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Article

Somewhat United: Primary Stakeholder Perspectives of the Governance of Schoolboy Football in Ireland

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Abstract

Despite an independent report on the governance and organisational practices of football in Ireland, the National Governing Body continues to face criticism in relation to stakeholder management and communication. As positive outcomes in non-profit organisations are associated with quality relationships between organisations, the purpose of this article is to explore primary stakeholder perspectives of the governance of schoolboy football in the Republic of Ireland. The research questions to be addressed are: do tensions exist between stakeholders of football governance in the Republic of Ireland and does the FAI display effective governance behaviours in relation to its primary stakeholders (SFAI).

This exploratory investigation of stakeholder management utilised purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven stakeholders from the football governance system. Content analysis used a deductive and inductive process.

A lack of congruence across the system was identified, which resulted from ineffective stakeholder management (poor communication practices, perceptions of inaccurate disclosures, perceived lack of inclusion in decision-making, perceptions of organisational injustice, confusion over role clarity and responsibilities). Managing the quality of the relationships with diverse stakeholders within a sport governance system is key for strategic policy formation and implementation, yet this remains a challenging and multi-faceted concept.

Keywords

Stakeholder / sport / management/ governance / football / non-profit organisations

Introduction

Following the 2002 World Cup campaign in Japan/South Korea, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) secured the services of a Scottish based consultancy organisation (Genesis) to conduct an evaluation of the planning and organisational practices prior to and during the World Cup. Serious management, leadership and governance flaws within the FAI were identified by the Genesis review (2002). They reported that the FAI must accept a need for greater professionalism, develop effective voluntary leadership, professional management and structures. Organisational changes including the reduction in the number of board members, sub-committee formation and operational role-clarity were recommended, with a further recommendation that two independent "non-executive" directors be appointed to the board; a number of these changes remain unimplemented (Fallon, 2016). The Genesis report also cited that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders and that they failed to recognise good organisational practice employed elsewhere in sport. The FAI assert in their strategic plan for 2016-2020 that 'governance is at a high level and will be maintained as such' (p34, para 2) and they fully endorse best practice in governance (FAI, 2016). Yet the FAI still face criticism in relation to gender representation, lack of independent directors, age and term limits of board members and fiduciary transparency (Sweeney, 2017).

Weak governance and scandals have seen sport organisations undergo reform to assess governance practices (Numerato et al., 2013; Parent & Patterson, 2013), with significant external pressures being placed on National Governing Bodies (King, 2017). Responding

to pressures to professionalise is a key compliance related challenge for organisations (Nichols, 2013), with eradicating executive-level power abuses and improving stakeholder relationships being cited as enhancing organisational effectiveness (King, 2017).

After a thorough analysis of national level, non-profit sport organisations, stakeholder satisfaction was identified as being the 'most consistent determinant of performance' (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014; p.307). A key consideration is that if a group can affect an organisations viability, then the primary objective for that organisation is to create value for stakeholders and to do this effectively they must focus on how value gets created for stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010). Frooman (1999) identified how the behaviour of stakeholders and their management of relations with the governing organisation to achieve their interests has been missing from theory. There remains a dearth of knowledge about the overall functioning and interactions of networks of organisations (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015; Provan & Kenis, 2007) and resultant tensions or issues which can arise from such interactions (Bayle & Robinson, 2007).

The FAI and the Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland (SFAI) are the primary actors and key stakeholders in youth development, yet their relationship has never been theoretically examined. With the Genesis report criticism on stakeholder relationships being conducted 15 years ago and the current insistence by the FAI that governance practices are at a high level, it is timely to instigate an exploratory study of the practices of the primary stakeholders in youth football and their relationship with the hierarchical levels of football governance within the Republic of Ireland. The purpose of this article is to explore primary stakeholder perspectives of the governance of association football in the Republic of Ireland.

Below, an overview of sport governance and specifically football governance is provided with a focus on stakeholders in this process, which is followed by a presentation of the theoretical framework and its multiple constructs and interpretations. Insights into the structure of football within the Republic of Ireland are presented to contextualise the current situation. Finally, research questions are presented.

Sport governance

Governance within a sporting environment is the process of granting power and managing and leading an organisation (O'Boyle, 2013). Therefore, governance is both administrative and political (King, 2017). Shilbury, Ferkins and Smythe (2013, p.349) suggested that; "to govern is to steer an organisation, and to make decisions that are consequential, strategic, and impactful, usually on behalf of others". Governance can therefore be about defining ends and controlling the means to achieve these ends (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Thus, the notion of 'sport governance' is wider than a single organisation and has been aligned not only to the governance of an organisation but also governance across a sport system (Shilbury et al., 2013) or the shift away from the direct control of a sport, towards its governance (Amara et al., 2005).

A myriad of characteristics of non-profit sporting organisations have been identified which adds to the complexity of governing (Fishel, 2003; Watt, 2004). These include the dependence on volunteers for governance and delivery of services, complex structures accommodating many diverse stakeholders, tensions between paid and volunteer staff and the board, objectives that are difficult to quantify, potential domination by influential groups or individuals. Sport administrators may lack specific skills and competencies, thus often struggle to manage the increasing demands placed on sport federations for their effective management, which can lead to poor governance practices (Kartakoulls et al., 2015).

Good governance is seen as being embedded within the context of the organisation's economic activities and social relations both sitting in and with the wider society (Persson, 2011) and refers to the ethical standards of these relationships (Henry & Lee, 2004). Nanda (2006, p. 272) refers to good governance as that which combats "corruption, nepotism, bureaucracy and mismanagement", with good governance in practice imbuing the opposite of these terms (Persson, 2011). Governance is concerned with three key issues, how an organisation develops strategic goals and direction, how the board of an organisation monitors performance to achieve these goals and ensuring that the board acts in the best interests of the members (ASC, 2012).

An effective sporting organisation should ensure that key stakeholders are consulted and involved in the development of strategic plans, actively involved in achieving the outcomes of the plan, well-informed and actively participating at its general meetings and regularly provided with timely and accurate disclosures on all matters regarding the governance and performance of the organisation (ASC, 2012). A role of NGBs is to meet the heterogeneous needs and expectations of stakeholders (Winard et al. 2010) and to create solidarity between such units (Bayle & Robinson, 2007). Utilising the input and expertise of stakeholders, establishing representation and democratic standards for communications and formalising the role, responsibilities and objectives of stakeholders is critical for effective sport governance (EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013). Formalising these roles 'promotes accountability and should assist in minimising the prospects of any party exceeding their powers, avoiding consultation on key decisions, duplicating resources and/or generating tensions associated with unbalanced policy or decision making' (EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013, p.8). Where interests and objectives diverge, power is likely to determine the outcome (Pfeffer, 1997). The 'top-down' system of governance given way to a complex system of inter-relationships between stakeholders, each looking to exert

power and draw on alliances (Henry & Lee, 2004, p. 28). The delegate system of representatives that usually comprise the board of a network sport system can be problematic in the sense that members may try to represent their local areas needs rather than a broader national view on the governance of the sport (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Henry & Lee, 2004). Whilst facilitative regional relationships are a key aspect of organisational strategic capability (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012) the impact of this system can lead to self-serving motives being advanced.

Football Governance

The governance of football has been the subject of much academic debate over the past 10 years (Garcia & Welford, 2015) with studies focusing on both overarching international football governance (cf. Geeraert & Drieskens, 2015; Strezhneva, 2016) and context specific research (cf. Hamil et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, 2013; Liang, 2013). The traditional hierarchical model of football governance has been transformed. Historically sporting organisations retained a command and control, hierarchical approach to governance but due to external pressures there has been a move towards governance being managed through a network of horizontal structures (King, 2017). With the vertical channels of power undermined, stakeholder power is growing through these complex forms of network governance (Strezhneva, 2016) where it is the role of the NGB to 'create solidarity between the units which make up its sport system' (Bayle & Robinson, 2007; p.259).

Despite the organisational homogeneity of modern national football structures (King, 2017; Relvas et al., 2010), there are certain contextual factors that influence stakeholder relations within these settings (e.g. culture, organisational structure) (Anagnostopoulos, 2011; Senoux, 2008). Due to the increasing complexities of modern day football, negotiation and interaction between a multitude of members and organisations is needed to govern efficiently (Geeraert et al., 2012; Hamil et al., 2010; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005).

The fundamental task of an NGB is to ensure that member organisations follow established rules and regulations (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015), thus the management of stakeholders is an essential part of football governance.

Football Stakeholders

Stakeholders in modern day football organisations can include shareholders, players, leagues and federations, local authorities, support associations, supporters, broadcasting companies, commercial, voluntary and public providers and EU regulatory authorities (Anagnostopoulos, 2011; King, 2017; Senaux, 2008; Stevens & Watkins-Mathys, 2006). Lack of time, patience and resources can limit the attention paid to these stakeholders by governing organisations (Cyert & March, 1992) thus a process of stakeholder salience identification can reconcile divergent interests of many stakeholders (Hill & Jones, 1992). Mitchell, Angle and Wood (1997) identified three attributes of stakeholders that are key to identifying this stakeholder salience; power, legitimacy and urgency. Legitimacy implies that the actions of an entity are appropriate within social constructed system. Urgency adds a layer of dynamism to understanding the relationship, being "the degree to which stakeholder claims call for immediate attention" (Mitchell et al., 1997, p.867), while power refers to the extent that a stakeholder can impose its will on the relationship. Power and legitimacy constructs are distinct yet can combine to create authority in a setting (Mitchel et al., 1997). Despite being an important factor in non-profit football governance, stakeholder literature has mainly neglected ideas of power structures, abuse of power and power relationships (Fassin, 2012).

Stakeholder Power

Slack and Parent (2006, p.199) define power as "ability to get someone to do something they would not have otherwise done". Power has also been described as representative of social relations rather than an actor's attribute and holds potential for influencing one or more other actors toward acting or changing in a certain direction (Emerson, 1962). Positive outcomes in profit and non-profit organisations are associated with high quality relationships between leaders, followers and organisations as a whole (Geertshuis et al., 2015; Harris et al., 2011). Power is structural and arises from the relationships between two parties (cf. Mason & Slack, 2007; Walker & Hayton, 2017). The daily operations of any organisation may involve power struggles which can arise due to the diversity of opinions, goals and ideas of the various stakeholders involved (Soares et al., 2010). Contextual elements such as structures and resources can influence power within organisations (Doherty, 1998; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2003). Within sport organisations, a primary way for a stakeholder unit to acquire power is by its ability to acquire and control resources (i.e. money, people, and information). The dependence of organisations on resources held by stakeholders gives leverage and power to those stakeholders (Frooman, 1999). The power to implement and the external compliance with, national initiatives has been cited as a potential issue within a federated governance system, as the sport governance system doesn't operate as a top-down system, meaning that lower level organisations do not always fully comply with directives and policies proposed at the national level (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007).

Stakeholder Communication

With the Genesis report concluding that the FAI had poor and ineffective communication with stakeholders, it is crucial to assess what the outcomes of such ineffective relations are within sport governance networks. Representing stakeholders in decision-making, being

accountable and responsive to stakeholders in terms of decisions taken are key recommendations for NGBs (UK Sport, 2004). Unmanaged task and process conflict which can escalate and trigger relationship conflict can develop from a lack of communication (Hamm-Kerwin, 2010). Communicating to stakeholders is key in initiating any operational change within organisations (Tyler et al., 2013). Due to the voluntary nature of non-profit sporting organisations and the multiple levels involved, informal communication is often used which can lead to message confusion (Danylchuk et al., 2015), trust issues and the message being negatively influenced (Legg et al., 2016). Communication problems and power imbalances between the units of a network governance structure are some of the leading causes of conflict within sporting organisations (Slack & Parent, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Whilst the governing dynamics of a non-profit organisation can be viewed through the lens of stakeholder theory (Brown, 2002), little attention has been paid to the dynamics of stakeholder theory within sport governance of non-profit organisation (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015). Studies have been conducted from the perspective of sports clubs and NGBs on their relationship with stakeholders (Anagnostopoulos, 2011; Esteve et al., 2011; Wellens & Jegers, 2016) but rarely have the individual stakeholder perceptions been explored. To add to governance literature, stakeholder research needs to focus on what the stakeholders actually do and how they try to manage the governing organisation (Frooman, 1999).

Stakeholder theory

The stakeholder concept was introduced by the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, with the intention of broadening the notion of shareholders being the only group that management needed to be responsive to (Freeman et al., 2010). The theory gained momentum within academic and applied management spheres following the publication of Freemans (1984, 1999) work and became arguably one of the most prominent business

management theories to ever emerge from an ethical or philosophical viewpoint (Stieb, 2009). Advocates of stakeholder theory argue that organisations need to consider and take into account the range of individuals and groups affected by the work of the organisation (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001). Stakeholding can be seen as a matter of moral social conscience, where stakeholders are not seen as just a means to an end (Freeman, 1984) and thus should be incorporated into an organisation's practices and policies (Freeman, 1984; Stoney & Winstanley, 2001). Freeman (2002) prompts a rethink of shareholder-centric management principles when asking "for whose benefit and at whose expense should the firm be managed" (p. 39).

Confusion over; and varied practice within the field of the stakeholder concept has led to a multitude of interpretations, classifications and definitions (cf. Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Fassin, 2009; Kaler, 2002; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Philips, 2003; Senaux, 2008). Freeman (1984, p.46) defined stakeholders as "any group of individuals who can affect or is affected by the achievements of the organisation's objectives." Contemporary stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of mutual enrichment and nurturing rather than control or domination, which requires the primary organisation (i.e., FAI) to internalise the unique perspectives of its stakeholders (i.e. SFAI) to facilitate and promote growth within the organisation (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2005). Central tenants of the theory advocate redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). Cooperation and communication are outlined as key actions within effective stakeholder management, with Dunham, Freeman and Leidtka (2006) suggesting that management;

> *'ought to interact with other communities that it affects or is affected by, seeking to*
>
> *understand their perspectives, listen to their preferences, and evaluate the impact*

of actions on them. Such interaction is best characterized as...cooperation…it ought to be in closer community with those upon whom it relies for support... It requires a more active pursuit. The firm's interaction with these groups must be...collaboration' (p.38).

Opponents of the theory have critized the approach suggesting that it adds complexity to management by making firms responsible to a larger group of interested parties (Sundaram & Inkpen, 2004) and that including the voice of stakeholders compromised firm results due to negotiation needed to deal with competing interests (Blattberg, 2004). Freeman et al. (2010) attempt to address these concerns by emphasising that this approach is 'about creating as much value as possible for stakeholders, without resorting to trade-offs' (p. 28).

Stakeholding is also cited to be instrumental in increasing economic measures such as efficiency and profitability (Campbell, 1997; Esteve et al., 2011; Kaserer & Moldenhauer, 2008; Stoney & Winstanley, 2001). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (1999) decision-makers should recognise that the interests of organisations are served by recognising the interests of stakeholders and their contribution to the long-term success of the corporation. Involving stakeholders in the governance process can also act as a "psychological contract that binds the individual to the organization" (Stoney & Winstanley, 2001, p.609) suggesting greater levels of commitment to the organisation and thus preventing undesirable and self-serving behaviour. There exists a dichotomy of focus between two streams of stakeholder literature, those that focus on the potential returns for the organisation through accounting for their stakeholders, known as instrumental stakeholder theory. Those who hold a more altruistic view over such a utilitarian one and see stakeholding as the 'right thing to do', follow a moral stakeholder approach (Berman et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2007).

While stakeholders are affected by the governing organisation, they consequently can also affect the organisation, a salient concept of reciprocity that has been lacking in stakeholder theory literature (Fassin, 2012). Despite having responsibilities within a network governance system, the obligations and duties of stakeholders are rarely examined (Robins, 2005). Fassin (2012) labelled stakeholders who have a genuine and legitimate stake in an organisation and strive for mutual benefits as 'stakeowners' (p.89). Three other categorisations of stakeholders are also presented, including stakewatcher, stakekeeper and stakeseeker, all with differing attributes related to legitimacy, power, loyalty, responsibility and reciprocity. Ferkins and Shilbury (2015) introduced this concept to sport governance literature, whilst stating the need for future research into stakeholder responsibility and reciprocity within the non-profit governance sector.

Irish Football Governance

The Football Association of Ireland (FAI) is the national governing body for the sport in the Republic of Ireland. Youth development within Irish football begins within the structures of the Irish schoolboy leagues (governed by the Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland, SFAI, which is affiliated to its parent body, the FAI). The SFAI receive funding from the FAI but also seek and receive sponsorship from independent sources to support its activities (Bourke, 2007). The organisation is governed by an Executive Committee and a National Council (see figure 1).

Figure 1 near here.

Under the umbrella of the SFAI, there are 32 individual leagues, spanning the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. These leagues are autonomous entities in relation to competition structures within their leagues, but act as a federation under the stewardship of the SFAI. In accordance with the SFAI rulebook (section 26), a 'properly constituted' league is one

which; promotes the game of association football and is governed by the rules of the SFAI, is governed by regularly elected officers and management committee, has the right to dispose of its own funds through the management committee and doesn't report or disclose any of its business to any organisation other than the SFAI (SFAI, 2017). Each league has a representative on the National Council, with some leagues also having a seat on the Executive Committee. The FAI have reduced the voting power of the SFAI on the FAIs Council and continues to receive criticism about its lack of funding to the SFAI and underage football in Ireland (Murphy, 2015). The complex and fragmented nature of the organisational structure of football in the Republic of Ireland has frequently led to disarray and disagreement both within the SFAI, its associated leagues, clubs and its parent body, the FAI (Fallon, 2013).

The SFAI can be seen as salient stakeholders within football governance in Ireland as they have power (due to their control over resources), legitimacy (as a formal sport governing authority) and urgency (can mobilise formal and informal communication channels if needed) thus according to proponents of stakeholder theory, merit managerial attention (Mitchel et al., 1997).

Summary

Stakeholder theory emphasises the need for cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders by engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship which advocates redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). It is impossible to isolate organisations from their stakeholders; indeed, the multiple relationships must be enriched as these interconnections constitute the very existence of the organisation (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2005). The Genesis report outlined that

organisational changes by the FAI were needed for coherent football governance, primarily related to communication with stakeholders.

The purpose of this article is to explore primary stakeholder perspectives of the governance of association football in the Republic of Ireland and to examine operational practices and difficulties for a National Association in relation to stakeholder management. The research questions to be addressed in this article are as follows, does tensions exist between stakeholders of football governance in the Republic of Ireland and if so, what is the basis for such tensions? Does the FAI display effective governance behaviours towards its primary stakeholders, from the perspective of these stakeholders?

Methods

Research design

This research followed a social constructivist approach which assumes that reality is constructed through interactions of phenomena related to an interplay between history and culture (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Due to the exploratory nature of the approach, a single case, qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate (Creswell, 2013; Sekaran, 2003) as it allowed the researcher to go beyond descriptions and attempt to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex relationships being explored (Anyan, 2013) in a context-specific setting (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were selected as they are a commonly used method of collecting data in qualitative social research methods (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004).

Participants

The sample (n=7) consisted of three members of the SFAI Executive Council and four League Secretaries and National Council members. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, this supports the use of smaller sample size numbers as it

ensures richness of data in terms of the diversity and characteristics of views that the sample represents (Patton, 1990; Ritchie et al., 2014). If the selected participants possess a level of expertise within the cultural context, then small samples can be sufficient in generating reliable data sets (Romney, Batchelder, & Weller, 1986). Richness of the data was ensured by selecting appropriate participants with an in-depth knowledge of the topic area and embedded within the relevant cultural context. The researcher followed guidelines from Ritchie et al. (2014) in designing a purposive sample which included identifying the framework of variables to include and prioritising the selection criteria used. Criteria included holding a position on the identified governance rungs (figure 2), with geographical diversity and age spread also being prioritised when selecting participants to contact.

Due to the exceptionally small pool of people that have been members of the SFAI Executive Council, anonymity assurances were given to participants and numbered acronyms based on their organisation are used throughout to protect their identity. Conversely, Singleton and Strait (1999) argue that complete anonymity is impossible to achieve in social science research. As historical and contextual factors and information are important in social constructivist qualitative research, the researcher will attempt to provide as much background information as possible whilst ensuring that micro-aggregation of data and thus identifying individual participants does not occur (Clark, 2006). The following alphanumeric system was used to attribute respondents' quotations in the Results and Discussion section; 'EC' 1-3 represent respondents from the SFAI Executive Council and 'LS' 4-7 represent respondents from League Secretaries.

Figure 2 near here

Procedure

Ethical approval was sought and granted by Liverpool John Moores University. Following the purposive sampling procedures, participants were contacted via email and provided with an overview of the study. In total, 11 SFAI members were contacted, 4 didn't reply to the initial email or provide any feedback on their lack of involvement. The interview guide was deductively developed using previously generated key research elements (Table 1). All interviews were conducted by the same researcher who was experienced in qualitative methodology, which standardised the interview process (Patton, 1990). These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews ranged from 68 to 119 minutes in duration (M= 83 minutes). A clear paper-trail of the anonymization strategy was maintained, which consisted of original transcriptions, anonymity numbering systems and labelled codes being located separately (Clark, 2006).

Table 1 near here

Data Analysis

Credibility depends more on the richness of the data and the analytical abilities of the research team than on sample size (Patton, 1990). The primary researcher is from Ireland and has played underage football in Ireland but didn't have pre-existing personal knowledge of the participants included in this research. The secondary research team had no experience of underage football within Ireland but had experienced underage football in a different country and added a wealth of qualitative research experience. Constructivism values multiple realities, thus to acquire valid and reliable interpretations of such realities, multiple methods of examining data are required (Golafshani, 2003). The secondary research team aided the reflexivity of the process by providing 'triangular consensus' or general agreement regarding the reality being constructed, throughout the analysis procedure (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993, p.137; Hill et al., 2005; Rennie, 2004) with any

differences being resolved by in-depth discussion and negotiated consensus (Bradley et al., 2007).

Content analysis used both a deductive and inductive process, which saw the incorporation of contextual analysis after theoretical data had been collected and analysed (Meyer & Wagner, 1998). Using primary themes derived from stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1999) to form an organising framework for codes, the content analysis continued with a line-by-line review of the data, clustering quotes around identified themes. Along with these conceptual codes, relationship codes (links among conceptual codes), participant perspectives and characteristics code types (age, geographic location, paid/unpaid position) were also utilised (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Bradley et al. 2007) which facilitated analysis across participant roles (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) and allowed for greater insights and overall contextual analysis. Data which was not coded under this framework was identified and subsequently analysed to determine if they represented a new category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) with the purpose of this being to identify if this inductive approach could derive new insights (Legg et al., 2016).

While individual participants remained anonymised, as much as possible, the context is made available for analysis to understand the networks and relationships at play (Clark, 2006). This was done by the author providing the reader with a background to football in Ireland, the current roles of the organisations involved in the governance of football, their historical engagements and interactions and significant events (i.e. Genesis report). Quotes are used to display results to emphasise and retain individual uniqueness (cf. Morrow & Smith, 1995).

Results and Discussion

The SFAI has been identified as the primary stakeholder in this analysis of schoolboy football governance as there is a high dependency on the SFAI (and its league affiliates) by the FAI in relation to providing league structures, providing competition structures and initial access to coaching resources. This lends importance to seeking and exploring their views due to the potential influence that they could yield in relation to the governance of football. Findings within this section are constructed around the following research questions; Do tensions exist between stakeholders of football governance in the Republic of Ireland and if so, what is the basis for such tensions? Does the FAI display effective governance behaviours in relation to its primary stakeholders (SFAI), from the perspective of these stakeholders?

1. *Do tensions exist between stakeholders of football governance in the Republic of Ireland and if so, what is the basis for such tensions?*

Histories of conflict and antagonism and minimal mutuality between bodies have been identified as adversely impacting on the governing of such networks (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016), as outlined by LS5 "there are historical grudges and clashes, they affect everything other bodies try to do". This conflict was outlined by EC2 "I think it's a pity that there are people in school-boy football who call the FAI 'they'. When they should be saying we, not they and them". Stemming from "traditions", with the governing body "being entrenched in 100-year-old systems" (EC1), all participants stated that poor relations between the units of football governance hampered strategic management and progression of the sport. Views on the FAI differed significantly across various sections of the SFAI structures, which is not unusual within governance research, with Inglis (1997) noting that different positions within an organisation can bring differing perceptions of the importance and performance of governing body board; "I'd prefer that we break away from them [FAI]

entirely, what do they do for us?" (EC3), "The FAI should be more proactive in their involvement in schoolboy football, they have the expertise, and the clout with UEFA to force change, I'd welcome that" (LS4). LS5 demonstrated an individualistic perspective from that league, continuing that he "'didn't know how tensions had developed" between bodies;

> *Personally, I don't care who we get support from, whether it's the FAI or*
> *SFAI, whoever, I don't have any interest in these politics, old school-*
> *rows, let them get on with it they can sort it out (LS5)*

There have been several potentially latent preconditions to conflict between organisations identified within governance literature, for example leadership behaviours, power struggles, group composition and diversity and poor communication (Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale 1999; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Robbins, 1997). The primary causes for tensions felt by the stakeholder group in this exploratory study were governance issues related to the leadership apex of the NGB (governing actions, communication, perceptions of injustice) and resource issues (financial and human).

NGB leadership

From clubs and leagues a lot of the attention surrounding the FAI focused on its CEO, who is a 'pivotal player' in developing board capability (Ferkins, Shilbury & McDonald, 2009, p.271); "When [the CEO] came on board first I thought he was doing a great job, he has done some marvellous things. Like everything else, he just got too powerful and we feel ignored" (LS5), "[The CEO] tries to be all things to all people in football" (CS8). The primary actor (i.e., CEO) often develops a level of 'recreational pluralism' as he must maintain multiple types of relationships with a number of actors within the governance processes, developing multiple identities as a result (Shipilov et al., 2014, p.449). This

position was highlighted by LS5 when he identified that the CEO "tries to be friends with everybody, eh and I think maybe slowly but surely he's finding out that he can't be". The ability of the CEO to network is recognised as a key political skill in influencing tactics and moderating outcomes (Ferris et al., 2007). Ferkins, Shilbury and McDonald (2005) identified a tension between a CEO who should be focused on maximising commercial opportunities for the organisation balanced with the boards' recognition of remaining grounded in 'community sensibilities' which reflect the requirements of the wider members (p.218). Perceptions of the CEO seemed to be a subjective concept across the SFAI membership influenced by recent dealings, historical perceptions and personal impacts, these varying perceptions highlight the complexity of CEOs maintaining a positive image (Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2013). The difficulty for the FAI in maintaining a positive working relationship with the SFAI and its federation of leagues is that the various stakeholders "differ in the criteria they use to evaluate the effectiveness of an organisation" (Herman & Renz, 1997, p. 187). This is a key consideration in this case as there were different opinions by SFAI members on the FAI and its leadership, management and effectiveness and indeed relevance. What complicates these relationships further is that these views may change over time depending on interactions and experiences of the stakeholders with the organisation and its members. This was acknowledged as being an issue within the SFAI by the Executive Council, 'The SFAI Executive committee faces all sorts of administrative, disciplinary and other issues in a season and while their decisions are deliberate the reaction depends entirely on the receiver and many react in a political way' (EC 2).

Financial tensions

The FAI fund the SFAI to cover administration costs and provides funds in grant format for its 32 leagues. The monetary value of these grants was seen as extremely low by the

SFAI, with one league secretary referring to it as "window dressing… we look after over half of all players playing football in this country and that's all we receive" (LS4). Along with concerns raised about the extent of the funding, league secretaries and executive council members also voiced concerns regarding the lack of accountability that the FAI maintain over this spending. Barney (2011) outlines that a goal for the governing organisation should be to create a positive ratio between tangible outcomes received and resources given (i.e. time, effort) by stakeholders. In football these can take many forms "some people would do anything to put their bum on a plane and a free trip or a free dinner or a free drink" (EC3). NGBs are expected to meet a variety of expectations from an assortment of stakeholders, which tends to influence objectives and resource allocation (Winand et al., 2010).

Funding withdrawal was used by the NGB as a potential threat over incongruent behaviour and actions, "the FAI will say things like 'we'll take your funding', my answer to that is let them" (LS7), with some members believing that it reduced their autonomy and undervalued the work of volunteers within underage football. Other members preferred to remain unpaid as they felt it gave them more autonomy versus paid colleagues:

> *[FAI senior staff member] has an old principle which is that he believes that if you pay someone to do a job they'll do it better than the volunteer. I personally don't believe that…. I would say it's possibly because that would give the organisation control over us (EC4).*

The tension between autonomy and interdependence is a central tenant of power relations (Emerson, 1962). Usually this discretion over the allocation of resources can create a level of dependency with other stakeholders which creates a major source of power for the resource awarding organisation (Ma, Rhee, & Yang, 2013), in this case the FAI. A common

observation across the network of stakeholders was that the FAI were struggling financially so the notion of financial dependency and the automatic power of the FAI is reduced within this case. This perception of the FAI has affected relations between the FAI and its network of affiliates; "I sent back word saying that I wouldn't have anything to do with the FAI as they owe us money so we are now not participating in anything to do with them" (LS7).

Lack of organisational justice

Organisational justice has been defined as perceptions of fairness and how this impacts on behaviour within organisations (Moorman, 1991) and has been linked to both organisational productivity (Heponiemi, Elovainio, & Laine, 2007) and commitment (Cihangiroglu, 2011). Fairness was identified as a key driver of stakeholder perceptions regarding its external relationships (Harrison & Wicks, 2013) with stakeholders who feel strongly about people being accountable and fair expecting the same from organisations (Brummette & Zoch, 2016). Primary sources of a lack of justice perception within this study were related to the FAI taking "our players" (EC 1) and developing unique alliances with one of the 32 SFAI leagues.

Related to the incongruence regarding roles and responsibilities of the SFAI, some members of the SFAI felt that any attempt by the FAI to engage in policy related to players under 16 as "interfering with our players" (EC3). This differed from other SFAI members who welcomed even greater influence by the FAI onto policies related to player development; "they [FAI] need to go in strong and instruct the leagues that they must take part [in proposed player development policy]" (LS5) The sport organisation (FAI) is the 'system controller' in the talent development process and has responsibility for policy development within the sport (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013, p.91) yet an organisational context and culture that supports the integration of stakeholders into a shared vision and

belief for the future development and practices of the organisation is key (Gibson et al., 2000).

The federated nature of sport systems may significantly impact on the overall governing role due to the governing body not having complete control over decision making processes at all levels, resulting in lower levels of legitimate power. Within the SFAI, there was discontent regarding the relationship between one of the 32 leagues (Dublin District Schoolboy League) and the FAI. Financial aid provided by the DDSL to the FAI in funding its National Training Centre, prompted consternation amongst the Executive Council of the SFAI and the other schoolboy leagues regarding the nature of the alliance between the FAI and the DDSL. The DDSL providing funding to the FAI has blurred the lines of traditional vertical relationships between these organisations. With the outcome being that the other 31 leagues and the intermediary organisation (SFAI) have become uncomfortable with the power balance of the DDSL "There is far too much dependence on schoolboy football in Dublin" (LS6), which is consistent with Nierhoff and Moorman (1993) insight into perceptions of fairness influencing co-worker relationships. The schoolboy leagues question the 'fairness' of the dependency relationship. Money is a source of organisational power, and in this situation the parent body (FAI) is paradoxically relying on the sub-unit (DDSL) for financial aid which could complicate the power balance within the governance system. These interactions create social pressures for stakeholders to reciprocate with similar behaviour in subsequent matters, which perpetuates the cycle of incongruence (Mattingly & Greening 2002). Greenbery and Baron (2000) emphasise that avoiding unequal treatment between groups, promoting unbiased decision-making and providing effective feedback can enhance organisational justice with an organisation.

2. *Does the FAI display effective governance behaviours in relation to its primary stakeholders (SFAI), from the perspective of these stakeholders?*

Stakeholder theory emphasises the need for cooperation and collaboration with stakeholders and engaging in a mutually beneficial relationship which advocates redistributing benefits to stakeholders, redistributing key decision-making power to stakeholders and bearing a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders (Freeman, 2002). In applied management, the mechanisms of effective governance may be described as acting in the best interests of members and considering the ethical standards of these relationships, formalising roles and responsibilities, utilising stakeholder input, developing effective communication, regularly providing them with accurate disclosures on all matters regarding the governance and performance of the organisation, (ASC, 2012; EU Work Plan for Sport, 2013; Henry & Lee, 2004). Perspectives on the FAI from within the SFAI will be assessed on these key concepts.

Acting in the best interests of members

Governance is concerned with how an organisation develops strategic goals and direction, how the board of an organisation monitors performance to achieve these goals and ensuring that the board acts in the best interests of the members (ASC, 2012). Perceptions of equity and feeling that concerns are addressed are key tensions in managing a network system (Provan & Kenis, 2007). The difficulty of delegate based board compositions which often self-serve rather than taking a broader view on governance, is that members may try to represent their local area needs rather than a broader national view on the governance of the sport (Henry & Lee, 2004; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007), "There's no doubt that there is a

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lot of politics in Irish football, a lot of people looking after their green blazer brigade and looking after their own patch" (LS6). This is important when it comes to agenda setting which is a highly charged political process. Princen and Rhinard (2006) outline that the way policies are formulated and packaged has a strong bearing on eventual outcomes, which is why board composition and agenda setting power is highly charged and competitive. Independent members should be added to boards to allow for a broadening of the expertise of the group and to provide an independent voice to proceedings (Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). This lack of independent oversight on the FAI was noted by EC 1; "There is no communication whatsoever. The FAI go off and do their own thing". Participants noted a culture of rumour regarding the future actions regarding the governance of schoolboy football by the FAI, "It's like the fox looking after the hen coup" (LS4). The notion of organisational performance of an NGB is multi-dimensional, encompassing financial, social utility, economic, resource gathering and utilisation and sporting performance (Bayle & Robinson, 2007; Pferrer & Salancik, 1978; Winand et al., 2010). This presents a dilemma to the board of management within an NGB which must balance competing interests and maximise often scarce resources to a variety of output indicators. The dichotomy between the economic performance of the organisation and the 'social good' stakeholder voice was outlined by LS7;

> *Their focus is on money. That is the biggest problem, they don't want to sit down and talk to the grass-roots people (LS7)*

Formalising roles and responsibilities

Within the SFAI hierarchy there existed discrepancies over their actual role within football governance. Some members highlighted their administrative function, 'We oversee the leagues and the role of the league is of local governance and organising and supervising suitable competitions'. (EC2), whilst others identified a greater management and governing

role and future aspirations for the body, "Our overall goal is to control school boy football and run it and manage it. Someone has to manage it and we manage it well" (EC1), The governing role of the SFAI Executive Council was dismissed by League Secretaries, describing it instead as a "talk shop and a glorified cup committee" (LS7). Responsibility over the governance of football was unclear throughout the exploratory discussions, "we're the ones that run football, not the FAI" (LS7) with the EC 2 stating 'we are a direct affiliate of the FAI, it's the governing body. The FAI is God'. Chelladurai and Zintz, (2015) suggest that roles and responsibilities of each unit within a network governance context be reviewed to identify if restructuring or reorganisation of the individual units is required to reflect the functions of the apical NGB (in this case the FAI).

Effective communication

Apex organisations should facilitate the democratic process within the network of stakeholder organisations and oversee productive interactions among these organisations (Chelladurai & Zintz, 2015; Freeman, 1999). A lack of effective communication was noted as being present both within the SFAI and its constituent members and between the SFAI and the FAI. The closed nature of questioning allowed at the FAI AGM was highlighted by one League Secretary: "No-one is allowed to put a question at an AGM of the FAI. If you have a question you must put it in writing to them and they will tell you whether you can ask the question or not" (LS7). Communication is important as even if it initially doesn't solve problems it does provide the foundations for effective problem solving in the future (Brunsson, 1989), with Pelled and colleagues (1999) noting that inter-personal tensions are diminished when team members interact with each other and engage in task debates. The fear often is that holding large scale collaborative arenas for discussion with stakeholders can release the perception of the governing organisation bowing to collaborative pressure and reducing its power perceptions (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011) with

control over information being used as a form of power (Pettigrew, 1972). This alternate voice aversion often occurs when there are social advantages to be gained from holding the role (Joshi & Fast, 2013). The disconnect between 'them' and 'us' from the varying hierarchical levels of the football governance system was evident, "they won't sit down and talk to us, the ones that know what's happening on the ground" (LS6), this lack of empathy undermines the effectiveness of conflict and relationship management (Golman, 1998).

Accurate disclosures

Ineffective communication can lead to message confusion and trust issues amongst levels of governing networks (Legg et al., 2016). This was highlighted as an existing issue both between SFAI levels of management (Executive Council and Leagues) and between the SFAI and the FAI; "a lot of the floor of the SFAI wouldn't trust the Executive, wouldn't trust the top table"' (LS5). Regarding recent prominent interactions regarding the proposed implementation of a national player development plan by the FAI, a League Secretary dismissed the accuracy of FAI senior staff in transmitting the message;

> *'We were at one meeting with [FAI official] and we were told a load of lies. They said they were given permission to bring in the ETP [development programme] age u11, the SFAI said that they were not, that there was a meeting being held. That's the sort of politics that you have going on there (EC1)*

Conclusion

This study focused on the governance perceptions of primary stakeholders in schoolboy football (SFAI) on the governing organisation (FAI). Tensions exist across the system (both within the SFAI and outwardly to the FAI) based on leadership capabilities, financial tensions and a lack of perceived organisational justice. SFAI members encountered ineffective stakeholder management practices which included non-formalised roles and

responsibilities, ineffective communication, perceptions of not acting in the best interest of and inaccurate disclosures to, stakeholders which led to incongruence across the governance network.

As this paper outlined an exploratory approach to examining the relationship between stakeholders in football governance, future research could extend this approach by providing concurrent analysis of both the governing body and stakeholder perceptions on governance approaches and by expanding the number of participants interviewed in each hierarchical rung. Another limitation of this study was the reliance on semi-structured interviews. Mixed methods of data collection (e.g. document analysis, participant observation) could also be used to add objectivity and further insight into perceptions of ineffective governance behaviours.

This study utilises stakeholder theory to examine relationships within a network, non-profit, sporting governance structure. Freeman (1999) insists that the theory is practicable in applied settings. For a governing organisation to utilise the guiding principles of stakeholder theory for ethical purposes, economic efficiency or to develop psychological binds between the network of organisations involved in sport governance, it must consider the mechanisms required to overcome organisational inertia. The FAI need to assess current working relationships with each stakeholder group to develop congruence within the governance system, as the current state of incongruence, distrust and distain is unlikely to provide the platform for effective and coherent national policy implementation. Managing the quality of the relationships with diverse stakeholders within a sport governance system is key for strategic policy formation and implementation. Stakeholder typologies should be examined and all those involved in the development of coherent schoolboy structures be categorised to identify stakeholder salience. Appropriate practical managerial strategies should then be adopted which would maximise effectiveness and

minimise threats to governance (i.e. formalising roles and responsibilities, developing effective communication approaches, acting in the best interests of stakeholders and making accurate disclosures).

It should be highlighted that equally, stakeholders can affect the organisation, indeed Fassin (2012) states that stakeholder theory has neglected the reciprocal nature of the relationship between organisations and stakeholders. Senaux (2008) outlined that "A good system of governance should then be one where managers take into account the interests of the different stakeholder groups (and have reasons to do so)" (p. 6). Effective stakeholder governance combined with the notion of stakeholder accountability begs the question of who should drive improved stakeholder involvement with schoolboy football in Ireland? From a normative perspective, a dual responsibility exists from the FAI as the nexus, apical organisation to take the SFAI into account yet also, for the SFAI as a salient stakeholder in the governance process to give the FAI a reason to do so. If the SFAI consider themselves as true 'stakeowners' in the governance of football, then there exists responsibility on their behalf to reciprocate responsibility, fairness and loyalty if that is the approach demonstrated by the FAI.

This study adds to stakeholder management literature by focusing specifically on stakeholder experience through their lens which allows for a nuanced analysis of the SFAI perspective. Stakeholder groups are often presented as having homogenous opinions but focusing on a variety of views within the same group revealed multiple perspectives and inconsistencies. This is also relevant in relation to Fassin (2012) typology of stakeholder groups, where some members of the SFAI display categorisations of 'stakeowners' yet others display 'stakekeeper' and 'stakewatcher' attributes, thus adding complexity to stakeholder management approaches.

This study raises questions as to how the National Governing Body (FAI) can attempt to develop and maintain harmonious and productive relationships with their primary salient stakeholder group when such a group often hold incongruous opinions relating to the allegiance it should show to the governing body, the future of football governance, the importance of funding and their preferred communication channels, leaving the current approach to football governance only somewhat united.

Declaration of interest statement:

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare. The article is the authors' original work, has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Glossary of terms

NA – National Association

NGB – National Governing Body

FAI – Football Association of Ireland

SFAI – Schoolboy Football Association of Ireland

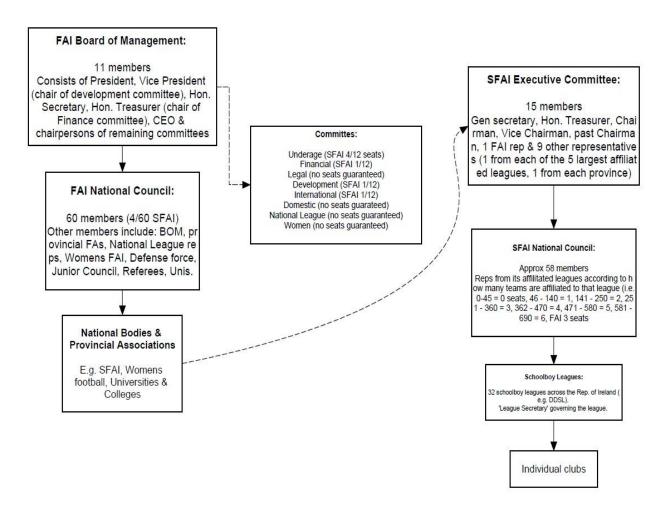DDSL – Dublin District Schoolboy League

Figures

FAI Board of Management:

11 members
Consists of President, Vice President (chair of development committee), Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer (chair of Finance committee), CEO & chairpersons of remaining committees

FAI National Council:

60 members (4/60 SFAI)
Other members include: BOM, provincial FAs, National League reps, Womens FAI, Defense force, Junior Council, Referees, Unis.

National Bodies & Provincial Associations

E.g. SFAI, Womens football, Universities & Colleges

Committes:

Underage (SFAI 4/12 seats)
Financial (SFAI 1/12)
Legal (no seats guaranteed)
Development (SFAI 1/12)
International (SFAI 1/12)
Domestic (no seats guarateed)
National League (no seats guaranteed)
Women (no seats guaranteed)

SFAI Executive Committee:

15 members
Gen secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Chairman, Vice Chairman, past Chairman, 1 FAI rep & 9 other representatives (1 from each of the 5 largest affiliated leagues, 1 from each province)

SFAI National Council:

Approx 58 members
Reps from its affilitated leagues according to how many teams are affiliated to that league (i.e. 0-45 = 0 seats, 46 - 140 = 1, 141 - 250 = 2, 251 - 360 = 3, 362 - 470 = 4, 471 - 580 = 5, 581 - 690 = 6, FAI 3 seats

Schoolboy Leagues:

32 schoolboy leagues across the Rep. of Ireland (e.g. DDSL).
'League Secretary' governing the league.

Individual clubs
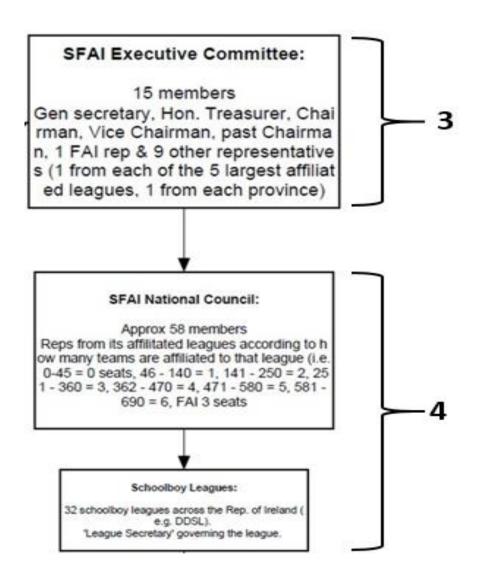
Figure 1: Governance graph of FAI and SFAI

Figure 2: Role of SFAI study participants

Table 1. Summary of interview schedule
Section 1 – Introduction Study and interview purpose and importance. Participant ethical rights and confidentiality. **Section 2 – Participant football background** Experience and current role within Irish youth football. **Section 3 – Intra-organisational analysis** Aim: to examine the aims, philosophy and role of their organisation within the context of the Irish network governance system. Clarify governance structures and identify organisational culture and practices within each level (Bourke, 2007; Shilbury, Ferkins & Smythe, 2013; Hoye & Doherty, 2011; Mitchell et al., 1997; Schultz, 1995). **Section 4 – Inter-organisational analysis** Aim: to examine relational issues with other organisations (e.g. requirements as stakeholders, communication channels, power balance, areas of incongruence) views of the role of other organisations, historical relationships and key contextual issues (Harrison & Wicks, 2013; Henry & Lee, 2004; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Slack & Parent, 2006). **Section 5 – National Player Development Plan** Aim: to explore stakeholder views on the establishment, content, acceptance and future development of the plan (Henriksen, Stambulova, & Roessler, 2010; FAI, 2015; Martindale, Collins & Daubney, 2005; Williams & Reilly, 2000). **Section 6 – End of interview** Clarification of any issues, appreciation for participation.

Table 1: Summary of interview schedule

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