

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF AMATEUR SPORTS CLUBS: ARGENTINA/ FRANCE

Análisis comparativo de Clubes Deportivos Amateur: Argentina/ Francia

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ABSTRACT

Amateur sports clubs (ASCs) play a crucial role in multiple sports delivery systems around the world. The ASCs contribute to the achievement of objectives related to multiple dimensions, such as sports missions (leisure, training, competition) as well as social missions related or not related to sport such as integration, youth, health, leisure, education. The multiple external and internal challenges that CSAs must face can lead to a change in organizational goals and dysfunctions. Based on a cross-national comparative analysis of amateur sports clubs in France and Argentina, the main results show the convergences and divergences in sports clubs and the challenges they face in these two countries. From a management point of view, this research should help the sports institutions involved to inspire how to support and guide policies adapted to another model of organization..

RESUMEN

Los clubes deportivos amateurs (ASC) desempeñan un papel crucial en múltiples sistemas de entrega deportiva en todo el mundo. Los ASC contribuyen a la consecución de objetivos relacionados con múltiples dimensiones, como las misiones deportivas (ocio, formación, competición) así como las misiones sociales relacionadas o no con el deporte como la integración, la juventud, la salud, el ocio, la educación. Los múltiples desafíos externos e internos que los ASC tienen que enfrentar pueden conducir a un cambio en los objetivos de la organización y a disfunciones. A partir de un análisis comparativo transnacional de clubes deportivos amateurs en Francia y Argentina, los principales resultados muestran las convergencias y divergencias en los clubes deportivos y los desafíos que enfrentan en estos dos países. Desde el punto de vista de la gestión, esta investigación debería ayudar a las instituciones deportivas implicadas a inspirar la forma de apoyar y orientar las políticas adaptadas a otro modelo de organización.

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KEYWORDS: sports clubs, non-profit sports organizations, organizational capacity, sports policy, social role.

PALABRAS CLAVE: clubes deportivos, organizaciones deportivas sin ánimo de lucro, capacidad organizativa, política deportiva, papel social.

1. INTRODUCTION

Amateur sports clubs (ASCs) are central to global sport, as they support sporting and social objectives. However, they face several problems such as the lack of public financing, political use by the authorities, increased commercialization, private competition and the repercussions of the economic and health crises. These problems force clubs to change their socio-economic model, which can lead to changes in their objectives. This study, which is part of an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Union, seeks to carry out a comparative analysis of amateur sports clubs in Europe and South America, focusing on how to sustain the social role of these associations. This article focuses on two countries (Argentina and France). The main objective of this research is to better understand the challenges and crises faced by sports clubs in both countries and to highlight convergences and divergences. It is to be hoped that sports policy makers and federations will be able to find new guidelines to support their clubs with this contribution.

The article is divided into three parts. The first is a review of the literature on the role of amateur sports clubs and the challenges they face. The second part describes the methodology used in the research. The third part presents the similarities and differences found between clubs from both continents. The final discussion addresses the results and raises options for future research.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It is generally taken into account that amateur sports clubs fulfill social functions that transcend the practice of sports, constituting spaces for integration, training and generation of social capital. Their purpose is not limited to offering physical activity, they promote community values, collective identity and cooperation networks. Bourdieu (1992)

highlights that they are environments where social capital is reproduced and accumulated, understood as the set of resources derived from belonging to lasting networks of relationships. Along these lines, Coleman (2011) stresses that trust and shared norms strengthen social cohesion, while Heinemann (1997) emphasizes the role of clubs in the democratization of sport and citizen participation. Elsey (2011) and Frydenberg (2011) analyses how these entities contribute to the construction of local and national identities, reinforcing the sense of belonging among the associates. For his part, Paredes (2002) points out that this deep-rooted feeling not only generates affective bonds, but also enhances community resilience in the face of social and economic crises. In short, amateur sports clubs are fundamental nodes for the articulation of sports practices and the consolidation of social life in diverse contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the dynamics of amateur sports clubs globally, altering both their sports practices and their social function. In Argentina, studies reveal that neighborhood clubs had to reinvent themselves, prioritizing strategies of virtual socialization and community assistance in the face of the impossibility of sustaining face-to-face activities (CLACSO, 2021). The interruption of training affected eating habits and increased sedentary lifestyles among athletes and coaches, evidencing a substantial decrease in the frequency and duration of physical practice (APDA, 2020). In France, the health crisis had a strong economic impact on amateur football and sports associations, putting their sustainability at risk and forcing them to rely on state aid (Carin & Andreff, 2021). Globally, research indicates that the pandemic not only reduced physical activity, but also shifted training to domestic environments, affecting mental health and social cohesion (Silva et al., 2021;

Frawley & Schulenkorf, 2022). These findings confirm that amateur sports clubs, beyond their sporting role, are key actors in community resilience, whose vulnerability in crisis contexts requires supportive policies and adaptation strategies.

2.1. RESEARCH IN FRANCE

Amateur sports services are crucial in the global sports system (Swierzy et al., 2018). They exist in various forms, from small clubs to large associations. According to the research, European sports clubs are voluntary organizations with characteristics such as voluntary membership, orientation to the interests of members, and democratic structure. In France, the history of sports clubs began at the end of the nineteenth century, and with the Law of 1901 freedom of association was guaranteed, which facilitated their expansion. Throughout the twentieth century, the structure of clubs changed from multisport to monosports (Hoekman et al., 2015). A vast network of 360,000 sports clubs (18.4 million members) forms the basis of a pyramidal structure crowned by 120 national sports federations and the French National Olympic Committee (CNOSF). Olympic single-sport federations account for almost 68,000 clubs (around 41% of the total), followed by multisport federations with 54,000 clubs (one third).

However, the traditional pyramid of clubs is changing. More and more athletes are moving away from conventional clubs. One study shows that physical activity occurs primarily outside of formal sports organizations, and sports such as hiking and cycling have grown considerably.

The club's involvement in politics and society is significant, especially in promoting health and social integration. Although there has been a slight increase in club membership, most French people play sports outside of these organizations. Statistics indicate that women's participation in sport has grown, although men are still the majority in sports clubs. Club membership also tends to be tied to socioeconomic factors, such as education and income.

Amateur sports clubs have a social function as their main mission, supporting leisure, education and social integration. Their affiliation with federations allows them to access public funds and federal activities, which helps them offer affordable services.

Community, intermediate and high-level competition clubs have varied structures and budgets. Most clubs rely on membership for their income, while high-level clubs are more diversified. Despite the challenges, clubs remain an essential part of social and sporting life in France.

2.2. RESEARCH IN ARGENTINA

Argentine sports clubs began to form in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and expanded between the two world wars. These clubs are related to communities, mainly European, that have influenced the development of sport in the country. During this time, sports such as football, rugby, hockey, tennis and rowing became popular, thanks to the influence of workers from English companies, among others. Likewise, the French promoted disciplines such as bocce ball, fencing and horseback riding.

Clubs in Argentina are non-profit civil associations and can offer educational activities. The national sports structure includes clubs that are considered first-degree sports entities, which in turn are associated with national federations (second degree) and higher entities such as the Argentine Olympic Committee and the Argentine Sports Confederation (third degree). These clubs are connected to the international federations through their national federation, which is linked to the National Olympic Committee. Both the National Sports Federation and the National Olympic Committee are part of the Olympic Movement led by the International Olympic Committee.

The 2023 survey by the Social Observatory of Sport shows that there are almost 5 million sports club members in 18,510 Argentine clubs, of which 74% regularly participate in sports or physical activities, but 26.5% attend for social reasons. Small clubs without legal recognition have an average of 170 partici-

pants, while small clubs with recognition have about 213. Medium and large clubs have an average of 1.350 participants.

Football is the most played sport in all types of clubs, with between 63% and 81% of them being present. In terms of gender and age composition, 39.7 per cent of the members are under 18 years of age, and the majority, 62 per cent, are men, while women make up 33 per cent.

In small clubs, 74.9% of attendees play sports, while in medium and large clubs, 66.6% do. The diversity of offers and activities in the clubs is also recognized. The research will compare the socio-economic models of clubs in Europe and South America to understand their challenges and opportunities, highlighting the lack of literature on this topic.

3. CHALLENGES AND CRISES THAT CAUSE SITUATIONS OF VULNERABILITY

CSAs are increasingly facing the economic effects of financial and health crises that influence their sustainable development to continue to maintain community engagement and participation in sport (Terrien et al., 2023).

3.1. CHALLENGES AND CRISES FACED BY FRENCH ASCS

For many years, CDAs have faced significant tensions. Recent studies have shown that these CDAs face a reduction in public funding (Prouteau and Tchernonog, 2017), which increases instrumentalisation by public authorities to achieve non-sport social objectives (Vandermeersch et al., 2017; Perechuda & Cater, 2022), rapid professionalization and management (Bernardeau, 2018), greater commercialization (Boutroy et al., 2015), and competition from private for-profit sports providers. The study on the funding of grassroots sport in the EU (Eurostrategies 2, April 2013) includes the demographic changes affecting the sport sector, both in terms of the age of practitioners and the availability of voluntary work. At the same time, sports associations are increasingly facing the impact of the financial and health crises (Covid-19). The economic

effects of these crises on their income (membership fees, sponsorships, and other business income) and on their ability to cover their operating expenses (Carin, 2024). Other research has examined the ability of CSAs to cope with the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis (Carin et al., 2022) and how they can adapt their economic models to changing environmental conditions. The authors also highlight stronger solidarity behavior that emerged in the CDAs in the wake of the crisis. Hammerschmidt et al. (2021) examined how CSAs in Austria, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the Netherlands responded to the COVID-19 crisis. CDAs show that they are in a more retroactive than proactive position with systematic strategy and planning in the face of new situations and that the crisis management process has been seriously neglected, which means that they are not well prepared to overcome them.

Multiple tensions caused CSAs to face the transformation of their economic model, leading to a shift in organizational objectives and poor functioning (Raw et al., 2022).

3.2 CHALLENGES AND CRISES ENCOUNTERED BY ARGENTINE ASCS

Recent studies by the Sports Observatory show a vision of the challenges encountered in the CDAs in Argentina. First, the authors recognize the dynamic nature of clubs and, consequently, the need for regular updates of reliable evidence-based information from clubs.

Resource disparities among clubs play a role, as small entities face challenges in accessing public services and subsidies to maintain specific activities. And cost issues, related to services, are a major investment.

It is common to depend on volunteers, due to the impossibility of employing due to resource limitations, a limitation more noticeable in clubs without football.

Larger clubs, with more resources, can offer a wide range of sports, while smaller clubs tend to be dominated by football, with male dominance and consequent gender disparity. This clarification highlights the complexities of governing and maintaining sports

organisations, especially smaller ones, and shows the importance and uncovers real challenges to the development of CDAs.

The expected results focus on the identification of socio-economic models of CDA in Europe and South America. Based on the results, we also hope to compare the different socioeconomic models to identify their strengths/weaknesses and try to identify the models best adapted to the main current challenges. The results are compared with other recent studies on sports organization models (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021). However, the research conducted covered a much larger sample than previous studies and focuses on ACDs, which is still limited in the literature.

4. METHODOLOGY

Because national studies must be overcome to be inspired by other models, it is necessary to make a comparison between countries where sport has an important social place. This comparison will help to identify the sustainability of the associative model in countries and question the resilience of CSAs to stresses and crises. The methodology based on comparative analysis is useful to improve the understanding of a national system, it is essential to compare it with other systems (other countries) to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Based on the multilevel conceptual framework (Nagel et al., 2015), we focus on the following three analytical levels: macro level: the historical roots and integration of sports clubs into society as a whole, and the sports system and policies; meso level: sports clubs with their structural characteristics, objectives, resources and management, especially programmes and measures to contribute to socio-political functions; Micro level: members and volunteers, with their personal characteristics, sports activities, social integration, democratic and voluntary commitment to the club. Then, these levels of analysis will be applied to five constituent elements: population, preference for physical activity, clubs, income and expenses, and social role.

5. RESULTS/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. POPULATION

In terms of the population of both countries, France has a population of approximately 67 million people (Chavinier-Réla, Bayle, & Barget, 2015), while Argentina has a population of less than 46 million people (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses - INDEC 2022). Although there is a significant demographic difference between the two countries, it could be observed that both share a similar regime in terms of amateur sports clubs, which are legally considered as non-profit sports associations, with certain specificities depending on the country. In addition, both have a rich history, tradition and current sporting status across the board. Despite the population difference, these models can be compared in the sports field, highlighting their similarities and differences.

5.2. PREFERENCE FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

As for the number of people who engage in physical activity, according to the survey on sports practices carried out in 2011 (Ministère des Sports, 2011), 65% of the population over 15 years of age, resident in France, had performed one or more physical activities, while 89% did so occasionally. For the same age range, in Argentina, according to the National Survey of Physical Activity and Sports (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2021), 50.9% perform some type of sport or physical activity. In addition, the report highlights that 23.5% of respondents stopped practicing physical activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this same section, it is mentioned that the activities preferred by the French are hiking and cycling, while in Argentina, the most popular practices are walking, running and cycling.

As for the most common places of practice, in France, according to data from the Eurobarometer of Sport (2022), 41% do physical activity in parks or outdoors, 28% at home, 16% at work, school or shops, 6% in health or fitness centers and 16% practice sport in a club. The same question for Argentina, according to the National Survey of Physical Activity and Sports (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2021), indicates that 28.4% perform activity in public spaces, 27% at home, 22.7%

in private facilities (gyms, sports complexes, etc.), while 11% perform physical activity in a club.

In terms of participation in clubs, in France, people mainly go to perform some type of physical activity, while in Argentina, about 26% of club members participate in cultural, recreational and social activities, as well as sports. (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022) This highlights the importance of the club's social value, not only as a sports venue, but also as a meeting place for members.

5.3. CLUBS. QUANTITY. PROPERTY

Both countries have a significant number of clubs spread throughout the country, distributed in urban and rural areas. In France, there are approximately 360,000 amateur sports clubs, which form the base of a pyramid structure run by the national sports federations and the French National Olympic Committee (CNOSF). In Argentina, according to the National Survey of Sports Clubs and Entities 2022 (RENACED), it is estimated that there are approximately 11,870 clubs distributed throughout the country (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

While France has a much higher number than Argentina, only 10% of clubs in France offer two or more sports. In Argentina, the opposite is true: only about 7% of clubs have a single sport, and 93% offer two or more sports (Chavinier-Réla et al., 2015; Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

In terms of the ownership of sports facilities, there are also notable differences that affect how they should be managed. In France, most of the sports infrastructure is publicly owned and approximately 80% of the facilities are in the hands of the municipalities. In addition, 70% of these facilities are managed directly by the municipal authorities, which facilitates access to these spaces for sports clubs. Only 15% of municipal facilities are granted in concession to sports associations, and in most cases, the use of the facilities is free or low-cost for clubs and their members (Chavinier-Réla et al., 2015).

In Argentina, the situation is different. Most

sports clubs own 70% of their facilities, while 19.5% of clubs own or rent their facilities and 7.3% are rented land. The smallest clubs are those that, to a greater extent, do not own their facilities. In the case of leased or leased premises, approximately 40% belong to the State (municipal, provincial or national), and around 20% are premises of other sports organizations (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

5.4. INCOME AND EXPENSES

The analysis of the income and expenditure of amateur sports clubs in France and Argentina shows differences in their sources of funding and in the structure of expenditure. In France, the main sources of income are membership fees, sponsorships and donations, as well as government subsidies, especially from municipalities. Other income comes from the generation of activities, such as sales or services offered by some clubs. (Chavinier-Réla, Bayle, & Barget, 2015).

In terms of expenses, French clubs spend most of their budget on travel to competitions, maintenance of facilities and contributions to sports federations. Although salaries are generally not the most important expense, as most amateur clubs operate on a volunteer basis, some larger clubs allocate part of their budget to remunerating staff.

On the other hand, in Argentina, the sources of income of the clubs include membership fees, fees for sports activities, rental of spaces and solidarity fundraising activities. Government donations and subsidies also play an important role. Larger, more formalized clubs tend to rely more on membership dues, while smaller informal clubs generally rely on solidarity funds and the bar or buffet to secure revenue. (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

In terms of expenses, Argentine clubs invest mainly in sports equipment, infrastructure maintenance and payment of services. In large clubs, salaries represent a significant expense, while smaller clubs concentrate their resources on the maintenance of their facilities (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

5.5. SOCIAL ROLE

In addition to their sporting role, amateur sports clubs in France and Argentina play a key role in community education and social cohesion.

In France, these clubs are recognized for their contribution to social integration by offering activities aimed at various groups, such as women, people from marginalized urban areas, and people with disabilities. Some programs, such as "Sentez-vous Sport", promoted by the National Olympic Committee and sports federations, promote supervised physical activity in clubs as a way to improve quality of life and promote healthy lifestyles (Chavinier-Réla, Bayle, & Barget, 2015). In addition, access to public funds and free or low-cost facilities contributes to the accessibility of clubs to people of various socioeconomic levels (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

In Argentina, clubs are spaces of great relevance in the social and cultural life of communities. Law No. 27,098 has established a regime for the promotion of neighborhood and municipal clubs, recognizing their importance as places of socialization and citizen participation. In addition to sports activities, many clubs offer cultural, recreational and social activities, thus strengthening the social fabric and promoting values of solidarity and democracy. These spaces also function as platforms for inclusion and personal development and are key in the training and promotion of sports talents at the local and national level (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2022).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The study carried out has allowed Amateur Sports Clubs, helps to better understand the characteristics of amateur sports clubs in terms of socioeconomic model and allows comparisons between France and Argentina. The need to generate and record evidence-based data and variables, which are indispensable conditions for sports management, has been demonstrated.

This study invites further comparison in detail of the socioeconomic models of the clubs of both countries, taking into account regional and continental characteristics.

Based on Sports Management, it is possible to offer some answers to the challenges and crises faced by the Clubs of both countries, and for the implementation of public policies. Policymakers and the sports federations involved must find ways to define supportive and guidance policies tailored to each model. There are possibilities for studies and research that complement this proposal and that link amateur sports clubs with sports development models, the structuring of different public policies, the exercise of taxation of institutions, the substantiation of sports values, governance, etc.

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