances (26% for the empty model) and facilities (13%). Comparing the ICCs for the empty model and full model (containing all predictors), we also see that the ICCs are affected to different degrees (from close to 0 for recruitment and retention of coaches to a 38% decrease for facilities) by introducing the club- and nation level predictors to the models. The importance of our predictors is reflected in relatively large increases in *R*-squares (from 83% increase in model of recruitment and retention of

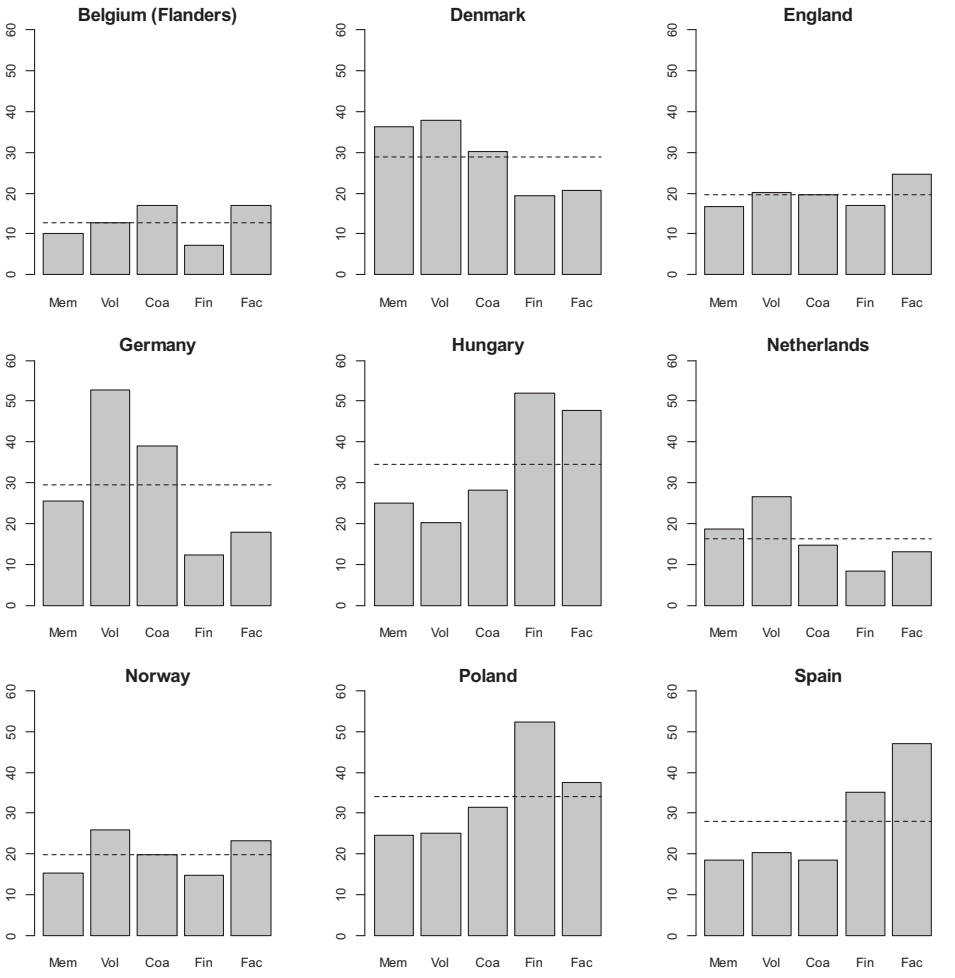


Figure 1. Perceptions of Problems in Percentages by Country.
Note: Survey question: 'How serious are certain problems in your club at the moment?'. Percentage of clubs in each country reporting that each of five problems are 'big' or 'very big'. Dotted lines are average problem level in each country. Abbreviations: ***Mem*** *= Recruitment/retention of members,* ***Vol*** *= Recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level,* ***Coa*** *= Recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors,* ***Fin*** *= Financial situation of the club,* ***Fac*** *= Availability of sport facilities.*

members to a decrease for model of club's financial situation) and decreases in AIC when comparing empty to full models.

On the national level, we hypothesized (H_{GDP}) that clubs in nations with high GDP would experience fewer problems than clubs form poorer nations. This hypothesis is confirmed for the financial situation of the clubs (b=–0.20, se = 0.07, $p < 0.01$) and availability of facilities (b=–0.15, se = 0.05, $p < 0.01$), but there are no significant effects on GDP on problems with human resources as recruitment/retention of members ($b = 0.02$, se = 0.04, n.s.), recruitment of board volunteers ($b = 0.03$, se = 0.04, n.s.) and recruitment of coaches/instructors (b=–0.02, se = 0.04, n.s.).

We further hypothesized (H_{Size}) that being a large club (having many members) represents a wide set of opportunities for members so that these clubs would have fewer problems with recruitment/retention of members than small clubs, and this

Table 4. Influence of National Contexts and Organizational Capacities on the Problem Perceptions: Multilevel Regressions.

	Recruitment/ Retention of Members	Recruitment/ Retention of Volunteers on the Board Level	Recruitment/ Retention of Coaches/ Instructors	Financial Situation of the Club	Availability of Sport Facilities
Fixed effects:					
Intercept	2.55***	2.94***	2.78***	3.53***	3.69***
	(0.20)	(0.25)	(0.25)	(0.38)	(0.28)
Organizational level:					
Size (members)	–0.21***	0.11***	0.12***	–0.18****	0.16***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Employees (*N*)	–0.02	0.01	–0.07***	0.05***	0.08***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Revenues	0.01	0.10***	0.04**	0.16***	0.08***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Negative balance	0.22***	0.16***	0.15***	0.38***	0.03
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Owning facilities	0.20***	0.10***	0.04*	0.12***	–0.60***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Network-social	–0.05***	–0.09***	–0.04***	–0.05***	–0.04***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Planning capacity	–0.16***	–0.19***	–0.15***	–0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
National level:					
GDP	0.02	0.03	–0.02	–0.20***	–0.15***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Random effects:					
Intercept (SD)	*0.26*	*0.33*	*0.33*	*0.51*	*0.37*
Observations	13798	13824	13711	13816	13694
Loglikelihood	–21127	–21611	–21985	–21328	–22858
AIC, empty	68537	69966	70840	68601	73352
AIC, full	42276	43244	43993	42678	45739
ICC empty	0.06	0.11	0.07	0.26	0.13
ICC full	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.17	0.08
ICC: %diff	–33	–36	0	–35	–38
R-square empty	*0.06*	*0.11*	*0.07*	*0.26*	*0.13*
R-square full	*0.11*	*0.14*	*0.09*	*0.24*	*0.15*
R-square: %diff	*+83*	*+27*	*+29*	*-8*	*+15*

hypothesis is supported (b=–0.21, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$). Next, we developed a type of complexity hypothesis predicting that recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level could be more troublesome in large clubs because it is more demanding to take part in the administration of such clubs. Our finding supports these assumptions ($b = 0.11$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.001$ and $b = 0.12$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$). We were uncertain of the effect of club size on the financial situation of clubs, but the results indicate that large clubs have fewer problems with the economy than small clubs (b=–0.18, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$). Finally, we expected larger clubs to develop a higher need for, and more problems with, availability of sport facilities, and this assumption is confirmed ($b = 0.16$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$).

Most sports federations and many clubs are in favor of professionalization – having employees – so an overall assumption is that having employees should be helpful for most tasks. Our theoretical discussion and hypothesis ($H_{\text{PaidStaff}}$) supported this

positive view – except for recruitment of board volunteers, perhaps being more demanding in professional clubs. Our results give a composite picture: Professionalization does not matter for recruitment/retention of members (b=–0.02, se = 0.01, n.s.). It helps for recruitment of coaches/instructors (b=–0.07, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$), yet is negative for the financial situation of clubs ($b = 0.05$, se = 0.01, $p < 0.001$) and availability of facilities ($b = 0.08$, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$). We left the question of recruitment of board volunteers as an open question, and professionalization seems to have no effect here ($b = 0.01$, se = 0.01, n.s.). Taken together, these findings clearly ask for refinement of what it implies to hire employees in voluntary sport organizations.

It is not obvious how the size of clubs' economies (revenues) should influence how they solve their tasks ($H_{Revenue}$), but the results of our analyses are relatively uniform; clubs with higher revenues report more problems compared to clubs with lower revenues. There is no significant effect on revenue size for the recruitment/retention of members ($b = 0.01$, se = 0.02, n.s.). For all other problems, high revenues accompany high problem levels and thus confirm our hypotheses on the negative effect of big revenues for the recruitment of board volunteers ($b = 0.10$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$) and the financial situation of clubs ($b = 0.16$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$), but rejecting hypotheses on the positive effect of revenues for recruitment of volunteer coaches/instructors ($b = 0.04$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.05$) and availability of facilities ($b = 0.08$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$). We assumed (H_{negbal}) that a negative balance could be destructive for clubs, and this has been confirmed for all problem-types (recruitment of members: $b = 0.22$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$, recruitment of volunteers at board level: $b = 0.16$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$, recruitment of coaches/instructors: $b = 0.15$. se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$ and financial situation: $b = 0.38$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$), except for availability of sport facilities ($b = 0.03$, se = 0.03, n.s.).

The hypothesis ($H_{Facilities}$) claiming that clubs owning facilities should have fewer problems with the availability of facilities is supported (b=–0.60, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$), but otherwise, clubs owning their facilities consistently have more problems than non-owning clubs. Hence, our hypotheses on a positive effect of ownership on recruitment of members ($b = 0.20$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$) and coaches/instructors ($b = 0.04$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$) are rejected, whereas the hypotheses suggesting a negative effect of facility-ownership is confirmed for recruitment of board volunteers ($b = 0.10$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$) and clubs' financial situation ($b = 0.12$, se = 0.02, $p < 0.01$).

We hypothesized ($H_{SocialNetwork}$) that having a lively social environment in a club is helpful, especially for human resources (recruitment of members: b=–0.05, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$, board volunteers: b=–0.09, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$ and coaches/instructors b=–0.04, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$) and this hypothesis is supported. We had no explicit assumption on how social relations could be helpful for clubs' financial situation (b=–0.05, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$) and availability of facilities (b=–0.04, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$), but found that social relations also lessen these types of problems.

For planning capacities, we hypothesized ($H_{PlanningCapacity}$) that they should be helpful for all tasks, but focused a set of hypotheses, both confirmed, for positive effects on recruitment of members (b=–0.16, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$), volunteers at board level (b=–0.19, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$) and coaches/instructors (b=–0.15, se = 0.01, $p < 0.01$). We left it as open questions on how planning capacities influence the

perception of problems with financial situation for clubs (b=–0.01, se = 0.01, n.s.) and sports facilities (b = 0.1, se = 0.1, n.s.) yet found no significant effects.

6. Discussion

In this study, we asked two sets of questions. First, we empirically surveyed the problems European sports clubs report and the factors that explain these problems at both the national and organizational levels. Second, we asked how our findings can be of relevance to policy action and the development of sports clubs.

6.1. Summary of Findings

To answer the empirical questions, we used data on sports clubs in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, England, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Spain, from the SIVSCE project. Our theoretical framework is based on a multilevel perspective where sports clubs have different organizational capacities for handling their situations and their ability to do so depends, in part, on national contexts described as economic, political, and civil society-based opportunity structures.

We chose to focus on five types of problems – i.e., recruitment/retention of members, recruitment/retention of volunteers at the board level, recruitment/retention of coaches/instructors, financial situation of clubs and availability of sport facilities, and whether clubs reported each of these problems as 'big' or 'very big.' Problems with the availability of sports facilities were reported by 28% of the clubs, recruitment and retention of volunteers on the board level by 27%, the financial situation of the club by 24%, recruitment and retention of coaches and instructors by 24% and recruitment and retention of members by 21%.

We further described the prevalence of problems in each of the nine countries separately and found noteworthy differences between the problem profiles in the various countries. First, we found that human resource problems were most widespread in Denmark and Germany and least common in Belgium (Flanders). Second, in Hungary, Poland, and Spain, finances and facilities stood out as the most reported problems, while these problems were most seldom in Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands. National characteristics matter in the clubs' perception of problems, including GDP, which is included in the multivariate analyses that showed clubs with high GDPs have fewer problems with finances and facilities than countries with lower GDP.

Finally, we surveyed how perceptions of these problems depend on club capacities. The emerging picture indicates that club characteristics do matter for how clubs perceive their surroundings, but also that the patterns are composite. Human resources, i.e., members and employees, are, in general, no guarantee for the absence of problems. Large clubs seem attractive to members and also experience less financial problems, but otherwise have more problems than smaller clubs. Professional clubs (with employees) have fewer problems with recruitment of coaches and more problems with clubs financial situation and availability of facilities; for recruitment of members and board volunteers, there were no effects. High revenues come with all types of problems, except when recruiting members. Having a sound economy (not a negative balance), is, however, helpful for

almost all problems the sports clubs might encounter. Owning facilities gives better access to facilities but increases all other types of problems. Planning capacity is especially helpful concerning human resource problems, such as recruitment/retention of members, board volunteers and coaches. Well-functioning internal social networks – companionship and conviviality – protect against all types of problems.

6.2. Implications

The topic for discussion was what these findings imply for sports clubs and sport politicians concerned about the situation for sports clubs across Europe. In the national context, the importance of national prosperity (GDP) for clubs' finances and access to facilities could seem to restrict the opportunity for domestic and local sport policies. Even though this is true and the finances and infrastructures of local sports depend on national financial capacities, we believe there are opportunities to develop more club-friendly sports policies, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, in this field: e.g. more knowledge, smarter organizations, standardization of facilities, cleverer financial funding, cross-sectional cooperation, programs for volunteering, and better use and prioritization of resources.

At the club level, some findings are clear and have direct implications for those involved. Other findings are still systematic, but do not point as clearly toward strategic action. Finally, some findings are more difficult to interpret both systematically and strategically. Three of our findings fall into the first category: They are clear, and they point to the possibility of the clubs themselves being proactive. It should come as no surprise that clubs with a negative financial balance (controlled for nationality and size of economy [revenues] and other club capacities) have more problems than other clubs, yet it is interesting to note this systematic pattern because it is, if not easy, at least possible for clubs to influence this factor since a sound economy pays off. A club's planning capacity has a thorough effect on its problem situation, and this is encouraging for all actors involved: It makes a difference for clubs how they relate to their situation. Even though national context matters, there is a room for the clubs themselves to think through and act out strategies (being proactive) that have positive effects for the clubs. Much the same yields to the social climate of the clubs. Working on internal social relations in the club, which could be possible in most clubs, decreases the perception of problems.

For larger clubs (more members), we sketched two social mechanisms – i.e., large clubs imply more opportunities but also indicate a more complex organization with higher demands to volunteers – that (partly) have the expected effects: encouraging members' participation, setting (too) high standards for volunteers. However, size, professionalization (high number of members and employees) and the size of the economy (revenues) also have effects that are more difficult to link to social mechanisms. Why do some clubs with employees have more problems with facilities than other clubs? The same goes for facilities: Clubs that own facilities have fewer problems with access to facilities, but otherwise, they have all sorts of problems. When the social mechanisms behind correlations are vague, it also becomes harder to understand implications and develop sound strategies to meet problems.

We have documented systematic links between national prosperity and a set of organizational capacities and which problems sports organizations experience across nations. We have furthermore addressed some social mechanisms inherent to these links, We still face, however, a challenge, both theoretically and empirically, both for academics and practitioners, when it comes to improve on our understandings of these more minutiose aspects of the relations between sports clubs perceptions of their problems and the clubs' surroundings.

For those involved in sports politics, it should be encouraging to note that the capacities most consistently helpful, were the club capacities most easily developed and handled by sports clubs themselves (good planning, balanced budgets, strong social networks). These capacities help for problems with human resources (members, volunteers, coaches). Material resources (facilities and financial issues) seem to depend more on external factors and national contexts. As such, it seems as if actors at the local and national levels have complementary roles. Clubs could plan, economize (positive balance), and network in a way that helps many problems, but primarily with human resources. Second, we see that national differences first and foremost make a difference for finances and facilities. These discussions point directly to future challenges for research on sports clubs, their perception of problems, explanations of these perceptions, and how problems could be handled.

6.3. Limits and Future Research Directions

Our research design is well chosen for getting a bird's-eye perspective on sports clubs and their main problems. However, it is less useful for understanding nuances and the intricate social mechanisms behind some of the correlations described. Hence, a crucial challenge is to get better insights into the social mechanisms behind some of our findings, and this would require complementary research (specific data, improved analyses) along the lines we have followed in this study. However, it would also require other types of data – qualitative interviews and observations —and analyses, making it possible to go more in detail concerning how clubs experience and ascribe meaning to their situations. We were able to include data on GDP in our multivariate analyses, but more information on national levels (civil society traditions, political organization and sport systems) could also help to understand the influence of both national factors, club factors and their interactions.

An unresolved challenge in these types of analyses is the direction of effects. Are clubs socially successful because they succeed with, e.g., recruitment of volunteers or do successful recruitment of volunteers lay the ground for vibrant social relations? Longitudinal data could help the understanding of such challenges.

We report the findings from this study as if they are valid for Europe, and even though they are based on the best available data for generalizing about Europe so far, a substantial number of countries did not join the study. From a global perspective, European nations have some similarities to non-European nations – welfare states like Australia and Canada, former non-European communist countries, Latin American nations with parallels to Spanish experiences – but we lack knowledge

about most nations. Future studies need a more global approach with more comprehensive and representative data.

Problems are social constructs, both when it comes to the facts they are based on and the normative standards pointing to the misfit between what is and should be. A better understanding of how such perceptions of problems develop would be useful. What interests make clubs communicate some problems at the cost of others? Which perceptions are more biased opinions of specific actors' ideocracies, and how do they develop? As a part of this challenge, one should also aim to understand better variations in interpretations of questions both between nations and between various sports.

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