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Factors Facilitating the Sustainable Implementation of Social Sports Programmes: A Multiple-Case Study

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Abstract

Participation in social sports programmes can benefit people in socially vulnerable positions. In this study, social sports programmes are defined as sports programmes which are designed with the specific aim to support these people. However, the continuity of social sports programmes appears problematic. This study aimed to identify factors that facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting. For this purpose, an exploratory multiple-case study was conducted in six cities in the Netherlands. In each city, a programme called Life Goals was implemented, offering a range of sports activities for people in a socially vulnerable position. Twenty stakeholders, including programme coordinators, social sports coaches, policy officers of the municipality, social workers, and managers of social work organisations participated in an individual interview using a timelining method. The results of these interviews were subsequently explored during a focus group discussion with seven coordinators, four of whom had also participated in an interview. Five themes facilitating the sustainable implementation of local social sports programmes were identified: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining a partnership; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders. In addition, two overarching themes emerged as a common thread across the five themes: broad commitment and the role of the coordinator. Practical tips for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes are given, which can be used by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields.

Keywords

community sports programmes; local policy; sport as a means; vulnerable adults

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, around 10% of adults are in a socially vulnerable position (de Klerk et al., 2023). These adults face difficulties, such as low education, addiction, mental illness, and low income (Hede et al., 2019). The number of people in a socially vulnerable position is likely to increase due to various developments, such as the aftereffects of Covid-19 (de Klerk et al., 2023). To cope with everyday difficulties, people may rely on personal resources, such as self-esteem, resilience, and a social network (Super, 2017). Participation in sports can help adults to (further) develop these resources. Sports participation is, for example, positively related to good mental health (Friedrich & Mason, 2017; Marlier et al., 2015), increases in self-esteem (Friedrich & Mason, 2017), a broadened social network (Van der Veken et al., 2020b), and improved life skills (Hermens, Super, et al., 2017; ter Harmsel-Nieuwenhuis et al., 2022). However, people in socially vulnerable positions have fewer opportunities to participate in sports than their average peers, hence sports participation among this group is relatively low (Hoogendoorn & de Hollander, 2016; van Stam & van den Dool, 2021). For example, in the Netherlands, only 21% of people in a low socioeconomic position participate in sports weekly, compared to 74% of people in a high socioeconomic position (van Stam & van den Dool, 2021).

Social sports programmes have been developed to increase opportunities for sports participation among people in vulnerable positions. These programmes, also referred to as sport-for-development programmes, social sports practices, or community-based sports programmes, are sports programmes specifically developed for people in a socially vulnerable position in which the sports activity is used as a setting that facilitates positive personal experiences and development (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). In contrast to regular sports clubs, these programmes take geographical, financial, and socio-cultural barriers into account, and hence are often organised locally, financially accessible, and not high-level or focused on competition (Van der Veken et al., 2020a, 2020b). Additionally, the sports coaches of social sports programmes are often trained to be sensitive to the challenges that the participants experience and to support participants as best as possible (Super et al., 2016). The programmes commonly involve collaboration between social work organisations and the sports sector (Hermens et al., 2019). The social work sector, including organisations for homeless people and mental health care organisations, plays an important role in the recruitment of programme participants since they are often in contact with the target group (Hermens, 2018). Involvement of the sports sector, on the other hand, is needed to organise and provide the sports activities. They usually bring in the sports facilities, equipment, and coaches.

Social sports programmes must remain sustainable over time (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). Sustainability refers to "what extent an evidence-based intervention can deliver its intended benefits over an extended period after external support from the donor agency is terminated" (Rabin et al., 2008, p. 118). These intended benefits may be associated with various sustainability outcomes, such as participants' benefits, continuing the programme activities, and maintaining partnerships and organisational policies (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). However, the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes has proven difficult (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). A lack of long-term funding and challenges concerning the collaboration between a variety of partners appear to play an important role herein (Skinner et al., 2008; Whitley et al., 2015). Herbert-Maul et al. (2020) investigated the transfer and sustainability of a project promoting physical activity amongst socially disadvantaged women, the Bewegung als Investition in Gesundheit (BIG) project. The original BIG project was transferred to 16 other communities; however, 10 of these BIG projects were not sustainable over time and were discontinued (on average after 4.2 years). A few

projects ceased because of a lack of financial resources and funding; however, their discontinuation was primarily connected to the local project coordinator. For instance, due to an insufficient number of qualified and relevant stakeholders within their network, five coordinators were not able to build strong partnerships (Herbert-Maul et al., 2020).

1.1. Aim

The present study investigates the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in the Netherlands. Given the unique organisational context (i.e., partnerships including social and sports sectors) and target group (i.e., adults in a socially vulnerable position) of social sports programmes, factors facilitating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes may differ from more general physical activity programmes. Past research on the implementation of social sports programmes in the Netherlands has focused on the collaboration between sports and other sectors (Hermens et al., 2019; Leenaars et al., 2018). To our knowledge, research on the implementation process and sustainability of social sports programmes is scarce. Therefore, we aim to provide an in-depth picture of how social sports programmes are funded and how partnerships are established in local settings. By doing so, we aim to identify the facilitators for sustainable implementation. A broader and deeper understanding of facilitators that support the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes contributes to better implementation strategies that can be adopted by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields who want to implement social sports programmes sustainably.

2. Methods

2.1. Context and Selection of Cases

This qualitative multiple-case study is part of a larger research project called Life Experience Through Sports (LETS), which aims to investigate and enhance the societal impact of sports programmes for adults in a socially vulnerable position. The cases involved six cities in the Netherlands that offered a social sports programme based on the Life Goals (LG) method, an evidence-based method (van der Kooi & de Jager, 2021) that at the time of the research was running at 30 locations in the Netherlands. These LG programmes involve collaboration between local sports and social work organisations. The sports activities are coordinated by a local LG coordinator who manages the local collaborations and the funding of the programme. These local coordinators do not provide the sports activities themselves but are responsible for deploying the social sports coaches who supervise the sports activities in the LG programmes. These social sports coaches are trained in dealing with the target group, directing personal development and offering sports activities. The six cities were selected to maximise variation in geographical location, sports programme activities, living environments, and local policies. The content of the social sports programme varies by city in terms of the type and number of activities offered each week. This variation was deliberately chosen to help us understand actions and strategies that support the implementation of social sports programmes in different contexts, providing practical recommendations that benefit the implementation of a diverse range of sports programmes. Table 1 presents an overview of the social sports programmes in the six selected cities (October 2022). This study focused primarily on activities provided by the local LG programme (one programme in each city). However, we acknowledge that other social

Table 1. Overview of types of sports activities and partners in the six cities.

City	Activities	Partners
City A	Bootcamp, soccer, kickboxing, walking football, cycling, mixed activities	A forensic social work organisation, two social work organisations, a sports club, and the municipality
City B	Badminton, basketball, beach volleyball, (kick)boxing, bootcamp, fitness, jeu de boules, paddle, fishing, soccer, walking/running, swimming, mixed activities	Three forensic social work organisations, four social work organisations, a local sports service organisation, and the municipality
City C	Soccer, bootcamp, fitness, mixed activities	Three social work organisations and the municipality
City D	Soccer, mixed activities	Two social work organisations, professional sports club, educational organisation, the local sports service organisation, and the municipality.
City E	Bootcamp, kickboxing, soccer, mixed activities	Three social work organisations, a local sports service organisation, two sports clubs, and the municipality.
City F	Zumba, soccer	The collaboration ended; the activities are now offered by single organisations (social work organisations)

programmes may also be available within the cities. In City F the LG programme ended, but two of the activities are still provided by two of the partners.

In all six cities, the activities were organised for a broad group of socially vulnerable people, including people with a substance use disorder, people with mental illness, ex-convicts, people with long-term unemployment, refugees or immigrants, and homeless people. Although some activities are more targeted to a specific group, most activities within a local social sports programme are open to a wide range of adults in socially vulnerable positions. In most of the cities involved, the social sports programmes were developed through partnerships, usually consisting of one or more social work organisations, a local sports service organisation (i.e., the executive sports organisation of the municipality), and/or the municipality (see Table 1).

2.2. Data Collection and Procedures

Interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with multiple stakeholders. In doing so, both data and methodological triangulation were employed to increase the credibility and validity of the findings (Noble & Heale, 2019). The interviews were conducted with stakeholders actively involved in the implementation of the social sports programmes in the six cities. These stakeholders were acting on the provider (i.e., social sports coaches and social workers), organisational (i.e., coordinators and managers, social work organisation), or policy level (i.e., policy officers of the municipality). The stakeholders were selected through the snowballing method. First, the local coordinators of the six social sports programmes were informed about this research and asked to participate in an interview, to which they all agreed. In four of the six cities, two coordinators were employed. In two of these cities, we interviewed both coordinators. At the end of each interview, we asked the coordinators which other stakeholders (e.g., municipal policy officer, manager or professional within a social work organisation) played an important role in the implementation of the LG programme. These stakeholders were invited for an interview as well. All invited stakeholders accepted the invitation and, in total, 20 were

Table 2. Stakeholders interviewed in the six cities. Between brackets the researcher(s) who conducted the interview.

City	Stakeholders	#persons interviewed
City A	Coordinator LG programme (NH, DJ), municipal policy officer (sports domain; NH), social work organisation (NH)	3
City B	Coordinator LG programme (NH, LH), social sports coach (NH, LH), manager of social work organisation (NH), ex-manager of social work organisation (NH)	4
City C	Coordinators (two persons) LG programme (DJ, LH), manager at the social work organisation (DJ)	3
City D	Coordinator LG programme (LH, NH), municipal policy officer (sports domain; LH), social sports coach in the social work organisation (LH)	3
City E	Coordinators (two persons) LG programme (DJ, NH), municipal policy officer (sports domain; DJ), municipal policy officer (participation domain; DJ)	4
City F	Former coordinator in the LG programme (LH, NH), sports coach in the social work organisation (LH), social worker (LH)	3

interviewed, of which three were social sports coaches, two social workers, eight coordinators, three managers of a social work organisation, and four policy offers of the municipality (see Table 2). The interviews with the coordinators lasted between 69 and 87 minutes. The interviews with the other stakeholders were shorter, ranging from 29 to 57 minutes.

After the interviews, we organised a focus group discussion. Since the interviews revealed that coordinators had the best understanding of the complete implementation process—the other stakeholders were often only involved in part of the implementation—we decided to invite the coordinators of all 30 LG programmes running in the Netherlands. This included eight coordinators who had already been interviewed. Ultimately, seven coordinators participated in the focus group discussion. Four of the seven coordinators that participated in the focus group also participated in the interviews and three were from LG programmes in other cities and had not been interviewed before. The focus group discussion lasted 58 minutes.

Before the interviews and focus group discussion, the researcher(s) provided information about the research to the participants, informed them that the interview/focus group discussion would be audio-recorded, that the participant could stop the interview/focus group discussions at any moment, and that their data would be anonymised. Finally, they were asked for their informed consent.

The interviews with the coordinators were conducted by adopting a timelining method. The interview began with a request for the coordinators to describe the current state of the social sports programme concerning its sports activities, finances, partnerships, and policy. Then, a line was drawn on an A3-size paper and the interviewees were asked to mark the start of their social sports programme and to fill in the timeline by indicating key moments and events in the implementation of the social sports programme. After drawing the timeline, we asked additional questions to understand key events (e.g., Why was this an important event? What was the impact on the social sports programme? Which people were important? What was your role in that event?).

In the interviews with the other stakeholders (e.g., municipal policy officer, manager or professional within a social work organisation), the interviewees were asked to draw a timeline from the moment they became involved in the social sports programme until the moment of the interview. They were also asked to indicate key events on the timeline. During the interview, we discussed the similarities and differences between the interviewee's and the coordinator's timelines. Three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) were responsible for conducting the interviews with the coordinators and other stakeholders. The interviews with the coordinators were carried out by two of the three researchers, and the interviews with the other stakeholders were carried out by one of the researchers (see Table 2). For continuity, a single researcher was involved in all interviews conducted at each location.

After analysing the interview data, we organised the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion aimed to review and enrich the data obtained during the interviews. The analysis of the interviews revealed seven themes (see Section 2.3), which were presented and discussed during the focus group discussion. The interactive presentation software Mentimeter (n.d.) was used to support the focus group and to obtain the coordinators' initial responses. The initial responses were used to ask additional questions to gather more detailed information. The focus group was led by NH, and supported by LH and DJ.

2.3. Data Analysis

All interviews, as well as the focus group discussion, were audio-recorded. The researcher who attended all of the interviews within a specific city was responsible for establishing a timeline and narrative of the respective city. The drawn timelines of the local coordinator and other stakeholders were combined into one timeline for each city. Based on the recordings and timelines, a narrative on how the social sports programme was implemented was written for each city. The narratives ranged from five to six pages.

Data were analysed using the six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These six steps included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) familiarised themselves with the data by thoroughly reading the six narratives and timelines. The six narratives were independently analysed by the three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) to identify overarching themes that are important in the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Afterwards, they discussed the themes to find consensus. This process initially yielded seven themes.

After the first three steps of thematic analysis, the focus group took place. The focus group was organised to review the initial themes and consequently define the final themes and hence was an additional step within our data analysis. A five-page report was prepared summarising the focus group discussion. This report included the initial responses to the questions asked via Mentimeter, supplemented by the explanations given during the focus group discussion. The report was shared with the participants of the focus group discussion for review. No comments were received. First, the seven themes, distilled from the interview data, were enriched with the data obtained in the focus group discussion. Subsequently, the seven themes were subjected to a comprehensive review and underwent a process of re-definition and renaming. To complete this process, three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH) discussed the seven themes in detail. Ultimately, themes were combined and given more appropriate names that accurately reflect their content. Finally, five themes were exposed, which will be presented in the results section. After writing the results section, the three researchers (LH, DJ, and NH)

discussed their findings. In discussing the results, they identified two overarching themes that are discussed in more detail in the discussion section.

3. Results

The six timelines of each city are summarised in Table 3, showing the key events that led to (a more) sustainable implementation of the social sports programmes. The data revealed five themes that were experienced as important in the sustainable implementation of a social sports programme: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining partnerships; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders.

3.1. Employment of the Coordinator

The coordinators in the six cities had different employers (i.e., a self-established foundation, a local sport service organisation, the municipality, and/or social work organisations; see Table 4), which, according to the coordinators, had their advantages and disadvantages. The coordinators who worked for a self-established foundation were quite autonomous, for example, in making their choices and writing their funding applications. The downside, according to these coordinators, was that it took a lot of time and effort to start the self-established foundation. Coordinators working for the municipality faced challenges in gaining full autonomy over their plans but appreciated being reimbursed for their working hours. One of the coordinators said:

> Within the municipality, it is easier to claim hours for coordination….In a foundation, everything had to be covered. Within the municipality, they can declare the hours within regular budgets. (City C)

In the focus group discussion, it was mentioned that coordinators employed at a local sport service organisation or a social work organisation have easier access to the target group and to sports organisations where the activities can take place than coordinators that are employed at a self-established foundation or in a municipality. On the other hand, coordinators employed at a local sport service or social work organisation faced challenges in getting enough time for the project compared to other work-related activities. The participants of the focus group discussion (FG) concluded that, for the implementation of the programmes, there is no ideal way to shape the coordinator's employment, because it depends on the local situation (e.g., the presence of a local sports service or local policy):

> A local sports service is not always available, nor is some other form of service in some cases. So, it might have to be from the municipality. (FG)

Interviewees indicated that coordinators often had a broad range of tasks requiring different competencies. These tasks were carried out on two levels: an executed level and a policy level. In some cities, therefore, the coordinators' position was split between a policy coordinator and an executive coordinator. The coordinator of City C explained:

> The coordinator role is divided, and we both do what we are good at….They require different skills. If you can do one, you often can't do another task as well. You are excellent at networking with the municipality or working with participants. (City C)

Table 3. Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City A	Occasional sports activities for socially vulnerable adults. Participation in Dutch Street League Cup.	Cooperation with LGF. Appointment of local coordinator. Building a coalition.	Establishment of local LGF. Signing of letter of intent by all the coalition partners. Training social sports coaches. Kick-off event. Allocation of Oranje Fonds grant and a local (pilot) fund.	City Cup (local event). First allocation of local grant—social domain (from then on, requested annually). Allocation of grant Sportimpuls.	Allocation of local grant for undocumented people.	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).	Expansion to national projects (LG youth).
City B	Start pilot project for socially vulnerable youth (funded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; 2000). End of pilot, municipality continues the pilot for 3 years (2003). Building a coalition (2003). End of funding by the municipality (2006). Start Homeless Cup (2007). Salvation Army received a grant from the municipality for offering sports activities (2007). Participants were trained to become social sports coach (2007). Establishment of local sports organisation (2012).	—	Cooperation with LGF. Collaboration between Salvation Army and social care organisation. Allocation of grant to form a sports coalition.	—	Deployment of two coordinators.	Formalising coalition. Start coalition. Kick-off event.	—

Table 3. (Cont.) Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City C	Grant application Sportimpuls rejected (2014). Pioneering opportunities for collaboration with (social work) partners.	Cooperation with LGF.	Start LG-programme. External foundation continues LG programme.	Municipality continues LG programme. New sport policy. More activities with different social care organisations. Kick-off event.	—	Expansion to national projects (LG youth).	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).
City D	Local Salvation Army participates in the Dutch Street Cup (2013/2014). Cooperation with LGF (license fee paid by local Salvation Army; 2015/2016).	Establishment of local sport service organisation. License fee of LG paid by local sport service organisation and Salvation Army.	International tournament.	Two LG events.	Local sports service organisation is asked to continue the LG programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Local sports service organisation employer of social sports coaches.	Municipality extends partnership with LGF for 3 years. Expansion to national projects (LG youth).	New local sports policy, with defined mission, including continuation of local LG programme.

Table 3. (Cont.) Timelines of the six cities.

	<2017	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
City E	—	Current coordinator assigned to coordinator of inclusive sports. Building and formalising coalition. Cooperation with LGF.	Kick-off LG programme. Allocation of the grant Oranje Fonds.	Expansion to national projects. Involvement in other domains within the municipality.	Deployment of two coordinators (i.e., executive and policy).	New policy officer of sports within municipality.	—
City F	Investigation of the current sports activities in the community. Result: lack of activities for socially vulnerable groups (2012). Building a coalition (2014). Allocation of Sportimpuls—GALM-project grant (2015).	Start social sports programme.	Allocation of Sportimpuls grant. Cooperation with LGF. More activities for socially vulnerable adults.	—	End of cooperation with LGF. Continuing with one activity by the Salvation Army and one activity by a social work organisation.	—	—

Note: LGF = Life Goals Foundation.

3.2. Funding of the Social Sports Programme

The funding of the social sports programme was a central theme in all six cities. Table 4 shows an overview of how the six social sports programmes were funded. Our data revealed that the social sports programmes were financed in four ways. The programmes were (partly) funded by national grants, municipality budgets, social work budgets, or by the participants themselves (see Table 4). According to the coordinators, combining these funding methods is the most ideal approach for sustainable implementation.

Table 4. Employment of the local coordinator and funding of the social sports programmes at the time of the interview.

City	Funding				Employment of the local coordinator
	Municipality	Social work	National grants	Participants	
City A	Local grant—social domain Local grant for undocumented people	In-kind hours of social work organisations	Set Your LG grant Welcome to the Sport grant	—	One coordinator Self-established foundation
City B	Local grant—social domain BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations	LG Event grant	—	Two coordinators Social work organisation Social work organisation
City C	Fund—sports domain Small funds—several domains (e.g., mental health, neighbourhoods) BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations	Grant from the Ministry of Justice and Security	—	Two coordinators Municipality Social work organisation
City D	Fund—sports domain BRC funding	In-kind hours of social work organisations Financing sports activities	Set Your LG grant Youth LG grant	Participant's fee	Two coordinators Local sport service organisation Social work organisation
City E	Fund—sports domain BRC funding	—	Set Your LG grant Youth LG grant	—	Two coordinators Local sport service organisation Local sport service organisation
City F	BRC funding (when the programme was still running)	In-kind hours of social work organisations	—	Participant's fee Personal care budget clients	One (former) coordinator Local sport service organisation

Note: BRC stands for Brede Regeling Combinatiefuncties fund.

3.2.1. National Grants

According to the coordinators, national grants (i.e., grants provided by the national government or national organisations, but which can be used in local settings) are essential for the implementation of social sports programmes. In most cities, a national grant was used as a start-up for a new social sports programme, and eventually for creating a consortium to implement the social sports programme for a longer period. The grant ensured the time (i.e., hours for the coordinator) and resources that were needed for building a partnership and setting up the (pilot) project quickly. The interviewees realised that if the (pilot) project was running, coordinators would be able to show and tell stakeholders about the positive impact of the (pilot) project and start conversations with stakeholders about future funding and embedding. At the time of the interviews, national grants were still used to partly fund the social sports programmes in five of the six cities. One of the participants in the focus group discussion explained:

> We used it [i.e., the pilot] as a kind of travelling circus, to show that it helped….We invited them [i.e., stakeholders] to participate in Life Goals activities, and that made them think more quickly, "This is something for our target group, who have multiple problems." And we couldn't do it otherwise [i.e., without a pilot project]. (FG)

3.2.2. Municipal Funding

In multiple cities, the social sports programme was funded by the municipality (e.g., sports or social domain). Inclusive sports were an important theme in the local sports policies of three cities. To give substance to this policy, funds had been made available for the implementation of social sports programmes. In City D, the social sports programme was even mentioned by name in the local municipal sports policy document. Additionally, all municipalities in the Netherlands can apply for the Brede Regeling Combinatiefuncties fund to receive co-financing from the state for deploying community sports coaches (*buurtsportcoaches*). Coordinators and/or social sports coaches were paid from this subsidy in five of the cities. Finally, in two cities, they used local grants provided by the municipality. According to the interviewees, the downside to these local grants is the short-term character and (bi)annual application of the funds that took a lot of time and effort.

3.2.3. Social Work Funding

In most cities, social work organisations provided some of the funding by embedding the social sports programme in the daily work and policy of the social work organisation(s). Under this funding model, the coordinators made agreements with social work organisations concerning the hours that social work professionals contribute to the social sports programmes (in-kind investments). In all cities, for example, social work professionals are trained and employed as social sports coaches:

> The agreement at the beginning was that social work organisations would take care of the counselling of their clients, at their own expense, and that the sports activities would be provided by the sports organisation. (City C)

In one city, the social work organisation even financed part of the project by paying for the sports activities.

3.2.4. Participant Funding

Finally, in two cities, participants paid a small fee to participate in some of the activities in the programme. This fee was used to fund the local activities. For one of the activities, participants decided for themselves how much they wanted to contribute based on their financial situation. For another activity, the clients' personal care budgets were used to finance the activity. A personal care budget is a subsidy from the government that allows people to purchase the care they need, like day-care activities, for example. In one of the cities, the LG activity was integrated into a day-care activity, in which participants in socially vulnerable positions engage in voluntary work at the sports club.

In addition, some of the programme participants were encouraged by their coach to assume the role of social sports coaches themselves. Social sports coaches demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of their programme participants, enabling them to discern which programme participants are suited and receptive to the role of social sports coach. In almost all of the cities, several programme participants were trained and subsequently deployed as social sports coaches. Interviewees felt that this reduced the reliance on professionals, so training programme participants as sports coaches seemed to be a useful strategy for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. The coordinator of City A explained:

> This [training participants in becoming coaches] ensures that the social sports programme is less dependent on the social work and sports professionals and that there is enough capacity to scale up, but also to ensure that activities continue if the coach is indisposed. (City A)

3.3. An Evidence-Based Method

Some coordinators and other stakeholders mentioned that being part of a nationally recognised evidence-based programme (i.e., LG) and network helped them gain support and financial resources for implementing the social sports programme in their city:

> Life Goals methodology is important because it is an intervention that you stand behind and is proven. You then start linking things to it rather than figuring it out yourself and setting up new projects. (City C)

The added value of an evidence-based method was discussed in more detail during the focus group discussion. The coordinators who participated in the focus group discussion mentioned that using an evidence-based method with a well-known name strengthened the content of the "story" they could tell stakeholders, making it easier to engage them in the project. Besides that, the coordinators mentioned that LG had a back-office and a large network of partners working on sports programmes for vulnerable people, which made it possible for the coordinators to share knowledge and experiences.

3.4. Building a Partnership

The coordinators from all six cities mentioned that building a strong partnership was essential to implementing the social sports programme. The interviewees viewed central coordinators as an important condition to build and maintain such a partnership. One of the stakeholders said:

> You need a leader who will continue to put it on the agenda, maintain the collaboration, and look for new sports activities. (City B)

The coordinators explored opportunities to implement the social sports programme, constantly looked for relevant partners, and had (exploratory) talks with them. During the interviews, the coordinators often called this "pioneering" and mentioned that it requires structural attention and a personalised approach:

> These were mostly open conversations where everyone could say what they had to say. Especially about the dream we are pursuing. What and who are needed and who pays for what? (City D)

According to all coordinators, it was important to make agreements within the partnership. They all mentioned that it helped when they took the lead in making agreements on responsibilities, finances, and in-kind investments (i.e., the contribution of professionals). In City C, for example, they agreed that social work organisations arrange the supervision of the participants (i.e., their clients) and sports organisations provide the sports activities. Besides agreements, the coordinator of City A believed it was important that all partners felt responsible for the social sports programme. In City A they assumed equal cooperation and all partners organised activities. In this way, they were all involved and felt responsible for the weekly schedule of the social sports programme.

Based on their own experiences, coordinators mentioned that in this phase of "pioneering" and making agreements, it was important to gain support from the various layers within an organisation, from the execution level (recruiting enthusiastic professionals) to the management level (making agreements on finances), to achieve broad support for the project. Furthermore, some of the coordinators recommended a single contact person at the social work organisations. However, finding and maintaining this contact person was difficult due to the workload of social work professionals.

3.4.1. Formalising the Partnership

In multiple cities, the agreements on responsibilities, finances, and in-kind investments were presented in a covenant or a letter of commitment. In City A, the covenant was also used to show that the partnership and the social sports programme itself are supported by multiple stakeholders, which helped the coordinator in gaining new grants. In City B, all social work organisations signed the official covenant. This covenant includes clear agreements on roles and tasks, which facilitated the funding from the municipality (i.e., one grant instead of separate grants). However, not all managers/directors signed the covenant initially, some fearing the loss of autonomy over their "own" sports activities, additional costs, and that it would take a lot of their staff's time. Therefore, the coordinators in City B decided to start with a small number of organisations. By the time of the interview, all the social work organisations had signed the covenant.

3.4.2. Maintaining the Partnership

According to the coordinators, it is important to structurally invest in the partnership. To be successful and keep the partnership together, the coordinators invited all partners to evaluation meetings. During these meetings, the relationship between the partners and their input was discussed. The extent and structure of these meetings varied from city to city. In some cities, the meetings were structured and planned, and took place from every four weeks to annually. In other cities, the meetings took place organically. For example,

City B created a formal partnership and had an online gathering every four weeks. In this meeting, they discussed the sports activities held by every organisation and the roles they all played within the partnership. In City C, the coordinator evaluated the progress of the social sports program and the collaboration between the partners once or twice a year with all the partners. He wished to structure these meetings and have them more often so that the collaboration would run more smoothly.

3.5. "Sports-Minded" Stakeholders

The interviewees mentioned that stakeholders who can influence or determine the content of the local policy (e.g., policy officers and aldermen [the aldermen, together with the mayor, bear responsibility for the day-to-day management of municipalities]) or the policy of the social work organisation (e.g., social work managers and professionals) are crucial for the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. To gain support for these initiatives, coordinators explained that it is important for these stakeholders to be sports-minded and to recognise the added value of sports for adults in a socially vulnerable position. As a result, they are more likely to participate in the social sports programme and to provide financial resources or in-kind contributions. Moreover, some coordinators indicated that aldermen may have influenced stakeholders (e.g., social work managers and professionals) or their own policy officers due to their public function (e.g., opening an event, newspaper article). So, their support for the social sports programme may be extra valuable. The coordinator of City A explained:

> It's easier to talk to policy officers if the alderman is involved, is in the picture and says, "This is important." Then policy officers will come to you, too. (City A)

3.5.1. Influencing "Sports-Minded" Stakeholders

The interviews revealed that stakeholders can be influenced to be more "sports-minded" by creating visibility of the social sports programme (activities) and showing them the added value of the social sports programmes (i.e., the impact). According to the participants of the focus group discussion, coordinators focused on this at certain key moments, such as the end of a grant, a new alderman or a new policy, or during special weeks (e.g., national sports week).

To increase the visibility of the sports programme, coordinators invited stakeholders to sports activities or events to inspire them. Events, such as a kick-off or tournament, were held in all six cities, and coordinators explained that by inviting external stakeholders and media, the visibility of the social sports programme increased:

> This created an image and something tangible. Two hundred participants were standing in the sports hall, and this created the image that "In [name of city] we are organising something magnificent for adults in a socially vulnerable position," both in stakeholders and media as well as internally [i.e., local sport service organisation]. (City D)

Some coordinators indicated that showing the impact of the social sports programme was important to influence stakeholders. Results of the LG monitor, an online tool which monitors the personal development of the participants, helped coordinators substantiate their story in conversations with stakeholders:

> The conversations with other domains [i.e., domains within the municipality] are mainly about the impact and what to achieve, which indicates the importance of filling in the monitor. (City C)

Finally, the coordinator could indirectly influence the stakeholders through the social sports coaches. Interviewees mentioned that social sports coaches were important. They were the key to a successful and sustainable social sports programme. This is reflected, for example, in the satisfaction and enthusiasm of participants, which were noticed by stakeholders, who, in turn, recognised the added value of social sports programmes. Coordinators could partly influence this by hiring appropriate social sports coaches and managing them in a way that positively influences the quality of the programmes, as explained by one of the coordinators:

> You also depend on your coaches. You must find suitable people for the social sports programmes….In this, we have taken a step forward. That we have suitable people in the right places. (City C)

4. Discussion

4.1. Main Findings

The aim of this study was to gain insights into how the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes for socially vulnerable adults evolves in local settings and to identify factors facilitating a sustainable implementation. We identified five themes related to the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting: (a) employment of the coordinator; (b) funding of the social sports programme; (c) adopting an evidence-based method; (d) building and maintaining a partnership; and (e) sports-minded stakeholders. A deeper analysis of the five themes that play a role in the local implementation of social sports programmes reveals two overarching themes: broad commitment towards the social sports programme and the complex role of the coordinator.

4.1.1. Broad Commitment

Our study shows that (a) financial resources from multiple sources, (b) formalised partnerships, and (c) sports-minded stakeholders, are crucial for the sustainable implementation of local social sports programmes. Our interpretation is that these three aspects are all linked to the concept of commitment, which can be defined as the willingness to exert efforts on behalf of the relationship (Lucidarme et al., 2014, p. 57). This confirms findings from previous studies that broad commitment is needed for the implementation of these social sports programmes (Gipson et al., 2018; Hermens et al., 2019). Our findings indicate that commitment may be affected by the personal attitudes (e.g., personal interests, priorities) of stakeholders towards the social sports programme. This is in line with a previous study, which revealed that the success of intersectoral action (i.e., youth-care and sports sector) was influenced by personal elements, including the attitude, beliefs, knowledge, and skills of the stakeholders, type of relationships between the stakeholders, and the extent to which the stakeholders believe they can effect change in the intersectoral action (Hermens, de Langen, et al., 2017).

Moreover, our study revealed that in order to acquire commitment, coordinators aspire to influence the stakeholders' attitudes towards social sports programmes by adopting a personalised approach (e.g.,

one-to-one conversations in which shared objectives were discussed) towards stakeholders and making them more sports-minded by creating visibility of the activities and their impact. This finding concurs with Koelen et al. (2008), who explained that for intersectoral action in health, creating visibility may help garner political and financial support and may stimulate stakeholders to continue their work in a partnership. Furthermore, it is conceivable that sports-minded stakeholders within the social sector may be of particular significance in the implementation of social sports programmes. Socially vulnerable people experience more barriers to sports participation (e.g., financial restrictions, low motivation, and anxiety) than the general population (Brooke et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2021). As social workers are familiar with the target group and aware of their needs, they may be important intermediaries in recruiting participants and reducing the barriers to participation (Hermens, 2018; Smith & Wightman, 2019). However, more research is needed to better understand the role that social professionals can play in overcoming the barriers to sports participation together with the target group.

4.1.2. Role of the Coordinator

The second overarching theme is the role of the coordinator, who appeared crucial in the sustainable implementation of the local social sports programme. Our study revealed that coordinators operate at a dual level (i.e., policy and executive level) and carry out a variety of tasks. This requires them to have a broad set of skills and competencies. This is in line with the findings of Hermens (2018), who concluded that to embed a youth sports programme in local social policy, the coordinator needs to act at two levels: managing the collaboration between youth care and sports professionals at the operational level and building connections at the political, policy, and managerial levels.

We found that, on the executive level, the coordinator should possess very practical competencies, such as hiring and managing social sports coaches, optimising cooperation with social work professionals, organising local events, monitoring the results of the programme, and making the programme visible through public relations and communication. In addition to these competencies, we found that on the policy level, the coordinator should be able to pioneer, build, formalise, and maintain a partnership to find and apply for funding and to put the social sports programme on the agenda with the municipality. The role of the coordinators on the policy level corresponds to that of so-called boundary spanners. Boundary spanners act as a bridge between organisations representing different sectors (e.g., sport, social work) in a partnership (Williams, 2013) and "have a particular set of partnership skills that enable partnerships to function more effectively" (Jones & Barry, 2011, p. 410), such as good interpersonal, entrepreneurial, communication, and coordination skills (Williams, 2013).

4.2. Practical Implications

In order to facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes, some practical recommendations can be derived from the findings of our study. First, coordinators and social sports coaches are of critical importance in the implementation process of social sports programmes. Therefore, concerning the employment of coordinators and social sports coaches, it is recommended to (a) appoint coordinators who can fulfil the role of a boundary spanner; (b) give coordinators a permanent position and sufficient time to carry out their extensive range of tasks; (c) consider splitting the position of coordinator—one coordinator acting on the policy level and one coordinator acting on the executive level; (d) provide

coordinators with the time and resources needed to develop their skills and competencies through education; and (e) deploy coaches who are suitable to fulfil the role of social sports coach. As posited by Alarslan et al. (2024), social sports coaches should listen to their participants, be engaged, set clear rules, and provide activities with appropriate intensity. In addition, social sports coaches should strive to achieve a balance between setting clear boundaries and discipline and allow participants the freedom and autonomy to make their own decisions.

Secondly, to ensure the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes, it is advised that a considerable investment be made in creating a broad commitment amongst stakeholders. A broad commitment can be fostered by increasing visibility and providing support for social sports programmes. Coordinators can accomplish this by (a) using a national grant to start a pilot; (b) inviting (potential) stakeholders for a kick-off event or other programme activities (visibility of activities); (c) monitoring the social sports programme and demonstrating its impact to stakeholders (visibility of impact); (d) investing time to build and maintain relationships through a personalised approach; and (e) formalising the partnerships in a covenant.

4.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. First, considering the context of this study, it is uncertain whether the findings are generalisable to social sports programmes in other countries. This study was conducted in six Dutch cities offering social sports programmes based on the LG method, which contains specific elements, such as trained social sports coaches, trained LG coordinators, and an online monitoring tool. In addition, the Dutch sports sector is organised in a specific way: Approximately 22,000 sports clubs offer the majority of the sports activities in the Netherlands (NOC*NSF, 2022; van der Roest, 2015; Waardenburg & van Bottenburg, 2013). Whereas in many Western European and Scandinavian countries, and in Australia, sports clubs are also the primary provider of sports (Ooms et al., 2015; van der Roest, 2015), this is not common in other countries such as the United States (van Bottenburg, 2011). Hence, our practical implications may be relevant for social sport programmes in countries with a similar sports landscape to the Netherlands, but it is debatable as to whether these are useful for social sports programmes in countries where the sport sector is organised differently.

Secondly, several models and frameworks can be used to investigate the (sustainable) implementation of (sports) programmes, such as the framework of Public Health Programme Capacity for Sustainability of Schell et al. (2013), the normalisation process theory (May & Finch, 2009), the Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (Damschroder et al., 2009), and RE-AIM (Glasgow et al., 1999). As the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes is still an unexplored area, we decided to conduct an exploratory multiple-case study and not to be directed by a theoretical model or framework. By doing so, it was more challenging to compare our results with earlier research investigating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes and to examine whether it differs from that of other (sports) programmes. Therefore, for follow-up research, it is recommended to use a commonly used theory or model explaining the sustainable implementation of (social sports) programmes. For example, Helsper et al. (2023) adjusted the well-recognised conceptual framework of Schell et al. (2013), which describes core domains affecting a programme's capacity for sustainability. An alternative is to use the normalisation process theory in future research, as this study revealed that sports-minded stakeholders are important for the sustainable

implementation of social sports programmes. The normalisation process theory is a social process theory which can support future research to understand how and why the cognitive and social processes of individuals within their system are essential for the implementation of social sports programmes (Schroeder et al., 2022).

This study aimed to identify factors facilitating the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. An important factor is the funding of the social sports programme. Our data revealed different forms of funding. However, the retrieved data did not allow for a more in-depth analysis of sustainable funding. The remaining questions include: What steps are involved in the transition from a national start-up subsidy to other (local) forms of funding? And how long does it take for a social sports programme to become self-sustaining? It is, therefore, recommended that future research should aim to gain a deeper insight into the question of sustainable funding.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a deeper understanding of the factors that facilitate the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Five themes which facilitated the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes in a local setting are evident from the data: the employment of the coordinator, the funding method, adopting an evidence-based method, the process of building and maintaining a partnership, and sports-minded stakeholders seemingly influencing the sustainable implementation of social sports programmes. Additionally, a broad commitment to social sports programmes, integrated across various themes, is essential for building and maintaining partnerships and securing funding. Further, within all five themes, the coordinator plays an important role and is a key person in the implementation process. The results of this study can be used by professionals and managers in the social work and sports fields who want to implement social sports programmes sustainably. For instance, to gain broad commitment to the social sports programme, coordinators are encouraged to increase visibility by showing the programme's impact and making the activities more visible (e.g., inviting stakeholders to activities). Future research is recommended to further explore whether the revealed factors are also applicable to social sports programmes in other countries and to gain a deeper understanding of sustainable funding. In addition, for future research, it is advised to use a theoretical model or framework such as the normalisation process theory (Schroeder et al., 2022).

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Conflict of Interests

One of the researchers was an embedded scientist, in the sense that he was employed as a researcher by Wageningen University, but was also working within the foundation offering the sports programmes, namely the Life Goals Foundation. At all times during the research, the researchers adhered to the Dutch Code of

Conduct for Research Integrity to avoid potential conflicts of interest. In our opinion, the use of the embedded scientist had a negligible impact on the results.

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