Social Inclusion
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9383
https://doi.org/10.17645/si.9383

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Open Access Journal

Social-Sportive Work and Local Policy: Reflections From the Flemish Case

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Submitted: 8 October 2024 **Accepted:** 19 March 2025 **Published:** 30 April 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Impact Evaluation of Community Sport Programmes and 'Sport Social Work Practices' " edited by Kirsten Verkooijen (Wageningen University & Research) and Pascal Delheye (Ghent University), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i416

Abstract

Social-sportive work (SSW) in Flanders operates at the intersection of sport, welfare, and youth work, aiming to enhance accessibility and social inclusion through alternative sporting initiatives. Despite its growing prominence, SSW faces challenges in gaining recognition within local policy structures, which often remain rigid and compartmentalised. This study explores the perspectives of local government officials on the relationship between SSW and local policy. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, the research was conducted across two Flemish cities between November 2021 and April 2022. The findings support previous research on the tension between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid nature of policy structures. Furthermore, the study sheds light on the role of personal affinities, professional backgrounds, and political mandates of local government officials in determining the extent of support for SSW as well as the need for a broader discussion on creating transversal local policy cultures, next to local policy structures.

Keywords

Flanders; local policy; qualitative research; social-sportive work; sport-for-all

1. From Sport-for-All Policy in Europe to Social-Sportive Work in Flanders

1.1. Sport-for-All Policy in Europe

Sport-for-all has a long-standing history in European policy. Between 1963 and 1969, the first lobbying efforts were undertaken on a European scale to promote a sport-for-all policy. Under the leadership of Armand Lams (Director-General of the Flemish Administration of Physical Education, Sport, and Outdoor Recreation [BLOSO]), the first seeds were planted. This materialised in a planning bureau that would outline

the key principles of the sport-for-all policy in Europe (Delheye, 2004). As a result of the efforts of the planning bureau and the establishment of structures for information sharing and research, the European Charter for sport-for-all was signed in Brussels on 20 March 1975 (Delheye, 2004).

The charter marked a shift from focusing on sports performance to encouraging participation among all citizens, particularly those who are "disadvantaged or disabled" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1392). Additionally, it aimed to include individuals who are often excluded from mainstream facilities, such as traditional sports clubs. Such groups are commonly referred to as "socially vulnerable" (Crabbe, 2007). The charter also played a key role in recognising sport as an autonomous domain by establishing the European Committee for the Development of Sport. Furthermore, it facilitated the redistribution of financial resources from elite sports to initiatives that promote the democratisation of sports (Delheye, 2004).

This movement for the democratisation of sport received favourable attention and was further implemented outside the EU by international agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF. Striking examples of this widespread implementation of the sport-for-all philosophy can be found in the 1978 International Charter of Physical Education and Sport, the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon. This evolution (further) stimulated the efforts on European and national levels to promote widespread physical activity and participation in sports.

1.2. Flanders: A Pioneer in European Sport-for-All Policy

Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) can be regarded as one of the pioneers (Theeboom et al., 2010) in implementing the European sport-for-all policy. This assertion is supported, firstly, by the fact that BLOSO played a leading role in shaping the core principles of the European sport-for-all policy (Delheye, 2004). Secondly, Flanders has a long-established tradition of promoting this policy, with initiatives dating back to the first promotional campaigns in the 1960s and 1970s (Theeboom et al., 2010, 2015).

1.2.1. From Street Football to Community Sport

In the 1980s and 90s, sport-for-all initiatives in Flanders were employed for a plethora of objectives, ranging from the socio-cultural integration of young people with migrant backgrounds (f.e., children of unemployed miners in the post-war period; see Haudenhuyse et al., 2018; Theeboom et al., 2015) to providing accessible sport for women, elderly people, and people with disabilities (Theeboom et al., 2010). Initiatives such as *straatvoetbal* (street football [1989]), *buurtvoetbal* (neighbourhood football [1992]), and *buurtbal* (neighbourhood ball [1994]; see De Knop et al., 1999; Theeboom et al., 2015) were established.

In 2000, the Youth and Sport Division of the Ministry of the Flemish community took over the funding of the *buurtbal* campaign and launched the term *buurtsport* (community sport). Community sport in Flanders is defined as:

> A method of neighbourhood oriented initiatives departing from a broad understanding of sport, which can be given form through sport and exercise activities or guiding people to sport and support initiatives. Community sport is characterised by the terms unconditionality, low threshold, mildly organised and outreaching. (Van Poppel, as cited and translated in Sabbe, 2019, p. 42)

Community sport initiatives became especially focused on making sports more accessible for unprivileged youth between the ages of 6 and 16 (Theeboom et al., 2010, 2015). The urgency to increase access to sport for disadvantaged youth originated from the broader observation in Western society that groups with lower socio-economic status (such as vulnerable young people) are underrepresented in traditional sports clubs, and that white, highly educated, heterosexual, male groups are overrepresented in traditional sports clubs (Crabbe, 2007; Elling & Claringbould, 2005; Hylton & Totten, 2008). Community sport aimed to provide a countermovement to the exclusionary nature of traditional sports clubs (Hylton & Totten, 2008).

Community sport is far from homogeneous; instead, it varies in terms of organisational identity and structure, networks of partners, target groups, and facilities (Theeboom & De Maesschalck, 2006). Consequently, it has been described as a patchwork of practices (Theeboom et al., 2015).

In Flanders, alternatively organised sports (such as community sports) were mainly given form by non-traditional sport providers such as "the youth sector, education, integration, social affairs, prevention" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1396). In fact, scholars have argued that the traditional sport sector in Flanders has historically played a limited role in providing sport opportunities for vulnerable groups, including underprivileged youth (Theeboom et al., 2010). Additionally, there is scepticism regarding whether traditional sports clubs are genuinely capable of adapting to societal challenges and transitions (Scheerder et al., 2013; Theeboom & Haudenhuyse, 2014). This has led to an ongoing call for the de-traditionalisation of sport in Flanders (Theeboom et al., 2010).

1.2.2. The Emergence of a New Lexicon: Social-Sportive Work

In recent years, the range of sport-for-all initiatives has grown more diverse. These initiatives are increasingly innovative and experimental, combining both sporting and social elements (Smets, 2019).

Examples from the Flemish context include initiatives that integrate language learning opportunities into sport for non-native newcomers, dance setups in public spaces to highlight the positive effects of physical movement for citizens, and projects that strengthen young people's identity through the "skateboarding lifestyle." Other initiatives include a basketball club that provides safe spaces for girls and allows them to take on a high level of engagement within the organisation, sports in detention contexts fostering connections to the outside world, low-threshold movement initiatives organised by associations where individuals experiencing poverty have a voice, and employment-focused initiatives leveraging sport as a pathway to labour market integration. Moreover, some initiatives operate within strong collaborative frameworks, for example, within a network of sports clubs, through supra-local cooperation between youth care organisations, or within an inter-municipal welfare association (Delheye et al., 2021).

This small selection from an already vast and growing field highlights the diversity of initiatives. Furthermore, such initiatives continually adapt to societal needs and complex challenges—such as diversity, poverty, and inequality—in Flemish cities and municipalities (Withaeckx et al., 2019). The diversification of available offerings may be motivated by the observation that sport in Flanders remains "far from democratised" (Theeboom et al., 2010, p. 1394). Specifically, sport-for-all policies in Flanders have not succeeded in ensuring accessibility regardless of participants' backgrounds (Haudenhuyse, 2018), thereby underscoring the need for alternative initiatives.

The growth of innovative and experimental initiatives has led to the observation that many of these practices do not fit within dominant labels. Flemish sport-for-all initiatives in the past decade have been confronted with a proliferation of terms and labels such as "Sport+ (Sport-plus)," "+Sport," "Community Sport," "Sport for Development (and Peace)," and "Sport for (Social) Change" (Delheye et al., 2021). In recent years, however, scholars have argued that such labels "have led to terminological hair-splitting. Such divisions sometimes detract from the rich and complex reality" (Delheye et al., 2021, p. 10, translated by the authors), prompting the need for new terminology and language to describe these innovative initiatives. As Smets (2019, p. 94) describes in his interactions with practitioners: "The search for more precise terminology to capture their work is important to them in order to distinguish their social efforts from sports clubs and organisations that are less committed to advancing social ambitions" (translated by the authors).

Such a new lexicon has emerged in recent years in Flanders, with terms such as *sociaal-sportieve praktijken* (social-sportive practices) and *sociaal-sportief werk* (social-sportive work [SSW]) gaining prominence in academia and practice. The first reference to a social-sportive project appeared in the study by Delheye et al. (2016) on the social potential of a football club transformed by world-famous football player Vincent Kompany. Delheye et al. (2016) describe the club as a potential *sociaal-sportief utopia* (social-sportive utopia), due to its social mission, including social development support for young players and low registration fees.

Later, in 2019, Smets further developed the concept of *sociaal-sportieve praktijken* (social-sportive practices) to provide a language for the under-recognised movement of innovative practices in urban sports landscapes. Smets (2019, p. 21) introduced the term specifically to move away from a restrictive focus on "organisational forms" (translated by the authors) and towards the acknowledgement of a broad range of initiatives that take up an explicit societal role (Withaeckx et al., 2019). Smets (2019) defined social-sportive practices as hybrid organisational forms that blend elements of sports clubs with (experimental or adapted) forms of social work. Building on Smets' (2019) work, the Flemish *sociaal sportief platform* (social sportive platform) was established later that year under the umbrella of Demos (a nonprofit organisation focusing on policy and practice development in culture, youth work, and sports) and Sport Vlaanderen (the Flemish Sports Agency). This platform seeks to connect social-sportive practices, strengthen their collective impact, and influence policy.

Additionally, in 2021, Redig (under the umbrella of Demos) formulated a definition of "*sociale sportinitiatieven*" (social sport initiatives) based on six key characteristics, identifying common ground among these diverse practices. Redig (2021) emphasised that while variation exists between initiatives, these differences are often based on specific choices and areas of expertise.

Later, in 2021, a practice guide for *sociaal-sportief werk* (SSW) was published, featuring 125 testimonials from Flemish social-sportive protagonists (Delheye et al., 2021). The authors deliberately chose the term SSW to further distance themselves from restrictive institutional interpretations. The hyphen between "social" and "sportive" symbolises the intersection between three policy sectors: sport, welfare, and work. By introducing this term, the authors sought to move beyond an institutional perspective and instead advocate for an inclusive approach that emphasises activities rather than organisations. As such, the term SSW encompasses all initiatives that integrate sportive and social elements—including community sports, sports clubs with social ambitions, youth work, social work, and health care work, which uses sport as a tool.

2. SSW and Local Policy in Flanders: A Challenging Relationship

2.1. Municipal Sports Policies as Key Regulators

Regarding the impact of local policy on SSW, the local (municipal) policy level in Flanders has a significant influence on the existence, organisation, and recognition of SSW.

For example, the Flemish Sport-for-All Decree (2007) marked an important step towards the professionalisation of local sports services as local sports departments were required to develop a local sports policy plan in order to receive subsidies (Smets, 2019). In addition to that, the 2008 Participation Decree led to the development of five pilot projects with a sports-oriented approach, some of which prioritised the social benefits of sport (Smets, 2019). Further on, the Decree on Local Sports Policy (2012) stipulated that 10% of municipal sports budgets should be allocated to reducing barriers for disadvantaged groups. This decree also required municipalities to dedicate 20% of their sports expenditure to alternative forms of non-traditional sports (Smets, 2019). These policy trends between 2007 and 2012 not only provided a significant impetus to the field (more specifically in the development of community sport) but also further stimulated the broader societal role of organised sports providers.

In January 2016, based on an amending Decree of July 3rd, 2015, the 2012 Decree on Local Sports Policy was repealed, as its associated funding was integrated into the *Gemeentefonds* (municipal fund). This specifically meant that various Flemish sectoral funds were integrated into this municipal fund. One of the objectives of this shift was to encourage a more transversal approach across different policy domains, fostering the dismantling of siloed policy objectives at the local level (Smets, 2019). Moreover, as a result of this integration, municipalities were no longer required to report to the Flemish government, granting them greater financial autonomy in determining their strategic priorities.

The integration of Flemish sectoral funds into the municipal fund was part of a wider movement towards increased autonomy for local governments. The introduction of the Decree on Local Governance in 2017 exemplified this trend, as it provided local governments with greater organisational autonomy. This broader shift towards local autonomy reinforced the role of municipal sports policy services as the principal regulators of local sports governance, enhancing their authority in shaping the local sports landscape (Smets, 2019; Theeboom et al., 2010).

While this movement towards greater autonomy may be perceived as a positive development, it is noteworthy that this broader decentralisation coincided with a measurable decline in *buurtsport* (community sport) as a structured concept in Flanders. During this period, several initiatives ceased operations or underwent structural transformations (Delheye et al., 2021). Although further empirical research is needed to establish a direct causal link, this is a noteworthy observation that merits attention.

2.2. Hybridity vs. Rigidity

As explained above, municipal governments in Flanders have high levels of autonomy to determine local subsidy systems, including the type of subsidy, amount, procedures, and registration requirements. Many Flemish initiatives in SSW rely on these subsidies; however, only a small number of privileged initiatives gain

visibility within local policy. Many initiatives (and their complex work) remain invisible leading to little (long-term) to no recognition or support (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). As Withaeckx et al. (2019, p. 122) describe: "There is often no shortage of project calls for social-sportive practices, but many practices indicate that the support is usually temporary, whilst the challenges that must be tackled require a long-term approach" (translated by the authors).

This lack of recognition partially stems from the often difficult relationship between SSW and policy (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2019; Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). A core tension in this relationship lies in the clash between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid, institutional logic of policy structures (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). In what follows, we further describe this tension.

Regarding the hybrid nature of SSW, SSW incorporates a variety of didactic, pedagogical, and sports technical approaches, methods, and techniques while pursuing objectives at the individual, group, and societal levels. SSW operates in diverse and complex contexts, including those affected by urbanisation challenges such as (super-)diversity, poverty, inequality, and lack of space (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019). It also engages with a wide range of marginalised groups, such as children and young people in socially vulnerable situations, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, detainees, and the homeless (Delheye et al., 2021). Positioned at the intersection of multiple policy domains (Demos, 2019), SSW is inherently diverse and adaptable. This diversity is an asset, as it enables highly accessible activities for different groups and provides a countermovement against the rigidity of traditional sports initiatives. Smets (2019) highlights that such initiatives are often better suited to the needs of urban participants.

Conversely, the rigid nature of (local and supralocal) policy structures is evident in the way Flemish policy domains operate with little to no exchange or alignment across sectors. On this issue, the 2019 memorandum of the Flemish social sportive platform states:

> The daily reality of our practices intersects with areas such as the welfare sector, employment, education, integration, and youth assistance. This gives us a multifaceted identity, which requires tailored policy support. We request the Flemish Minister of Sport to take the lead in developing appropriate support for social-sportive practices in collaboration with ministers from other policy areas. (Demos, 2019, translated by the authors)

Since SSW in Flanders transcends the compartmentalisation of policy domains, it does not fit neatly within a single policy sector. As a result, many initiatives fall through the cracks when it comes to recognition, support, and funding (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2023). One testimony from someone who started in practice and now holds a position in public administration (Deduytsche, quoted in Delheye et al., 2021) describes this reality:

> Work is often done with children and young people, but it is not [perceived as] youth work. Attention is given to matters beyond the sporting aspect, but it is not [perceived as] social work. Sports are played, but usually not within a sports club. Although governments are trying to break down barriers between policy domains, policies, training, and organisations, [they] are still somewhat siloed. This somewhat hinders the recognition and development of social-sporting practices. (translated by the authors)

It is fair to state that the evolving lexicon of SSW, its inclusive nature, and its emphasis on the connection between social and sportive elements have not been fully adopted or integrated into Flemish policy (language and structures).

This dynamic in Flanders regarding the tense relationship between policy and practice mirrors broader international trends in sport-for-development, making Flanders an exemplary case. Scholars have argued that sport-for-development programs often operate under policy-driven, top-down mandates that fail to fully integrate the realities of grassroots organisations (Coalter, 2013). The dominance of top-down structures in sport-for-development has been widely critiqued, with calls for localised, bottom-up strategies to be better recognised and valued (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012). Black (2017) highlights how global development praxis in sport-for-development has long been characterised by a tension between top-down and bottom-up orientations, with the former often dominating the latter in policy and practice. This pattern is evident in Flanders, where policy frameworks struggle to adapt to the evolving needs of grassroots social-sportive initiatives, much like the broader sport-for-development landscape (Theeboom et al., 2010).

2.3. In Search of the Lived Experiences of Local Government Officials

On an international scale, scholars have argued the need to better understand the tension between top-down policies and bottom-up initiatives (Black, 2017) and the power dynamics between policy and practice (Darnell & Hayhurst, 2012) in the field of sport-for-development. Furthermore, understanding how local actors interpret and implement policy (Lindsey & Darby, 2019) has been deemed important to build a more effective relationship between policy and practice.

Our contribution aims to explore this relationship between policy and practice in the specific context of Flanders. We particularly aim to explore this from the lived experiences of local government officials, focussing on their beliefs, perspectives, and experiences in relation to SSW. As an early adopter and innovator, Flanders offers a rich context to look at this relationship between policy and practice. Insights gained from Flanders might not only highlight effective practices and potential pitfalls in this relationship but also foster a comparative dialogue that can inform and enrich policy-making for sport-for-development programmes or other grassroots initiatives internationally.

The central research questions we aim to answer in this contribution are: How do local government officials perceive the role and position of SSW in their municipality? How does SSW fit within or challenge existing local policy structures, according to local government officials? How do local policy structures, dynamics and choices influence support for SSW, according to local government officials?

3. Method

3.1. Research Context and Objectives

The overarching research project on which this contribution is based is part of the Flemish research centre eCO-CITY (Collaboratory for Sustainable and Socially Just Urbanisation) at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. The research conducts practice-oriented research on various issues in urbanising contexts together with citizens, professionals, policymakers, and students.

The research project as a whole (October 2020–2023) explored accessibility in SSW, focusing on the role of relationships between SSW, local policy, and civil society, their impact, and ways to enhance accessibility for vulnerable groups.

Within this contribution, we focus on one specific sub-study, an in-depth study of local government officials' perspectives on the relationship between SSW and local policy. This particular study was conducted between November 2021 and April 2022.

The research project followed a case study approach. Two cases were selected based on three indicators: (a) the presence of diverse initiatives combining social and sportive approaches, (b) varied dynamics between SSW and local policy, and (c) the willingness of local stakeholders to engage in the research project. Insights from previous research conducted by the first author informed the selection of these case studies, providing a foundational understanding of certain local dynamics.

Based on these criteria, two Flemish cases were selected. Both have a rich history in SSW and a broad social-sportive landscape in terms of target groups, objectives, and formats. The selected cities are two of the 13 core cities of Flanders and vary in size—one being medium-sized and the other large—yet both share a distinctly urban character. The scale of these cities, combined with the additional societal challenges of a metropolitan area—such as space constraints, (super)diversity, and poverty (Smets, 2019)—results in a high number of initiatives in both cases. This diversity of initiatives was essential, as it allowed us to capture a wide range of insights.

To ensure that the research remained closely connected to local realities, a local steering group was established for each case. These groups consisted of representatives from local policy and practice who provided input on key aspects such as relevant initiatives, important stakeholders, and potential respondents. Additionally, they played an active role in shaping the research phases, offering guidance, and ensuring that the study aligned with the specific challenges and opportunities present in each local context.

3.2. Data Collection

In 2021, the first author conducted semi-structured interviews with local government officials in both cases (n = 10). Interviewees were selected from both the political sphere (those who formulate policy) and the administrative apparatus (those who implement policy) across diverse policy domains, including sport, welfare, youth, and local social policy. Purposeful sampling was used to maximise the richness of the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), with the selection of interviewees informed by input from the local steering groups.

The interview questions with local government officials focused on four key topics:

1. The profile of the local government official;
2. The role and significance of SSW within local policy;
3. The relationship and connection between local policy, the respective official, and SSW;
4. Reflections on the current and future local policy framework in relation to SSW.

3.3. Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author conducted a conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to examine the transcripts. This predominantly inductive approach allowed codes and categories to develop naturally from the data rather than being predetermined. A coding tree was used to organise the data into categories, which the first author then reviewed to identify overlaps and explore connections between them. Through this process, clusters of categories or themes emerged. For this article, we focused on specific subcategories and themes that provided insight into the relationship between local policy and SSW. The NVivo software program was used to assist with the analysis.

Rather than comparing data across the two cases or explicitly analysing contextual differences and variations, the analysis aimed to identify common patterns. This required a substantial and diverse sample to ensure meaningful patterns could be discerned. Moreover, dividing the data into strictly comparable parts would have resulted in insufficient data per group, making a reliable comparative analysis infeasible.

The study adhered to the ethics guidelines of HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts. A data management plan was developed to specify the implementation of these guidelines, including informed consent, anonymisation of transcripts, and secure data management within the research project. This plan was reviewed and adjusted based on input from the institution's data protection officer. Throughout the project, it served as a guiding framework for ethical research and facilitated critical reflection on research ethics.

4. Findings

In the following section, we highlight some of the lived experiences of local government officials regarding SSW in their local contexts. The first section addresses the key challenge of defining, positioning, and monitoring SSW. The second section explores respondents' perspectives on overcoming these challenges, as well as the current and future opportunities and strategies they identify in their local contexts to address these issues.

In the quotes underpinning the findings, respondents are referred to as local government officials (e.g., local government official 1). To ensure anonymity, we do not explicitly distinguish between respondents from the political and administrative spheres in these quotes.

4.1. The Multilevel and Intertwined Challenge of Defining, Positioning and Monitoring SSW

4.1.1. In the Practice of Politics, It Clashes

The first main challenge identified by local government officials is how to position and define SSW within local policy structures. Respondents noted that initiatives in SSW are innovative and, as a result, are not firmly embedded within a specific policy domain (e.g., municipal youth services, welfare services, sports services, or education services). In contrast, youth work or traditional sports initiatives have a more clearly defined place within the youth policy domain and sports policy domain. These perspectives of local government officials align with the observation of the tension between the hybrid nature of SSW and the rigid structure of local policy (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2019; Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019).

Regarding the specific role of the sports policy domain, the findings indicate that most respondents recognise the importance and necessity of actively acknowledging and supporting SSW. Some respondents reflect on past transitions, noting that they previously redirected certain social-sportive-related queries to other policy services. For instance, a request from an initiative involving participants with a migrant background would have been referred to integration services. However, according to some respondents, local sports policy increasingly recognises its responsibility to support such initiatives, working in collaboration with other services rather than fully redirecting these matters elsewhere.

Building upon this evolving approach of collaboration, most respondents share the conviction that SSW should have a place within or across multiple policy domains in a way that transcends traditional boundaries (Demos, 2019). However, the daily reality for local government officials reveals tensions not only regarding where SSW should be embedded but also how it should be understood. One respondent highlighted the local tension between sportive and social interpretations of SSW:

> The discussion about whether SSW resides under sport or welfare is present in our policy context. I find this a difficult discussion. In our context, such initiatives reside under the sport domain, but, if I may put it in black-and-white terms, our alderman for sport [local government official who is part of the municipal council] does not have much affinity with the topic. For this alderman, sport is about performance and competition. And they do say things like, "It's also great because you gain a lot of social skills," but the focus remains on being the best….Whereas in the welfare domain, and especially from a vulnerability perspective, we say that sport is just as important for belonging, for getting opportunities, for developing talents. It should be highly complementary, but in the practice of politics, it clashes. (local government official 2)

As illustrated by the quote, when SSW falls under the sports domain, it may be approached primarily through a lens of performance and competition, whereas in the welfare domain, it is often seen as a tool for social inclusion, empowerment, and personal development. Thus, these lived experiences of local government officials underpin the challenge that SSW is often constrained by sectoral boundaries (Delheye et al., 2021; Demos, 2023).

4.1.2. Personal Affinity and Mandate

As illustrated in the quote above on the tension between the sportive and social interpretations of SSW, the positioning of SSW within local policy is influenced not only by sectoral boundaries but also by personal affinities within the political and administrative apparatus. The findings show that the placement of SSW can depend on which alderman has the strongest connection or affinity with SSW, how and by which policymakers they are inspired, and how the political mandate for developing social sport policy aligns with other domains or responsibilities within the same mandate.

Additionally, personal affinities and experiences within the administrative apparatus can play a crucial role (both positively and negatively) in determining whether and how SSW is integrated into local policy. Key influences within the administrative structure, according to the respondents, include the willingness of the head of a local government department to champion SSW and the specific educational or personal background and preferences of policy officers. The following four quotes provide further insight into these personal influences:

> I think it has a lot to do with your head of service. The previous government service head wasn't concerned with social-sportive initiatives. It was seen as something that had to be done, but it didn't really interest them. (local government official 7)

> Because I'm still from the "old school." When I completed my physical education training, social-sportive work didn't even exist. My education was 99% focused on physical education and sports clubs. I feel like that's sometimes forgotten. Now, we're expected to work on and implement these new topics as well. But to be honest, that's why I asked my colleague: "Am I really the right person for this?" (local government official 4)

> For me, it's about putting the target group first and moving beyond categorisation. It's about understanding what people need and ensuring we meet those needs. I might be a bit too much of an activist civil servant—I'm often called out on it—but that is my mission. (local government official 5)

> That is also the difference, as I always say, when bachelor-level physical education instructors give sports lessons, they are highly structured: warm-up, this, that, and so on. However, I am also aware that when youth workers organise activities, the approach is entirely different—much more flexible. Should it be so rigid? Perhaps not, but I do consider it an advantage of sport that it is more structured, precise, and follows clear guidelines. (local government official 1)

It is important to note that the responsibility for developing social-sportive (support) policy in the two cases is assigned to a single local government official or a small group of officials, such as a participation officer or liaison figure. These officials typically already have a connection to SSW, either through their professional background or personal experiences. As key figures within the policy framework, they play a crucial role in staying closely attuned to the needs in the field and identifying opportunities for support.

However, some respondents highlighted an unexpected challenge: They sometimes encounter resistance within their own team, particularly when there is insufficient (political) support to implement social-sportive policies. This lack of backing makes it especially difficult—if not impossible—to establish a strong support framework and foster a broad culture of support for SSW within the policy administration. As one respondent explained: "There are always supporters and opponents, but if the colleague that is responsible for the subsidy regulation doesn't want to go along with it, you hit a dead end" (local government official 3).

4.1.3. Context of Scarcity

In addition to personal affinities and experiences, the broader contextual conditions in which local government officials operate further complicate the integration of SSW into policy. The findings indicate that austerity measures within (Flemish) local governments contribute to a sense of powerlessness among officials, leading them to believe they have limited capacity to make a meaningful impact on SSW. While some respondents expressed a strong willingness to support SSW, they also highlighted the challenges of addressing requests from the field of practice they are unable to fulfil. These requests, for example, entail securing operational funding or providing access to free facilities.

Given this context of austerity, some respondents contend that it is neither practical nor desirable for each policy domain to sustain an additional set of initiatives, such as SSW. They argue that when new initiatives seek financial support without an increase in the overall subsidy budget, resources must inevitably be redistributed—often at the expense of existing initiatives, such as traditional sports clubs, that are already reliant on public funding.

As one respondent explained: "If there is a new influx of initiatives, which gives initiatives in SSW the right to subsidies, and the subsidy pot is not increased, then it is at the expense of everyone who already receives subsidies" (local government official 3).

Some respondents described this situation as reflecting a protectionist reflex, driven by concerns that the recognition and subsidisation of SSW could lead to reduced funding for established initiatives, such as traditional sports clubs.

4.1.4. Applying Traditional Sports Club Standards to SSW

Beyond concerns over funding distribution, these discussions also highlight deeper questions about the relationship between SSW and traditional sports clubs. The findings indicate that most respondents struggle to define the position of SSW within the existing sports landscape.

Some of the respondents argued that SSW should ideally be fully integrated into the traditional sports system, particularly in terms of recognition, monitoring, and evaluation. One respondent explains: "For me, it would be good if it were aligned with the recognition requirements of the traditional associations, if it were somewhat consistent with those" (local government official 1).

These respondents express enthusiasm towards the established systems for traditional sports clubs, as the recognition requirements—and the subsequent support provided—are perceived as clear and straightforward. Local government official 4 explains:

> If you are recognised as a sports club, that immediately gives you an advantage in terms of the rate you pay when renting sports halls….Secondly, if you obtain additional recognition for youth or G-sports—by meeting a few extra conditions—you automatically receive operational subsidies as well.

For this group of respondents, applying the same recognition and monitoring systems to both SSW and traditional sports clubs could help mitigate concerns—emanating from the protectionist reflex described above—that informal groups might exploit the flexibility of certain easier systems, gaining access to facilities without adhering to the rigorous criteria imposed on traditional sports clubs.

Other respondents, while also sharing frustrations over the lack of clarity, transparency, and consistency in the recognition and monitoring systems for SSW, argue that integrating SSW into the existing monitoring framework of traditional sports clubs is neither feasible nor appropriate. They contend that current monitoring systems—such as those used to assess traditional sports initiatives—are predominantly based on quantitative indicators (e.g., number of participants, trained supervisors, activities, trajectories, hours worked). These indicators primarily measure short-term outputs and capture the linear effects of individual

initiatives or actions, which do not necessarily align with the core objectives and holistic approach of SSW. As one respondent explains:

> In social-sportive work, it's much less about those quantifiable things, and that makes it difficult. So, what you now have in your regulations systems are questions such as: "How many participants do you have?" "How many trainers do you have?" "How many trainers with a recognised diploma do you have?" That's hard to pin down. (local government official 6)

This group of respondents argues that strict regulatory systems often rely on controlling dynamics, making it harder for SSW to meet imposed standards. An example of a specific concern is the inconsistent enforcement of rules, for example, regarding the primary language used in the initiative. While SSW is closely monitored for Dutch language use to receive subsidies, traditional clubs in bilingual regions often face little oversight. One respondent notes that this creates tensions:

> I have had a discussion recently with some initiatives about how the sports department strictly monitors the use of Dutch—if Dutch is not spoken, organisations do not receive subsidies. However, in other traditional sports clubs, the sports department does not apply such monitoring, only to social-sportive initiatives….At times, it appears as though they [local government officials] are unsure how to handle the situation. In some cases, they even make things more complicated or impose stricter controls on social-sportive initiatives than traditional clubs, which may also predominantly use French. (local government official 2)

In other words, existing monitoring systems—primarily designed for traditional sports clubs—tend to emphasise whether SSW is "doing things right" (Biesta, 2007), such as enforcing Dutch as the official language simply because it is a formal policy requirement, rather than "doing the right thing" (Biesta, 2007), which would prioritise social inclusion and accessibility through more flexible language use. As local government official 3 critically puts it: "The first question asked by the City from initiatives is: 'What is your structure?' Only then followed by the question: 'What does your association do?'"

These lived experiences tie into the broader discussion on how such initiatives, often set up for failure within the current monitoring and evaluation systems, risk being pushed to the margins or the shadows of local policy (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx et al., 2019).

4.2. Opportunities and Strategies

In the following section, we outline the perspectives proposed by respondents to address the aforementioned challenges. Additionally, we examine the specific opportunities, strategies, and potential limitations they identify within their local context for implementing these approaches.

4.2.1. Transversal Policy and Subsidy Systems

The first strategy highlighted by respondents is the integration of SSW within transversal policy. The findings indicate a strong plea for strengthening connections between various policy domains and sectors. This approach aims to reflect and acknowledge the transversality of SSW while fostering

complementarity—an aspect that is sometimes already present to some extent in practice but remains underdeveloped in local policy.

According to some respondents, transversal systems for recognising, monitoring, and funding SSW can be implemented through mechanisms such as cocktail subsidies or cloverleaf subsidies. Local government official 7 elaborates on this specific strategy within their local context: "A group approached the authorities, presenting a dossier outlining their activities and need for funding. In response, funding was provided from three different sources: financial means from the welfare budget, from the youth sector, and sport."

Many respondents were generally positive about the concept of cocktail subsidies or a shared financial pool sourced from multiple policy domains. They highlighted potential benefits such as enhanced sustainability, increased trust in SSW, and greater opportunities for professionalisation. In this regard, respondents reinforced the importance of such funding models; an argument also put forward by Smets (2019, p. 200), who stated:

> Providing co-financing models for subsidies, i.e., cocktail subsidies or cloverleaf subsidies, where other sectors are involved, is therefore essential for the future sustainability of sport for all policy. Only in this way can we succeed in valorising the pioneering role of socio-sportive practices as knowledge centres and laboratories for future sports policy. (translated by the authors)

Although many respondents were generally positive about the concept of cocktail subsidies in their local context, they also highlighted certain limitations that temper their perceived success.

First, respondents noted that while these systems effectively promote cross-domain policy collaboration, they do not (yet) provide structural or long-term financial support for all initiatives in SSW. Funding is often reserved for larger, more established initiatives, leaving smaller or emerging projects struggling to secure adequate resources. As local government official 8 explains: "Those covenants [tailored-made contracts between initiatives and city], I have the feeling those are only used for those large social-sportive initiatives."

Second, respondents raised concerns about the arbitrary nature of these funding mechanisms, linking back to the earlier discussion on the influence of personal affinities. They pointed out that a lack of clear, standardised criteria for subsidy allocation can lead to frustration and perceptions of unequal treatment. The absence of transparent guidelines creates uncertainty and inconsistency, making it difficult for all initiatives to access support on an equal basis. As one respondent explained:

> Our alderman knows the people who are involved in that initiative, and then a budget gets thrown together. Those aren't the ideal examples because that's a politician making promises. But that's not the kind of politics we want to practice. (local government official 2)

Another respondent emphasises the need for consistency in policy application, stating: "If you do it for one, you have to do it for the others as well. You have to develop a policy with clear criteria, rather than making promises and leaving others out in the cold" (local government official 1).

In practice, smaller initiatives often depend on short-term project subsidies for funding. While this approach allows local policymakers to experiment with and support a broad range of projects, it also limits initiatives to

temporary financial support, raising concerns about their long-term sustainability. As local government official 4 questions: "Can such organisations suddenly continue without support? That won't be so straightforward."

Although respondents acknowledge that systems like cocktail subsidies are beneficial for certain social-sportive initiatives and create opportunities, they highlight a major issue: These systems are not equally accessible to all initiatives and remain too dependent on individual decision-making.

Finally, another key challenge is that these systems often result in ad hoc discussions about funding distribution between different policy sectors. As one local government official points out: "The proportion each sector—such as Sport and Youth—should contribute to this fund remains an ongoing debate" (local government official 1).

4.2.2. A Solid Framework With Flexible Options That Serve the Target Group

In response to the inconsistent decision-making processes regarding the funding of SSW and the limitations of cloverleaf financing, some respondents argued that establishing a clear definition of SSW—and distinguishing what it is and what it is not—would facilitate more consistent and transparent funding decisions.

As previously mentioned, one group of respondents supports aligning the definition and monitoring of SSW with the systems used for traditional sports. They believe that such alignment could also foster greater transversality, as it would encourage the traditional sports sector to integrate more social-sportive ambitions into its framework.

Other respondents, however, argue that future funding and monitoring systems should strike a balance between clarity and flexibility. While providing clear direction is essential, they emphasise that overly rigid frameworks may hinder the adaptive and community-driven nature of SSW. Instead of imposing result-oriented expectations, future systems should focus on stimulating engagement and participation, ensuring that initiatives can develop organically while maintaining policy accountability:

> And that's precisely why it's so dangerous to have a strict framework. Those needs, and especially those initiatives that meet those needs, are constantly changing. What they should build in, in my opinion, is a kind of constant platform for flexible social-sportive work. A sort of structure with a large amount of adaptability within that structure….At the very least, there is a commitment agreement. Naturally, the extent of this commitment depends on circumstances and certain conditions, but one must be willing to engage to some degree….For me, it's important that they are supported. The way in which this is done doesn't really matter. You need to meet their needs, and the framework for support is secondary to that. (local government official 7)

In addition to "meeting their needs" (local government official 7), respondents emphasised that the needs of SSW are inherently linked to the needs of its target group, a crucial aspect often overlooked in discussions about systems and structures. As a result, respondents argue that the target group and the impact on them should become the focal point of policy dialogue, ensuring that funding and monitoring frameworks are designed to support the social and participatory objectives of SSW rather than merely adhering to administrative or structural requirements:

> Perhaps it's time to think about how to deal with an organisation that doesn't fit into any particular structure, but is still valuable, and how you handle that, as well as what aspects you actually want to reward within their operations. Don't start from a reward system you already have, but look at their operations: What is valuable? (local government official 3)

In other words, some respondents argue that the focus should shift towards questions such as: What works for whom? Do SSW initiatives create meaningful change? How has the general well-being of participants improved through their participation in SSW? In which life domains have participants experienced positive influence? What opportunities have been created in terms of accessibility? How has their position and perception in society evolved?

Rather than prioritising rigid systems and categorisation, these respondents advocate for placing the experiences and outcomes of the target group at the forefront of policy discussions. As one respondent concludes: "The target group should always come first, regardless of categorisation or political realities" (local government official 5).

5. Concluding Reflections and Recommendations for Future Research

5.1. Concluding Reflections

The findings of this study largely corroborate earlier research into the intricate interplay between local policy and SSW in Flanders. Notably, our results underpin the enduring tension between the hybrid, dynamic, and innovative nature of SSW and the rigid, compartmentalised structure of policy, which often results in the limited recognition of SSW (Smets, 2019; Withaeckx el al., 2019). These observations align with the internationally debated tensions between top-down and bottom-up approaches within sport-for-development (Black, 2017; Coalter, 2013).

However, this study offers further insights into the specific mechanisms that drive the misalignment between SSW and policy, as well as potential solutions for fostering a more constructive relationship between SSW and local policy. In the final section of this article, we present concluding reflections that emphasise the significance of the personal beliefs, backgrounds, and priorities of local government officials and the need for a broader discussion—one that moves beyond merely establishing a structure for SSW towards fostering a policy culture that supports it.

5.1.1. A Matter of Personal Beliefs, Background, and Priorities

A key insight emerging from the findings is that the positioning of SSW within local policy often depends on the personal priorities and interests of key figures on the political and administrative levels. The degree of commitment from aldermen, the sources of inspiration for policymakers, and the alignment of different mandates can all influence whether SSW receives institutional backing. At the administrative level, individual experiences and professional backgrounds also shape the prioritisation and implementation of SSW. In particular, the willingness of department heads to advocate for SSW, as well as the expertise and perspectives of government officials, significantly impact the extent to which these initiatives are integrated into local policy frameworks.

These findings align with existing research (e.g., Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980) on the discretionary power of civil servants in policy implementation, which suggests that bureaucratic actors do not merely enforce top-down decisions but actively shape policy based on their own experiences and professional interpretations.

A notable challenge identified in this study is the reliance on a small number of government officials to shape SSW policy and support such initiatives. In both cases, the responsibility for SSW within local services is assigned to a single officer or a small team, often individuals who already have a professional or personal connection to the field. While this ensures a degree of expertise and commitment, it also creates vulnerabilities. In cases where these individuals encounter resistance within their departments or lack institutional backing, progress can be hindered. Moreover, when policy implementation is highly dependent on personal motivation, there is a risk that shifts in personnel or administrative priorities will lead to inconsistency.

This highlights a broader issue: If support for SSW remains contingent on the enthusiasm, beliefs, and experiences of few individuals, there is a risk of discontinuity and fragmentation in policy efforts.

5.1.2. Towards a Transversal Policy Culture

While an institutionalised approach may provide greater stability, the findings suggest that neither a purely structural focus nor a reliance on individual agency is sufficient to ensure the long-term integration of SSW within local policy. Rather than framing these perspectives as oppositional, a more effective approach would be to acknowledge their interdependence. Such an approach would facilitate the recognition of both the formal structures necessary for embedding SSW—such as more structural and permanent forms of cloverleaf financing—and the discretionary space required for policymakers to respond to local needs and opportunities, thereby ensuring the flexibility that some respondents of this study identified as essential.

This integrative approach could be realised through the cultivation of a distinctive culture—one that emerges from the interplay between explicit formal structures; implicit dynamics such as individual agency, norms, beliefs, values, social interactions; and local contextual dynamics. Moreover, it is imperative that this culture be developed and examined in a co-creative manner with participants. Facilitated and studied by researchers, such a co-creative framework would not only provide a shared space for dialogue but also foster more inclusive and participatory policy development. This aligns with the work of Smets (2019) and Skille (2008), who argue that collaborative policy-making can lead to more responsive and sustainable social-sportive policies.

Moreover, specifically within the Flemish context, a broader reading of policy trends suggests that developing a transversal policy culture involves considerations of power-sharing and fostering shared commitments between practice and policy. The integration of Flemish sectoral funds into the *Gemeentefonds* (municipal fund) granted municipalities significant financial autonomy, yet this shift coincided with a changing role for *buurtsport* (community sport) as a structured concept (Delheye et al., 2021). While no direct causal link can be established, this observation raises questions about the potential unintended consequences of increased local autonomy, particularly in terms of how responsibilities are redistributed. These reflections underline the importance of establishing co-governance cultures and long-term commitments between local governments, practitioners, and citizens.

A promising finding of this study is that, despite long-standing concerns about the limited role of the traditional sports sector (Scheerder et al., 2013; Theeboom & Haudenhuyse, 2014; Theeboom et al., 2010), local sports policy in Flanders is increasingly contributing to the development of a supportive culture for SSW. Our data indicate a gradual shift in local sports policy, where an increasing recognition of responsibility is leading to stronger collaboration with other sectors rather than the delegation of these matters elsewhere. Moreover, such cross-sectoral efforts might offer a means to address concerns regarding the perceived competition for subsidies between SSW and traditional sports clubs by promoting a shared vision that integrates both sectors into a more cohesive and complementary policy framework. These findings offer grounds for optimism, as they indicate a growing openness towards collaborative approaches between the traditional sports sector and other policy domains. The recent development of learning platforms and networks on SSW in Flanders—such as those established in the city of Antwerp (Delheye et al., 2024)—where knowledge, information, experiences, and uncertainties can be exchanged across sectors—reinforce this optimistic outlook.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

5.2.1. Examining the Long-Term and Comparative Effects of Local Policy on SSW Sustainability

The first limitation of this study is that it does not fully capture the long-term sustainability of different funding models or the ways in which policy choices impact SSW over time. This is partly due to the fluid nature of SSW itself, as well as the fact that a significant proportion of local funding remains project-based and short-term. Additionally, the limited research timeframe constrains the ability to assess these dynamics over a prolonged period. Further research is needed to better understand how these shifts in governance structures have shaped the landscape of community sport and cross-sectoral collaboration. A longitudinal approach would be particularly valuable in identifying barriers and enabling factors related to structural funding mechanisms (e.g., cloverleaf subsidies, structural funding pools spanning multiple policy sectors), personal dynamics (e.g., the impact of staff turnover within local policy teams), and cross-sectoral policy cultures, as well as their effects on the field.

The second limitation of this study is its lack of a comparative design. The research did not include case comparisons given that the key objective of the project was to identify overarching patterns rather than to contrast specific contexts. Moreover, the study did not systematically contrast the perspectives of practitioners or participants with those of policymakers, which could have provided deeper insights into the interplay between policy frameworks and on-the-ground implementation. A larger multi-city comparison that integrates the perspectives of diverse stakeholders could offer valuable insights into which policy cultures foster more effective SSW recognition and support, while also accounting for context-specific challenges, such as the differing needs of rural versus urban settings.

5.2.2. Research as a Facilitator for co-Creating: Aligning Policy, Practice, and Participants

In discussing ways to overcome the challenges in the tense relationship between policy and practice, respondents emphasised the importance of placing participants' needs at the centre of conversations and decision-making regarding SSW support.

From a practice-oriented research perspective, an action-oriented design—in which action and theory formation are intertwined—can establish co-creative environments where policymakers, practitioners, and

participants collaboratively develop policy, implementation, monitoring, and research strategies. This approach ensures that expectations, needs, and accountability mechanisms are collectively defined, fostering more responsive and sustainable social-sportive policies. As mentioned earlier, this co-creative framework provides a shared space for dialogue and aligns with the arguments of Smets (2019) and Skille (2008).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the participants who took part in the research, as well as the local steering groups, for their valuable advice. The LLM tool Chat GPT was used for minor grammar and style improvements.

Funding

This article has been made possible by the support of the research centre eCO-CITY (Collaboratory for Sustainable and Socially Just Urbanisation) at HOGENT University of Applied Sciences and Arts (Belgium) and VLAIO (Flanders Agency for Innovation & Entrepreneurship).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the need to protect participant anonymity, the data underpinning this study are not publicly accessible.

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