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**The Logic Behind the Initiatives of National Governing Bodies in Flanders to improve
Organised Youth Sport: A Theory-Based Evaluation Approach**

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Abstract

Regular involvement in organised youth sport boosts the likelihood of lifelong sport participation. However, increasing youth dropout rates in sport clubs and alarming levels of young people not meeting physical activity guidelines may suggest that the organised sport sector's efforts have been insufficient to date. This situation calls for evaluation of the applicable youth sport policy to determine how organised youth sport is intended to operate and to articulate whether and how the policy achieves its stated goals. Accordingly, this paper identifies and analyses relevant initiatives of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to increase participation rates and improve the quality of youth sport in their affiliated sport clubs, using Flanders as a case study. A theory-based evaluation was applied working with qualitative data derived from extensive document analysis and five focus groups with representatives of 19 Flemish NGBs. The results reveal that the focus of NGBs is narrowed to increasing participation rates of youth members and building a sound organisational structure in sport clubs, rather than investing in the quality of provision to maximise enjoyment. Furthermore, most of the initiatives lack a clearly articulated strategy and are based on assumed mechanisms, rather than on prior understanding of effective processes. This study adds to the scarce literature on sport policy evaluation research by mapping out NGBs' youth sport initiatives and using a theoretical lens through which to evaluate them. For practitioners, the results demonstrate the usefulness of a logic model to evaluate the youth sport policy and optimise effectiveness of undertaken initiatives.

Keywords: Quality, organised youth sport, sport policy, theory-based evaluation, logic model

1 **Introduction**

2 Organised sport is one of the world's most popular pastimes among children and adolescents
3 (Vella, 2019). Organised youth sport is provided by a sport club or association and refers to
4 activities that require physical exertion and skill, includes structured training sessions and/or
5 competitions, and takes place outside school hours (Swann et al., 2018). The literature
6 demonstrates the benefits of organised youth sport participation as it is positively correlated
7 with physical, social, psychological, and intellectual health (Bailey, Hillman, Arent, &
8 Petitpas, 2013; Gould, 2019; Logan & Cuff, 2019; Vella, 2019).

9 Despite the popularity of organised sport among young people, there is a persistent
10 global trend of sub-optimal physical activity levels amongst this group (Aubert et al., 2018).
11 Furthermore, dropout rates of youth members in an organised sport context have increased,
12 with low retention rates after the age of 12 years old (Carlman & Augustsson, 2016; Gould,
13 2019; J. Murphy, Woods, Dijk, & Seghers, 2018; Witt & Dangi, 2018). This finding might
14 seem peculiar considering the positive correlation between organised youth sport
15 participation on the one hand and physical activity (PA) and lifelong sport participation on
16 the other hand (Kjønniksen, Anderssen, & Wold, 2009; M. Murphy, Rowe, & Woods, 2016;
17 Pfeiffer & Wierenga, 2019). The reasons for dropping out from organised youth sport have
18 been systematically reviewed by Crane and Temple (2015) who classify them into three types
19 of constraints, namely: intrapersonal (e.g., lack of enjoyment), interpersonal (e.g., parental
20 pressure), and structural constraints (e.g., injuries), with an ultimate consensus between
21 researchers that lack of fun is the most important reason for dropping out of organised youth
22 sport (Carlman & Augustsson, 2016; Crane & Temple 2015; M.R. Weiss, 2019; Witt &
23 Dangi, 2018). In the literature, both high dropout rates and low PA levels are attributed to
24 inadequate quality in organised youth sport (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Murphy et al.,
25 2016).

1 In most European countries governments intervene in sport in many ways, including
2 organised sport. In Belgium, high government involvement results in the establishment of
3 rules and regulations for the organised sport sector to attain sport policy goals in exchange for
4 resources and funding (Scheerder, Willem, & Claes, 2017). National Governing bodies
5 (NGBs), also referred to as sport federations or national sport organisations in an
6 international context, have the mandate to stimulate grassroots and elite sport programmes in
7 their country (Kasale, Winand, & Robinson, 2018). In this regard, NGBs play an important
8 role in achieving sport policy goals through the steering power they exert on their affiliated
9 sport clubs (Hoekman, Elling, & van der Poel, 2019).

10 While academics have focused their attention on the reasons for sport participation
11 and dropout, the effect of sport policy, particularly in organised youth sport, and the
12 presumed causal mechanisms behind initiatives undertaken by NGBs to achieve policy
13 objectives successfully, have both been overlooked (Chen, 2018; Jones et al., 2017; M.R.
14 Weiss, 2019; Witt & Dangi, 2018). Although some research concerning sport policy analysis
15 has emerged in recent years, evaluation of initiatives to reach sport policy goals is lagging
16 and described as an interesting area for scholars to elaborate on further (Grix, Lindsey, De
17 Bosscher, & Bloyce, 2018). Furthermore, in sport policy research, the call for applying public
18 policy theory and methods to generate evidence that informs policy is persistent (Bolton,
19 Martin, Grace, & Harris, 2018). Even though theory-based evaluation has been argued to be a
20 sound methodology in the context of sport programmes and has been used extensively in
21 public policy, little attention has been paid to its application in sport interventions or policies
22 (Bolton et al., 2018; Coalter, Theeboom, & Truyens, 2020). Hence, almost no literature
23 considers whether and to what extent the initiatives of NGBs lead to the intended results
24 (such as increased youth sport participation or improved quality in sport clubs) and few
25 articles use theory-based evaluation to analyse youth sport initiatives designed to increase

participation (Bolton et al., 2018; Chen, 2018; Hoekman et al., 2019; Lindsey & Bacon, 2016; Marchal, Van Belle, Van Olmen, Hoerée, & Kegels, 2012).

To address these issues and to advance the existing literature, this paper used a theory-based evaluation approach to analyse NGBs' youth sport initiatives and the assumed mechanisms behind them. This allowed to explore whether and how these initiatives are supposed to contribute to the government's intended policy goals for organised youth sport. Two research questions guided this study: (1) What are the initiatives that NGBs undertake under the stimulus of government sport policy to increase youth sport participation on the one hand and the quality of organised youth sport on the other hand? (2) How and why will these initiatives, according to NGBs, deliver the desired results (i.e., the assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind such initiatives)? The answers to these research questions were developed through a case study of the organised youth sport context in Flanders (Belgium). Employing the evidence-led theory-based evaluation approach not only aids in understanding which initiatives are undertaken under the current policy objectives, but also in uncovering why and how initiatives do (or do not) lead to the intended impacts, moving beyond the descriptive outcome-based approach.

The next section of the article provides a brief overview of the literature on theory-based evaluation as a methodology for researching public policy. Next, the article describes the context of this case study, Flanders, outlining the factors that need to be considered when evaluating initiatives. Subsequently, the methods are explained to develop theory-based evaluation of the applicable youth sport policy in Flanders. Finally, the results are discussed and implications for practitioners, researchers and policymakers are set out.

Theory-based evaluation in the context of sport

Policy evaluation research emerged from the 1970s onwards and has received considerable attention since then (Chen, Henry, & Ko, 2014; Marchal et al., 2012). Before the introduction of theory-based evaluation, traditional input-output evaluation approaches failed to determine the factors contributing to the success or failure of a policy (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Marchal et al., 2012). Chen et al. (2014) described this deficit as the ‘black box’ problem of policy processes. The theory-based evaluation approach provides a solution for this ‘black box’ problem and attempts to find out how and why policies do, or do not, lead to the desired impact (Chen et al., 2014; Morgan, Parker, Meek, & Cryer, 2020; C.H. Weiss, 1995). In other words, the theory-based evaluation will focus not only on the implementation of the policy (‘does it work?’), but also on mechanisms or logic and contextual factors that cause the outcomes (‘why and how it does (or does not) work?’) (Marchal et al., 2012).

Theory-based evaluation has been increasingly employed in public policy intervention research (Bolton et al., 2018). In the literature, two prominent theory-based evaluation approaches can be distinguished: theory of change and realist evaluation. Both approaches rely on programme theory to determine the presumed causal mechanisms between an intervention and the resulting impact, but are fundamentally different (Han, Theeboom, & Zhu, 2020). Evaluation of a programme is based on the theory of change underlying the programme (C.H. Weiss, 1995). The theory of change attempts to answer the question ‘how and why does the programme (not) work?’ (C.H. Weiss, 1995). This approach focuses on overall programme outcomes. It creates a macro-level perspective on complex programmes to clarify implementation theory (i.e., what is required to translate objectives into programme activities) for the purpose of programme improvement (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; C.H. Weiss, 1995). By contrast, the realist evaluation approach focuses on the micro-level, considering the aspects of the most promising programmes and is less useful in complex interventions with different outcomes (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Han et al., 2020). The

theory of change fits the purpose of this paper best, which takes a macro-level perspective to achieve an in-depth understanding on the effect of NGBs' initiatives to optimise youth sport under the applicable government sport policy.

Classified as a theory-based evaluation, a theory of change summarises how initiatives or activities should operate and how these are supposed to lead to desired impacts, given their specific context (Coalter, 2013). Every activity or initiative has its own theory and forms a base for which evaluation can be used (Coalter, 2013; C.H. Weiss, 1995). In other words, for each initiative, the theory of change determines the hypothesised logic pathway between the resources used and the desired impact envisioned. Therefore, the theory of change identifies the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts of every initiative to show their theoretical links (Bolton et al., 2018). A theory of change can be visualised by a logic model, representing the assumptions and presumed causal mechanism underpinning initiatives (Bolton et al., 2018; Han et al., 2020; Marchal et al., 2012; Rogers, 2008). This approach is useful for evaluation purposes as it outlines graphically the essential components of the programme, the logical relationships between resources and outputs, as well as the expected impact (Chen et al., 2014; Rogers, 2008). Two types of logic models are commonly used. The first type, the descriptive logic model, presents the programme in a chronological order to gain understanding at a base level. The second type, the analytical logic model, represents causal relationships between the different components which are subjected to evaluation (Chen et al., 2014). A logic model typically consists of (a) context relevant to the policy; (b) inputs used to address the policy; (c) activities undertaken; (d) immediate outputs from the activities; (e) short-term and long-term outcomes of the initiatives; and (f) the ultimate intended impacts of the policy.

Theory-based evaluation highlights the importance of context when evaluating initiatives. Understanding the context in which initiatives operate is crucial and determines the extent to

which the results are generalisable, if at all (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007). However, sport policy interventions are undertaken in open and dynamic contexts, which makes it difficult to include all factors and to make sure all elements of the context are captured (Han et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2020).

In theory-based evaluation, the use of theory of change, in which the logic behind initiatives can be visualised into an explanatory model, provides several advantages for research, policymakers and practitioners. Through modelling the assumed logic on how initiatives are supposed to achieve policy objectives, a shared understanding is created among different stakeholders involved in the policy process (Chen, 2018). For researchers, the determination of links between inputs, activities, output, outcome, and impact, specifies sets of measures against which outcomes can be reported and whether the theory behind the initiatives is valid or not (i.e., theory failure) (Bolton et al., 2018; Chen, 2018; Han et al., 2020). For practitioners and policymakers, this process forms a basis from which initiatives can be tested empirically to identify implementation gaps (i.e., implementation failure) (Han et al., 2020). Drawing on the framework created by a logic model, the assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind initiatives leading to desired key results can be presented systematically and serve as a starting point to understand and improve programmes in the future (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Chen et al., 2014). In other words, the logic model opens the black box between input and intended outcomes to understand if and why the policy objectives are achieved (Bolton et al., 2018). Hence, it provides a basis for practitioners and policymakers to evaluate their policy and initiatives for future planning, improvement, and monitoring (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Bolton et al., 2018).

To improve public policy, evidence-based empirical research has received increasing attention from researchers, policymakers, and practitioners (Bolton et al., 2018). In this regard, Bolton et al. (2018) claim that the use of public policy theories, such as theory-based

evaluation, provides rigorous evidence to inform policies, yet remains relatively neglected in sport policy and research. Therefore, it is argued that sport policy research is lagging, with very few articles focusing on this area of enquiry (Bolton et al., 2018; Coalter et al., 2020; Lindsey & Bacon, 2016). Also, several authors claim that adequate policy evaluation in the field of sport is still in its infancy and some studies on sport policy evaluation fail to employ any theoretical framework (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Chen, 2018; Coalter, 2013). One of the findings of the systematic integrative literature review by Jones et al. (2017) was that only 18 % of the research articles included information on the assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind sport programmes. In addition, a recent paper of Coalter, Theeboom and Truyens (2020) confirmed through their literature review that current descriptive outcome-based evaluation approaches of sport programmes are, in most cases, limited because they lack information on the underpinning assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms of those programmes. A theory-based evaluation has been argued by Morgan et al. (2020) to be a useful technique to explore the assumptions and mechanisms behind specific initiatives, using the logic model to visualise them in a systematic manner. This study goes beyond the merely descriptive outcome-based approaches and uses a theory-based evaluation approach to map out the youth sport initiatives undertaken by NGBs on the one hand, and to uncover the presumed relationships between the initiatives and their impact on the other hand. Therefore, NGBs with an explicit objective to improve youth sport in their clubs were investigated within the policy context of Flanders.

Context of the study: youth sport in Flanders

In Belgium, a country with 11,5 million inhabitants, sport is a ‘community’ matter (Statbel, 2021). Flanders, the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium which accounts for 6,6 million of the population, is one of three communities and has its own and independent sport policy system. Characterised by strong government involvement, the ministry in charge of sport,

1 ‘*Sport Vlaanderen*’, decides the level of funding for NGBs to achieve specified sport policy
 2 goals (Scheerder et al., 2017). NGBs, in turn, allocate part of the funding they receive to their
 3 affiliated sport clubs. Flanders serves 21% of the population with a sport offer via 16,000+
 4 sport clubs affiliated to one of the 70 recognised NGBs, of which 49 receive funding (Sport
 5 Vlaanderen, 2022). NGBs in Flanders vary in size, ranging from 6 to 2,652 associated sport
 6 clubs and 397 to 283,000 affiliated members (Sport Vlaanderen, 2022).

7 Over the past decade, participation of Flemish children and young adolescents in a
 8 sport club context in Flanders has stabilised at around 48% (Sport Vlaanderen, 2022).
 9 However, in Flanders, only 7% of the 6 to 9-year-olds and 3% of the 10 to 17-year-olds meet
 10 the WHO recommendations of being moderate to vigorous physically active at least 60
 11 minutes a day (AHKGA, 2018). Even though other European countries report about the same
 12 percentage of youngsters involved in organised sport, they attain a better score for the
 13 proportion of children and adolescents meeting WHO physical activity recommendations,
 14 such as the Netherlands (50%), Finland (30%), France (20%), Slovenia (80%), Germany
 15 (20%) and Sweden (18%) (AHKGA, 2018). Furthermore, after a slight decrease of dropout
 16 rates in Flanders from 2014 (16%) to 2017 (14%), percentages are increasing again, with
 17 16% of the 10 to 19 years old population dropping out from the sport clubs in 2020 (Sport
 18 Vlaanderen, 2020). Hence, it seems that sport policy in Flanders has not achieved its intended
 19 effects in full, namely, to increase sport participation and to improve the quality of sport
 20 supply. Both intended effects are central pillars on which NGB’s subsidies for youth sport in
 21 Flanders are predicated. Accordingly, this study was implemented to understand whether,
 22 how and why Flemish NGBs undertake initiatives for youth sport in the context of achieving
 23 government youth sport policy goals.

1 The sport policy rules and regulations in Flanders are organised through specific
 2 ‘decrees’¹. The most current decree of June 10th in 2016 regarding the recognition and
 3 funding of the organised sport sector stipulates the conditions under which NGBs can apply
 4 for government funding. First, all NGBs can obtain a base level of funding dependent on their
 5 number of affiliated members and full-time employees, the quality of the sport they provide
 6 in terms of qualified coaches, and their standard of good governance (Flemish government,
 7 2016). Further, NGBs can submit a ‘youth sport project’ application and receive additional
 8 funding when deemed eligible (Flemish government, 2016). The so-called ‘policy focus on
 9 youth sport’ was initiated in 1999 and has its own assessment committee to scrutinise the
 10 projects submitted by the NGBs to enhance youth sport in their clubs. Through this project-
 11 based support, the government aims to increase the quality of organised youth sport and to
 12 boost organised youth sport participation rates (Flemish Government, 2016). In 2020, the
 13 youth sport projects of 41 Flemish NGBs were approved, and, for the purpose of this case
 14 study, they were all reviewed (Sport Vlaanderen, 2020). An overview of the 41 NGBs can be
 15 found in appendix A. These 41 NGBs represent the supply side of organised youth sport and
 16 decide whether and how to stimulate demand in their affiliated sport clubs through (a)
 17 making their services more available to attract new youth members and / or (b) improving the
 18 quality of their supply for existing youth members (Bullough, 2011; Meldrum & McDonald,
 19 1995).

20 Three important contextual points concerning sport policy in Flanders are noteworthy
 21 when analysing the youth sport initiatives of NGBs. First, in Flanders, as well as in many
 22 other European countries, most of the youth coaches are volunteers rather than paid
 23 employees (Breuer, Feiler, Llopis-Goig, & Elmoose-Østerlund, 2017). Second, during the past

¹ Belgium is a federal state with three communities. Legislation by the central parliament is called ‘laws’ and legislation by the Flemish parliament is called ‘decree’. Because Flanders has full responsibility for sport in their community, all legislation concerning sport is provided in decrees.

decade, after different sexual harassment scandals, there is an increased focus from the government on creating an ethically responsible sport environment, which is now a prerequisite to be recognised as an NGB (Flemish Government, 2016; Vertommen, 2017). Third, from the 1960s onwards, Flanders has been one of the pioneering countries in ‘sport for all’ campaigns, focused on making sport accessible for everyone, and is still heavily committed to the organised sport sector (Vos et al., 2011).

Method

A qualitative research methodology in the form of an instrumental case study of ‘youth sport in Flanders’ is used to understand which initiatives NGBs currently undertake to increase youth sport participation and improve the quality of youth sport within the current sport policy context of Flanders (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). An instrumental case study is deemed appropriate when a particular case is studied in-depth (youth sport in Flanders) to provide in-depth understanding into a phenomenon (Sparkes & Smith, 2013).

Participants

All 41 Flemish NGBs with an approved youth sport project in 2020 funded by the ministry in charge of sport, ‘*Sport Vlaanderen*’, were considered. The Flemish NGBs included in the investigation differ in type (multisport versus unisport), sport offered (for the unisport NGBs), number of affiliated sport clubs and, number of (youth) members (see appendix A). Multisport NGBs offer at least five distinct sports and are recreationally oriented. Unisport NGBs are limited to a single sport and offer it in both recreational and competitive forms (Flemish government, 2016). From the 41 NGBs included in this research, six are multisport and 35 are unisport. Within the group of unisport NGBs, a typology for the type of sport is applied resulting in four categories: individual sport (no direct opponent), team sport (with at least two other players), combat sport (at least one opponent) and racket sport (at least one

opponent) (Scheerder, Vandermeerschen, Borgers, Thibaut, & Vos, 2013). As such, 19 NGBs offer individual sport, eight team sport, four fighting sport, and four offer racket sport. The affiliated sport clubs of the 41 NGBs ranged from five to 2,829 and affiliated youth sport members from 342 to 165,646, based on 2018 data (Sport Vlaanderen, 2020).

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected in two sequential stages.

First, an extensive programme of desk research was carried out on the policy documents of all Flemish NGBs with an approved youth sport project in 2020 (N = 41). This process involved three secondary data sources for each NGB: (a) the specific policy plan of the NGB; (b) the youth sport project submitted for additional funding; and (c) the website. The policy plan and the website were searched for all forms of youth sport initiatives. For each NGB (N=41), a specific logic model was established visualising the initiatives undertaken to improve youth sport (participation and quality) in their affiliated sport clubs, together with a presumed programme theory behind each initiative. The individual logic model was sent to each NGB separately by e-mail for validation purposes and all 41 NGBs were subsequently invited to attend focus group interviews to reflect on the initiatives they implemented.

Second, representatives of 19 NGBs attended focus group interview voluntarily. An overview of the 19 participating NGBs can be found in Appendix B. Focus groups are recommended when the topic investigated is of an exploratory nature (Creswell, 2014). In total, five focus groups were held based on the typology of sport with representatives of 19 NGBs. The interviews in the focus groups were semi-structured and were directed using a PowerPoint presentation to ensure a standardised protocol. The focus group questions concentrated on (a) the validation and evaluation of the logic model, including the specific

question ‘Are all the initiatives in the logic model and the presumed reasoning behind them applicable to the NGB you represent?’; (b) getting insights into reasoning of NGBs concerning the different initiatives they undertake by asking questions such as ‘Why do you think this specific initiative would achieve the intended goals?’, and ‘For which purpose is this initiative undertaken?’; and (c) to share knowledge about which initiatives do or do not seem to work from their experience, with questions such as ‘What are the struggles that your NGB encountered during this initiative and why do you think that is?’ and ‘Did the initiative lead to the intended results. And if so, why do you think that worked for your NGB?’. Each focus group had a maximum duration of two hours and were all conducted in July 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus groups were held through online video calls using the Microsoft Teams application. At the end of each focus group discussion, the audio recording was transcribed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was applied to analyse the initiatives undertaken by NGBs, as this is a recommended qualitative data analysis method for providing insight and for describing a topic when literature is scarce (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). For each NGB, every initiative concerning youth sport arising from the document analysis was listed in a separate row in Excel. Next, an inductive approach was used to cluster the data within themes (Basil, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Three steps were undertaken by one researcher throughout the open coding: (1) line-by-line coding where every initiative was given a code; (2) these codes were grouped into categories; and (3) the categories were abstracted to themes. This process was analysed by another researcher and the constant comparison method was used in which codes, categories and themes were compared and reviewed until consensus was reached between the researchers (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The ultimate initiatives were ranked from most undertaken (at the top of the list) to least

undertaken (at the bottom of the list). After the thematic analysis, a logic model was compiled for every NGB with their specific initiatives listed under the agreed themes. Every NGB was invited to a focus group to validate their populated logic model and to provide feedback on their initiatives.

Important quotations from the focus groups are used in the results to illustrate the findings and to provide insights into the assumed causal mechanisms behind the NGBs' youth sport development initiatives.

Results

Logic model

In figure 1, an overarching logic model summarises the initiatives NGBs undertake to increase youth sport participation rates and improve the quality of youth sport programmes in their affiliated sport clubs. This analytical logic model visualises the causal relationships between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and the impact of the NGBs in their specific context (Chen et al., 2014; Coalter, 2013). Further, the assumed mechanisms reflect the rationale or underlying assumptions of NGBs on how and why the initiatives should lead to the intended impact (Chen, 2018; Coalter, 2013).

[Figure 1 near here]

There are three types of contexts in which an NGB operates that need to be considered. First, *the NGB's specific context* outlines characteristics of the NGB for which the logic model was established: the foundation year, number of affiliated (youth) members by gender, number of affiliated sport clubs and whether the NGB is classified as a uni- or multi-sport NGB.

Second, the *social context* considers demographic trends such as ageing and increased

migrant populations; and social trends such as increased leisure time, the importance of technology and the individualisation of society, etc. Third, *the applicable government policy context*, as previously described, also needs to be considered when implementing initiatives for youth sport. The latter two types of contexts are similar for all NGBs operating in Flanders.

‘Inputs’ refer to the funding that Flemish NGBs receive from the ministry in charge of sport in Flanders (i.e., Sport Vlaanderen) and can be broken down by: (a) base funding for daily operations and staff payments of the NGB; (b) additional funding received for approved youth sport projects; and (c) additional funding for other focus projects (i.e.: innovation, grassroots promotion, sport camps, and elite sport).

The ‘initiatives’ component of the logic model reflects the thematic analysis and reveals seven themes under which all the initiatives initiated by Flemish NGBs to improve youth sport in their affiliated clubs can be clustered. These are initiatives regarding: (1) training sessions and activities for youth members; (2) organisation and structure of the sport club; (3) youth coaches and staff; (4) ethically and medically responsible sport participation; (5) sport for all; (6) competition; and (7) quality in training sessions. The detailed thematic analysis can be found in table 1.

The ‘outputs’ column refers to the immediate results that NGBs wish to achieve in their affiliated clubs through the funded initiatives. The ‘outcomes’ consider short term as well as long term outcomes and reflect the changes NGBs want to achieve for their youth members. These outcomes include: (a) increased youth member participation rates; (b) better quality of youth sport in sport clubs; and/or (c) increasing awareness concerning ethically responsible sporting in affiliated sport clubs. The ‘impacts’ consists of the two main goals set

out by the government: (a) to increase organised sport participation rates of children and adolescents; and (b) to enhance the quality of organised youth sport in Flanders.

Finally, the ‘assumed mechanisms’ reflect the underlying assumptions NGBs make as to how the different initiatives should lead to the desired results.

[Table 1 near here]

In what follows, we elaborate on the different initiatives implemented by the NGBs within each of the seven themes and indicate for each theme how many NGBs are active engagers within this theme. For each theme the ‘underlying assumptions’ section is illustrated with quotations from the focus group discussions explaining how the initiatives are assumed to lead to the intended impact (assumed mechanisms) according to the NGBs.

(1) Training Sessions and Activities for Youth Members (N=41)

Regarding the training sessions and activities for youth members, most NGBs concentrate on the quantity of training sessions and activities organised for new and affiliated youth members. They principally focus on the organisation of a minimum amount of (a) training sessions; (b) promotional activities such as introduction days and field days; (c) sport camps; and (d) side activities such as a teambuilding. Several NGBs also highlight the need for further provisions such as separate coaches, training sessions and training infrastructure for youth members in their clubs. NGBs also work collaboratively with other actors, such as schools and other sport clubs to reach as many youth members as possible.

Underlying assumptions for number of training sessions

Focus group discussions revealed that increasing participation rates through organising more training sessions to serve more, new youth members only works when there is an increase in supply within sport clubs, in terms of the availability of sufficient infrastructure and/or human capacity.

We [NGB] have various sport clubs that do not accept any additional youth members because they lack the capacity in terms of sport infrastructure or youth coaches. (Focus group 1-3)

Underlying assumptions for activities

Promotional activities are intended to attract new youth members, whereas side activities focus on the retention of existing youth members by offering other activities in addition to the regular training sessions for existing youth members. NGBs are convinced that organising accessible promotional and side activities respectively leads to increased participation rates and less dropout of youth members as they create more social cohesion.

To guarantee a good atmosphere and improved cohesion between youth members, the additional side activities need to be fun and accessible for everyone. (Focus group 3-4)

We [NGBs] must keep them [promotional activities] accessible if we want to grow our participation rates (Focus group 4).

Underlying assumptions for collaboration with other partners

According to the NGBs, working regularly with partners reduces the barriers for children joining a sport club and leads to increasing participation rates.

We [NGB] notice that the number of affiliated youth members increase through the provision of multiple training sessions at the school. (Focus group 1)

It [project at school] works because it reduces the barriers to join the sport club. (Focus group 1)

(2) Organisation and Structure of the Sport Club (N=41)

The majority of the NGBs considered it important that affiliated clubs have an explicit organisational approach for making decisions regarding youth sport. More specifically, appointing a (qualified) coordinator for youth sport and implementing a specific youth sport policy is a priority for many NGBs to assure quality in their clubs. Referring to laws and regulations for organised sport in Flanders to get funding, this focus on specific coordinators

and policies for youth members follows the good governance principle stipulated by the decree, which in turn enables clubs to receive funding.

Furthermore, almost every NGB highlights the importance of mapping the inflow, the throughput, and the dropout numbers of affiliated youth members. This process is in accordance with the relationship between the number of affiliated members and funding that NGBs receive. By contrast, remarkably few NGBs pay attention to the planning and evaluation of training sessions or activities. For example, only two NGBs actively encourage their sport clubs to survey affiliated youth members to assess their satisfaction with the club, which would be a good indicator of the tastes and preferences of the current generation of youth members and a starting point to influence their demand. However, the focus groups discussions revealed that, according to NGBs, it is equally important to pay attention to retaining the youth members and have a thorough understanding of the reasons for dropout rather than merely keeping track of the numbers.

It is useful to know at around what age youth members decide to leave the sport clubs and why, so that we can respond accordingly. (Focus group 3)

For the sake of loyalty to the club, atmosphere, and the generation of potential coaches, it is important that the club retains its members. (Focus group 4)

Communication with (new) youth members using a website, social media, brochures and/or newsletters, is an important tool for promoting sport for numerous NGBs. According to NGBs, social media is the primary communication channel that a sport club should use.

Communications through e-mail or newsletters are disappearing. Social media is the new channel through which to communicate with youth members and their parents. (Focus group 2)

Fewer than half of the participating NGBs focus on parental involvement within their sport clubs through for example specific information sessions or parental activities. Also, several NGBs encourage their sport clubs to undertake actions that benefit the volunteers. The

positive interaction between parental involvement and the number of volunteers in sport clubs is confirmed by different NGBs.

Through parental activities, parents tend to become volunteers of the sport club. (Focus group 1)

Additionally, few NGBs provide sport clubs with the freedom to devise their own initiatives to optimise the quality of youth sport and only one NGB has its own independent quality control system for affiliated clubs.

Underlying assumptions for organisational decisions concerning youth sport

NGBs assume that appointing a coordinator and establishing a youth sport policy ultimately lead to better quality, without necessarily accounting for the required factors behind these initiatives to achieve the intended quality improvement. Also, the strategy behind these initiatives to be effective, such as the tasks that the coordinator needs to perform, and the content of the youth sport policy plan, are only specified by a few NGBs.

The coordinator for youth sport needs to be subjected to different criteria to guarantee quality in the sport club. (Focus group 1)

We [NGB] notice that sport clubs either do not have a coordinator for youth sport, or they do, but rather in theory only. (Focus group 1)

Underlying assumptions for mapping out the youth members

NGBs acknowledge that there is no determined strategy underpinning the initiative to map out the number of affiliated youth members and the process seems to be designed solely for data collection purposes, with NGBs assuming their clubs analyse the data themselves, or they have the feeling that they already know the causes of dropout and no investigation is required.

For us [NGB], mapping the numbers of youth members is solely for data collection purposes. (Focus group 2-5)

We [NGB] expect that sport clubs establish evaluation reports of sport camps and training sessions in which they think critically about improvements for the future. (Focus group 2)

Dropout occurs because the combination with school life is hard, or they prefer other types of sports. These are things we [NGB] know, however we do not ask explicitly why our members leave. (Focus group 4)

By contrast, many of the NGBs recognised the problem that no evaluation or thorough understanding explaining the number of affiliated members is evident, and hence, remains a policy black box for them.

A training session is successful when the children keep participating every week, with a smile. We [NGB] do not specify the factors that should lead to this. (Focus group 1)

We [NGB] must admit that in some sport clubs, we noticed high dropout rates they were not aware of. (Focus group 1)

Underlying assumptions for communication

The use of social media should ultimately lead to higher participation rates, according to NGBs. Whether and how this should lead to higher rates of participation remains rather unclear, reflecting the input-output approach of the initiative.

Last year, we [NGB] focused on the use of social media to promote our sport clubs. Even though we reached numerous people, it is uncertain if this eventually led to an increase in participation rates. (Focus group 1)

Underlying assumptions for parental involvement

Through parental activities NGBs organise other non-sport activities to retain existing youth members. Also, NGBs hope to reach parents and either inform them about positive sport development impacts on their children, or to involve them in the sport clubs of their child(ren).

Information sessions for parents are organised to ensure they do not take up the role of a coach, and they do not pressure their child too much. (Focus group 2)

Through initiating parent-child tournaments, we hope to increase parental involvement and lower dropout rates of youth members (Focus group 2 - 3).

(3) Youth Coaches and Staff (N=41)

All NGBs attach value to sport clubs with qualified youth coaches and many NGBs reward sport clubs that develop a policy to educate youth coaches and other staff. Trained coaches are highlighted in the decree and form an important funding requirement for NGBs.

However, not all NGBs are convinced of the relationship between education and the quality of training sessions as some NGBs focus on the education of youth coaches merely to get funding.

We [NGB] focus on the training of youth coaches because it is imposed from the government.

However, in my opinion, the trained coach does not necessarily equal the best coach. One needs to consider the experience a youth coach has and whether the coach fits with children and youth he/she trains. (Focus group 5)

Although sport-specific education is of importance to every NGB, education concerning ethical issues or pedagogical principles is considered by only four NGBs. However, the importance of a motivating coach, or a coach with pedagogical skills is acknowledged in the focus group discussions.

Education for coaches is still focused on the technical level of [playing] sport. In future, coach training should focus on developing didactical and motivating skills as a youth coach. (Focus group 2)

Underlying assumptions for qualification of coaches

NGBs associate the education of coaches with higher quality in training sessions for youth members. Nevertheless, when uncovering the black box between education of youth coaches and the outcome of improved quality, some difficulties were revealed that NGBs experience in practice, which may be due to a lack of strategy. First, it is not because an education for youth coaches is organised, that youth coaches will be interested in participating. Second, the

content of the education needs to be adapted in such a way that it is relevant for the youth coach. Third, following an education does not immediately lead to the application of this knowledge in practice.

We [NGBs] have invested in coach education to improve quality in training sessions. Yet, motivating the youth coaches to follow the education seems more challenging. (Focus group 3)

The education of youth coaches needs to be relevant for the sport club, the youth coaches, and the youth members. (Focus group 3)

It remains difficult to effectively test to what extent youth coaches apply what they have learned. (Focus group 1)

Unfortunately, a youth coach following a training does not imply that he/she immediately follows the philosophy of the NGB. (Focus group 1)

(4) Ethically and medically responsible sport participation (N=40)

All but one of the NGBs encourage sport clubs to create a good governance climate with attention paid to ethics, reflecting the increased requirements from the government for recognised NGBs to create an ethically responsible climate. The majority of the NGBs require their sport clubs to appoint a (qualified) single point of contact for integrity, or to set up projects and/or actions on ethical issues such as sexual harassment and abuse, fair play, bullying, healthy lifestyle, etc. and to communicate about them.

Other initiatives concern the establishment of an ethical code of conduct or decisions at the organisational level of the sport club such as signing the Panathlon Declaration ² and establishing a protocol in the event of ethical issues surfacing.

A minority of the NGBs highlight the importance of injury prevention and safety provisions like a sport medical examination to verify that an athlete can participate in sport

² The Panathlon Declaration in Flanders is a declaration that NGBs can sign to commit themselves to record clear rules of conduct in the pursuit of positive values in youth sport (<http://panathlonvlaanderen.be>)

without risking their health. Likewise, few NGBs require staff with medical knowledge at the sport club or to communicate about the importance of medically responsible participation to members.

Underlying assumptions for ethics in the organisation

When uncovering the policy black box, NGBs seem to experience difficulties when talking about the implementation of ethics in sport clubs. Due to a lack of underlying strategy, appointing a single point of contact for integrity within sport clubs does not guarantee that this person knows their tasks, that he/she is fit for the task description, or that he/she is known by the members of the sport club.

It is crucial to clearly define what the single point of contact for integrity is supposed to do.

(Focus group 3)

An integrity point of contact is purely a theoretical concept in sport clubs. (Focus group 3)

Not only is it important to check whether the sport club appointed a single point of contact for integrity, but also whether this is effectively communicated within that sport club. (Focus group 4)

Underlying assumptions for codes of conduct

The following quotations illustrate that, once an NGB has given input, the desired outputs of effective communication and establishing a code of conduct are assumed.

The presence of a code of conduct improves the quality of youth sport and the presence is of importance for parents of youth members. (Focus group 5)

We [NGB] have established blueprints of a code of conduct for sport clubs to adopt. We can do no more than provide this to sport clubs. (Focus group 5)

Underlying assumptions for safety provisions

Communicating about injury prevention and safety is deemed crucial to convince people to become a member of the sport club, i.e., increase participation rates. How sport clubs should communicate this effectively, is not mentioned.

Everyone thinks that our sport is dangerous, but, compared to other sports, our injury rates are good. We must keep it that way to maintain our reputation and communicate about it. (Focus group 3)

Communicating about implemented safety provisions can convince parents to approve the participation of their children in the sport clubs. (Focus group 1)

(5) Sport for all (N=37)

Almost all NGBs attempt to provide sport for everyone, which reflects the aim of ‘sport for all’ campaigns, of which Belgium (Flanders) was a pioneer. NGBs highlight the importance of the inclusion of disadvantaged and/or disabled people in sport clubs through initiating specific activities or cooperating with social organisations to reach these target groups.

Several NGBs focus on the inclusion of girls or boys, dependent on the gender inequality in their sport clubs. Also, a quarter of the NGBs require sport clubs to offer recreational opportunities for youth members who are not interested in participating at a (highly) competitive level.

If you want to increase participation rates, it is paramount to broaden the supply at the grassroots level. (Focus group 1)

Underlying assumptions for sport for all

NGBs perceive that establishing the offer for specific target groups is not always successful because the target group cannot be reached and/or is not interested in the offer. Hence, the input does not guarantee the output and knowledge of individual tastes and preferences of targeted youth members is needed along with understanding the mechanisms that change them in favour of sport.

We do not have sufficient youth members to implement separate training sessions for both competitive and non-competitive members within one age category. (Focus group 1)

We [NGB] notice that many sport club encounter difficulties in reaching specific target groups. (Focus group 2)

You need to be aware of the expectations of the target groups and adapt your supply accordingly. (Focus group 3)

(6) Competition (N=35)

Organising youth competitions or tournaments and/or encouraging youth members to participate in youth sport competitions are important issues for the majority of the NGBs. For competitive youth members, sport clubs should organise separate training sessions and sport camps, and talented youth need to receive opportunities to develop and progress.

Youth members enjoy their participation in the sport club when they can improve their skills. (Focus group 4)

Underlying assumptions for competition

Many NGBs assume that competitions and tournaments are organised in such a way that existing youth members find them enjoyable and remain attached to the sport club. However, the mechanisms behind factors contributing to this ‘enjoyment’ (or in economic terms ‘utility’) are not properly understood. Others admit that narrow attitudes concerned with winning and early specialisation are prevailing issues in many sport clubs.

Most sport clubs merely concentrate on winning competitions. It will take a while to change the attitude from winning to long-term development (focus group 1).

Everyone needs to experience learning opportunities at their own pace. We [NGB] notice that most youth coaches cannot cope with this. (Focus group 1)

It is acceptable to experience a little pressure as youth member, but we [NGB] must develop more diversity in our competitions. (Focus group 3)

(7) Quality of training sessions (N= 23)

Several NGBs incentivise affiliated sport clubs to create challenges and rewards for all youth members to the extent that everyone can progress at their own pace. The NGBs highlighted that there should be different forms of competition available, adapted to individual tastes and preferences, and that everyone should have a positive experience from their participation.

Compared with the focus on the quantity of training sessions and activities organised for youth members, only half of the NGBs show a strong focus on guiding the content of the training sessions and activities. If they do, the focus essentially is on the acquisition of fundamental movement skills for the youngest members, the use of forms of play in training sessions and the use of a training plan during training sessions. However, in the focus group discussions, the content of training sessions and activities was deemed crucial in terms of quality, as illustrated by the quotations below:

Fun and formation should be part of each training session and should be present at every level of participation in sport [from recreation to competition]. (Focus group 1)

In certain age groups, it is not only sport specific training that matters. Rather, the more developed their [youth members] motor skills are, the better. (Focus group 4)

Some NGBs reflect that the content of training sessions is the primary responsibility of the sport clubs or the youth coach. Other NGBs do recognise their role in influencing the content of training sessions.

We [NGB] do not offer elaborate schedules for each group. We trust on the capacities of the youth coach. (Focus group 4)

Concerning training sessions, sport clubs must decide the content to make it fun. (Focus group 5)

Provide sport clubs with tools to implement it [quality in training sessions] effectively. (Focus group 1)

We [NGBs] should not put all responsibility on the youth coaches, but the NGB must deliver the content of training sessions too. (Focus group 3)

The use of web applications and programmes with a variety of exercises for each age category is highlighted by a quarter of the NGBs. These applications serve mainly as inspiration for more and better exercises during youth training sessions.

Underlying assumption for the content of training sessions

When NGBs establish guidelines for the content of youth training sessions they assume that sport clubs and youth coaches follow these guidelines effectively. However, as illustrated in the following quotations, in practice, it does not seem that this input ultimately leads to the intended output. The problems indicated below refer to the dependence on the translation of the content by the youth coach, who often still has an early specialisation and winning focus.

In our sport development model, the most important content and teaching method for each age category are described. However, youth coaches need to understand this model to recognise what they should teach at what age or level of skill. (Focus group 1)

We [NGB] have worked out a sport programme for sport clubs with a curriculum to give youth coaches a guide on how to build their training sessions and content. However, because a youth coach wants to perform with his athletes, it is not easy to switch the focus from short-term performance to a long-term development focus of the athletes. (Focus group 4)

Underlying assumptions for applications and programmes with exercises

Increasing numbers of NGBs have created a web application with ideas and protocols for training exercises in sessions with youth members. How exactly NGBs will encourage youth coaches to use these resources effectively was not indicated.

Discussion and conclusion

To uncover the policy black box and investigate causal explanations or links between NGBs' initiatives for youth sport and their impacts on participation rates or quality in youth sport clubs, a theory-based evaluation was used (Chen et al., 2014). Instead of merely considering the outcomes of the policy on youth sport (the NGBs' initiatives), the paper provides understanding into the processes the policy involves (Chen, 2018; Coalter et al., 2020). The document analysis on the youth sport projects, website and policy plans of every NGB, together with the thematic analysis and the visualisation in a logic model (figure 1), enabled a better understanding of the initiatives taken by Flemish NGBs to optimise organised youth

sport. Along with the focus group discussions, this process revealed the presumed mechanisms and the underlying strategies behind the different initiatives (Chen, 2018; Coalter, 2013). In this way, it provides interesting insights into the way of thinking, i.e., the logic, that underpins NGBs' initiatives within the Flemish policy context, which aims to increase organised youth sport participation and improve the quality of sport offer for youth members.

First, the results of the thematic analysis showed that all NGBs under consideration undertake initiatives focused on increasing participation rates. Hence, current initiatives are focused on attracting new youth members, through for example organising more training sessions, promotional activities, the use of social media, safety provisions and providing sport for all. Fewer NGBs focus the retention or the increase in frequency of participation of existing youth members through investing in quality of provision (Bullough, 2011; Meldrum & McDonald, 1995). When initiatives are oriented towards quality improvement, these tend to be at the management level of a club rather than guiding the real, practical content of the service offered to youth members. Despite the efforts to increase participation rates, the stagnation in sport club participation by young people indicates that the efforts of Flemish NGBs are not creating the additionality in participation desired from the funding for youth sport. Blamey and Mackenzie (2007) highlight that, to effectively increase participation rates, it will require more effort than merely providing additional opportunities to engage in the sport club. This confirms the statement of Chelladurai and Chang (2000), indicating the need for experienced quality of youth members to continue their participation in the club.

Second, the focus group discussions revealed that an input-output approach reflects the NGBs' policy black box rationale behind most initiatives. NGBs provide inputs and specify criteria which sport clubs need to fulfil, such as establishing a youth sport policy, providing more training sessions, appointing a coordinator and an integrity point of contact etc. The

assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind these initiatives is rather unclear and relies on the goodwill of the sport clubs to successfully implement this in practice and achieve desired impacts. This finding reflects the call for using a sound programme theory to analyse sport initiatives and uncover potentially successful mechanisms between initiatives and outcomes (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Chen, 2018; Coalter, 2013; Hoekman et al., 2019). Hence, most initiatives are not underpinned with adequate theory or strategy and thus, those who devise them do not use an evidence-led approach, which means that any success is more likely to be attributable to good fortune rather than good planning. Indeed, the focus group discussions acknowledged that initiatives of NGBs often lead to unexpected problems and do not seem to lead to the intended effect. This can be attributed to two main causes: theory failure and implementation failure of the initiatives (Han et al., 2020). Implementation failure implies that intended initiatives cannot be delivered by the methods used, whereas theory failure suggests inappropriate use of theory (Han et al., 2020). These two dimensions of failure are discussed in turn below.

Implementation failure

The thematic analysis showed that only half or fewer of the NGBs invest in improving the quality through for example guiding the content of training sessions and activities, assuring motivating or pedagogically skilled coaches, and adapting training sessions and competitions to tastes and preferences of targeted youth members to make sure they experience fun. In the literature, a fun environment for youth members is the principal reason for continuation in sport participation, whereas a lack of fun ultimately leads to drop out from sport participation (Vissek et al., 2015; Witt and Dangi, 2018). Despite the recognised importance in the focus group discussions of providing fun and high-quality supply, a minority of NGBs attempt to create this in their clubs. Within this minority, the assumed mechanisms behind the initiatives

are often confined to the decentralisation of responsibility, relying on the presumed efforts of sport clubs and youth coaches for successful implementation.

In addition, even when initiatives are undertaken by NGBs to improve quality, they tend to be located at the strategic level of club administration rather than the practical, implementational level. For example, many NGBs attach value to the appointment of a coordinator for youth sport, the communication with youth members through social media, having youth coaches with a sport-specific qualification, appointing a point of contact for integrity, establishing actions to improve ethics in sport etc. These are broad and general initiatives without explicit guidance on what these persons should do or how activities should be performed in practice. In line with Perck, Van Hoecke, Westerbeek and Breesch (2016), there is a focus on the availability of sport services, rather than on the content of the provision offered. This content should focus on the experiences of sport participants (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010).

One possible explanation of these findings might be that NGBs often undertake initiatives not because they believe it will lead to better quality or a boost in participation rate, but rather to get funding or to comply with government requirements (Grix, 2010; Scheerder et al., 2017). Hence, the government regulations encourage NGBs to implement initiatives in return for funding, but these do not necessarily lead to desired outcomes as a new rule from the government simply becomes another box NGBs need to tick. For example, qualified coaches, a point of contact for integrity and mapping the number of affiliated youth members, were mentioned in the focus groups as necessary to get funding or support from the government. However, these initiatives are not underpinned by an explicit strategy to stimulate demand in terms of higher participation rates or improvements to the quality of provision.

Another explanation for the lack of practical quality guidance is that NGBs expect that organisational decisions are thought to translate into a quality and fun environment for as many youth members as possible. However, NGBs often do not know how exactly to increase the quality of provision in clubs. They describe it as having fun during training sessions and activities and providing optimal experiences, but often they do not know the critical success factors which lead to retaining existing members or attracting new members. They lack knowledge in this field and may need a framework explaining the different elements of quality in youth sport. Consistent with the literature, the focus is narrowed to the organisational capacity of the organised sport sector, rather than providing guidance to establish a quality sport offer for youth members (Perck et al., 2016). Therefore, further research should elaborate on a definition of quality in youth sport at a practical level.

Theory failure

Discussing the programme mechanisms behind initiatives provided insight in to how NGBs thought they would work relative to what happened in practice (Coalter, 2013). This process enables to identify the assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind initiatives by testing empirically whether the theory which underpins the initiatives is valid or not (Bolton et al., 2018). Below, we elaborate on two important findings which reflect the theory failure of the different initiatives that NGBs undertake.

When NGBs focus on the content of training sessions, it is predominantly based on the development of motor skills and using forms of play in training sessions for the youngest age groups. The development of fundamental movement skills is necessary to have a basic motor ability and is essential for sport participation in later life (Gulbin, Croser, Morley, & Weissensteiner, 2013). Using forms of play in training sessions is perceived to be fun in the literature and is thought to reduce dropout rates (Witt & Dangi, 2018). These points are in

line with early sampling principles with the goal to provide playing and training opportunities for many children across various sports (Vierimaa, Erickson, Côté, & Gilbert, 2012). However, when discussing competition and the guidance of the content of training sessions in the focus group discussions, it was clear that the short-term performance focus is still present in many sport clubs and, particularly for youth coaches, it seems difficult for to focus on long-term development rather than short-term performance. This short-term performance and early specialisation focus might exclude many youth members who are interested in playing the sport recreationally and, even for talented athletes, it does not always guarantee success (Côté & Hancock, 2016). This finding means that successfully switching the focus from short-term performance to long-term development depends on different processes and people being involved rather than merely introducing new forms of play.

Second, many initiatives are implemented without an *a priori* understanding of how they are supposed to work (Chen, 2018). Often, NGBs undertake them assuming they will ultimately lead to the intended effects. How and why initiatives should lead to intended effects either relies on the assumption of successful implementation through sport clubs and youth coaches, or remains a policy black box (Chen et al., 2014). However, in practice, they recognised many difficulties in the implementation of initiatives which were not foreseen. For example, reaching different target groups through organising separate training sessions and activities did not lead to more members from the group targeted. How they would reach a particular target group and what was required to change one of the determinants of their demand, their tastes and preferences, was not well thought through (Bullough, 2011).

This paper has some limitations. It is worth restating that we have taken a macro-perspective on NGBs' initiatives in terms of youth sport. Although our results give an indication of the situation in Flanders, results remain general and are not specific to one sport or NGB as different NGBs operate in different contexts. Therefore, it would be interesting to

1 focus on selected practices that show promise in being effective and to elaborate further on
2 the specific mechanisms behind them within their specific context, using a realist evaluation
3 approach (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007). In addition, using a theory-based evaluation helps to
4 illustrate how desired outcomes are intended to be achieved. It provides interesting insights
5 for policymakers and practitioners to distinguish effective from ineffective initiatives and
6 how interventions might be improved or monitored in the future (Chen, 2018; Coalter, 2013).
7 However, there is the danger that only intended policy objectives are considered and
8 unintended outcomes, whether beneficial or not, can be overlooked using this approach
9 (Bolton et al., 2018).

10 This research contributes to the sport policy evaluation literature by mapping out the
11 initiatives of NGBs, under the applicable sport policy and using a theory-based approach to
12 evaluate them in optimising youth sport provision in clubs (Chen, 2018). The results
13 represent the context of Flanders and can provide a basis for generalisation and describing the
14 mechanisms behind initiatives launched within the same context (Coalter, 2013). Yet,
15 different results may appear in other countries within their own context. First, the
16 bureaucratic configuration applying to Flanders, which reflects high government involvement
17 in sport, will probably yield different results relative to countries where government
18 involvement is less pronounced (Scheerder et al., 2017). Second, it would be interesting to do
19 further research internationally and investigate how the results appear in different funding
20 contexts, for example in a country where youth coaches are paid employees.

21 Finally, the results show that programme theory is an effective way to map out youth
22 sport initiatives. The visualisation through a logic model is useful for practitioners as it is
23 shown to be effective for evaluating NGBs' youth sport initiatives and determining the
24 strategies behind them. Also, if NGBs aim to achieve meaningful progress in the
25 development of youth sport, we recommend theory-based evaluation for initiatives to

1 understand the assumptions and presumed causal mechanisms behind the process of how
2 initiatives will, or will not, lead to the intended results, before implementing them. Hence,
3 NGBs can start to learn from the results and increase their likelihood of success in the future
4 (Chen, 2018). However, academic expertise and knowledge are preferred when undertaking
5 theory-based evaluation, and not all NGBs have the capability and capacity to undertake this
6 approach (Chen, 2018; Grix et al., 2018).

7

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- 1 **Appendix A** - Overview 41 Flemish National governing bodies (NGBs) with youth sport
 2 project in 2020, according to sport type

Name NGB	Affiliated clubs (2018)	Members (2018)	Youth Member (2018)	% youth members
Uni NGBs – Individual sport (N = 19)				
Gymnastics Flanders (GymFed)	324	120.351	102.682	85 %
Flemish Athletics League	90	32.983	20.655	63 %
Dutch speaking League for Underwater research and Sport	158	9.504	1.101	12 %
Flemish Swimming Federation	143	46.693	35.650	76 %
Equestrian Flanders	581	38.957	23.577	61 %
Snow Sport Flanders	20	2.077	669	32 %
Triathlon Flanders	93	4.495	845	19 %
Parantee – Psylos ³	121	5.351	752	14 %
Wind and Water Sport Flanders	74	24.364	5.236	21 %

³ Parantee – Psylos offers sport for people with a physical, psychological, intellectual, auditory, or visual disability

Dance Sport Flanders	304	45.754	26.422	58
			%	
Golf Flanders	55	39.249	3.216	8 %
Flemish Rowing League	22	1.815	491	27
			%	
Water Ski Flanders	45	3.361	860	26
			%	
Canoe and Kayak Federation	38	3.387	907	27
			%	
Arch League	70	1.325	357	27
			%	
Cycling Flanders	1.295	48.226	11.014	23
			%	
Orientation Flanders	5	1.625	642	21
			%	
Skate Flanders	38	2.894	1.904	66
			%	
Flemish Rescue Federation⁴	30	2.815	1.400	50
			%	
<hr/> Uni NGBs - Team sport (N = 8) <hr/>				
Soccer Flanders	2.829	281.103	165.646	59
			%	
Flemish Baseball and Softball League	29	2.327	1.170	50
			%	
Volley Flanders	510	40.617	22.372	55
			%	

⁴ The Flemish Rescue federation is an NGB to educate lifesavers

Flemish Hockey League	50	22.462	14.251	63
			%	
Basketball Flanders	245	36.318	21.795	60
			%	
Flemish Handball Association	60	6.666	4.028	60
			%	
Rugby Flanders	29	4.123	2.157	52
			%	
Royal Belgian Korfball Bond – Flemish League	50	6.529	3.642	56
			%	
Uni NGBs - Racket Sport (N = 4)				
Tennis Flanders	446	151.499	54.542	36
			%	
Flemish Table Tennis League	176	8.951	2.613	29
			%	
Squash Flanders	48	2.430	557	23
			%	
Badminton Flanders	214	24.873	9.175	37
			%	
Uni NGBs - Fighting Sport (N = 4)				
Flemish Judo Federation	211	17.498	13.269	76
			%	
Flemish Ju-Jitsu Federation	98	4.976	3.376	68
			%	
Flemish Fencing Association	25	1.343	824	61
			%	

Flemish Taekwondo	78	3.623	2.727	75
League				%
Multi NGBs (N = 6)				
FROS Multisport	1.227	68.761	15.227	22
Flanders				%
Family Sport Flanders	490	32.944	17.613	53
				%
Sporta Federation	1.306	65.674	19.510	30
				%
Sportievak	456	35.353	15.334	43
				%
S-Sport Recreas	320	15.879	1.414	9 %
OKRA-Sport	1.083	53.345	1.554	3 %

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1 **Appendix B - Participants in focus groups**

Focus group 1

Soccer Flanders

Volley Flanders

Flemish Handball Association

Rugby Flanders

Flemish Hockey League

Focus group 2

Golf Flanders

Squash Flanders

Badminton Flanders

Focus group 3

Flemish Judo Federation

Flemish Ju-Jitsu Federation

Flemish Taekwondo League

Focus group 4

Gymnastics Flanders (GymFed) – General Coordinator Club Support

Flemish Athletics League

Flemish Swimming Federation

Equestrian Flanders

Dance Sport Flanders

Orientation Flanders

Focus group 5

Sportievak

S-Sport Recreas

Tables

Table 1. Overview of initiatives that NGBs (N=41) undertake to increase youth sport participation and/or improve quality of youth sport in their affiliated sport clubs

Theme 1: Training sessions and activities for youth members (N=41)	
Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Number of training sessions (N=33)	Provide minimum amount of training sessions a week for children and young adolescents (N=19) Provide training sessions within every age category and discipline (N=13) Provide separate training sessions for youngest members (up to 12 years old) (N=11) Provide 'start to' programmes or separate training sessions for new youth members (N=6) Provide off-season training opportunities for youth members (N=4)
Promotional activities and initiatives (N=33)	Organise introduction days at sport club (N = 27) Organise or participate in field day at schools (N =11) Organise own sport event / field day (N=7) Participate in initiatives organised by the government to promote sport participation (N=7) Create media attention by publicising press releases, getting attention from press, having publications, ... (N=6) Make use of mascot representing the sport in activities (N=5) Provide 'start-to-sport' packages for new youth members and free trial training sessions (N=4) Set up an innovative project to attract new youth members (N=1)
Sport camps for youth members (N=31)	Organise sport camps for youth members (N=31)

Collaborations to provide sport training sessions or activities for youth members (N=29)	Collaborate with schools (N=23) Collaborate with other clubs or NGBs (N=16) Collaborate with municipality (N=12) Collaborate with social institutions (N=2) Start-up small sport club at locations where the sport is not represented yet (N=2) Collaborate with youth associations (N=1) Volunteer at youth activities organised by other organisations (N=1)
Additional side activities and initiatives for youth members (N=21)	Organise teambuilding activities: Santa Claus party, barbecue, Christmas party, teenage evenings, ... (N=18) Organise alternative training sessions where youth members can invite their friends and/or family (N=7) Undertake actions to create a pleasant atmosphere in the sport club (N=1)
Additional provisions for youth members during and after training sessions (N=14)	Appoint a separate, individual coach for each training group (N=6) Schedule training moments of youth members at a different time slot as those of adults (N=5) Separate the sport accommodation of youth members from those of adults (N=3) Provide sport equipment for youth members during training sessions (N=2) Provide sportswear specific from the club for youth members (N=2) Assign a buddy to each new youth member (N=1) Provide a playground for youth members (N=1)

Theme 2: Organisation and structure of the sport club (N=41)

Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Decisions at the organisational level of the sport club to benefit youth (N=38)	Appoint a responsible to coordinate youth sport in the club, <u>i.e.</u> a coordinator for youth sport (N=28)
	Establish a youth sport policy including a mission and vision about youth sport (N=25)
	Make sure the coordinator for youth sport is qualified (N=15)
	Attend the annual meeting concerning youth sport, organised by the National Governing Body (N=4)
	Assure the responsibility person for has a seat in the board of the sport club (N=3)
	Establish a committee for youth sport (N=3)
	Establish a council of youth members in the sport club (N=3)
	Allow youth members to co-create the policy for youth sport in the sport club (N=2)
	Establish an advisory committee consisting of experts in youth sport (N=1)
Overview of the evolution of youth members affiliated to the sport club (N=37)	Map the number of youth members affiliated to the sport club (N=30)
	Map the number of newly affiliated youth members (N=17)
	Map the number of youth members that dropped out from the sport club (N=12)
	Map the number of youth members that prolonged their membership in the sport club (N=9)

Communication with (new) youth members and parents (N=26)	<hr/> <p>Establish a website that is up to date (N=20)</p> <p>Use social media as communication tool for (new) affiliated youth members and their parents: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (N=15)</p> <p>Establish an information brochure for newly affiliated youth members and their parents (N=10)</p> <p>Advertise the sport club in the form of posters and flyers (N=8)</p> <p>Establish a newsletter for youth members and their parents (N=5)</p> <p>Establish a calendar with an indication of the date for different youth activities (N=3)</p> <p>Use e-mail as communication tool to existing youth members and parents (N=3)</p> <p>Make a separate website or section of existing website specific for children and young adolescents (N=2)</p> <p>Send letters as communication tool to existing youth members and their parents (N=1)</p> <p>Make movies of training sessions to promote sport club (N=1)</p> <hr/>
Involvement of parents in the sport club (N=18)	<hr/> <p>Organise information sessions for parents of affiliated youth members about the organisation of the sport club (N=12)</p> <p>Undertake initiatives to increase parental involvement in the sport club (N=5)</p> <p>Organise activities targeted to parents of affiliated youth members (N=3)</p> <p>Inform parents about the importance of positive youth development in the sport (N=2)</p> <p>Inform parents about the progression their children make in the sport (N=1)</p> <hr/>

General organisation of the sport club (N=15)	<p>Make the sport club a non-profit association (N=6)</p> <p>Join the local sport council (N=4)</p> <p>Organise coach gatherings (N=3)</p> <p>Make sure there is enough age diversity on the board of the sport club (N=2)</p> <p>Promote proper policy (N=2)</p> <p>Appoint responsibility person for communication (N=1)</p> <p>Appoint responsibility person for promotion (N=1)</p>
Planning and evaluation of training sessions, activities, and youth coaches (N=11)	<p>Prepare and make a planning for youth training sessions (N=4)</p> <p>Determine effectiveness of activities in attracting new youth members (N=3)</p> <p>Map the presence of youth members at each training session (N=2)</p> <p>Survey youth members to gauge their satisfaction levels or dropout reasons (N=2)</p> <p>Evaluate sport camps for youth members (N=1)</p> <p>Evaluate youth coaches (N=1)</p>
Attracting and retaining volunteers (N=7)	<p>Appoint responsibility person for the volunteers in the club (N=3)</p> <p>Organise volunteer gatherings (N=2)</p> <p>Reward volunteers for their engagement (N=2)</p>
Incentivising initiatives from sport clubs (N=3)	<p>Initiate actions to promote quality of youth sport (N=2)</p> <p>Invite an expert to talk about the sport to youth members (N=1)</p>

General organisation of the sport club (N=15)	Make the sport club a non-profit association (N=6) Join the local sport council (N=4) Organise coach gatherings (N=3) Make sure there is enough age diversity on the board of the sport club (N=2) Promote proper policy (N=2) Appoint responsibility person for communication (N=1) Appoint responsibility person for promotion (N=1)
Planning and evaluation of training sessions, activities, and youth coaches (N=11)	Prepare and make a planning for youth training sessions (N=4) Determine effectiveness of activities in attracting new youth members (N=3) Map the presence of youth members at each training session (N=2) Survey youth members to gauge their satisfaction levels or dropout reasons (N=2) Evaluate sport camps for youth members (N=1) Evaluate youth coaches (N=1)
Attracting and retaining volunteers (N=7)	Appoint responsibility person for the volunteers in the club (N=3) Organise volunteer gatherings (N=2) Reward volunteers for their engagement (N=2)
Incentivising initiatives from sport clubs (N=3)	Initiate actions to promote quality of youth sport (N=2) Invite an expert to talk about the sport to youth members (N=1)
Incentivising audit of sport clubs (N=1)	Organise an independent audit on the sport club (N=1)

Theme 3: Youth coaches and staff (N=41)

Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Requirement of qualifications for youth coaches (N=41)	<p>Require youth coaches to follow coaching education concerning the technical skills of the sport and / or to upgrade this educational knowledge (N=41)</p> <p>Require youth coaches to follow coaching education concerning ethical issues and/or to upgrade this knowledge (N=2)</p> <p>Require youth coaches to follow education concerning pedagogical principles and/or to upgrade this knowledge (N=2)</p> <p>Require youth coaches to follow development plan, established by the NGB, to become a better coach (N=1)</p>
Incentivising education or refresher course in the sport club (N=35)	<p>Organise coaching education for youth coaches (N=20)</p> <p>Require the members of the board to follow an education concerning the organisation of youth sport in a club (N=15)</p> <p>Promote the coaching education concerning technical skills of the sport to affiliated youth members (N=12)</p> <p>Require referee to follow the appropriate education of the sport (N=9)</p> <p>Require jury members to follow the appropriate education of the sport (N=2)</p> <p>Promote e-learning (N=1)</p>
Increasing the number of (qualified) staff in youth sport club (N=24)	<p>Appoint more qualified youth coaches relative to number of youth members (N=16)</p> <p>Appoint more youth coaches relative to number of members (N=10)</p> <p>Appoint more referees (N=4)</p> <p>Appoint more qualified referees (N=1)</p> <p>Develop a referee platform (N=1)</p>

Theme 4: Ethically and medically responsible sport participation (N=40)

Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Having a point of contact for integrity in the sport club (N=34)	<p>Appoint a point of contact for integrity in the sport club (N=34)</p> <p>Require the point of contact for integrity to follow appropriate seminars (N=13)</p> <p>Make sure point of contact for integrity is capable to register all complaints (N=2)</p> <p>Make sure point of contact for integrity has the appropriate personal skills: good communicator, discrete, empathising abilities, ...) (N=1)</p>
Actions / projects to highlight ethical issues (N=30)	<p>Undertake actions concerning sexual harassment and abuse in sport: make it discussable and use a toolkit to discuss this ethical issue (N=18)</p> <p>Undertake actions promoting fair play in the sport (N=15)</p> <p>Undertake actions concerning bullying (N=12)</p> <p>Undertake actions promoting healthy food and drinks (N=10)</p> <p>Undertake actions concerning antidoping (N=9)</p> <p>Undertake actions promoting positive cheering during games of youth members (N=3)</p> <p>Undertake actions concerning alcohol and drug use (N=2)</p> <p>Undertake actions to promote environmental sustainability (N=1)</p>

Communication about ethics in sport (N=30)	Promote and communicate about ethics in sport to youth members and parents (N=19)
	Communicate and promote the point of contact for integrity in the sport club (N=12)
	Communicate about the variety of hotlines that youth members can consult when countering ethical issues (N=7)
Establishment and promotion of code of conduct (N=28)	Establish a code of conduct for every stakeholder in the sport club (N=25)
	Develop ethical code of conduct on coach practices (N=6)
	Engage in activities to teach the code of conduct to the different stakeholders (N=5)
	Establish disciplinary policy for inappropriate behaviour (N=1)
Implementations in the organisation of the sport club concerning ethics in sport (N=22)	Sign the <u>Panathlon</u> Declaration (N=16)
	Assure the presence of a protocol that can be followed when ethical concerns or ethical questions arise (N=3)
	Assure that club representatives follow information sessions or seminars about ethical themes (N=2)
	Establish an ethical committee in the sport club (N=2)
	Appoint a nutritionist in the sport club (N=2)
	Appoint a mental coach in the sport club (N=2)
	Cooperate with other actors to organise actions to promote ethical values (N=2)
	Appoint responsibility person for fair play within the sport club (N=1)

Safety provisions (N=11)	Require a medical examination for every youth member before participating in sport (N=5)
	Make sure training sessions for youth members are guided by adults (N=3)
	Provide AED (Automated External Defibrillator) (N=2)
	Provide appropriate, safe equipment youth members need to participate during training sessions (N=2)
	Provide first aid kit (N=1)
Staff with medical knowledge (N=8)	Appoint doctor and physiotherapist in the sport club (N=7)
	Assure youth coaches have followed first aid training (N=1)
Injury prevention (N=8)	Pay attention to injury prevention (N=5)
	Assure warming up, <u>stretching</u> and cooling down during training sessions (N=4)
Communication concerning medically responsible sport participation (N=2)	Communicate about importance of medically responsible sport (N=1)
	Undertake action to promote medically responsible sport participation (N=1)

Theme 5: Sport for all (N=37)

Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Training sessions and activities for disadvantaged youth (N=31)	Lower financial burden (N=17)
	Cooperate with other actors (social organisations, other NGBs, the municipality) to offer sport and reach disadvantaged youth (N=16)
	Organise of activities for disadvantaged youth (N=14)

	Create a project to integrate disadvantaged youth members in the sport club (N=9)
	Organise sport camps for disadvantaged youth members (N=1)
Training sessions and activities for disabled youth (N=28)	<p>Organise activities specific for disabled youth members (N=16)</p> <p>Establish separate training sessions and competition for disabled youth members (N=11)</p> <p>Cooperate with actors specialised in working with disabled youth (N=10)</p> <p>Adapt the sport material and infrastructure for disabled youth members (N=4)</p> <p>Organise information sessions concerning sporting with disabilities (N=1)</p>
Training sessions and activities at recreational level (N=10)	<p>Organise training sessions, competitions and sport camps for youth members participating at recreational level (N=6)</p> <p>Cooperate with other sport clubs to provide training sessions recreational level (N=3)</p> <p>Promote recreational participation through flyers and social media (N=3)</p> <p>Organise activities for youth members participating at recreational level (N=2)</p> <p>Organise information sessions for youth members participating at recreational level (N=1)</p>
Training sessions and activities for boys or girls (N=9)	<p>Organise training sessions and competitions, only accessible for girls (N=7)</p> <p>Organise activities, only accessible for girls (N=6)</p> <p>Promote sport participation for girls (N=4)</p> <p>Organise separate training sessions, only accessible for boys (N=1)</p>

Theme 6: Competition (N=35)

Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Participation to youth competitions or youth tournaments (N=35)	<p>Organise tournaments or competitions for youth members (N=28)</p> <p>Stimulate youth members to participate to competitions or tournaments (N=24)</p> <p>Participate in or organise school competitions (N=5)</p> <p>Focus on organisation of competitions at recreational level (N=4)</p> <p>Create competition calendar with an indication of the dates of the different competitions for youth members (N=3)</p> <p>Cooperate with other actors (other clubs / youth association) to organise youth competitions (N=3)</p> <p>Organise trial competitions (N=2)</p> <p>Make sure that youth members are appropriately guided by adults in competitions or tournaments (N=1)</p> <p>Provide appropriate sport equipment for youth members during competitions or tournaments (N=1)</p> <p>Combine youth members from different sport clubs to ensure sufficient players to participate in competitions (N=1)</p> <p>Offer a license that is free of charge to participate in competitions or tournaments (N=1)</p>
Training sessions at competitive level (N=14)	<p>Organise separate training sessions for youth members with a competitive membership (N=8)</p> <p>Organise competitive sport camps for youth members (N=6)</p> <p>Recognise importance of achieving medals, performance of youth members, ranking (N=4)</p> <p>Establish system for talent development (N=3)</p> <p>Provide sport equipment for youth members with competitive membership (N=1)</p>

Theme 7: Quality of training sessions (N=23)	
Subtheme	Detail: which activities/initiatives do NGBs stimulate in their affiliated sport clubs?
Challenges and rewards for every youth member (N=16)	<p>Establish a system such that every youth member is stimulated to improve at its own pace through certifications, awards, degrees, ... (N=12)</p> <p>Adapt competition to level of youth members with different rules of play (N=4)</p> <p>Follow up each youth member individually (N=1)</p>
Training sessions adapted to age of youth members (N=16)	<p>Provide additional programmes focusing on acquiring fundamental movement skills (N=16)</p> <p>Follow training plan for youth that is set up by the NGB with the aim to engage all youth members in lifelong sport participation (N=7)</p> <p>Apply pedagogical principles in training sessions (N = 1)</p>
Diversification in training sessions (N=11)	<p>Use different forms of play in training sessions customised to youngest members (under 12 years old) (N =8)</p> <p>Provide training sessions of other type of sport (N=3)</p> <p>Provide variation of exercises in training sessions (N=1)</p> <p>Provide youth members with the opportunity to try different type of sports during a year (multisport) (N =1)</p> <p>Provide free play opportunities in training sessions for youth (N=1)</p>
Working with programmes and applications (N=9)	<p>Use the application with exercises developed to learn multiple skills to youth members (N=8)</p> <p>Work with programmes where different exercises for youth are brought together (N=2)</p> <p>Provide exercises on your website for youth coaches (N=1)</p>

Figure 1. Overarching logic model of initiatives of National Governing Bodies to optimise youth sport

