



RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Improving the Implementation of Sport Governance with an Analysis of Its Determinants: The Case of Sport National Governing Bodies in Switzerland

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigates new empirical routes to improve the implementation of sport governance by sports organizations. It asks the question: what determinants influence the decision of sport national governing bodies in Switzerland to implement sport governance? It builds on implementation deficits highlighted by benchmark analysis, an exploratory literature review and a description of the non-profit sector. This paper invites a reflection on the challenges and difficulties related to sport governance standards. The method builds on an exploratory, inductive and qualitative research design. The data comprise interviews with 10 decision makers of national sport federations and the national umbrella federation of sport and Olympic committee analyzed by theme-based coding. The analysis highlights five meta-themes associated with determinants: (1) strategic priority, (2) decision makers' knowledge on the concept of sport governance, (3) sport governance issues, (4) resources, and (5) personal attributes of decision makers. The results and findings indicate that improving the implementation of sport governance is a multidimensional issue that mainly involves organizational and individual elements, and calls for a tiered approach rather than a "one size-fits all" approach.

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## 1. Introduction

Knowledge of sport governance is constantly improving. In addition to this knowledge base, plethora of analytical frameworks are available (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2019), conceptual convergence is forming around the principles of democracy, transparency and accountability (Thompson et al., 2022), and research is tending to confirm that the board structure of sport organizations influences organizational performance (Parent & Hoye, 2018). However, the topic still offers many opportunities for

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reflection and development. Indeed, although governance has gained importance and legitimacy in the world of sport (Geeraert, 2019) and national and international sport organizations have been familiar with the narrative of sport governance for more than 20 years now, comparative analyses still show many implementation deficits by sport organizations.

At the international level, for example, analyses by the Sports Governance Observer show that the best-performing international sport federation (IF) among five selected cases is the *Fédération Internationale de Football Association* (FIFA), with an implementation level of governance indicators of 61%, but some, such as the *Fédération Internationale de Natation* (FINA), struggle to reach 25% (Geeraert, 2018b). A more recent study of six other IFs again shows considerable deficits, with 66% of the organizations reviewed not exceeding the 50% mark (Alm, 2019). The results of the second analysis of the *Association of Summer Olympic Federations* (ASOIF) show that the 'governance score' of its member federations ranges from 46 to 177 out of a theoretical total score of 200 (Association of Summer Olympic Federations, 2018), which equates to a degree of compliance with expectations of between 23% and 88.5%, while the overall index stands at 60%. At the national level, Cingiene (2019) shows, for example, that Lithuanian sport organizations comply with the Sports Governance Observer index at 68.4% and that transparency and public communication are only partially implemented, while the results of the National Sports Governance Observer range from 27% to 78% (Geeraert, 2018a).

We observe that the benchmarked sport organizations all implement sport governance standards as defined by the frameworks to a certain level, which shows that they are prone to reform. However, we also observe first, that there is a difference in implementation levels among sport organizations, and second, that none of these organizations reaches the maximum score. This leads us to question whether the standards are unsuited to the organizational context of certain surveyed sport organizations and that given factors prevent them from reaching a certain level, or that the constructs are too ambitious for the benchmarked sport organizations as a whole, that in turn, can lead to a lack of conceptual validity.

Several indirect and tentative explanations regarding the reasons why sport organization can be constrained in their decision to implement sport governance, have already been presented in the literature. The autonomy of sport organizations to decide to implement their own standards at the expense of other ones (e.g. Geeraert et al., 2015), a low degree of constraint of the institutional context and mechanisms leading to a reform leaving space for self-realization (e.g. Geeraert, 2016), the rationality of actors and organizations to decide what standard best suits their interests (e.g. Geeraert, 2022a), cultural burdens leading to incompatibility of local practices (e.g. García & Meier, 2022; Ghadami & Henry, 2015; Girginov, 2019; Henry, 2022), conceptual complexity leading sport organizations to implement only minimum standards (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2019), attitudes and lack of knowledge of individuals that are not equipped with sufficient skills to improve (e.g. Král & Cuskelly, 2018), decision makers' capabilities to follow path (e.g. Ferkins et al., 2005) or inadequate organizational structure (ASOIF, 2018; Král & Cuskelly, 2018) have been suggested.

However, apart from Král and Cuskelly (2018) contribution to the transparency of sport organizations, no empirical study on the determinants that influence a sport organization's decision to implement sport governance standards has been conducted. Moreover, few benchmark studies focus on sport national governing bodies in the non-profit sector, such as the national umbrella federations for sport, national Olympic committees, or national sport federations, and case studies remain limited. Switzerland is, for instance, not included in the National Sports Governance Observer by PlaytheGame (Adam, 2021). These are important limitations of research in the field of better sport governance (e.g. Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013) that the present contribution aims to address.

Anchoring governance reform as a constituent element of a sport organization's strategic decision making (Mrkonjic, 2022; O'Brien et al., 2019) and in line with the need to better understand the effectiveness of a sport organization's governance decisions and actions (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2019), this contribution asks the question: what determinants influence the decision of sport national governing bodies in Switzerland to implement sport governance? It focuses on the non-profit sector of the Swiss sport system and two of its main (group of) organizations. This sector (and its organizations) is particularly interesting to investigate because it has no sport governance code, it is autonomous in its development (Baddeley, 2020), and it is organized with a complex network of organizations (Bayle, 2017; Mrkonjic, 2019). Moreover, the linguistic diversity of the country brings conceptual and operational challenges to an already historically vague concept (Rhodes, 1996).

Using a qualitative and inductive research design anchored in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2013), we conduct 10 semi-structured interviews consisting of 16 open-ended questions with decision makers (president, vice-president, CEO or head of division) of Swiss Olympic, the national umbrella federation of sport and Olympic committee, and of national sport federations.

The first part of the present paper reviews the literature on the potential determinants of the implementation of sport governance. The second part describes the study context including the specificities of the Swiss sport system with a focus on the non-profit sector and the two organizations under investigation. The third part describes the chosen method. The results are presented and discussed in the fourth and fifth parts. A conclusion proposing new avenues of reflection ends the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

In line with the debated nature of the concept in other fields of study (Rhodes, 1996), sport governance is a contested and multidimensional concept. It is often segmented into several dimensions, approaches, or constituent principles. For instance, Holt (2006) distinguishes analytical and normative approaches, and Henry and Lee (2004) identify three dimensions (organizational governance, systemic governance, political governance). The concept has gained importance in the political sphere and sport management literature in the aftermath of corruption scandals in international sport since the early 2010s.

A series of normative sport governance frameworks and recommendations (often referred to as 'good' or 'better' governance principles) have been adopted. These

invite international and national sport organizations to reform and improve their governance by implementing standards such as democracy, transparency and accountability (Thompson et al., 2022). These also include several sub-categories and a plethora of indicators that illustrate organizational realities (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2019).

### **2.1. Determinants of Sport Governance**

A determinant is an element that illustrates an influence or causal relationship shaping an individual or organizational behavior or practice. For over 25 years, literature that combines sport management and organization theory abounds with (categories of) determinants that influence organizational structure. The environment, technology, strategy, power and politics, the size of the organization, or culture (see for example, Auld & Cuskelly, 2012, and Parent & O'Brien, 2018) are a few among them. Sport governance research meets organization theory when investigations focus on “structure[s] and process[es] used by an organization to develop its strategic goals and direction” (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007, p. 9) or the “system by which organizations are directed and managed” (Australian Sports Commission, 2012, p. 2). These board-centric or “traditional” sport governance studies (Cho et al., 2023) see a determinant as a factor that influences the composition of decision-making bodies or effective and efficient practices and decision-making (e.g. Ferkins et al., 2005; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Kerwin et al., 2024).

However, there has been relatively little research on the factors influencing the implementation of governance recommendations with a much broader focus than the board. The only publication that explicitly addresses these determinants from a governance perspective is Král and Cuskelly (2018), but the authors limit themselves to associating a determinant with a cause-and-effect relationship, one that is positive, negative, or null; yet they do so without really conceptualizing the notion and sometimes associating it theoretically (e.g. Pasquier & Villeneuve, 2007) or empirically<sup>1</sup> with other elements. The authors propose three categories with associated determinants: 1) structural (e.g. number of members/licenses or board size); 2) attitudinal (e.g. fear of reactions to disclosure); 3) knowledge-based (e.g. ignorance of “good” governance and environmental principles or uncertainty about financial disclosure). Their results show that the majority of the identified determinants negatively influence transparency, but the number of members, which is very much linked to staff capacity and accountability to stakeholders, facilitates its implementation. Král and Cuskelly (2018) suggest that the level of quasi-transparency is most appropriate for smaller sports organizations.

### **2.2. The Role of the Structure**

The influence of those elements related to organizational structure, such as the number of members, the number of employees or the composition of the board (Ferkins et al., 2005), on the implementation of governance has been reflected for many years in the widespread narrative of ‘one size does not fit all’ in the promotion and development of analytical frameworks. Based on the premise that not all sport

organizations are equipped with the same resources to implement general standards, this narrative is a key element of the policy discourse on ‘modern’ sport governance (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2018). It is also very present in the differentiation of financial support for national sport federations in some Anglo-Saxon countries, such as England or Australia, where compliance with governance code is based on three implementation levels of standards (three-tiered approach) that consider the size of the organization (Sport England, 2022). In this vein, the Sports Governance Observer (Geeraert, 2015) expects that medium and large IFs should achieve a differentiated index close to or above 75%. Although, based on the results of its third assessment of IF governance, ASOIF argues that sport organizations’ size may play a role in the implementation of governance (Association of Summer Olympic Federations, 2020), this aspect has yet to be investigated (Thompson et al., 2022).

In particular, Král and Cuskelly (2018) regression analysis highlights that structural determinants only provide a partial picture of transparency and that more qualitative analyses should be conducted. This finding aligns with more theoretical studies that question the challenges and issues of implementing sport governance by sport organizations and that open the door to more systemic and interactionist or individual-centered approaches.

### **2.3. The Role of the Environment**

Using a legal perspective influenced by neo-institutionalism, Geeraert (2016) shows, for example, that the institutional context and type of control mechanism and governance modes chosen by European institutions (steering, monitoring or sanctioning) differentially influence the governance of FIFA or UEFA and the decision to activate counter-strategies (e.g. lobbying). This refers to the idea of ‘enforcement’ proposed by Chappelet and Mrkonjic (2019), which assumes that the hierarchy of norms in which standards are embedded (e.g. in a law or a recommendation), and the legal accountability between the initiator and recipient of the standards (e.g. between the national umbrella organization and the national sports federations) influences the degree of implementation of sport governance.

The significant institutionalization of sport governance standards by IFs including principles of transparency, integrity or democracy (e.g. those of ASOIF), has also given rise to a critique of their universalist and globalizing character that is supported by the role of culture, which are closer to an ‘aspiration than a practical outcome’ (Ghadami & Henry, 2015, p. 997) and that such standards should give national, regional, or local actors the possibility, here based on their values and priorities, like the Iranian National Olympic Committee (NOC), to ‘select, amend, and give weighting to indicators and operational measures of “good” governance’ (Ghadami & Henry, 2015, p. 997). Garcia and Meier (2022) studied sport governance in developing countries and observed persisting misfits and tensions between governmental and sport stakeholders at the national and international level that might force the International Olympic Committee (IOC), as a private transnational regulator, to adopt a more pragmatic view on when implementing its governance standards. This is all the more important because governance is a normative concept

‘relative to desired ends and is grounded in values and norms that originate from national culture and are reflective of different world ontologies’ (Girginov, 2019, p. 91).

The role of culture is manifested both in the conditions of existence and development of the organization, for example, through language or traditions, and within the organization itself, for example, through the sharing of ideas or communication (Tohidian et al., 2019). The risk of not taking into account the culture of the organizations requested to implement the standards is that they will, through mimetism (Girginov, 2019), ‘follow the form, style and modus operandi’ of the (international) organizations that are carrying out the project but will be unable to ensure implementation in the face of local preferences and practices (Henry, 2022).

#### **2.4. The Role of Individuals**

Many sport governance reforms are also driven by individuals with personal or organizational interests. Being considered a trend at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it has not been uncommon to see the theme appear in the candidacy programs for the presidency of national sport federations or to have it be mandatory in some countries (e.g. in France, where it is mandatory to have a project for the federation before the election). In this vein, Geeraert (2022a) argues that the decision to engage in governance is explained by a relatively cost-effective calculation to satisfy the interests of the sport organization’s external stakeholders by demonstrating its credibility and legitimacy (Tacon & Walters, 2022). This is an approach that places at the center the capacity of actors to collect and process information useful for decision making.

In this way, sport governance is presented as an element of the strategy of a sport organization (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Kikulis, 2000; Mrkonjic, 2022; O’Brien et al., 2019) carried out by decision makers who master their organization and the characteristics of its environment. Many studies have focused on the role and functioning of (volunteer) board members (O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2016), in particular, the way in which board members develop strategic capabilities, for example, in the areas of strategic planning, monitoring or resource acquisition and allocation (Ferkins et al., 2005; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012) to lead their organization. The attributes and knowledge of decision makers are key determinants for reforming a sport organization (Král & Cuskelly, 2018).

#### **2.5. Complex Indicators**

In an increasingly complex and diffuse sport governance narrative, the greater the elasticity of the concept to be implemented, the greater the need for individuals to be equipped with specific attributes and specialist knowledge. Measuring governance is an ongoing academic debate that draws on the ontological and epistemological affiliations of researchers. In the context of comparative studies, the aim to assess the state or level of democratic governance in developing countries was initiated in the 1990s in light of structural adjustment programs by intergovernmental organizations, such as the World Bank. These debates have been crystallized in the work

on Worldwide Governance Indicators, which provide fertile ground for a better understanding of the issues involved in measuring sport governance (Mrkonjic, 2015).

The choice of indicators and their measurement is a strategic act; it allows the validation of the reality expected by sport organization stakeholders. Although reliability, validity, reproducibility, or relevance are generally the basic criteria of a measurement, the construction of governance indicators is more oriented toward types of indicators, input (e.g. existence of legal documents), processes (e.g. decision making process) or outputs (e.g. number of information or people) (United Nations Development Programme, 2006). From this perspective, thinking about the hierarchy, prioritization and measurement of indicators makes sense; it is the strength of the Sports Governance Observer, despite its complexity, because of the number of indicators in the framework.

### **2.6. The Need for a Multi-Level Approach**

On the question of sport organization can be constrained in their decision to implement sport governance, the sport management and governance literature highlights several potential routes to explore, especially that determinants can be incorporated into broader categories such as individual (related to beliefs and attitudes), organizational (related to the structure and processes), and systemic (related to the environment and culture). However, despite their proven quality, none of these directly address the issue of determinants of the implementation of sport governance or offer criteria that would allow a deeper understanding within a national sport system with its peculiarities.

## **3. The Non-Profit Sector of the Swiss Sport System and Study Context**

The Swiss sport system is organized in three sectors: public, non-profit (private) and for-profit (private) (Kempf & Lichtsteiner, 2017). The non-profit sector is composed of eight (groups of) actors, which include two specialized foundations (Swiss Sports Aid and Swiss Sport Integrity), accident prevention organizations, IFs, Swiss Paralympic, voluntary sport clubs, national sport federations and Swiss Olympic. These organizations often work closely with the public sector and can receive subsidies because they perform tasks that contribute to the development of sports and have a socioeconomic impact, such as integration and cohesion (i.e. public benefit). For example, the Swiss Olympic budget (2020) is mainly composed of funding from national lotteries and the federal government (Swiss Olympic, 2021). Economically, this sector plays an important role in the system because the activities of the four main actors (IFs, national sports federations, Swiss Olympic, clubs) generate 3.6 billion Swiss francs of revenue per year, which represents 18% of the overall economic impact of sports in Switzerland (Rütter et al., 2016).

The importance of this sector is also because of the historical presence of national sport federations. Today, they represent more than 150 sport disciplines, leading to more than two million active members, of which football, gymnastics and university sports are the most important (Lamprecht et al., 2017). All national sport federations are constituted as associations under the Swiss Civil Code (Art. 60 ff.), hence



enjoying a significant degree of autonomy and flexibility in their strategy, organizational structure, and functioning. They promote and develop their specific sport on a national level with two strategic orientations: popular and elite sports. In this respect, they are primarily concerned with governing member organizations and, as such, are integrally linked to constituent members (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015), such as clubs or regional associations. National sport federations shape, formalize and sanction the rules of their sport, implement development projects and organize national teams to participate in international competitions. The organization of national competitions is not systematically their responsibility. To accomplish their tasks, more than 50% of their budgets rely on sponsorship and membership fees (Kempf & Lichtsteiner, 2017). The (direct) dependence on public support remains very low. Only the two most publicized sports, football and ice hockey, receive significant support from sport lottery funds.

Swiss Olympic is one of the main partners of the national sport federations in developing sport within the Swiss sport system. It acts as the umbrella organization for the national sport federations that meet its membership requirements (i.e. mainly national Olympic sport federations) and other partner organizations, as well as the NOC. The presidents of the affiliated national sport federations are present in its legislative body, the 'Parliament of Sport', hence holding an important power of orientation and control over the activities of the organization. In 2022, 83 national sport federations were members of Swiss Olympic. Its support is founded on a promotion model based on performance agreements and a classification system that values, among other things, the contribution of the national sport federation to elite sports (e.g. results at the Olympic Games) and the importance of its sport (e.g. national popularity).

In contrast to the United Kingdom (UK), there is no national ('good') sport governance code in the Swiss sport system; but an ethics charter has existed since 2002 and includes nine principles sport organizations in the non-profit sector should respect. In 2021, Swiss Olympic adopted new ethics statutes that provide a legal basis for reporting, investigating, and sanctioning ethical breaches and abuses in Swiss sport. These apply to all members as well as to their direct and indirect members and other natural persons in the field of organized sport under private law (Swiss Olympic, 2023).

#### 4. Method

Because little empirical knowledge on the determinants of the implementation of sport governance of sport national governing bodies exists, and because there is no homogenized and applicable sport governance definition or code in the Swiss sport system, the current contribution is exploratory and inductive in nature. It is based on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2013), which aligns with the calls in sport management research for more contributions in this direction (Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2010). In line with constructivists ontologies, we also believe that knowledge and reality are co-constructed by the individuals participating in the definition of a phenomenon. Therefore, we aim to offer a "thick description" to build the foundations of

a potential theory based on a large set of questions not directly associated with an existing definition or framework.

#### **4.1. Sample**

We used purposive sampling to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with seven national sport federations and Swiss Olympic. To reflect the diversity of the Swiss sport system, these federations were selected according to two criteria, here taking into account the classification of their sport by the umbrella organization,<sup>2</sup> in which case all five levels are represented in the group of national sport federations, as well as a linguistic criterion whereby 70% of the interviewees were predominantly native speakers of German (reflecting the national representation). To generate interpretations of a reality with individuals best informed about the case, the interviews were conducted in person with decision makers who have a broad understanding of the sport system. The list of interviewees includes 10 people (two presidents, one vice-president, five CEOs, and two heads of unit).

#### **4.2. Data Collection**

The interview grid contained 16 open-ended questions that allowed the interviewees to share their perceptions and interpretations of the concept and definition of sport governance and the factors that influence the implementation of sport governance. The interview grid was sent in advance to allow the interviewees to ask questions and the procedure was always explained beforehand. The first ten questions focused on the concept of sport governance (e.g. what does sport governance mean to you? What dimensions/categories would you propose to define sport governance?) and the last six questions on the determinants according to the three categories (individual, organizational, systemic) that we identified as salient in literature, such as what organizational determinants do you think could influence governance in your organization? The interviews were conducted over a three-month period and lasted approximately 60 min.<sup>3</sup>

#### **4.3. Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which has proven its worth, for example, in the analysis of the perceptions of sport club representatives regarding the professionalization process (Seippel, 2019). This was supported by the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2022. A first analysis associates the questions and complete answers to the question with a ‘general theme’ (GT) (i.e. general code), for example, ‘Organizational determinant’ or ‘Dimensions.’ Each interview fragment was then analyzed by generating “subthemes” (ST) (i.e. subcodes), for example, ‘transparency’ or ‘legitimacy,’ based on words, sentences or groups of sentences according to the discourse content. These were directly associated with the GT.<sup>4</sup> To improve data comparison and interpretation, the analysis was carried out by sequencing the questions, not the individuals. To abstract and generate the determinants—and following the inductive path—we grouped all related GTs and STs into ‘meta-themes’

(MTs) by interpreting the first results. In other words, MTs are those determinants that can influence the implementation of sport governance. This procedure is justified by the fact that the interview grid contains open-ended questions, that redundancies may remain in the answers to the questions, or that a determinant element may be identified outside the scope of the question.

## 5. Results

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed 867 fragments of analysis. The average number of STs per interview was 86.7. However, one interview generated only 18 STs, while another generated 138 (see [Table 1](#)).

Notwithstanding that external factors may have influenced the proper conduct of an interview and that the type of coding into ST by word, sentence or group of sentences did not allow this result to be interpreted as representative of an objective reality because it would generate bias related to the structure of the discourse, this difference still highlights the fact that not all sport organizations react in the same way to sport governance and that some may be more committed or attach more importance to the development of the theme. The analysis of the GTs did not provide relevant results. The analysis of the data, specifically of the STs (within the GTs), allowed us to generate five MTs (see [Table 2](#)), which are presented below.

### 5.1. Strategic Priority

The interview results show that sport governance is mainly considered as a priority at the national level. Several interviewees clearly associated it as such, having to prioritize it ‘before the problems start’ (Interview 1). Swiss Olympic also saw it as ‘a prerequisite for everything else [and that] there are no compromises and exceptions’ (Interview 6). However, for some federations, this priority should be relativized. Indeed, governance should not appear as an imposed constraint but more as a support to development activities ‘which comes a bit later’ (Interview 9) or ‘when we are asked to take care of it’ (Interview 8). National sport federations are often confronted with very concrete and operational problems that affect the activities of the sports, whose characteristics or stakes do not necessarily justify the implementation of sport governance standards. Sport governance should be

**Table 1.** Number of subthemes per interview.

Interviews	N Sub-themes
Interview 1	80
Interview 2	138
Interview 3	69
Interview 4	18
Interview 5	98
Interview 6	73
Interview 7	84
Interview 8	101
Interview 9	90
Interview 10	56
Total	867

**Table 2.** Determinants of the implementation of sport governance.

General themes	N Sub-themes	Determinants of sport governance
Sports governance priority	26	Strategic priority
Awareness	390	Decision makers' knowledge on the concept of sport governance
Notion		
Dimensions		
Indicators		
Responsibility		
Reasons/causes	195	Sport governance issues
Effect		
Stakeholder influence		
Effect of stakeholder influence		
Implementation of governance	139	Resources
Organisational determinants		
Other determinants		
Individual determinants	72	Personal attributes of decision makers

balanced according to the state of development of the federation and constraints on the ground:

*In some cases, it is very important to have a term of office; in our case, our terms of office are very short, two years in terms of the presidency. If we increase the term of office to four years, there is a risk that fewer people will apply, as we have almost no president who has served more than two terms. The problem for us is rather how to ensure that presidents stay and [...] bear responsibility in a context that is not always simple. (Interview 8)*

## **5.2. Decision Makers' Knowledge on the Concept of Sport Governance**

Governance is a polysemous concept (Rhodes, 1996). Whether in sport or in other fields, this is not debated. The classic definition in sport that deconstructs it into three distinct (political, systemic or organizational) but interconnected dimensions (Henry & Lee, 2004) already sets a theoretical challenge. Its political appropriation by many sport organizations (e.g. IOC) or other organizations (e.g. Council of Europe) has made it nearly impractical without the intervention of a sport regulatory body imposing it or linking it to funding, as is the case for some national sport agencies. Hence, the concept and awareness of it are relatively diffuse. Awareness of the concept can come from a number of different environments. This can be rooted in the experience of other activities more oriented toward corporate governance (Interviews 1, 7 and 8), in the context of higher education (Interviews 2 and 5), through the role played by the Federal Office of Sport (FOSPO) (Interview 8) or by Swiss Olympic (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 6, 8 and 10), particularly in the context of the implementation of the Ethical Charter in Sports, or through IFs (Interviews 3 and 8). Sometimes, the interviewee was also not familiar with the concept at all:

*I have no idea, I think that it is leading an organization. I don't know. (Interview 4)*

The transfer from awareness to knowledge of the concept is not without difficulties because 'the notion of governance [is] relatively unusual in German, OK in English and "à part" [distinct] in French' (Interview 2); this is a key element in a country with four national languages whose promotion is anchored in the Federal Constitution. Although acknowledging that there are different understandings of sport governance

and that the notion remains very broad (Interview 2), in the vein of Thompson et al. (2022) or Chapelet and Mrkonjic (2019) analyses of the similarities and differences in the governance principles identified, the results show a certain convergence of the notion around the principles of transparency and democracy, but also of ethics (Interviews 1, 5 and 9) and equity (Interviews 1, 3, 6 and 9), here with elements related to the importance and role of rules, the issues of separation of powers and responsibilities or the inclusion and participation of stakeholders.

Although it is the second most cited principle in the literature (Thompson et al., 2022), accountability was absent from the analysis; but because it remains an Anglo-Saxon concept that is difficult to translate into French (e.g. *imputabilité, rendre des comptes, responsabilité, responsabilités*) or German (e.g. *Rechenschaftspflicht* or *Verantwortung*), this is probably more related to an effect of language than a lack of importance. The deconstruction of the concept into dimensions or measurement indicators tends to confirm this observation because some of the fragments analyzed refer to elements of indicators that are typical of the four principles above, such as the ethics committee, the annual report, the organization chart, the ethics charter, the auditing of accounts by an external entity, the term limit or the age limit.

However, there seemed to be a certain dichotomy in the understanding of sport governance, in its anchoring with rules related to sport development or discipline and more general rules related to the development of the organization independent of its sport development purpose, for example, in human resources management through the respect of a code of conduct:

*There are a few indicators for which we can say...yes well..., all staff members have signed the Code of Conduct, it is logical when these are part of the employment contract. (Interview 10)*

This is significant given that sport governance frameworks take little or no account of the origin of the standards, usually simply stating that they are derived from corporate governance. This is particularly the case for some Anglo-Saxon national frameworks and raises many issues of appropriation for not-for-profit organizations, of which almost all IFs are. The question of the initial frame of reference and autonomy of sport to create its own governance of sport outside this frame of reference must be considered in the implementation. Hence, in line with Král and Cuskelly (2018), the reality of the researcher or organization producing the frameworks is confronted with the level of knowledge of the workings, intricacies and evolution of the organization by the recipient:

*There is an easy set of indicators, where you can say, all employees have signed the code of conduct, it makes sense when it is part of the employment contract. If all committee members have signed the code of conduct, you can say yes because, when he is newly elected, he has to read and sign it. So if we want to define it as an indicator, we can measure that 100% of the committee members have signed it. (Interview 10)*

*At one point, we set up measurement indicators [...] These measurement indicators were certainly interesting, but in the end, they did not allow us to activate any levers and to validate very few things because they were not the right indicators [...]. If the preparatory work is not well done, the measurement indicators only serve to validate what is already in place [...]. We must be sure that the indicators are good indicators and we can correct*

*them [...]. You have to identify the need, you have to identify the problem, not the solution, and then you have to have the indicators, and then, depending on the solutions applied, you have to see if the effects work on these indicators. In a federation, you have [...] members on the committee, none of whom have worked with measurement indicators in their job [...] They will try to understand what it really means, ask questions, they will come across what they know, and we will end up confirming what is already in place. (Interview 9)*

A proper analysis of the meaning of the indicators must be put in place. Decision makers must know the concept of sport governance. Depending on the meaning given, a diversity of potential indicators without any real prioritization apart from the term of office or age limit (Interviews 5, 6, 8 and 10) emerged from the analysis; in addition, an openness to those indicators not necessarily linked to the fundamental principles of governance or main analytical frameworks, such as the publication of positions (Interview 3), or the relationship with/between staff can be formulated:

*In addition, the way we deal with our employees must be constantly monitored. (Interview 1)*

### **5.3. Sport Governance Issues**

Although it appeared as early as the late 1980s in the context of reforms in American university sport, the theme of sport governance was popularized at the international level in the early 2000s, arising from IFs' desire to respond to corruption scandals. This reform movement then spread to a wider scale thanks to its instrumentalization by European institutions, such as the Council of Europe, to promote clean and honest sport. The promotion of governance at a national level has existed since the mid-2000s. It is less explained by a crisis of governance than by a desire to codify positive organizational practices for legitimization purposes (Tacon & Walters, 2022; Walters & Tacon, 2018), here as a way to reinforce the professionalization of sport organizations or by 'institutional mimetism' induced by the integration of sport organizations into systemic governance (Girginov, 2019).

In the same way that a national sport federation must fit into IFs' regulatory framework for the organization of sport competitions, the latter will reproduce the rules of the parent federation in the sense that they construct their reality through their integration and participation in the legislative body as members. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that some national sport federations are 'doing' governance through the influence of international and national umbrella associations' governance activities and that have to set an example to follow:

*The IOC issues guidelines on what should be included in a constitution. The IOC issues guidelines on what should be included in the statutes. The ethical charter, these kinds of issues, that have to be taken into account and that is taken into account. (Interview 6)*

In addition, interviewees noted, 'There is a wish, but there is not a strong pressure, on the other hand at the level of Swiss Olympic [...]. It shapes the federation in a certain way' (Interview 9). In this systemic governance perspective, governance becomes everyone's business. Sport governance becomes a matter of collaboration with partners (Interviews 2, 3, 6, 7) and of living together (Interview 3).

Although it may, in some cases, be linked to intrinsic motivation (Interviews 6 and 10), it is useful because it generates trust within the system, but also credibility with external partners, especially funders, such as sponsors or public authorities who threaten to reduce services or break off collaboration. This was the case in Australia for the national swimming federation or when the airline Emirates broke off its contract with FIFA following the corruption scandals, as Interviewee 9 stated, to ‘break the sacred bond between the participant and the spectator.’ A national sport federation that enacts governance is not necessarily involved in a scandal but believes that it is doing the ‘right thing’ and, in doing so, is contributing to the better sport development in general. In other words, the implementation of sport governance standards should solve a concrete issue that exists within a sport organization.

#### **5.4. Resources**

Implementing sport governance within one’s organization is costly. ‘Professionalizing management, organizing more meetings, introducing greater transparency in reporting; these are naturally [elements] that cost money and resources’ (Interview 7). This price varies, on the one hand, according to the type of indicator chosen (e.g. input, process, or output) and, on the other hand, by the change management process it triggers within the organization: ‘When we go further, we automatically arrive at a quality management system, so we arrive at processes, implementations [...] which are also important for the transparency of the organization’ (Interview 2).

Having statutes is, as a rule, a legal requirement for the existence of a sport association according to the Swiss law on associations, which concerns most IFs. Therefore, expecting a sport organization to be transparent by publishing its statutes does not imply, at first sight, creating statutes but instead triggers a process that makes them accessible to (internal or external) stakeholders. Having a committee (e.g. ethics, nomination or remuneration committee) is not subject to the legal framework and requires a substantial and potentially lengthy institutional effort, which must involve amending the statutes, drawing up terms of reference or staff regulations and finding people to compose them. Publishing an annual or financial report involves a substantial drafting and coordination effort to collect data over a given period of time and compile and format these data in such a way that it is readable by members and possibly by external stakeholders, who may feel the need to read it. Appointing an ethics officer within an organization involves a salary. Within the organization, to implement governance, it is necessary to have a certain level of ‘professionalism’ (Interview 10), as shown in the following quote:

*In six years, we have grown, tripled the number of our staff [...], precisely to create structures that allow for good governance. With nothing, you can’t do anything [...]. It is certainly necessary to have a certain budget, that is, financial resources and human resources, but not just a number of people. (Interview 7)*

### 5.5. Personal Attributes of Decision Makers

Beyond potential structural determinants (e.g. the size of the board), knowledge about ‘good’ governance principles and the environment, as well as attitudes (e.g. fear), can be a barrier to the implementation of organizational transparency, which can be explained by the recruitment policies of board members and managers, who are often ex-athletes with little knowledge of governance or management (Král & Cuskelly, 2018).

The individual plays a key role within the organization to ensure implementation. The functions and governing bodies are expected to carry out the project: ‘In our case it’s certainly the Presidium, so with the president, the vice presidents, the director, [also] the finance manager, the sport manager [who] is certainly needed’ (Interview 7); ‘I really believe that it’s the management that sets the example, that drew the theme on the flag and constantly sets it as the theme’ (Interview 5). Indeed, ‘one person has to take the lead in implementing governance’ (Interview 5). That being said, the results of the analysis show a mixed and relatively broad picture of the personal attributes that these individuals taking the lead should have (see Table 3).

## 6. Discussion

On the one hand, sport governance has become a mantra in the development and organization of sport worldwide. On the other hand, evidence from benchmark studies on sport governance shows a contrasting picture illustrated by different implementation levels. To better understand this evidence, we investigated what determinants influence the implementation of sport governance with two (groups of) sport national governing bodies in Switzerland. Our analysis generated five MT that are determinants to consider when implementing sport governance: (1) strategic priority, (2) decision makers’ knowledge on the concept of sport governance, (3) sport governance issues, (4) resources, and (5) personal attributes of decision makers.

As such, we provide new inductive and context-sensitive evidence of the implementation of sport governance. Previous studies on sport governance presented different routes with divergent results on the potential role of culture, actor’s rationality, or institutions. Our research design allowed us to uproot a complex phenomenon building on the perceptions and interpretations of decision makers directly

**Table 3.** Personal attributes of decision makers.

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Being consistent
Being credible
Be a role model
Being a good listener
Having a strong enough voice
Have a line
Take responsibility for the theme
Be a good salesperson
Motivations for the job
Have skills
Commitment
Have an affinity for the theme
Have leadership skills

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confronted with sport governance implementation. Therefore, we pave the way for a grounded, yet minimalist, framework that allows sport organizations to improve their governance by anticipating possible strategic, knowledge-based, or resource-based resistance toward successful implementation. In line with the approach and results by Král and Cuskelly (2018) on transparency, our first finding based on 867 STs supports the argument that sport governance implementation is influenced by several determinants and that improving sport governance should be framed in a holistic way including different levels of analysis.

The second finding shows that the determinants are organizational and individual (e.g. strategy or knowledge) rather than systemic (e.g. sport participation level, number of medals by athlete, team vs. individual sport, or Olympic vs. non-Olympic sport). The role played by decision makers and decision-making bodies emerged from the interviews as a key element. Elements related to the management and the activities of sport organizations are, therefore, more important to explain implementation deficits or successes. This also aligns with statistical evidence by ASOIF (Association of Summer Olympic Federations, 2020) showing that the size of a sport organizations can influence implementation improvements and with new evidence by Stieger et al. (2023) that the degree and forms of professionalization of sport organizations defined by activities, individuals, and structures and processes (Bayle & Robinson, 2007) can lead to important changes in governance structures.

The third finding of our interviews highlighted how sport organizations are concerned with governance issues, but more as a mark of solidarity or loyalty to the system than as a real strategic direction that could generate added value to position themselves in a given environment. The Swiss sport system is characterized by a high degree of cooperation and integration, where the umbrella federation of sport and Olympic committee and the national sport federations play a considerable role because their expectations and actions are diffused throughout much of the system within regional associations, sport clubs or performance centers. Based on the model of performance agreements, the FOSPO and Swiss Olympic significantly support and promote the non-profit sector both financially and in terms of the framework conditions for the development of national sport federations. In this context, the latter also produces and makes available a large number of mechanisms or tools for organizational development, such as ‘management checks’ or ‘ethics checks.’ This observation of the Swiss sport system is reflected in the interviews and supports the importance of the institutional context (Geeraert, 2016), but more so in its capacity to frame the standards to be implemented. In other words, although organizational and individual categories of determinants are more salient, the fact that national sports federations are represented in the legislative body of Swiss Olympic also gives them the power, the legitimacy, and the capacity to frame the content of the standards and steer their implementation. This role is even more important to improve sport governance in a situation where there is not yet a consolidated and detailed code and they must respond to the multiple expectations of their other stakeholders, whether internal (e.g. staff who may need further training) or external (e.g. sponsors who want to see value and return on investment).

The policy implications of our findings support the creation of a governance code for Swiss Olympic and national sport federations whose implementation would

be monitored, respectively by FOSPO and Swiss Olympic. Such an initiative would help overcome a current lack of knowledge on the concept and possible resistances to organizational change (Král & Cuskelly, 2018). Building on previous experience with codification processes in the Swiss sport system (e.g. ‘Transparency in structured sport’, ‘Code of conduct’, ‘Ethics Charter’), this code would generate a common understanding and pathway to follow. As recent studies on sport governance show that there is no ideal type of governance code for all sport organizations (Parent et al., 2022) and that codification can challenge particularisms (Tacon & Walters, 2018, 2022), policy makers are invited to build a tiered approach that meets the complexity of the Swiss sports system and the results of our study, and to develop education-based initiatives.

Finally, the current research was limited in its ability to reproduce and generalize results. It does not create an objectifiable reality or (positive or negative) statistical correlation. The choice to ask a relatively large number of open-ended questions resulted in a large volume of data. This empirical richness is matched by the researchers’ analytical capacity, knowledge of governance, and experience in grouping fragments into meaningful themes. Because the thematic analysis was not based on frequencies, other MTs could have been generated. However, this is a matter of choice. Nevertheless, a reduced number of more closed-ended questions, coupled with an analysis of a limited number of cases, could strengthen the quality of the analysis by allowing for an even better understanding of the perceptions of the actors involved.

## 7. Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature on sport governance by providing answers to a topical issue in the international and national sport systems on the implementation of sport governance standards. We asked the following question to two groups of sport organizations in the non-profit sector of the Swiss sport system: what determinants influence the decision of sport national governing bodies in Switzerland to implement sport governance? Inductively we generated five determinants to consider when implementing sport governance: (1) strategic priority, (2) decision makers’ knowledge on the concept of sport governance, (3) sport governance issues, (4) resources, and (5) personal attributes of decision makers. Our findings highlighted that organizational and individual categories of determinants are key to ensuring improvements in the implementation of sport governance, but that the system in which non-profit sport organizations are integrated frames the setting in which the implementation will be possible. In this vein, we suggested that policy makers should develop a governance code that would include a tiered approach and targeted measures to ensure sustainable improvements.

Improving sport governance is a noble cause. By doing so, sport organizations are better equipped to prevent and combat integrity issues that could call into question their own image and legitimacy or the one of the sport system they represent. Yet, governance has always been described as a difficult concept to handle. It has many ramifications in the corporate, public and non-profit sectors. Sport governance is no exception, as several dimensions and approaches are possible. From a normative perspective, in a systematic review of sport governance principles,

Thompson et al. (2022) showed that these are present in the literature in more than 73 contributions and that they are embodied in 258 distinct principles. Some analytical frameworks contain more than 300 indicators, and these can be inherently flawed (Geeraert, 2022b). Often, these principles are also concepts in themselves (e.g. democracy), whose boundaries are just as complex and malleable as the concept of governance itself. The measurement units contain elements that are sometimes difficult to compare in the sense that they refer to processes (transparent), structures (democratic), or activities (accountable). The implementation of sport governance should not result in higher costs for sport organizations and negatively impact their processes, that, in turn would generate new deficits or limit other strategies (e.g. the promotion of youth development).

Further research on sport governance implementation should take this complexity into account, aiming for more focused and minimalist analyses by isolating a relatively small selection of indicators to be implemented and focus on the factors that explain implementation successes and deficits (e.g. only individual determinants). It should consider that sport governance is not only a matter of the board, but also a dive into the peculiar dynamics and the culture of an organization and its staff. In the vein of McLeod et al. (2022), organizational case studies, particularly those built on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2013), should therefore continue to be promoted, as they are the key to successful fine-grained tiered approaches. This is particularly salient for policy-makers facing the challenge of harmonizing broad principles within a sport system for the sake of policy legitimation and, at the same time, trying to align the expectations of heterogeneous sport organizations.

## Notes

1. For instance with the following: ‘This finding also indicates that knowledge-based barriers might outweigh the attitudinal barriers of transparency’ (Kräl & Cuskelly, 2018, p. 255).
2. As per 01.01.2019. The classification of sports is a management tool used by Swiss Olympic to determine the level of support for sports. Sports are classified on a scale from 1 to 5 depending on whether they fulfil specific criteria (e.g., elite sports promotion concept, successful participation in international competitions, results achieved, or national significance). For instance, level 1 includes the most “performing” sports such as tennis or beach volleyball, and level 5 includes the least “performing” sports such as twirling or American football.
3. Applicable for nine interviews (30 April to 17 July 2019). Because of organisational constraints, one interview took place in October 2019.
4. Fragments interpreted as being off-topic or not providing information on the question asked were not coded. Thus, parts of the text were not included in the analysis.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest has to be reported.

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