

## Public-private partnership in youth sport delivery: local government perspective

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### Abstract:

Youth sport programs in Lithuania are delivered in public and private sports schools, also by private sport clubs and various non-government organizations. However, a recent shift from public sector towards private sector has been observed. As a result, public-private partnerships in sport sector and, particularly, in youth sport program delivery, could be seen as a logical next step in strive for good governance. Private sector is mainly focused on utilization of sport facilities, while public sector – the owner of sport facilities – is mainly concerned with the economics of facility maintenance and additional income to offset budget reductions. Similarly to the findings of Legg and colleagues (2018), potential partnership efficiencies are not always realized due to a lack of goal alignment and limited resources. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, data were collected through online questionnaires from 8 municipality representatives who were either the heads of sport division or had direct contact with youth sports programs. Research findings were constructed along three phases of partnership governance – formation, management, and outcomes. Study results provide insights into the advantages and disadvantages of public-private partnerships in youth sport delivery, as well as identify possible solutions towards increased effectiveness of collaboration in future. Multiple positive outcomes were identified by this study – from improved infrastructure, increased sport participation numbers to successful collaboration in event management and constructive influence on the establishment of a more efficient regulatory framework. And although, this research has not uncovered more systematic findings regarding public-private partnerships, it clearly proved that benefits outweighed shortcomings, thus, indicating future potential of such governance model.

**Keywords:** public-private partnership; youth sport; facility management; municipality

### Introduction

In October 2018, the Lithuanian Seimas adopted the Law on Sports, on the basis of which (from January 2019), the formulation, coordination and implementation of state sports policy was transferred to the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports. The Law on Sports defines the principles of sport, foresees the role of the stakeholders and the competence of the specialists, and determines other important sports related issues (Republic of Lithuania, 2018). Two of the seven principles underpinning sports activities emphasize the competence of municipalities. First, the principle of continuity of sports activities means that state and municipal institutions, as well as non-government organizations actively involved in the field of sports, must create such conditions that individuals can play sports and, thus, strengthen their health. Second, the principle of encouraging the public to participate in physical activity means that state and municipal institutions encourage people to engage in sports as widely as possible.

Article 8 of the Law on Sports defines the functions of the municipal council in setting long-term goals for the development of sports, sports areas to be financed from the municipal budget, criteria and procedures for financing from the municipal budget, and promoting public-private partnerships in sports. It also obligates the municipal executive institution to analyze the state of sports within the municipality. This means control and assurance that the state policy in the field of sports at the local level is being properly implemented; sports facilities are being developed and widely accessible to the population. Also, educational activities that form a positive attitude of sports towards health are among municipal responsibilities according to Lithuanian Law on Sports. Finally, participation in the preparation and development of elite level sports furthermore includes local governments.

Youth sport delivery system in Lithuania is performed through sports education centers (SEC) and clubs. In 2019 there were 72 sports education centers and 45,372 children and youths participated in sports activities as a part of their non-formal education (2019 Lithuanian sports statistics data, 2021). Such centers are under the responsibility of local authorities with a large part of the local budget allocated for the needs of sports development. Children and young people (aged 7-19) engage in different sports and participate in championships at the local, national and international levels. Sports federations looking for talented athletes keep close contacts with SECs. There are three sports gymnasiums (in Vilnius, Panevėžys, Šiauliai) were gifted children and young

people from various regions of Lithuania have the opportunities to obtain education and to practice sports, while living in one location.

As can be seen, municipalities are tasked with wide range of responsibilities pertaining delivery of various sports programs: from grass-root sports development to elite level athlete preparation, and from construction and maintenance of sports facilities to popularization of physical activity among general population. It would be naive to assume that municipality has sufficient capacity to adequately deliver on every level of aforementioned domains. Aside from limited budget, it also lacks required human resources as well as managerial expertise. As a result, outsourcing by bringing in partners could be seen as the essential condition in modern society exploring the concept of new public management. By taking into consideration one area of municipal sport responsibilities – youth sport – this research focuses on local government's practices of forming partnerships with a private sector. Private youth sports providers are capitalizing on large youth sport market by providing competition, administrative, scheduling, and coaching services. However, economies of scale are prompting the collaboration between municipal sport departments and private sports clubs. Consequentially, there is a fruitful area for potential public-private partnership observation that could help broaden the understanding of the subject, as well as help the improvement of sustainability of youth sport in general.

Public-private partnerships (PPP) are a popular way to build synergies between public organizations and private companies to answer contemporary challenges and to develop new opportunities. These are collaborative arrangements between public and private partners to share resources, risks, responsibilities, and benefits and to pursue mutually beneficial social, economic, or environmental goals (Kwak et al., 2009). Some authors note that public-private partnerships are even inevitable for growth and improvement (Tunčikienė et al., 2014).

According to scholarly literature (Wang et al., 2018; Rybnicek et al., 2020), there are many examples of public-private partnerships in both developed and developing economies. Roehrich et al. (2014), emphasizes that European governments in particular seek to use the private sector to finance and build the necessary infrastructure and provide services. It is obvious that due to shortage of state or local (municipal) government budgets, but with the growing needs of society and the infrastructure and services required to meet them, alternative financing mechanisms are being sought. The benefits generated through public-private partnerships, as provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), amount to 645 billion USD for the period of 1985-2009 (Roehrich et al., 2014). In summary, there is a prevailing belief that public-private partnerships achieve better results and create greater added value for a project than if it were otherwise managed and operated by only one of those sectors. Thus, grounding on this core belief, it could be stated that the PPP theory is based on the premise that a for-profit private firm can provide services and infrastructure more efficiently than the public sector. The basis of such assumption is the argument that the built-in *incentive structure*, the *aggregation of project components*, and the optimal *distribution of project risk* among partners, lead to efficiencies that create value for money (VfM) for consumers. Therefore, the PPP theory has been embedded in the set of basic utilities that public-private partnership is expected to provide, starting with the need to respond to public needs for critical infrastructure, to limit pressure on the state treasury, to benefit from private sector expertise and innovation, and have a fair distribution of risk between the contracting parties, while ensuring a better VfM for general public.

Looking from a historical perspective and explaining the reasons for the emergence and popularity of public-private partnerships, it is important to understand the prevailing background of needs and the theoretical knowledge that analyzes and explains those needs. Naturally, the beginnings of public-private partnerships stemmed primarily from needs of an economic nature. Such interactions are better understood by a number of economic theories, such as property rights theory, agency theory, or transaction cost theory. The background of public governance and politics has also influenced the emergence and development of public-private partnerships. This kind of relationship is analyzed by network and governance theories, public choice theory, and the new public governance theory. Finally, the background of organizational governance and theories addressing its problems, such as institutional theory or stakeholder theory, have contributed to even different developments in public-private partnerships (Wang et al., 2018).

The main advantages of public-private partnerships are the opportunities for public partners to obtain additional private funding, increase operational efficiency, import management expertise or implement cost reduction mechanisms. Meanwhile, private partners can share the risk and transfer it, while entering public projects in which they would not otherwise have the opportunity to participate.

However, public-private partnerships also have certain and substantive shortcomings. Partners involved in a public-private partnership project may have different interests. Still, as noted by Molen and colleagues (2010), the different goals of organizations, while likely to be inevitable, in no way imply the collapse of public-private partnerships. Also, especially in developing economies, there is a public concern that through such a partnership, the state ownership will pass into the private hands and, ultimately, the quality of service will suffer (Meidutė, Paliulis, 2011). In addition, Roehrich et al. (2014) and Wang et al. (2018) acknowledge that public-private partnerships may have both more and higher levels risks than conventional projects. This is because public-private partnerships may have more stakeholders, project procedures may be more complex, special rules on funding, documentation and fees may be set, or there may be a lack of experienced partners. Research shows that the greatest risks exist in the areas of contracting (59%), resources (58%), differing objectives (45%),

structure (40%), partner commitment (39%) and the external environment (36%) (Rybniczek et al., 2020). An interesting aspect to note is that the main risk group – concluding contracts – is also most often identified as the main possible solution for reducing other risk groups (Meidutė, Paliulis, 2011). Finally, one of the most dangerous risk scenarios is a situation in which, in the event of a project failure, the government has to cover the losses of such an event, which means passing them on taxpayers in the form of increased taxes or reduced services (or both) (Opara, 2020). As Motta et al. (2018) outlined, the strategies that foster alliances between partners from different sectors not always reflect actual behavior.

Still, most scholars are in agreement that the success of public-private partnerships depends largely on a strong institutional environment (Casady et al., 2018). By quoting Mrak, Casady and colleagues (2018), note that “creating effective institutional support is of key importance for initiating and developing the PPP concept in a country” (p. 2). It can be argued that institutional support, or, conversely, its absence could be among key factors determining the success or failure of public-private partnership programs. Verhoerst and colleagues (2015) emphasize that the political and institutional contexts of states can be equated to the enabling factor of public-private partnerships.

Despite the emerging academic attention to the issues of public-private partnership (Wang et al., 2018), projects of road infrastructures, hospitals and schools receive majority of interest. Only few studies have looked into PPP involving a sports sector. Wingholz and Hodge (2019) investigated the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Federation of Football Associations (FIFA) and examined their global regulatory and legal power with regards to public-private partnerships and possible implications in the future. Van Den Hurk and Verhoerst (2015) revealed a compromised performance of the Flemish Sports Infrastructure Program. Authors indicated that the governance of the project was subject to political and stakeholder interferences, as well as technical complexities that were not properly addressed and solved, leading to ineffectiveness of an entire program. Youth sport delivery system has been a topic of several recent studies: Legg et al. (2018) and Jones et al. (2018) examined public-private partnerships within youth sport delivery system in the United States; Parent and Harvey (2017) and MacIntosh et al. (2016) presented cases studies of Canadian community-based youth sport for development programs; Jones et al. (2017) and Baker et al. (2017) investigated community sports networks in England. However, public-private partnerships in sports sector need more investigative research and this article aims to provide an attempt to shed more light into PPP issues within sports sector.

Public and private sector partnership in Lithuania is defined and regulated by the Law on Investments (What is PPP?, 2021) and, as such, can be implemented in two ways – through concession and contractual partnership. However, other hybrid forms of joint organizational mechanisms exist, involving government and public entities. Most notably sports sector provides ample evidence of public-private partnership. Sports facilities are mostly state owned, but lack essential managerial and human resource aspects in order to deliver adequate services, especially in youth sport. In response to Legg et al. (2018) call, this study aims to investigate the perception of PPP within youth sport delivery sector by the local governments. Namely, this research focuses on three PPP phases: formation, management, and outcomes.

In light of aforementioned public-private partnership complexities – namely, inherent risk sharing and long-term collaboration – it is instrumental to analyze perceptions of PPP by their actors. Understanding their risks, apparent issues, as well as possible solutions, could help deepening the knowledge of public-private partnership governance. Following the findings of Rybniczek and colleagues (2020), this research aims to look at the most common risk factors in public-private partnership management and possible risk mitigating solutions. As uncovered by Legg et al. (2018), public-private partnerships are the key to sustainability of youth sport programs in the United States. Thus, understanding partner roles in PPP formation and management is paramount towards improved effectiveness and value enhancement.

The purpose of this research was to investigate local government’s perception of public-private partnership within youth sport delivery system. As a result, the key aim of this investigation was to construct an understanding of specific sector representative’s interpretations regarding their professional experiences, namely those related to partnerships with private sport program providers.

This study helps provide the answers to the following questions: how successfully municipalities deal with public-private partnerships; what forms of partnership could be examples of dissemination of good practice; what barriers and obstacles should be taken into account and how those should be addressed in order to ensure sustainable development of youth sports.

### **Material & methods**

Following research framework adopted by Legg and colleagues (2018), a critical realist approach was utilized for this study. Such descriptive qualitative methodology enables to make a distinction between external (or contingent) and internal (or necessary) relations among objects. External relationships are those that exist between bodies that can have independent existence but nevertheless can influence one another, thus, making it appropriate match for public-private partnership studies. Also, since it is an initial phase of a broader research (which will be explained in more detailed in the following sections), critical realist approach is perhaps best suited because of its focus on the nature of the phenomenon rather than placing the emphasis on the

performance. Particular fit of critical realism within the setting of institutional entrepreneurship is presented by Leca and Naccache (2006). By advocating that organizational actors possess distinctive properties, relative autonomy, a previous existence, and causal efficiency, and are in constant interaction, authors indeed outline many inherent features of public-private partnerships. The following paragraphs will provide a more detailed overview of the methods, research participants, data collection, and data analysis.

Predetermined criteria for potential study participants included that he/she worked for a municipality and had direct contact with youth sports programs. As a result, heads of the divisions of sport within local city municipalities were personally contacted and asked if they would be willing to participate. In case of inability to participate, they were asked to assign one of their subordinates, who would be best equipped for such a role. The territory of the Republic of Lithuania currently comprises of 10 counties and 60 municipalities (Regions of Lithuania, 2021). Municipalities from seven different counties were contacted for this study. Ten questionnaires were returned, but two of them were improperly completed, thus, rounding out total number of research participants at eight (n=8).

An online questionnaire was constructed by adopting Legg's et al. (2018) semi-structured interview framework. Anonymous link to a questionnaire was forwarded to each participant electronically. Data collection was performed in February, 2021. No demographic data of participants was collected, thus, protecting confidentiality of participants, while in cases where certain answers were indicative of respondent's identity, those were coded and not revealed during results presentation.

Data analysis was driven by the framework established by research questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed along three phases of partnership governance – formation, management, and outcomes. As a result, data findings were constructed according to an identical pattern. Lived experiences of participants were traced and summarized in results section.

## Results

In *formation* phase the researchers looked into what organizations municipalities enter into partnership with, what form those partnerships took, and how compatible were the goals of partnering organizations. Each municipality had cooperation with multiple (well over 10 subjects) youth sport program providers. Partnering organizations also displayed wide variety of sports disciplines (ranging from team sports, such as basketball, ice hockey, football, to individual sports, such as tennis, canoeing, curling). In terms of partnership forms, majority, as indicated by the municipalities' representatives, collaborations were in organizing sporting events and development of elite level athletes. Goal compatibility of PPP actors, which included promotion of physical activity and sports competition achievements, was indicated as "compatible" or "very much compatible" by 88 % of the participants. Thus, indicating that public-private partnerships in youth sports delivery system was mutually beneficial and, likely, avoiding one of the major risks associated with PPPs (Rybnicek et al., 2020).

*Management* phase placed focus on advantages and disadvantages of public-private partnership in youth sport delivery system, as well as potential suggestions for the betterment of the process. When asked to indicate main advantages of such partnerships, participants agreed that such collaborations enabled resource savings and utilization of each partner's specific skills, knowledge. Also, PPP allowed for a wider reach and helped to increase popularity of particular sport. Interestingly, when asked to point major challenges in public-private partnership, participants indicated differing goals of public and private sectors (75 %). Also, scarcity of financial resources (75 %) and sports facilities (63 %) were acknowledged among major challenges to the effective PPPs. When asked about what needed to be changed in order to create an ideal partnership, research participants indicated that legal regulation must be improved (63 %) and compatibility of goals achieved (75 %). Division of responsibilities and increased effectiveness were among key suggestions by the participants, as Respondent 4 noted, "there must be understanding of common goals, agreement on how and in which way to operate effectively." Possible solutions were recommended by Participants 3 and 6, "we should strive for a gradual transfer of public sports services to non-governmental organizations. In the end the municipality should be the purchaser and the private sector the provider of services."

Finally, the *outcomes* phase focused on the performance of partnerships with particular attention paid to the most efficient, as well as the most inefficient cases. Pupil's non-formal education voucher has been notified by several participants as an effective and efficient mechanism in youth sports delivery system. Non-formal education voucher is a system established by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport in 2013 (Non-formal education, 2021), according to which pupils can attend classes at various non-formal education schools, such as sports, music, fine arts, etc. Most of these activities are free of charge or paid from the pupil's education voucher. "Introduction of pupil's voucher system resulted an increase in number of non-governmental sports organizations from 17 to 32, while the number of children practicing sports in sports clubs increased from 1,150 to 3,000", noted Participant 2. Also, particular effectiveness of public-private partnership was noticed during a sport event organization, as Participant 5 stated, "clear regulation of the program was achieved during the implementation city representing sport events program. All sides agreed on understanding of long-term goals, thus enabling business continuity and effective implementation."

Among examples of inefficiency, lack of facilities and/or improper usage of facilities, particularly an inconsistent legal regulatory basis, were mentioned the most. Participant 3 highlighted in his/her opinion a

classic case of PPP absurdity, “after municipality council abolished the possibility to provide the premises through the usage agreements, they rented them out and currently receive an annual income of EUR 2,000 for renting the premises, while the municipality pays EUR 30,000 for the services provided.” Asked to suggest possible future solutions, which would strengthen and improve public-private partnerships in youth sport delivery system, participants outlined simplification and flexibility of legal regulations, better accessibility of sports facilities. Also, an increased competence of private partners – either through professional development or learning from foreign best practices – was indicated as possible solution for PPP improvement. “...smallness of private clubs. Often, a private club consists of one coach, while the goal should be for a private club to have at least a few hundred children with multiple coaches working,” emphasized Participant 2.

### Discussion

With youth sport taking an important role in society’s life, understanding of the intricacies of delivery system is important in maximizing both participation numbers and success of sporting achievements. This study contributes to that objective by looking into phenomena through the lens of public-private partnerships. Main findings provided contradicting results, as participants originally stated that goal compatibility among partners were high or very high, however, after going deeper into particular issues, acknowledged goal difference between public and private sectors as both areas of present concern and possible solutions in future. Such findings were not surprising, given the complexity of public-private partnerships, and were consistent with those of other researchers (Legg et al., 2018; Rybnicek, 2020).

The importance of appropriate legal regulation system and the competence of private partners were other key findings of the research. As outlined by Casady and colleagues (2018), institutional support and proper regulatory framework enables the process of public-private partnership. As a result, it would help both partners in starting and developing the collaboration, as well as in navigating through it, since vast majority of such programs are long-term commitments. Managerial and organizational capacity of private partners, though indicated as somewhat lacking, needs further investigation and, most importantly, an input from private subjects themselves.

Finally, study of public-private partnership in youth sports delivery programs at the municipal level revealed important features that are significant in terms of public value recognition and interpretation at the national context. Firstly, while implementing strategic plans, municipalities traditionally develop sports activities in two directions – elite level sports and physical activity. The promotion of partnership is not prioritized, but is being developed in all municipalities. Secondly, while implementing administrative functions, municipal activities are developed on the principles of programs and projects. However, it is difficult to assess whether long-term programs (up to 3 years) are more effective partnerships than annual projects. Thirdly, it is difficult to exclude and evaluate partnerships of youth sports, because municipalities usually allocate financial resources to sports organizations that provide sports services for people of all ages. Fourthly, although public-private partnerships have been implemented for many years, there is a lack of evaluation of the practice among existing partnerships, control mechanisms, and incentives for the development of more active partnerships in the future.

### Conclusions

With an apparent shift of state policy towards a private sector in youth sport program delivery, understanding the public-private partnerships becomes increasingly important in addressing development and sustainability of such programs. The aim of this study was to construct local government’s comprehension regarding their partnerships with private sport program providers. Key findings of this research revealed that within youth sport delivery system municipalities consider private sector representatives as partners with whom they share mutual goals. Such partnerships enable municipalities save resources, utilize lacking skills and knowledge, and increase general popularity of sports. However, further enhancement of efficiency of public-private partnerships needs improvement of legal regulatory base as well as professional competencies of private partners.

This article contributes to the growing body of academic understanding about how partnerships in youth sport programs work by providing the perceptions of public institutions towards PPP. By using a critical realist approach this study detailed three phases of public-private partnership as it relates to youth sport delivery system: formation, management, and outcomes. Findings of this research also carry practical implications. First of all, it enables information dissemination between different municipalities, thus, enabling recognition of comparable patterns or problems and opening meaningful discussions. Second of all, it reinforces the notion of need for risk sharing as well as knowledge transfer and search for mutual long-term solutions in public-private partnership projects. Finally, the strengthening of the understanding of partnership concept helps to better understand the specificities of regional development through sport.

Limitations of this research are obvious, as it only provides the view of one side of the partnership – that of local government. These shortcomings are legit and in the process of being addressed, as the immediate follow up to this research involving participants from the private sector, is currently under construction. Future research should provide the perceptions of private sport program providers, as well as comparisons with those of public actors.

**Conflicts of interest** – authors declare no potential conflicts of interest.

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