



Seed Money Call 2020-2022

Institutions as bad barrels: criminal undermining of sport clubs

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Position paper Institutions as bad barrels: criminal undermining of sport clubs

Undermining crime is a hot topic in Dutch public administration, policy and media. The mixing of the 'under- and upperworld', is seen as a societal problem and a creeping threat of the integrity of public administration and its institutions. There is ongoing reporting and evidence that a significant amount of these criminal activities is taking place in and around sport. This does not only concern white-collar crime including fraud, match fixing and (transfer related) money laundering in international, professional sport.¹ There are also growing concerns that undermining crime takes place at the local, amateur sport club level.

Recently, various media have reported about football clubs put in trouble by (suspected) criminal infiltration, such as Turkiyemspor in Amsterdam, Young Boys in Haarlem, WKE in Emmen, vv Glanerbrug in Enschede and OFC in Oostzaan.² Research by Bruinsma, Ceulen and Spapens (2018) showed that this is part of a broader societal problem. They found that one third of all municipalities in the Netherlands have to deal with a criminal 'benefactor' who uses ideological or socially meaningful activities to obtain illegal income, status, image and recognition or other benefits. The largest number of known cases of this nature relates to sport clubs. According to Bruinsma et al. (2018), in one of the cases, the list of sponsors of a local football club reads as a "who is who" of the local underworld.³ In addition, several sectors in sport such as the full context mixed martial arts have been associated and stigmatized with high impact crime for years already.⁴

Understandably, politicians and policy makers are increasingly concerned about the undermining and normalizing functioning of criminal activities in sport clubs and its impact on local society and communities.⁵ The negative influence of this poses not only a threat to the integrity of sport, for



instance by distortion of competitions, but also to the integrity of society and its institutions as such. Authorities have taken action to combat this threat. The 'Maatschappelijke Weerbaarheid program' of the Taskforce Brabant Zeeland, for example, focuses on protecting football clubs against criminal influences. Similarly, with the 'Sport en ondermijning-project', the Province of Gelderland aims to prevent that sport clubs are susceptible to undermining activities.⁶ Furthermore, the Dutch Football Association has announced that it shares the concerns about crime in football and supports research into the nature and extent of it.⁷

From a scholarly perspective, the criminal undermining of sport clubs has received little attention.⁸ The few studies that exist on this topic, are inventory studies. Moreover, these studies mainly focus on the background, criminogenic determinants and role of criminals and how to tackle the issue. Research to date is not focused on sport clubs as institutions that may serve as 'cradle' for criminal activities and the (effectivity of) measures that may protect them. In other words, it is more about the 'bad apples' (criminals) than about the 'bad barrels' (institutions).

This research proposal for Sport & Society seed money is intended to focus research more on the understanding of sport clubs as institutions where undermining criminal activities takes place. In both scientific and policy-based publications, sport clubs increasingly emerge as powerful, sustainable institutions that are expected to contribute to solving societal issues.⁹ Interestingly, one of the public values of sport clubs that is often mentioned in this respect, concerns the potential positive influence of organized sport on the prevention of juvenile delinquency.¹⁰ In the debate about the public values of sport, much attention is paid to the vulnerability of the sports association as an institution. However, this vulnerability mainly relates to external public developments that affect sport clubs, such as individualization and commercialization, and lack of professionalism and customer- and market orientation by the sport clubs themselves.¹¹ The fact that the sport club as an institution also has internal characteristics that makes it susceptible to threats of a different nature, namely criminal activities, is a topic that has not investigated thoroughly and systematically yet.

It can be argued that civic associations in general are institutions susceptible to undermining criminal activities, and that this applies to sport clubs in a specific way. Generally, non-profit associations are socially valued and legally established institutions that give citizens freedom to collaborate with like-minded people on specific goals. Board members, volunteers and new members are recruited from and socialized by existing members, which results in associations that emerge over time into relative homogeneous social networks with high internal loyalty and peer pressure, and with little external supervision.¹²

This freedom of association has been developed into a powerful 'beating heart' of Dutch civil society.¹³ At the same time, however, it ensures that associations can develop a modus operandi



and culture hidden from society's view. Examples are initiation ceremonies at student fraternities and criminal activities of motorcycle clubs. These associations traditionally are difficult to control and correct as well as to dissolve and prohibit. In the last decade, however, several associations including motorcycle clubs have successfully been banned because they served as a cover for illegal activities.

In contrast to these prohibited associations, sport clubs do not form closed communities. They are assumed to be open to everyone. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that several distinctive characteristics of sport clubs might stimulate people with criminal intentions to infiltrate. These characteristics can be structural (e.g., relatively small sized organizations, frequent changes in governance, low level of professionalism, dependence on volunteers, financial dependence), cultural (e.g., performance orientation), social (e.g., embeddedness in society/neighbourhoods, peer pressure), geographical (location, urban/rural) and historical (tradition of 'paying under the table').

Research questions

Central question for the research program we are intended to start with the use of Sport & Society seed money, is as follows: *To what extent and why are sport clubs susceptible to criminal infiltration, what is the impact of this undermining crime, and how can sport clubs be supported to better protect themselves against this threat?*

This question has descriptive, explanatory, evaluative and intervening components that require an interdisciplinary research approach:

Descriptive

- What is the nature and scope of the problem of undermining criminal activities in sport clubs?
- How are sport clubs used for infiltration and undermining?
- In which (geographical) areas does infiltration and undermining of sport clubs occur more/less strongly?
- How do the money flows run and work?
- How do media, politicians and board members of sport clubs and federations describe and frame problems of this kind?
- What is the cultural history of this problem?

Explanatory

- Why does crime infiltrate in sport clubs (possibilities and motives)?
- Why are sport clubs vulnerable and/or susceptible to criminal infiltration (possibilities and motives)?
- Which associations, type of sports and regional/local areas are the most vulnerable and why?

Evaluative



- What are the consequences of criminal infiltration for (those involved with) sport clubs?
- How is criminal infiltration framed in society in general and sport clubs in particular and in what respect and extent has this changed over time?
- Which ethical issues are involved in dealing with criminal infiltration in sport clubs?
- To what extent do sport clubs contribute to the normalization of criminal behavior?
- What is the impact of the criminal undermining of sport clubs on society?

Intervening

- What are desirable measures that stakeholders inside and outside the sport sector can implement to make associations less vulnerable to infiltration?
- How does this relate to the general approach and rules and regulations established to combat undermining criminal activities?
- Who is responsible to intervene?

Aim

The aim of this research program is to develop a scientifically sound conceptual framework by which the problem of criminalization of sport clubs and normalization of criminal behavior can be better investigated, understood and addressed. To succeed in this, this proposal is aimed at investigating this issue from a multidisciplinary perspective and by using innovative approaches. In doing so, we seek to connect with scholars from the UU strategic theme *Institutions for Open Societies* and with UU researchers with expertise in the fields of criminology, law, management and organizational sciences, economics, human geography, sociology, anthropology, data science, history, ethics, media studies and others. Preferably, we aim to start this research program with a diverse research team including researchers from different disciplines.

Procedure

- If you are interested in participating in this research program and think you can supplement the research team, please send your motivation (max 2 pages A4), including your ideas and suggestions and explanation how this topic relates to and integrates with your current/future research activities, and an indication of time available for participating in the research program **before December 5th 2019** to Ineke Deelen (i.deelen@uu.nl).
- The Sport & Society focus area helps to fund this project with a contribution of 140.000 euros, of which (faculties/departments of) participants should match 67 percent. Matching must come from first stream funding - in kind (research or education time) or in cash - or from third stream funding (for example contract research). It is recommended to check the matching possibilities with your department/faculty before submitting your motivation.
- The multidisciplinary team to be assembled is planning to further explore whether this budget can be increased with contributions from other stakeholders.



- The duration of the project is two years, ending on October 31st 2021. Before this date, The Sport & Society focus area requires an overview of the expenditure of all funds and a final report.
- The first meeting of the research team is scheduled for **December 17th 2019, 13.00-15.00**, USBO, Bijlhouwerstraat 6 (room to be confirmed), 3511 ZC Utrecht. The meeting might be re-scheduled depending on the availability of colleagues who want to join the team.

Sport & Society seed money calls

The focus area Sport & Society promotes innovative, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research that studies the meaning of sport¹ for a healthy, inclusive and secure society. In order to reach its goals (see www.uu.nl/sportandsociety), Sport & Society offers the opportunity to researchers and lecturers from UU and UMCU to apply for seed money.

Sport & Society seed money primarily serves as a 'plus' for already planned or covered activities. This 'plus' should focus on more embedding of the Sport & Society themes within education and research at Utrecht University. For example: an existing research program that adds a 'sports' component; an educational program that invites an external, sport-oriented guest lecturer; a researcher who needs time to submit an application to NWO or EU; researchers who, after a contract study, need time to turn their findings into a scientific article or conference paper; a research group that wants to organize a colloquium or symposium to present their research results.

The 2020-2022 seed money call consists of two different thematic calls, of which the topics of the intended research programs to be subsidized ('institutions as bad barrels: criminal undermining of sport clubs' and 'the power of risky play') have been selected because of their relevance for Sport & Society and their potential for generating interdisciplinary research.

¹ We realize that the meaning of sport is ambiguous and changes over time. In everyday language, sport can refer to a wide range of activities, varying from practicing elite sport to being physically active, and from equestrian sports, winter sports, mind sports to air sports. In Utrecht University's Focus area Sport & Society focus, we do not consider that ambiguity and changeability of the term sport as an obstacle to research, but rather as an object of research. This does not release us, however, from the obligation to set the goal posts of our research domain. Thus, without wanting to draw stricter boundaries than the historical changeability and cultural variation allow us, we therefore understand sport as follows: an activity that people engage in with the aim of health improvement, playtime or competition, in which the body is charged voluntarily and purposefully and barriers and rules are created that are meant to make the activity possible and to give meaning to it.



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