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A Green Flag for the Flag System? Towards a Child Protection Policy in Flemish Sport

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Abstract

Over the past decade the international agenda on the prevention of child sexual harassment and abuse in sport has been strengthened by a number of general policy recommendations. Despite a growing body of literature and research about sexual harassment and abuse in sport, there is hardly any evidence-based policy and prevention research to guide the policy implementation process. By using the Flemish sport system as its empirical focus, this paper investigates the feasibility of the so-called Flag System to translate policy into practice. The Flag System is a didactic tool created to assist sport stakeholders in the assessment of sexual behaviour involving children. It is in the process of being implemented in Flanders and preliminary findings suggest a high level of feasibility at all levels of organised sports. Demonstrating that a number of inhibiting forces have effectively been reduced in Flanders, the current analysis of the process of planned change suggests that the Flag System has potential in bridging the gap between policy and practice and may also be suitable for implementation in other Western countries.

Keywords: sexual harassment, sexual abuse, prevention, youth sport, didactic tool, planned change

Introduction

In the late 1990s, government agencies and sport organizations in Australia, Canada and the UK started implementing child protection policies to combat sexual misconduct. Since, a growing body of evidence on child sexual harassment and abuse in organized sport has warranted an increased and wider focus on athletes' rights and wellbeing (David 2005). The Council of Europe (2000), the International Olympic Committee (2007) and UNICEF (2012) have gradually embraced the principles within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) that stipulates the need to protect the right to play (article 15) and the right to be kept safe from harm within any social setting (article 31). The declaration specifically states that "*stakeholders shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect and dereliction of duty, improper treatment and exploitation, including sexual abuse, while the child is in the parents or other caregivers custody*". Although many national and international stakeholders have found no real alternatives to intensified policy work, others are opposed, inactive or reactive towards increased regulation of sport. Currently, there is a lack of evidence-based policy and prevention research to substantiate the potential effects for athletes or even to guide the policy implementation process. An in-depth qualitative inquiry by Parent among Canadian sport administrators in Quebec (2011) showed that most sport federations were unequipped to deal with cases of sexual abuse, and that only a minority of these had policies in place. Whilst this study took place in a country that had set out early to implement child protection policies, it could be argued that a less favourable status could be found in countries that have not even considered child protection and safeguarding yet. According to Kippenberger (1989) and his use of Lewin's theories on planned change (Schein 1996), social domains, like sport, can be seen as miniature force fields governed by specific rationales where the existence of facilitating and inhibiting forces determines the

equilibrium of systemic change. For countries and other stakeholders considering the implementation of child protection measures, national and international binding frameworks are important facilitators that may, however, become challenged by inertia, reluctance and anxiety at various organisational levels. Among the many reasons for this are social agents responsible for change who are opposed or hesitant due to their being ill-equipped with regard to knowledge, skills and resources. During policy implementation processes concerns are often raised that child protection and safeguarding measures in sport organisations can lead to an undesirable, over-bureaucratic culture (Piper *et al.* 2012, 2013, Stoeckel, 2014). Policies and the associated paperwork may appear non-conducive to grass-roots sports delivery if they are perceived as too complex, incomprehensible or detached from the practical realities of those involved. However, without adequate policies and procedures in place, sports bodies also struggle to fulfil their safeguarding obligations towards children. Thus, what we do need is practical and didactic tools that appeal to coaches, sport leaders and other practitioners and professional support to help them to make sense of and apply the principles within the policies. Being in the process of implementing child safety policies while taking advantage of such a newly developed didactic intervention tool, the Flemish sport system offers a unique opportunity to investigate its feasibility at grassroots level. In this article we use a theory-informed approach to critically evaluate the potential the tool offers for systemic change in an international context.

A short introduction to child protection policies in Flemish sport

Historically, in Flemish sports little attention has been paid to children's welfare. This began to change in 2004 when Panathlon International, a sports federation that promotes positive values in youth sport, drafted the Panathlon Declaration on Ethics in Youth Sport, with the Flemish branch having a pioneering role in its development (Panathlon International 2004; Vanden Auweele 2004).

Because the organisation takes a positive approach to children's rights, the declaration emphasizes equity, fair play and ethics without explicitly mentioning child sexual abuse or other transgressive behaviour. Since its issue, the charter has been signed by hundreds of national and international sports organisations, showing their commitment to upholding ethical values in youth sport. The Flanders government endorsed the declaration in 2006 following a symposium organised by the Flemish Sports Confederation and the Flemish branch of Panathlon International and today, many Flemish sport organisations use the Panathlon Declaration as their code of ethics (De Waegeneer and Willems 2013, Seghers *et al.* 2012).

In February 2012, the Flemish ministers for Sport, Youth, Education and Welfare signed a 'Declaration of Commitment on the protection of children's physical and sexual integrity', prompting the implementation of prevention initiatives in Flemish sport organisations (Vlaamse Overheid 2012). This change in policy followed from two disconcerting national events, starting in 1996 when a severe case of child sexual abuse created a moral panic and national trauma in Belgium. The police investigations into the criminal acts of Marc Dutroux, who was found to have kidnapped, systematically abused and murdered several young girls for years, and the subsequent prosecution process were heavily criticised. Although the Dutroux case did trigger significant changes in the Belgian criminal justice system, no preventive measures were taken. In 2010, political pressure to improve child protection in extrafamilial settings rose again following the public disclosure of more than 700 cases of child sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church. This time, immediate action was taken: the Belgian parliament set up a special committee for 'the management of sexual abuse and acts of paedophilia in an authority relationship, in particular within the church' (Belgische Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers 2011).

Because of the excessive (media) attention to these severe, but incidental, cases of child sexual abuse, there was growing concern that the government's positive stance on, and approach to,

the overall physical and sexual integrity of minors, would lose momentum (Frans and De Bruycker 2012a). To redress the current lack of formal policies protecting children's sexual integrity in organisations, Sensoa and Child Focus¹, drafted the so-called Framework for Sexuality and Policy, which was made available to all Flemish organisations working with children in February 2012. All strategies proposed in the framework originate from the positive philosophy that the sexual development of children deserves a place in every social organisation (Frans and De Bruycker 2012a). Model visions at three policy levels (i.e. quality, prevention and reaction) are presented, as well as a toolbox of policy instruments.

Besides the Catholic Church and (child) care institutions, the special parliamentary committee's investigations also focused on the sports sector as another risk environment for the emergence and persistence of sexually abusive relationships involving young athletes. The commission referred to the little available scientific data on sexual harassment and abuse of children in Flemish sport (Vertommen *et al.* 2014). Vanden Auweele and colleagues (2008) studied the experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours in sport among female students at two Flemish universities. Between 2-14 per cent of respondents reported what was defined as 'very serious unacceptable behaviour' from coaches, such as indecent exposure, being asked for sex in exchange for a reward or being touched sexually without their consent. Meanwhile, between 17-50 per cent of respondents reported experiencing what was termed 'serious' unacceptable behaviours from coaches, such as having their breasts or buttocks stared at or experiencing sexual comments. A 2011 study by the Flemish Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner surveyed 356 about their experiences in sport, 10 per cent said they had experienced sexually transgressive behaviour at least once

¹ Sensoa is the Flemish expertise centre for sexual health and is subsidised by the Government of Flanders. Child Focus, the Foundation for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children, is a public service foundation. Both organisations are expert in sexual education and the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse.

(Kinderrechtencommissariaat 2011). In accordance with a similar study in the UK (Alexander *et al.* 2011), most respondents reported peers as perpetrators.

During the parliamentary investigations of 2011, those responsible in sport had to admit that they had never received a complaint or report of child sexual abuse, simply because there was no official reporting or registration channel (De Wit 2011). This omission proved to be the necessary wake-up call for the governing bodies. In the same year, the Flemish Sports Council (the advisory body of the Flemish Minister of Sport) as well as the Belgian Interfederal Olympic Committee (BOIC) organised two symposia on the issue. Both institutions formulated recommendations to the Ministry of Sport, asking for immediate actions (BOIC 2011, Vlaamse Sportraad 2011). In their recommendations both bodies advocated for a) the creation of a general violence and sexual abuse unit (in and outside sport), b) the appointment of local welfare officers in sport federations and clubs, c) investment in coach education with special attention to how to deal with incidents of violence and abuse, and d) the launch of a major information and awareness campaign aimed at all parties involved in sports. The Flemish Sports Council also advised to make funds available for scientific research and to establish a knowledge centre dedicated to this topic. The Flemish Sports Council urged policymakers to act swiftly and to apply a zero tolerance for any type of unsolicited, transgressive behaviour in sport (Vlaamse Sportraad 2011). Vetting procedures for all professionals and volunteers working with children in sport was rejected as being too burdensome for the authorities and too much of a deterrent for volunteering sports leaders (BOIC 2011).

Soon after signing the Declaration of Commitment, the Flemish sport authorities granted a two-year project (2012-2014) aimed at 'providing expertise related to ethically justified sports practices, including the issues of integrity, sexual abuse and violence' to the International Centre Ethics in Sports (ICES 2012). The project includes scientific research and policy advice. ICES cooperates with four Flemish universities, with the universities conducting the scientific research

and ICES translating the outcomes into practical guidelines. Furthermore, ICES took up its former role of supporting sport federations in developing ethical policies, providing substantive guidance, and designing and delivering tools, education and workshops.

A framework on physical and sexual integrity

ICES' first choice of action was to deliver a sport-specific version of the Framework for Sexuality and Policy as this was designed to apply to various social arenas (family, education and childcare). Frans and De Bruycker supervised the ICES working meetings with the various stakeholders from sport (umbrella) organisations and federations, which led to the publication of the 'Framework on Physical and Sexual Integrity and Policy in Sport' (Frans and De Bruycker 2012b). The framework offers a comprehensive toolbox with 11 different instruments offering an integral approach to safeguarding the physical and sexual integrity of athletes, emphasising the need for a protective environment that allows for the normal, positive aspects of the young athlete's sexual development. The tools to facilitate the implementation of the prevention policy framework include:

1. a *guideline* offering a range of suggestions on how to draft and implement a comprehensive policy on the issue;
2. main *starting points* to formulate a policy vision and a *topic list* to evaluate the current situation;
3. the *Flag System* (see next section) to help assess and react to 'real life' incidences of unwanted physical and sexual behaviour in a sport setting;
4. a detailed *policy matrix* with suggestions of possible interventions, working methods and actions to implement a policy (in terms of care, education, house rules, screening and communication interventions);
5. a *competency checklist* for sports leaders to help identify the need for (further) staff training;

6. a *profile outline* for an Integrity Contact Person delineating his/her competencies, role and responsibilities;
7. a *house rule checklist* providing suggestions on how to handle sexual harassment and abuse at the club level;
8. a *code of conduct* to help formulate staff expectations with regard to the physical and sexual integrity of minor athletes;
9. a *list of risk factor signals* to detect signs of sexual harassment and abuse;
10. an *action protocol* providing a uniform, stepwise approach to deal with a suspicion, a disclosure or a report of child sexual abuse, as the basis for the reaction policy;
11. a *directory* of helpline information, support and care services.

As this policy framework is a ‘heavy’ document intended for professional staff of formal sport organisations, ICES and the Flemish Sports Confederation created a ‘light version’ aimed at semi-professionals and volunteers active in both regional and local sport clubs (Vandevivere *et al.* 2013a). To increase its ease of use, an online and hard copy version was made available.

Aim and content of the Flag System

The aim of the Flag System is to help sport leaders, coaches and other members of the sport entourage to identify and aptly respond to inappropriate behaviour between adults and young (underage) athletes and among peers. The system includes a practical toolkit consisting of playing cards with pictograms of undesirable behaviours together with brief situational descriptions. The toolkit is founded on both experiential and social learning theories emphasising a problem-based cognitive approach to planning future behaviour on the basis of past knowledge/experience and a client-centred approach to communication and the use of shared experiences.

The Flag System is a key tool within the policy framework because of its positive and proactive approach to behaviour change. The general ‘mother’ version (Frans and Franck 2010), developed by Sensoa for all professionals working with children in different settings, was adapted to the specific context of youth work (Steunpunt Jeugd 2012) and sports (Vandevivere *et al.* 2013b) and was developed in cooperation with sport administrators from the field to enhance organisational identification and ownership, with all pictograms having been derived from ‘real life’ situations to make them tangible and recognisable.

Sexual behaviour among children and young adults encompasses healthy, acceptable experimental behaviour and incidents involving force or violence committed by age peers or adults (Frans and Franck 2010). In line with the policy framework, all professional and volunteer stakeholders in organised sports should be able to make a distinction between acceptable/unacceptable, appropriate/inappropriate sexual behaviour and to act on critical observations. To help them assess the appropriateness of different sexual behaviours, the Flag System relies on the three criteria suggested by Ryan and Lane (1997): consent, equality and free will. When each criterion is fulfilled, the behaviour can be classified as healthy. Consent implies mutual agreement. In practice, consent is often given non-verbally and, especially with children, sending and interpreting these non-verbal signals clearly and correctly may present problems. Equality refers to the potential difference in power between the two parties. Such an imbalance is obvious in interactions between a coach and an (underage) athlete, but this is sometimes less clear in peer-to-peer relations. As proposed by Ryan and Lane (1997), the third criterion uses the positive antonym of coercion: free will. Acts of sexual coercion, i.e. any pressure to allow or perform sexual acts, can also be very subtle; think, for instance, of a coach offering a reward or punishment (new or loss of a privilege). Although the three criteria help set the essential conditions for positive sexual interactions, they do not suffice. Frans and Frank (2010) therefore introduced three additional

criteria to guarantee appropriate and non-damaging sexual behaviour: age and developmental appropriateness, context appropriateness, and self-respect (see Table 1). Other than judging behaviour as ‘OK’ or ‘not OK’, the Flag System proposes a four-flag scale, with flag colours ranging from green (entirely appropriate/acceptable), over yellow (slightly inappropriate/undesirable), red (inappropriate/unacceptable) to black (entirely inappropriate/unlawful).

Insert Table 1 about here

Based on the assessment of each criterion and the sum total and severity of the transgressions, an overall rating, i.e. flag, is assigned, with a green flag indicating that the sexual behaviour meets all six criteria and thus is fully acceptable and yellow that there have been occasional, minor transgressions on one or several criteria (e.g. inappropriate verbal or non-verbal sexual interactions or harassment) that may warrant attention. A red flag signals more serious or repeated transgressions and lesser acts of sexual abuse (e.g. inappropriate touching), while the black flag is equivalent to seriously harmful sexual behaviour and (severe) sexual abuse (e.g. sexual assault, (attempted) rape). Drawing from the available literature, the system’s manual provides a list of developmentally appropriate behaviours for children between 0 and 17 years to assist users in assessing the ‘normality’ of sexual behaviours in children.

While the flag system leaves room for disagreement (the allotted flag colour can differ between users), the method primarily aims at engaging stakeholders in the discussion and reflection process and enabling them to understand the nuances of sexual behaviour more adequately. In addition, educators can formulate a more uniform response. In the manual, specific attention is given to organisations operating within a more repressive environment (e.g. schools) where a more

repressive policy towards physical, emotional and verbal violence is in place. In this situation, one might consider to adjust the reaction policy (and flag colour), to be in line with other interventions/sanctions.

The Flag System: some examples

The Flag System addresses 30 sport-related scenarios of physical or sexual behaviour between peer athletes or between an adult sport leader and a young athlete in as many pictures. The depicted situations are to be assessed using the six criteria described above along with a response manual (ranging from educational interventions, expulsion or (advice to) reporting a crime). We will explain the tool using two examples.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The sexual development of girls going through puberty is quite visible to others and many have difficulties handling others' reactions to changing appearances, even when these comments are (intended to be) positive. For a coach it is never appropriate to make sexual comments to an athlete, let alone to a 13-year-old athlete, or to noticeably stare at body parts (see Figure 1). With or without the athlete's appreciation, this behaviour is classified as unwanted sexual attention. Complimenting an athlete's general appearance or athletic performance is acceptable, but any utterance with a sexual connotation is unacceptable, as the athlete might feel intimidated especially given the imbalance of power. Although the comment does not necessarily imply a sexual interest in the athlete, the behaviour may be construed as an unnecessary or unwanted sexualisation of the athlete's body, behaviour or appearance. None of the criteria for appropriate behaviour are met in this example. In the case of a first offence without physical contact, this scenario qualifies for a

yellow flag. According to the pedagogical reaction formulated on the flag card, fellow coaches or club (board) members witnessing such behaviour, or being told about it, should act on this and explain to the coach why the behaviour is inappropriate.

Insert Figure 2 about here

As illustrated in Figure 2, group hugging may be a part of celebrating performance victories in many sports. When intimate body parts are touched accidentally, apologies are required. In the scenario depicted, however, the boy has intentionally and repeatedly grabbed the breasts of his teammate. The criteria of equality and developmental appropriateness (similar age and status) are met here. However, the criteria of consent, free will, contextual appropriateness and self-respect may all have been violated. As this behaviour may harm the girl's integrity and the boy's social image, it should be assigned a 'red flag', signalling inappropriateness, especially because of the intentional, repetitive component.

The Flag System recommends for the adult in charge to explain to the boy that his behaviour is undesirable and inappropriate, pointing out other behaviour that is appropriate during group hugs. Next, the boy should be informed of the consequences if this were to happen again, and the adult should insist on him apologising to the girl. Action should be taken at the earliest convenience after the incident. However, reprimanding the boy in front of his teammates is not recommended. Secondly, the person in charge should assert to the girl that her teammate's behaviour was unacceptable (even if the girl herself did not mind being touched) and encourage her to oppose such behaviour in the future.

First experiences with putting the Flag System into practice

Educational workshops

In 2013, a total of 19 workshops were held with an accumulated attendance of 282 participants. Additionally, a training of trainers workshop (TOT) was staged to enable participants to organise workshops themselves, while relying on the support provided by ICES. The support package consists of a basic Power Point presentation, toolkit materials, and a fixed contribution for every scheduled workshop. Workshops intended for and hosted by sport administrators working in the field have the advantage of lowering the threshold for other members of their sport communities while being customised to sport type or culture, allowing participants to relate on a more personal level and share their experiences or concerns in a safe environment. The workshops have a fixed format. In the introduction, the context and consequences of integrity violations in sports are explained and specific risk factors for sexual harassment and abuse in the relevant sport highlighted. Next, the six criteria for and steps to elicit appropriate behaviour, as described in the Flag System manual, are explained in detail. The theory behind the criteria and the four-flag system is clarified through a variety of case descriptions, where the participants, in small groups, are encouraged to assign the correct flag and apply the relevant theory-informed action. During the workshops, participants are also consistently alerted to other policy instruments within the framework to allow them to get acquainted with the wide range of available views and techniques.

Communication and support structures

ICES developed a webpage with a recognisable URL that contains all information on the project (theme, tools, seminars, etc.). Additionally, a humorous promotional video was launched to attract the attention of sport organisations (ICES 2013). The information campaign was set up in three stages. First, major sports and umbrella organisations were informed and requested to communicate the project to their member organisations. Second, sports federations (N=34 from a total of 95) were

educated about the subject, the purpose, the problems and the instruments during a seminar on integrity in sport. Third, municipal sports services (N=212 from a total of 308) were informed in a plenary session at their annual Flemish-wide conference. The toolkit materials and background information were made freely available. Sports federations and municipal sports services were urged to promote the Flag System to their members; the sports clubs. They were encouraged to post information on their websites, to incorporate the project in newsletters, and to raise awareness at meetings.

First user users' feedback

Several weeks after their attending one of the workshops in 2013, all 282 participants were asked to fill in an online evaluation questionnaire, of whom 137 fully completed the survey (49% response rate). The results showed that half of the respondents were members of a sport club, 30% were employees of a sport federation, with the other respondents being affiliated to municipal sport services (8%), schools (7%), universities/colleges (4%), and (youth) welfare organisations (1%). It is unclear whether they were intrinsically motivated or if they had been assigned to attend the workshop. The majority of respondents had an administrative or policy advisory role in their organisation (46%) or in coaching (29%), while another 13% had an administrative and coaching role. Others had academic roles (4%), social services (1%) or other (7%).

When asked about the relevance of protecting the physical and sexual integrity of underage athletes in sport, 90% of the respondents ticked 'important' or 'very important'. As to the need for more supporting materials, 50% answered Yes, with 42% being neutral and 8% indicating no need. Asked whether more in-depth guidance/supervision was required to help them develop a prevention strategy, 27% answered affirmatively, while 61% indicated to feel no need. With regard to the content of any such guidance, the respondents indicated a need for more education on the subject

that specifically focused on sport coaches, as well as one-on-one guidance when addressing a reported incident.

Sixty per cent of the respondents gave ‘because my organisation thinks this is an important topic’ as the main motive for addressing the issue of sexual harassment and abuse in their organisations, 25% indicated ‘the recent exposure of childhood sexual abuse cases in the media and the ensuing public outrage’ as the main reason, while one in six said to have engaged in the topic because of a previous reported case of sexual harassment or abuse within their organisation. The other reasons respondents reported were: ‘because others expect our organisation to take up the issue’ and ‘because experiencing sexual harassment and abuse has a major impact on the athlete’s well-being’.

Between the time of their workshop attendance and the time of the evaluation, 85% of the respondents had had a closer look at the Flag System and 17% had already organised an event to introduce the system to their organisation. The main reasons that those that had not followed up on the workshop gave were ‘too little time’, ‘no interest in my organisation’ or ‘too complex’, with 63% indicating they had plans to organise such an event in the near future. On the question if they thought the Flag System helps to put the issue of sexual harassment and abuse in sport on the agenda, 52% reported being ‘neutral’, while 37% judged it to be useful. Finally, 6% of the respondents stated to have already used the Flag System to address an actual incident of sexual harassment or abuse within their organisation.

Discussion

Bringing sensitive policies such as the one we describe into practice should be viewed as a process of prolonged systemic change that requires political, organisational and individual adjustments. Although generic, Lewin’s three-step model of planned change is an ideal approach to capitalize on

the pre-requisites and early processes of change. It should be noted that the desired change can be attained without resistance provided all participating parties are positive and willing to conform to the new directions. In the sections below we will first describe all the facilitating forces within the Flemish sport system that may in and by them elicit the desired effect when parties are intrinsically motivated. In order to understand and challenge inhibiting factors arising from a ‘natural’ defence mechanism to shield oneself against change, we will subsequently elaborate on Lewin’s unfreeze, change and refreeze model later in the discussion.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Facilitating forces

The Belgian adoption of the Council of Europe’s comprehensive resolution on the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse in sport (2000) had no immediate impact on Flemish sport policy or practice. While the Panathlon Declaration (2004) marked a positive starting point for national policy development on ethics in youth sports, its impact on Flemish sport policy and practices has not been systematically evaluated, although its theme of sports ethics did influence Flemish government legislation. The Ethical Sports Decree, issued in 2008, promotes an ‘ethically justified sports practice’, which was defined as ‘the body of positive values and related preventative and curative measures, provisions and recommendations that all parties are to take into account to safeguard and promote the ethical dimension in sports’ (Council of Europe 2009: 2). The decree urged sports federations to implement guidelines regarding at least one of six themes relating to ethical sports practice. With this soft approach, sport federations are more likely to select less sensitive thematic areas (Seghers *et al.* 2012) such as ‘fair play’ and ‘children’s rights’. A mere 9% of federations chose to address ‘the physical and psychological integrity of children’. This lenient,

non-binding line of attack was continued in the Flemish sexual harassment and abuse prevention policy implementation strategy by holding sport federations accountable for guaranteeing a safe sport environment for children (Vlaamse Regering 2008).

Although the current requirements have the potential to force sports organisations to take action on unethical behaviours, arguably, the decree may not go far enough. As mentioned above, it allows sports federations to select only one theme while ignoring other more sensitive ethical issues, at least temporarily. Additionally, their compliance with the decree is judged on their apparent commitment to implementing guidelines on their chosen theme rather than on concrete developments such as specific actions or actual achievements (Hendrickx 2007, Vlaamse Regering 2008). These limitations clearly weaken the impact of the decree.

The practical toolkit, educational material and ICES support services relating to the Flag System are clear examples of a hands-on implementation strategy that strongly facilitates actions at the grassroots level. The resources serve as incentives to help all parties involved to deal with sexuality issues in the context of organised sport. Additionally, the toolkit materials are based on ‘real life’ examples and in part developed in a cooperation with administrators from and experienced in their particular field of sports to increase self-identification and reduce the mobilisation of inhibiting defence mechanisms. By subsidising ICES as a resource and expert centre, the Flemish authorities support sport federations in developing sound prevention strategies.

Inhibiting forces

Throughout, the change process relies on the equilibrium of change parameters, making it imperative that inhibiting forces are identified early. Based on our earlier description of the political and organisational policy and implementation developments and our workshop evaluations, we have derived several change inhibitors or markers of an unwilling, reluctant, hesitant stance or

reactive approach by change agents. At the organisational level we found inertia to be the main constraining factor, while at the organisational and individual levels this was lack of resources (time/staff), lack of consensus on values and goals, and (fear of) over-bureaucratisation.

Next, we will discuss these inhibiting factors in accordance with Lewin's stages of 'unfreezing' in terms of disconfirmation, learning anxiety, the induction of guilt and overcoming anxiety/guilt.

At the political and organisational levels, the Flemish decree created sufficient incentive to accept the need for organisational change. Sport federations mostly evaded the sensitive topic of sexual harassment and abuse in favour of more 'popular' themes (e.g. 'fair play'). The scale of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church effectively served as disconfirmation by bringing home that something was terribly wrong with our ability to protect children and that this concerned a vast number of social institutions. Although some sport federations still do not consider the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse to be part of their social responsibility, consensus is growing.

In broad terms, learning anxiety derives from concerns or a lack of confidence change agents may have about their ability to understand or successfully carry out the action required. It is clear that the policy and implementation regulations and obligations for Flemish sport organisations were too vague and lenient when it comes to the more sensitive issues of child protection. Although learning anxiety can be found at all levels, it is more easily traceable at the lower (grassroots) levels. And seen in perspective, the Flag System, through its educational and problem-based approach, has allowed sport stakeholders to practically address the more difficult topics. The key issue was that all stakeholders were initially challenged by the absence of procedures, knowledge and skills. Although workshop participants generally agree that it is important to protect the sexual integrity of athletes, a somewhat reactive response is given as to the 'hows' of doing so. Six out of ten do not see the need for support to develop prevention tools within their organisation and four out of ten participants are in doubt whether they need support materials. It is important to note that being

neutral or passive with regard to support or materials does not mean that workshop participants are ‘against’. They are, however, not pro-active and according to one of the leading workshop educators there are at least three possible explanations for this. First of all participants do not have the knowledge or experience within this field and they do not see the bigger picture of a policy framework consisting of multiple tools. Secondly, they think sexual harassment is only about coach-athlete exploitation and subsequently they do not see the point of the Flag System. Thirdly, they do not think it is going to happen in their club/organization so they tend to question the relevance of dedicating resources to an issue that is only perceived as an extremely rare or hypothetical issue. In summary, there is a tendency to minimize the need for commitment and action and particularly for developing policy instruments at a higher organizational level and at lower grassroots level. By offering professional support and delivering the Flag System straight to sport consultants and grassroots practitioners, the programme has possibly reduced learning anxiety and created a sense of psychological safety now that policy has been made concrete for practitioners in the field. The first data of our survey among workshop attendants in 2013 showed that with the Flag System respondents felt they had been offered a new language to address inappropriate behaviours. The four-flag method offers its users new standards and means to evaluate and tackle challenging, improper behaviours, educating and effectively empowering practitioners and administrators to act in an apt, professional manner.

As the implementation of the Flag System in Flanders is a work in progress, definitive conclusions as to its effect in organised sport settings cannot yet be drawn. However, we feel that through its transparent, positive and user-friendly approach, the Flag System is an attractive, practical and effective tool for all stakeholders seeking to reduce factors inhibiting organisational change relating to the sexual integrity of children. More systematic studies are now required that a) evaluate the impact of the Flag System on the users’ perception and knowledge of sport related

integrity issues and their application of measures and (new) response skills and b) quantify its effects in terms of its power to promote (further) prevention policy initiatives within the organisations.

Future perspective

With the Flag System being implemented, a longitudinal, systematic study to monitor and review its impact on organised sports in Flanders is required. To complement our concise workshop evaluation survey, the proposed effect study is to compare pre and post-workshop perceptions on and changes in skills learned and applied to prevent or address (child) sexual harassment and abuse in practical sport contexts.

Furthermore, the tool is in need of constant updates to allow for new developments, specific sport settings (e.g. public swimming pools) and user audiences (disabled children, ethnic minorities, etc.). It should be treated as an organic instrument that, accordingly, will require dedicated modifications over time. Along these lines, an athlete-centred version of the tool (e.g. an interactive game) can help empower (young) athletes to speak up about inappropriate or unwanted sexual behaviour in organised sports. As research has shown there is a correlation between sexual harassment and abuse and other forms of transgressive behaviours (such as emotional abuse, bullying or violence), a version that incorporates non-sexual topics is indispensable.

While ICES stimulates and aids Flemish sport organisations to adopt the Flag System as their key tool in the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse towards children in sport, it is evident that, in and of its own, this tool will not fulfil all international recommendations and obligations. On the contrary, because of its awareness raising potential, incidents of sexual harassment and abuse might get more easily reported, making it a priority to motivate sport organisations to adopt other instruments of the Framework on Physical and Sexual Integrity and

Policy in Sport. This include raising awareness about how and when to refer children to the general helpline for violence, abuse and child maltreatment “1712” operating in Flanders since 2012 (Vertommen *et al.* 2014). Compared to the family setting, the sports sector is probably more susceptible to social interventions aimed at preventing childhood (sexual) abuse because of its voluntary structures and the many more possibilities to intervene. Interventions aiming at raising public awareness and increasing social control can be more effectively implemented in public settings. Adopting a code of conduct and providing a regional integrity contact person to receive reports of incidents who can then urge sport organisations to take action as well as preventive measures are crucial next steps. Also, close collaboration with Flemish welfare and health-care services is urgently required. We strongly suggest a well-equipped expert team be installed to handle reports of sexual harassment and abuse within organised sport. Moreover, a dual policy of victim advice and counselling delivered by child protection agencies complimented by comprehensive prevention policies to safeguard child integrity in sport is another prerequisite.

At the time of writing, the Flemish authorities are preparing a new decree on healthy and ethical sports to replace the 2008 Ethical Sports Decree. The new decree will emphasise the individual responsibility of every athlete, coach and sport organisation to create an environment that takes into account the age, capacities and needs of the minor athlete (Vlaamse Regering 2013). It will enable the Flemish government to set standards of quality for every sport organisation and create learning networks to stimulate the exchange of good practices among sport partners. Furthermore, with the new decree funds will become available to support an expertise centre in sport ethics that will continue to educate all stakeholders in sports on ethics and safeguards in the longer term. Once again, the decree will not impose obligations on sport federations but solely intends to foster substantive debate and create preconditions for healthy and ethical sports. The

question remains whether another such lenient, non-binding approach will sufficiently motivate sport organisations to seriously take on the issue of preventing sexual harassment and abuse.

Former and current policies and prevention initiatives were not prompted by major sexual abuse incidents in sport in Belgium, which lessens the political pressure to come up with hasty interventions. Nonetheless, the positive approach to children's rights and the assessment of the appropriateness of sexual behaviour in sports may be an example for other countries where a more repressive approach is being advocated. The successful implementation of the general Flag System methodology in the Netherlands, Ecuador, Australia and the UK (Brook 2012), illustrate that more positive policy instruments are in demand in countries that have previously been using more repressive approaches to child protection.

Relying on the enthusiastic reception and feedback from the field, the Flag System appears an effective icebreaker when broaching the issue of sexual harassment and abuse within the sport sector. By fostering concurrence and collaboration among sport stakeholders, it can be the starting point for the more substantial prevention policies, instruments and measures described in the framework. Instead of calling on parents' and sport leaders' fear of abuse, the Flag System's positive approach makes it easier for those responsible to place the topic on their organisation's agenda and to demand that both reactive and proactive measures are taken.

While children's sexual integrity is universal, there are cultural and structural differences in every sport organisation. From a children's rights perspective, the six criteria on which the Flag System relies (i.e. consent, equality, free will, age and developmental appropriateness, context appropriateness, and self-respect) can then be adapted to fit any social or cultural setting.

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Figure 1: The 13-year-old girl depicted has paid a great deal of attention to her appearance. Her 33-year-old coach has noticed this and walks up to her saying “you’re looking very sexy today”. Meanwhile, he explicitly and lengthily looks at her breasts.

Figure adopted from the Flag System with permission of the publisher.



Figure 2: During a korfball match, one of the female team players (aged 13) has just scored a goal. This is celebrated in the field by a group hug. During this hug, a 14-year old male team mate grabs her breasts, which the girl does not appreciate as it has happened before and hence seems intentional.

Figure adopted from the Flag System with permission of the publisher.

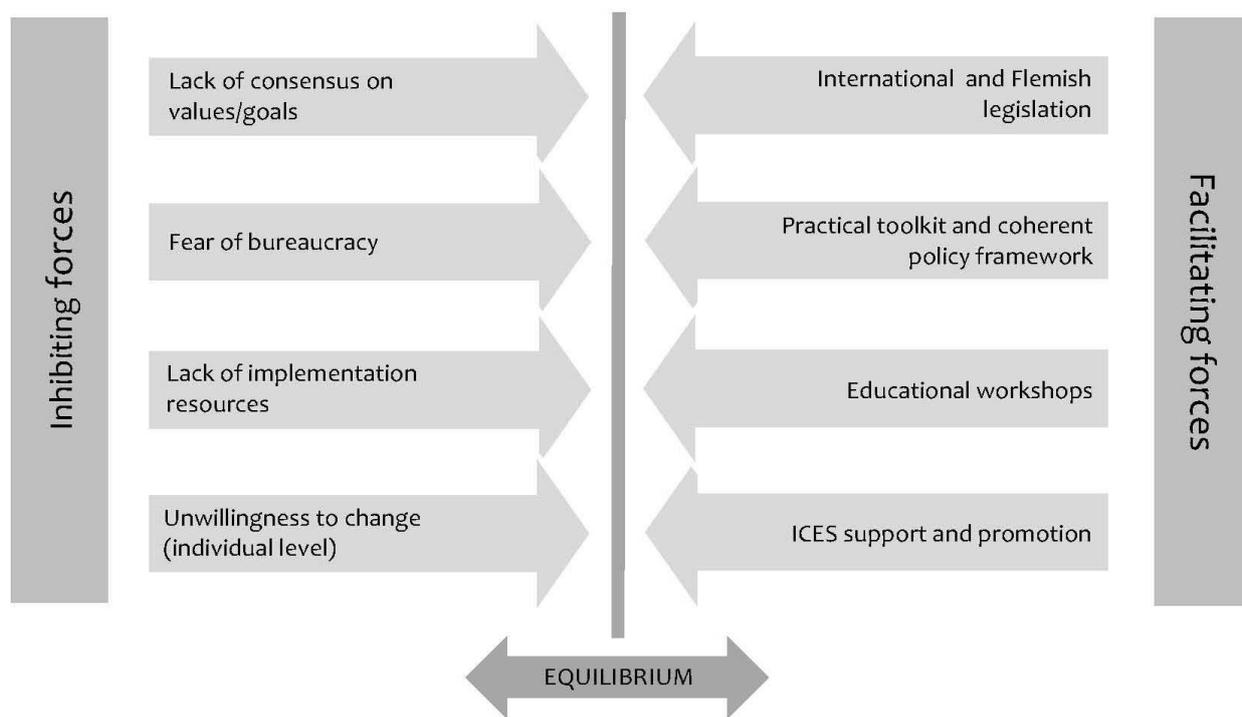


Figure 3 Equilibrium of Change in Flemish policy implementation