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The influence of voluntary sports clubs on the management of community sports facilities in Denmark

By Peter Forsberg and Evald Bundgaard Iversen

Abstract

In this article, we use institutional theory to investigate how the role of the manager of Danish community sports facilities (CSFs) was initially defined and then developed from when the first CSFs were established in 1890 until 2017. We focus on three periods: The formative period (1890–1920), the confirmative period (1960–1980) and the challenging period (1997–2017). We conclude that the expectations for the manager’s role were initially defined by the needs and wishes of voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) and, further, that these expectations were stable throughout the two following periods. The management of CSFs has primarily been concerned with technical aspects such as budgeting, maintenance and cleaning, while the sporting activities in the CSFs have been the responsibility of the VSCs. Based on the analysis, we discuss how the managers of CSFs could handle current challenges such as an excess of available timeslots, cutbacks in subsidies and a maintenance backlog. We conclude that it is questionable whether the managers can provide the solutions to these, as their role seems to remain stable primarily due to a persistent pressure from VSCs to maintain the status quo for the role of the manager – i.e. that the manager should primarily focus on the need and wishes of the VSCs. Finally, we argue that if the aim is to make it possible for the manager to handle the challenges, the municipalities should consider changing the way municipalities allocate subsidies to CSFs.

1. Introduction

Community sports facilities (CSFs) play an important role for sport for all in Denmark. Voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) are the main providers of sport for all activities in Denmark and VSCs are dependent on access to CSFs owned or subsidised by the municipality to do their sports. On average, the 98 Danish municipalities spent 591 million euros per year on building and operating CSFs from 2010–2015 (Statistics Denmark 2017). Despite the massive economic support the municipalities give to CSFs, the CSFs face serious challenges from the external environment (Mosbæk 2008, Ministry of Culture 2009, Bækgaard 2015) including trouble filling available timeslots for activities (Høyer-Kruse et al. 2017), and failing to adjust adequately to changes in adults’ sporting habits as an increasing number of adults exercise in private fitness centres or outdoors (Larsen 2003, Laub and Pilgaard 2012). In the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, a number of CSFs have been challenged by cutbacks in funding (Forsberg et al. 2017, Iversen 2018), and some CSFs now have a major maintenance backlog (Ministry of Culture 2009, Johansson and Munk 2011). Different stakeholders have recently argued that managers of CSFs have a responsibility to address these challenges, including the Ministry

1 Community sports facilities (CSFs) are used for a number of different sport for all activities and can consist of one or a combination of different facilities (e.g. football pitches, sports halls, gymnastics halls, swimming pools).

2 Voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) refer to volunteer-based sports clubs with a democratic structure as defined in the Leisure Act (1990). The Leisure Act gives them the right to receive a public subsidy and access to CSFs owned by the municipality or a subsidy to obtain their own or rent a CSF.
of Culture (Ministry of Culture 2009), the Chairman of the Sports Facility Manager Union (Mosbæk 2008) and the Chairmen of the Union for Danish Sports Facilities (Bækgaard 2015). These stakeholders all assign CSF managers with the vital role of making adjustments that can secure their CSFs’ futures. But discussions about the current and future role of the CSF manager have also emerged in other countries. For example, in the UK Liu (2009) has argued that managers have a responsibility for the performance of CSFs and concludes that managers lack ‘sufficient analytical skills’ to implement changes and enhance CSF’s performance. Hence, the Danish case under scrutiny here might be relevant in other national contexts as well.

It is, however, doubtful whether managers of Danish CSFs can meet today’s expectations from stakeholders with the qualifications they have. Only 15% of the managers have completed higher education in management (diploma or master’s degree) and they have very different educational backgrounds given that no formal education for their managerial position exists. CSF managers are typically self-educated and are hired as managers without any prior experience working in a CSF (Forsberg et al. 2017). The lack of formal education for CSF managers is very different from other welfare areas (such as public schools and daycare centres) where managers complete more of a formal and continuous managerial education (Klausen et al. 2011, Klausen 2016, Forsberg et al. 2017). To assess what could be done to help managers cope with the current challenges in CSFs, we aim to understand what has formed the CSF manager’s role if it has not been formed by education. We argue that understanding how the expectations to the role of the manager has changed over time is decisive in order to understand why the managers of today are finding it difficult to handle challenges from the external environment. Therefore, we analyse how the expectations placed on the manager’s role have developed over time. Our research questions are: Who are, and who have been, the dominant actors in deciding how the management role in sports facilities is defined? Then, how has the CSF manager’s role developed over time and how does this role influence their actions?

We follow the notion that ‘history matters’ (Pierson 2004, p. 5) and that the actions of today’s managers are formed by events in the past. The theoretical approach applied to uncover the manager’s role is based on historical institutionalism, including considerations on how the logic of appropriateness (LOA) has influenced the manager’s role over time. We also show how the expectations on the manager’s behaviour have developed since the first CSFs were established. The first part of the article consists of a literature review. Then we introduce the theoretical background and next explain the analytical framework. Section four describes the method and in section five we conduct the analysis. Overall conclusions are discussed in section six.

2. Literature Review

Research in CSFs (i.e. of sport for all facilities) has not tended to focus on the evolution of the manager’s role. Instead much of the research on CSFs has focused on establishing key indicators (i.e. benchmarks) for sports facility performance (Robinson 1999, Howat et al. 2005). This is particularly the case in Australia and the UK, where a substantial proportion of the research on sports for all facilities has been conducted. In these countries,
the research has largely been based on two benchmarking frameworks with some common traits. In the early 1990s, the CERM Performance Indicators (CERM-PI) were established in Australia (Howat 2004), while the National Benchmark Service (NBS) was established in the UK in the late 1990s (Taylor and Godfrey 2003). Both frameworks cover a range of different indicators on finance, usage, access and customer satisfaction, and allow for comparison between different types of CSFs. The emphasis on developing benchmarking systems i.e. NBS and CERM-PI) and conducting research based on these has led to an evolution in research on indicators and the technical operations of sports facilities. For example, in the UK, the NBS has been used to examine the operational efficiency of sports facilities (Liu et al. 2007), the influence of ownership (Kung and Taylor 2010), the influence of quality awards for sports facility performance (Ramchandani and Taylor 2011) and sports facility performance in times of austerities (Ramchandani et al. 2018). In addition, NBS data has been used to investigate customer satisfaction in sports facilities (Liu et al. 2009). In Australia, the data from CERM-PI has been used to reduce the number of performance measures to minimise the potential of managers becoming overwhelmed by data (Howat et al. 2005) and to develop a hierarchical model for measuring perceived quality and loyalty in sports facilities (Howat and Assaker 2013).

Hence, the literature gives some indications of the advantages and weaknesses in terms of finance, usage, access and customer satisfaction, as mentioned above, across different types of management aggregated in some overall categories (for example in-house vs. non in-house management). However, few studies have focused on the individual manager and managerial practices. One exemption is Liu’s (2009) use of action research to investigate how three sports facility managers use NBS data. Liu (2009) found that these managers lacked the necessary analytic skills to understand the data, and the article raised concerns about the relevance of NBS results to sports facility managers. In a Danish context, Iversen (2013) and Iversen and Forsberg (2014) have argued that there is a need to open the ‘black box’ of how sports facilities are managed and to consider how management might influence performance. Further, Iversen (2017, 2018) use case studies to analyse how managers might influence the performance of the sports facility under different types of public subsidy regimes. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on how historical and structural circumstances influence managers’ work and decision making. We initiate the work by applying historical institutional theory to analyse how the expectations of the manager role has been established over time, and how these expectations have affected managerial actions.

3. Theoretical Background

A central concept in historical institutionalism is path dependency (Thelen 1999), which means that institutions (i.e. formal rules, informal norms, or shared understandings) formed in the past determine the potential actions individuals and organisations take in a given situation (Pierson 2004, Streeck and Thelen 2005). Once in place, institutions predispose actors and organisations to follow a particular institutional path, and positive feedback mechanisms and increasing returns lock-in institutions and make some actions by actors and organisations
more likely than others (Pierson 2004). Traditionally, historical institutionalism has focused on institutional persistence and stability whereas limited focus has been on institutional change (Pierson 2004, Mahoney and Thelen 2010). However, institutional change does occur. Traditionally, institutional change has been explained with reference to the punctuated equilibrium model (True et al. 1999), which involves long periods of stability being punctuated with shorter moments in which change is possible (Hall and Taylor 1996, True et al. 1999). Pierson (2004) and Streeck and Thelen (2005) acknowledge this form of change, but they note that institutional change also occurs incrementally over time. Streeck and Thelen (2005) identify four different forms of institutional change: 1) reproduction by adaption represents a situation where established institutions reproduce and maintain themselves by adapting to evolution over time, 2) survival and return represents a situation where an abrupt incident/attempt for institutional change goes wrong and the institutions return to their original configuration, 3) gradual transformation represents a situation where a gradual process of change results in a new institutional configuration, and 4) breakdown and replacement represents a situation in which institutions suffer a sudden transformation due to an abrupt incident. The processes of change are either incremental (1 + 3) or abrupt (2 + 4), while the results of change can either be continuity (1 + 2) or discontinuity (3 + 4). These four forms are used to analyse how the CSF manager’s role has changed over time, and to what extent abrupt incidents and incremental changes have affected the CSF manager’s role in terms of continuity and discontinuity.

3.1. Roles and logic of action

There has been a trend in institutional theory of integrating different schools of thought to increase the explanatory power of institutional analysis (Pierson and Skocpol 2002, March and Olsen 2009, Hall 2010). In this article, historical institutionalism is supplemented with the logic of appropriateness (LOA) (March and Olsen 1984, 2009). The LOA was introduced by March and Olsen (1984) to analyse actors’ behaviours in organisations. According to the LOA, an actor’s behaviour in a given situation is a result of a combination of situations, rules and roles. The basis for their behaviour is the social norms that are deemed right in a specific situation. The actions chosen are then said to follow the perceived appropriate course of action for a given role.

In this article, we use the LOA to analyse, interpret and understand actors’ behaviour in CSFs over time. According to this line of thought, roles are defined as a persistent set of institutions that direct actors in certain positions towards ‘conceptions of appropriate goals or objectives’ (Scott 2014, p. 64). Hence, managers of CSFs hold a certain position and their potential actions are specified by the role defining this position. Managers will experience institutions as constraining as well as empowering their possible actions (Scott 2014). This role formation is an ongoing interaction between the expectations other salient actors have for the manager and how the managers perceive these expectations. When expectations are persistent over time some expectations become ingrained in the role, and the managers perceive them as rules or the ‘natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate’ way to act (March and Olsen 2009, p. 3). In this article, the CSF manager’s role is
analysed by looking at expectations of managers over time and how they might influence the management role.

According to the LOA, roles are bound to organisations, such as CSFs, and organisations impose roles on actors (March and Olsen 2009, Scott 2014). When actors follow the rules associated with their role, they act in accordance with the institutionalised practices of their organisations. Therefore, actors are expected to fulfil the interests of their organisation rather than their own interests (Scott 2014). In theory, every CSF, i.e. organisation, has its own particular ‘managerial role’ that differs slightly from the managerial role in other CSFs. Institutionalists are, however, preoccupied with the big picture and overall tendencies, which Pierson and Skocpol (2002, p. 696) describe as ‘the combined effects of institutions’. We also focus on the combined effects of institutions on the role of CSF managers in general, rather than on the management role in a particular CSF. The aim is to uncover the overall expectations and appropriate behaviours associated with the general manager’s role.

As mentioned above, and following Scott (2014), we argue that it is important to focus on who defines the role (i.e. ‘salient actors’). This draws attention to the organisational field of CSFs and the specific institutional logic (i.e. institutional setting) of CSFs. Scott (2014) notes that multiple organisational fields exist alongside each other with their own distinct composition of actors and institutional logic. The central actors in the organisational field of CSFs are politicians, board members of the CSFs, managers of the CSFs, bureaucrats and VSCs. These different actors struggle to impose the institutional logic from their field onto the field of CSFs (Friedland and Alford 1991). In this article, we use the above observations about the struggle between actors to analyse and assess the reigning LOA and how it influences the role of the CSF managers.

3.2. Analytic Framework

By looking at three periods described below, the research questions are answered by first determining who the dominant actors in are and then considering which role they play in defining the role of managing CSFs in each period.

Traditionally, historical institutionalists have focused on critical junctures and abrupt changes, omitting incremental changes. However, according to Pierson (2004), critical junctures often have a trigger point effect. Changes occur over long periods of time, and when they reach a certain cut-off point it ‘triggers a big effect’ (Pierson 2004, p. 84). The central element to Pierson is not the trigger point, but the period of slow moving progress leading up to the trigger point. We look for abrupt as well as incremental changes as a middle ground is chosen. Hence, the focus of the analyses is not only on possible critical junctures, but also includes the long periods of time leading up to and following the possible critical junctures.

The first period to investigate is the formative period (1890–1920), in which the first large CSF was established in the Danish capital, Copenhagen, in 1911. The second period, the confirmative period (1960–1980), is selected due to the passing in the Danish parliament of the Leisure Act in 1968. With this act,
municipalities became obliged by law to support VSCs’ use of CSFs. Finally, the challenging period (1997–2017) in which a structural reform in 2007 resulted in the number of Danish municipalities being reduced from 271 to 98, is chosen. The reform can be seen to have influenced the expectations placed on the CSF manager’s role due to changes imposed on the bureaucratic and political levels of the now larger and more complex municipalities (Ibsen and Jørgensen 2009).

4. Method
This section gives an overview of how the historical analysis is conducted. Mortensen’s (2004b) and Wøllekær’s (2007) PhD theses on the historical development of CSFs and sports politics in Danish municipalities have inspired and are a starting point for the research strategy.

The analysis is based on both primary and secondary sources (see Table 1). We have analysed the primary sources to uncover the manager role in the three periods, and the secondary sources have been used to understand the context. Some sources, for example, the white paper on sport from 1974, Sport and Outdoor Recreation (Ministry of Culture 1974), are both a primary and secondary source. The white paper contains details of an analysis of sport in 1974 (making it a secondary source), but also includes political and normative statements about how to plan the future for sport in Denmark (making it a primary source).

Methodological hermeneutics has been the guiding principle to understand and interpret primary sources. According to methodological hermeneutics, in order to understand the messages in sources, it is essential for the researcher to recover and ascertain the intentions of the messenger in the source and the context in which the message is created (Schleiermacher 1998). Hence, in this article we move back and forth between trying to understand the context and then use this understanding to assess the role of the manager during the three periods.

A few additional comments regarding some of the primary sources are necessary before continuing. The Sport-71 and Sport-73 conferences were organised by a committee of chairmen from the national sports federations in Denmark. All presentations and debates from the two conferences were transcribed by the organisers. Magazines of the Sports Facility Manager Union (SFMU) have been published regularly since 1966. The purpose of the magazine is to inform members on legal matters associated with their employment and to publish debates and discussions on the work of CSF managers. Both sources contain messages on the management of CSFs based on statements from CSF managers and other central stakeholders. We have analysed the material from both the conferences and the magazines. Both sources give a first-hand impression of how the managers perceive the expectations for their roles. However, both the conferences and the magazines have been edited by persons and organisations who are stakeholders in the CSFs. This may result in a biased understanding of the role of the manager, so both the conference presentations and magazine articles have been analysed critically to take this potential bias into consideration.
Table 1. Primary and secondary sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Periods</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
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<tr>
<td>The formative period</td>
<td>• Summaries of political meetings in the municipality of Copenhagen on establishing the Copenhagen Sports Park</td>
<td>• Wøllekæø (2007), PhD Thesis: Studies of policy development in the Municipality of Odense, Århus and Aalborg 1900–1959</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Leisure Act (1968)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The challenging period</td>
<td>• The Ministry of Culture (2009): White Paper on Sport</td>
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5. Analysis

The analysis is first structured around the formative period (1890–1920), then the confirmative period (1960–1980) and, finally, the challenging period (1997–2017).

5.1. The formative period (1890–1920)

The Municipality of Copenhagen decided that the Copenhagen Sports Park should only be used for sporting purposes (...). This led to the idea of entrusting the sports clubs with the free disposal rights of the sports park so the sports clubs could use it as they wish.

Political negotiations in the Municipality of Copenhagen, 6 December 1909

The Copenhagen Sports Park (CSP) opened in 1911 in the capital of Denmark. It became, according to Mortensen (2004b) and Wøllekæø (2007), an example to follow for municipal involvement in CSFs. The Municipality of Copenhagen invested 5% of the municipality’s total budget in 1908 to establish the CSP. Despite this massive investment, the politicians in the Municipality of Copenhagen handed over the administration and control of the CSP to a non-profit organisation, a union,3 consisting of representatives from VSCs.4 This section focuses on how the CSP became an example for municipalities to follow when being involved in CSFs and how expectations for the management role in CSFs were formed. From a historical institutional perspective, the formative period is of a particular interest because that is when the foundation of an institutional path is established. Once in place, institutions are hard to change. Therefore, early events seem

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3 The union had its own board and the municipality cannot dictate the board’s decisions.
4 The CSP was meant to be a place for VSCs as well as national sports organisations (i.e. SCD). ‘VSCs’ here cover both VSCs and national sports organisations.
to matter more than later ones and first-mover advantages exist (i.e. the advantages of those who first define the logic in a field) (Pierson 2004).

5.1.1. The dominant actors in the formative period

At the end of 19th century, few public spaces for VSC activities were available in Copenhagen, and VSCs had to pay rent to organise their activities. But in 1893, the Municipality of Copenhagen took over the green outdoor space of ‘Fælleden’, a large military exercise area, from the military. Continuing the practice of the military, the municipality rented out a small area of ‘Fælleden’ to local football clubs (Mortensen 2004a). But in 1904 the Municipality of Copenhagen set up a committee to decide on the future use of ‘Fælleden’. The Sports Confederation of Denmark (SCD) and the VSCs initiated contact with the municipality to designate an area of ‘Fælleden’ for broader use by VSCs (Mortensen 2004a). The Municipality of Copenhagen reacted positively and allocated an area of ‘Fælleden’ to sporting purposes (Mortensen 2004a). This was one of the first examples of CSFs being established and supported financially by a municipality with the purpose of being primarily used by VSCs.

As mentioned, the Municipality of Copenhagen created a union consisting of representatives from VSCs (and the SCD) to administer and control the use of the CSP for 99 years (Harsfelt 1936, Mortensen 2004a). The reason for letting a union administer and control the CSP for such a long period were because the VSCs were believed to be better suited to administer and control the CSP than the municipality (Municipality of Copenhagen 1909). The politicians thought VSCs to be experts on their own needs and they should have the ability to develop the CSP as they wished. From an institutional perspective, three reasons can explain why the municipality handed over the CSP to a union. First, as argued by Mortensen (2004b), the institutional logic of the field of sports was at that time dominated by a norm of voluntarism and self-management. For VSCs to flourish, the logic among the politicians in the Municipality of Copenhagen was that the municipality should support, but not interfere with the operations of VSCs. If the municipality interfered, the politicians were afraid of supressing the VSCs’ perceived positive influence on society. VSCs were believed to have a positive effect on youth by keeping them away from crime and on adults by encouraging camaraderie (Mortensen 2004a, 2004b). Second, the construction of the CSP shows the importance of the first-mover advantages described above. Prior to 1904, and the discussion on the future use of ‘Fælleden’, VSCs had approached the municipality on several occasions to get help to find locations to organise and play their sports. When the discussion on the future use of ‘Fælleden’ took place among the politicians in the Municipality of Copenhagen in 1904, SCD and the VSCs applied to take over a designated area within ‘Fælleden’ and use it for sporting activities.

The initiative came from SCD and the VSCs, and it seems to be due to SCD and the VSCs’ early interest and efforts that they were subsequently given a central role in the CSP. Third, the municipality wanted to define the limits of giving economic support to the CSP. By establishing a union, the municipality (attempted to) establish an institutional set-up that would place the task of further construction of facilities in the CSP in the
hands of the union (Municipality of Copenhagen 1909, Harsfelt 1936). In order to assist the CSP in raising money for further construction, the municipality chose to hand the CSP over to the union for 99 years. However, it became the norm for the municipality to continue to co-finance further constructions of the CSP (Harsfelt 1936). Hence, VSCs continued to be the dominant actor in the CSP (Mortensen 2004b) and the municipality continued to support the CSP financially to a higher extent than intended. This finding supports a central point in historical institutionalism: When established, positive feedback mechanisms and lock-in make change difficult. When the municipality first chose to construct the CSP by providing financial support, then handing over the administration and control of the CSP to a union (representing the interests of VSCs), a path was initiated. This path stressed that municipalities should be financially involved in CSFs, and that administration and control should be done by VSCs. Establishing unions consisting of VSCs with the purpose of controlling and administering the use of CSFs became a norm in many municipalities. The creation of unions dominated by VSCs for this purpose illustrates the dominant position VSCs had in the organisational field of CSFs. Prior to 1937, municipalities were under no obligation to finance CSFs or subsidise VSCs. But the perceived positive influence of VSCs on society became a state of mind of the municipalities and politicians (Mortensen 2004b). This state of mind defined the future relationship between municipalities, politicians and the VSCs. VSCs became the reference point for municipalities and politicians when considering support or grants to CSFs.

5.1.2. The manager’s role in the formative period

According to the bylaws of the CSP, the management of the CSP was the responsibility of the union’s board (Harsfelt 1936). The norm of voluntarism and self-management established in the formative period meant that neither politicians nor bureaucrats seemed to be interested in the management of the CSP. There are few sources and limited information on the expectations for the manager’s role in this period, which arguably illustrates the lack of interest the municipality had in influencing the expectations on the role of the manager.

Hence, the CSP manager’s role came to depend on the priorities and demands of the VSCs. According to the job description, the manager ‘should be a skilled and qualified male’ who could keep expenses low and act with restraint (Harsfelt 1936, p. 26–27). The municipality supported the CSP with subsidies and it seemed to be important for the CSP to show that the public money was well spent. Another area deemed to be important as a manager of the CSP was to address technical issues in the CSP. The first general manager of the CSP from 1914–1943 was Moritz Rasmussen. Rasmussen was a central figure in defining the importance of technical issues in the management of CSFs in Denmark, as he was the main contributor to SCD’s pamphlets on spaces for sports, published in 1916, 1926 and 1935 (Sports Confederation of Denmark 1916, 1926, 1935). The pamphlets were sent to politicians and municipalities and propagated for municipal support to CSFs. The publications contained in-depth information on the technical issues associated with building, operating and maintaining CSFs (Sports Confederation of Denmark 1916, 1926, 1935). These pamphlets, authored by the
manager of the biggest CSF in Denmark at that time, have been important in defining the institutional logic of the field of CSFs and framing the appropriate role of the manager in that field. Rasmussen defined the manager’s role as being concerned with the construction and maintenance of CSFs, whereas no focus was put on organising sporting activities as this was perceived to be the responsibility of the VSCs.

5.2. The confirmative period (1960–1980)

The Municipalit y of Viborg gives 0.134 million euro (...) to the union of voluntary sports clubs. The union then takes over the operation of the sports facilities in the municipality.

Presentation at the conference Sport 73, Kurt Møller, Chairman of the Sports Confederation of Denmark

In the confirmative period, CSFs became widely available across the country. While the construction of CSFs in the formative period primarily took place in municipalities with bigger cities (with the CSP as an illustrative example), in the confirmative period CSFs were built in all Danish municipalities and the number of CSFs increased dramatically (Ministry of Culture 1987, Ottesen and Ibsen 2000, Lind and Svendsen 2003, Wøllekær 2007). For example, the number of sports halls in Denmark more than doubled from 1971 to 1983 (Ministry of Culture 1987). One of the driving forces in this development was the passing of the Leisure Act in 1968, which obliged municipalities to support VSCs and their use of CSFs.

5.2.1. The dominant actors in the confirmative period

The dominant position of VSCs in the organisational field of CSFs intensified during the confirmative period. Many CSFs were, as in the case of the CSP, built on the initiative of VSCs. Further, the VSCs would often have to collect money and do voluntary work to construct the CSFs (Ottesen and Ibsen 2000, Svendsen 2002, Lind and Svendsen 2003). In such scenarios with the VSCs being heavily involved in the construction of the CSF, the municipality would typically support the construction of CSFs by offering a minor grant and a designated location to construct the CSFs (by either transferring or renting land to the CSF for a minor fee). The countless hours of work from volunteers and members of the VSCs functioned as a form of confirmation, strengthening the VSCs’ normative legitimacy and institutionalising their dominant position in the organisational field of CSFs. When VSCs contributed with volunteers to build CSFs they created a visible symbol of what volunteers were able to do. That symbol strengthened the norm of voluntarism and self-management and intensified the VSCs’ influence in defining the organisational field of managing CSFs. When VSCs showed their willingness to do voluntary work and contribute financially to the construction of CSFs, politicians were prone to continue to support CSFs and the dominant role of VSCs in CSFs.

Hence, the passing of the Leisure Act in 1968 by the Danish parliament institutionalised the VSCs’ position in CSFs. The Leisure Act made it mandatory for municipalities to provide CSFs owned by the
municipality to VSCs for free or for a minor fee and the municipalities were also required to reimburse VSCs’ expenses to owned or rented CSFs. The law was about grants for VSCs and did not include any requirements on how to operate or manage CSFs (Ministry of Culture 1974). Prior to the passing of the law, many municipalities did, however, already support VSCs and CSFs, and the act itself was in most places just a confirmatory statement of things that were already in place. Therefore, the passing of the act could be argued to be a tipping point (Pierson 2004, p. 84). Prior to the Leisure Act, many municipalities already had locally negotiated ordinances (local rules decided by the municipality) for municipal support to VSCs and CSFs, and in many municipalities these ordinances just continued without being replaced by the Leisure Act (Ottesen and Ibsen 2000). In most municipalities without local ordinances prior to 1968, such ordinances were negotiated after the passing of the Leisure Act (Ministry of Culture 1974, Haurum 1985). The local ordinances were possible because the level of subsidy in them often exceeded the minimum requirements of the Leisure Act. The presence of such generous levels of subsidies, both before and after the passing of the act, can be seen as a confirmation of the local political support for the VSCs (Ministry of Culture 1974, Haurum 1985). The negotiations for local ordinances on support to VSCs and CSFs formalised and institutionalised the relation between the municipalities and VSCs (often via the construction of unions consisting of local VSCs) in a corporatist manner. VSCs became a trusted partner for the municipalities and in many municipalities the VSCs acted as if they were a formal authority, as in the case of the CSP. Thus, the inclusion of VSCs in the negotiations illustrates the central role the VSCs had in defining the institutional logic of the organisational field of CSFs. The central position of the VSCs in the organisational field was also visible in the white paper on sport, Sport and Outdoor Activities, which was ordered by the Ministry of Culture and released in 1974 (Ministry of Culture 1974). The paper was written by a committee and contains normative statements on how sports should be organised and funded by the public (Ministry of Culture 1974). The white paper argued that the VSCs would be the decisive factor in the development of sport for all and the committee recommended that VSCs should be supported (Ministry of Culture 1974). At that time, some municipalities also delivered sporting activities directly to the public. The committee disapproved of these offers and insisted that municipalities should only initiate such activities if the VSCs were unable to provide similar offers (Ministry of Culture 1974). Hence, the development from the formative period to the confirmative period corresponds with what Streeck and Thelen (2005) refer to as incremental continuity and reproduction by adaptation. The VSCs retained their dominant position in the CSFs, but minor changes or adaptions occurred. The construction of unions consisting of local VSCs, which in some cases acted as a municipal authority regarding the control of CSFs, strengthened the VSCs’ position in CSFs. Hence, in many municipalities, unions were invited to join the discussions about how municipalities were to financially support sports/CSFs. According to historical institutionalism, including unions in these discussions was pivotal. Once unions were included in the discussions, it made it difficult at a later point to exclude them due to positive feedback mechanisms and institutional lock-in.
5.2.2. The manager’s role in the confirmative period

In the confirmative period, the Sport Facility Managers Union (SFMU) was established in 1963, at a time when CSFs could be found in all parts of Denmark (Knudsen 1977). In 1976, the SFMU and the national association of municipalities (Local Government Denmark) agreed on the working conditions for CSF managers. This agreement made it possible to negotiate wages and working conditions for managers working in CSFs owned by municipalities between Local Government Denmark and the SFMU. However, the profession can be described as ‘immature’ in comparison with other professions (such as doctors and teachers) in the sense that there are no formal requirements for education or courses on taking a position as a manager.

Studies of the articles in the SFMU magazine and of the transcriptions of the Sport-71 and Sport-73 conferences show that two different management roles (i.e. paths) emerged in the organisational field of CSFs in the period depending on ownership of the CSF: the municipal manager’s role and the non-profit manager’s role. Overall, however, the two roles were well aligned with the overall expectations place on the manager’s role in the formative period. For example, both roles stressed that the manager was expected to make the CSF available for VSCs to use and core activities would include maintenance and making sure that the CSFs met technical standards (Haarslev 1978). Also, both roles stressed the importance of keeping expenses as low as possible and taking an overall responsibility for the CSF’s finances. Neither roles were expected to be associated with initiating or developing sporting activities, which were left to the VSCs to carry out. But the expectations on the manager’s role differed across the two types of ownership when it came to work and pay conditions (Konradsen 1977). The managers of non-profit organisations were not only expected to operate the CSF but were also expected to run a cafeteria and events, and in some organisations, the manager’s salary depended on income from catering and events (Fink 1976). In contrast, in CSFs owned by municipalities, the manager’s salary was not dependent on income from the cafeteria or events. Further, and contrary to managers of CSFs owned by a non-profit organisation, the manager of CSFs owned by a municipality would often delegate tasks such as maintenance and cleaning to other employees. Typically, the manager of a CSF owned by a municipality would be a manager responsible for more than one CSF, whereas the manager of a CSF owned by a non-profit organisation would only be responsible for one CSF (Editoral 1977). The two slightly different managerial roles emerging in the period led to numerous discussions in the SFMU magazine on the working conditions of the managers. The wages paid in CSFs owned by a municipality were also higher. Differences regarding working conditions still exist among managers hired by a CSF owned by a municipality and by a non-profit organisation.

Despite two slightly different roles emerging in the confirmative period, the role still had a lot in common with the one established in the formative period as focus continued to be primarily on technical matters. Referring to Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) framework for institutional change, continuity rather than discontinuity describes the evolution of the role from the formative to the confirmative period.
5.3. The challenging period (1997–2017)

Sports clubs are the dominant actors in the existing system and will be in years to come. If we want to raise the level of activity in sports facilities, we need to open them to new user groups. However, municipalities and politicians are curtailed by the legislation and, together with sports clubs, they slow down the development.

Chairman of the Union for Danish Sports Facilities, Niels Bækgaard (personal communication, 27 October 2016)

In comparison with the confirmative period, the number of adults doing physical activity in the challenged period has increased (Pilgaard and Rask 2016). CSFs are, however, not the primary sporting arena for adults who increasingly use fitness centres and the outdoors (Larsen 2003, Pilgaard 2009). Finding new ways to use CSFs and opening them to new user groups then becomes an alternative to close CSFs (Ministry of Culture 2009). However, according to a statement from the Chairman of the Union for Danish Sports Facilities (UDSF), Niels Bækgaard, in 2016, the legislation (i.e. the Leisure Act) impedes the adjustments needed to address adults’ changing sporting habits. Seen from a historical institutional perspective, such slow adjustments to changes in the environment can be an unintended consequence of path dependency (Pierson, 2004). Therefore, the (too) stable legal framework is arguably a result of path dependency resulting in stability rather than change.

5.3.1. The dominant actors in the challenging period

In 1990, a new Leisure Act was passed. Whereas the Leisure Act from 1968 was a centralised law trying to impose equal standards across the country (Ministry of Culture 1974), the new act was a decentralised law giving municipalities and VSCs the opportunity to define the details of the law locally (Ottesen and Ibsen 2000). The new act formalised the procedures chosen in most municipalities with locally negotiated ordinances. The Leisure Act from 1990 confirmed and formalised the dominant role of the VSCs in the organisational field of CSFs. The new act can best be described as an indicator of incremental continuity. Hence, the new act formalised practices already in place.

Another possible critical incident for the CSFs was the merging of municipalities in 2007 from 271 to 98 municipalities. In total, 241 of the municipalities merged with one or more neighbouring municipalities. Many of the merged municipalities decided to streamline their rules and policies, and had to align their own distinct histories, traditions and cultures to form a new, larger municipality. Because of this, the reform was an opportunity for political and administrative changes among the CSFs (Madsen 2004, Mosbæk 2007). It that respect, it was an abrupt incident, as the bureaucracy of the municipality almost instantly turned into a larger administrative unit (because of an increase in inhabitants and new tasks being transferred to the municipal level from the state and regional level). In many municipalities, larger and more specialised departments administering sports, leisure and culture were created. According to Ibsen (2009), these changes resulted in an
increase in professional expertise and knowledge about CSFs among bureaucrats. Further, in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), national economies were forced to cut back on spending (Lin and Treichel 2012). In Denmark, the municipalities decreased public spending per inhabitant by 10% in the period from 2009–2013 (Foged and Sørensen 2016). In such an economic environment, both politicians and bureaucrats will be interested in assessing how to increase the efficiency of CSFs by minimising spending and maximising usage. The combination of the merging of municipalities and the consequences of the GFC seem to be likely reasons for the change in the attention for the use of CSFs occurring in many municipalities. Hence, in many municipalities the dominant role of the VSCs in CSFs was increasingly questioned, which led to a struggle of institutional logic in the organisational field of CSFs and the possibility of a critical juncture occurring (Madsen 2007). The municipalities did to some extent, try to increase the focus on other user groups than VSCs in CSFs, but, according to Ibsen (2009), the VSCs still managed to impose their institutional logic and avoid bigger changes in the organisational field. The primary reasons for the VSCs succeeding in maintaining the status quo is related to the norm of voluntarism and self-management established in the formative period, according to which municipalities would not challenge the VSCs’ dominant position in CSFs.

Another reason for the continued focus on VSCs from management could be that the management has closer relations with the VSCs than the new, more distant and larger municipalities. In the non-profit CSFs, the management is under the influence of a board – and VSCs are often represented on the board. In CSFs owned by the municipality there is also often a close dialogue between the users (VSCs) and the management. Hence, many managers will have a closer relationship to the VSCs than to the municipality. Further, the subsidy to the sports facility continued to be tied to the activities conducted by the VSCs. For that reason too, it seems likely that the manager would continue to focus on prioritising the role of the VSCs.

In sum, despite the aforementioned changes in the external environment, the established institutional logic, and therefore stability, seems to remain. Thus, the process of change is best described as abrupt continuity. The institutions in place prior to the merging of municipalities survived and after the merging, it was back to business as usual with VSCs as the dominant actor.

5.3.2. The manager role in the challenging period

As noted above, the new Leisure Act eventually reaffirmed the position of VSCs in CSFs. Their dominant position was also confirmed in a survey of the usage of 290 CSFs in 23 municipalities, which indicated that VSCs used 83% of the timeslots available for activities (Høyer-Kruse et al. 2017). Another survey showed that the technical requirements of a CSF (present in the formative and confirmative period) still defined the manager’s role in the challenging period (Forsberg et al. 2017). Continuity rather than discontinuity was the dominant trait.

However, discussions on the VSCs’ extensive use of CSFs have also emerged in the aftermath of the municipality mergers in 2007. Traditionally, VSCs have had the monopoly when it comes to organising
sporting activities in CSFs, but the parallel increase in adult Danes’ sports participation and the paradox of struggling to fill timeslots in CSFs intensified these discussions and the expectations of the managers. Some of these discussions documented in a new white paper on sport from 2009, ‘Sport for all’ (Ministry of Culture 2009), and in the SFMU’s magazine.

According to the white paper, managers must challenge ‘the rigid allocation of timeslots to dominant sports clubs’ in order to optimise the sports clubs’ as well as self-organised users’ use of sports facilities (Ministry of Culture 2009, p. 302). Studies of the SFMUs’ magazine show that these expectations were already deliberated in the mid-1980s (Madsen 1985), and that, as observed above, discussions on the managers’ responsibility for increasing usage increased in intensity after the municipal reform in 2007.

Additionally, expectations of managers to be involved in increasing usage of CSFs and to keep the budget is very much present at the bureaucratic level in municipalities (Forsberg et al. 2017). In particular, the focus on utilisation indicates that the formation of bigger departments with more qualified personnel in municipalities seems to have had an impact on expectations placed on the CSF manager’s role, because this emphasis was not evident to the same extent earlier. Thus, municipalities appear to have become more interested in intervening in the operation of CSFs.

Despite the expectations of managers to be involved in sporting activities carried out at CSFs, there is little evidence that the managers have challenged the monopoly of VSCs and complied with the municipalities’ expectations to increase the usage of CSFs. As noted above, almost all timeslots are used by VSCs and few sporting activities are organised by managers or are available for/used by self-organised users (Hoyer-Kruse et al. 2017). In that respect, the statement from the white paper on sport from 1974 still holds true and VSCs are still the preferred provider of sporting activities in CSFs. This illustrates that the institutional logic of the organisational field still primarily is defined by VSCs.

A possible reason for the managers not challenging the role of the VSCs might be that they lack education in management and the ability to look beyond the immediate needs and wishes of the VSCs. But it could also be based on the perception that the expectation on the managers to actively work towards increasing the usage of CSFs by organising sporting activities does not fit CSF managers’ image of the expectations formed about their role in the formative and confirmative periods. In these periods, managers were hired to oversee the technical standards of a CSF and thereby make CSFs easy for VSCs to use. Working towards increasing usage by organising sporting activities was not a part of their managerial responsibility, but was primarily the VSCs’ responsibility. Such a perception of the manager’s role still seems to be dominant in the challenging period. Thus, primarily taking care of technical issues has become, referring to March and Olsen (March and Olsen 2009, p. 3), the ‘natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate’ way for managers to act. Therefore, positive feedback mechanisms and increasing returns have kept the manager’s role stable in the challenging period despite substantial changes in the environment.
6. Conclusion and discussion

This article has investigated the formation of and expectations for the role of Danish community sports facility (CSF) managers over time. The analysis has shown that voluntary sports clubs (VSC) have been the dominant actor in influencing and defining the logic of the appropriate manager role. The manager’s role was established when the first CSFs were built in Denmark, as illustrated by the Copenhagen Sports Park case. Managers of CSFs have been expected to make sure CSFs meet technical standards by primarily focusing on cleaning and maintenance. In addition, the managers have been expected to have the overall responsibility for budgeting and accounting and to keep expenses as low as possible. These expectations formed the manager role in the formative period, and this role was later confirmed in the confirmative period. In the challenging period, municipalities challenged the manager role but the VSCs managed to hold their dominant position in the organisational field of CSFs and VSCs were able to apply their institutional logic. Throughout the three periods, the development in the manager role can be explained using Streeck and Thelen (2005) framework for types of institutional change (see section 3.1). From the formative to the confirmative period, small incremental changes occurred to the manager role which reflect reproduction by adaption. The manager’s role adapted to the evolution over time. Thus, continuity rather than discontinuity was the common trait and the LOA defining the manager’s role in the formative period was reproduced to also define the manager’s role in the confirmative period. The merging of municipalities in the challenging period was an abrupt incident that did not change the manager’s role significantly. The LOA defining the manager’s role prior to the merger of municipalities was also dominant after the merger (i.e. ‘survival and return’, section 3.1). Thus, a stable perception of the manager’s role, as proposed by historical institutionalism, exists across the three periods. Path dependency is at stake as the manager’s role in the challenging period largely corresponds with the role established in the formative period. Hence, the managers have continued to pursue the path dominated by the institutional logic of VSCs.

If managers are expected to be able to address the challenges facing CSFs, we argue that their role does need to evolve. However, it seems unlikely that the managers themselves will be able to make the necessary adjustments. If changes are to happen, the municipalities are likely to be key actors in making them happen. Municipalities are important because they are likely to continue to provide subsidies to and operate CSFs. But in order for the municipalities to be successful in shaping the manager’s role more in line with their wishes, they must consider whether they are asking the managers to undertake duties that counteract what they perceive as appropriate behaviour and the ‘natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate’ way to act. Thus, they are asking managers to undertake duties they do not see as a natural part of their job and may not be trained to carry out.

However, one way of challenging and potentially changing the role of the manager is to consider how municipalities allocate subsidies to CSFs. Managers need to secure CSFs financially, so financial incentives have a potential to change how managers act, and ultimately how they define their role. At present, the subsidies for CSFs are connected to the VSCs’ use of the CSFs. We argue that municipalities’ expectations of
managers must be reflected in the way municipalities give subsidies to CSFs. By only granting subsidies to VSCs to use the CSFs, the municipalities imply that the managers should primarily focus on looking after the VSCs. But the municipalities are also allowed to prioritise other users than VSCs and they can change how they allocate subsidies (Olesen 2012). Therefore, if the municipalities start to prioritise other user groups than VSCs when granting subsidies, this is likely to influence the role of the manager in the longer term. For example, the behaviour of managers of non-profit CSFs has been shown to depend partly on economic incentives (Iversen 2017). By changing how subsidies are allocated to CSFs and offering equal economic incentives for the use of VSCs and self-organised user groups, municipalities might gradually change how the CSFs are used and thereby incline managers to adopt a new role that focuses on organising sporting activities and a more diverse group of users. A more radical solution could be to introduce competitive tendering to the Danish context. However, this would be a big change in how the management of CSFs is considered, as this would include challenging the dominant role of VSCs in CSFs. As we have seen in this article, significant changes seem unlikely to happen in the short term as the institutional logic has long focused on the wishes and needs of VSCs.

As mentioned initially, this article aimed to start filling a gap in the literature on the historical and structural factors behind the role of a sports facility manager today and demonstrates how institutional theory can be applied to help fill this gap. The analysis of the manager’s role in Danish CSFs has shown that despite changes in adult’s sporting habits and municipalities’ expectations of managers to get involved in CSF-led sporting activities, the manager’s role has not evolved greatly since it was established 100 years ago.

In a wider context, the article is arguably applicable not only to CSFs in Denmark, but also in other countries with a history for VSCs having (almost) free access to CSFs. Other Nordic countries, Germany, Hungary, Switzerland and the Netherlands are examples (Ibsen et al. 2016). The article stresses the importance of institutional settings and knowledge about managerial actions for the performance of CSFs. This in-depth study of CSFs in Denmark provides valuable information for stakeholders who are considering how to change the direction and performance of CSFs in Denmark as well as in countries in which the VSCs use CSFs in a similar manner. The lesson from the Danish case is that expectations formed in the past about the CSF manager’s role still influence the role today despite changes in the external environment. Hence, the manager role is still primarily defined by VSC’s, rather than by wishes and needs of the actors who finance CSFs – in this case municipalities. Once institutions are in place their trajectories are difficult to change and stability over time occurs.

**References**


