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Challenges for sport infrastructure in the Netherlands

Remco Hoekman explores the implications of population development and the location of facilities on the sporting future of the Netherlands.

About 85 to 90 per cent of the Dutch sport budget is dedicated to sport facilities. This makes sport facilities an important, or perhaps the most important, aspect of sports policy. The main contribution of municipalities to sports participation lies in the fact that they facilitate sport to a large extent. However, curiously enough, we do not know the extent this investment in sport facilities actually contributes to sports participation and whether investments other than in sport facilities would be more effective in stimulating sports participation. This raises the question of what we know about the relationship between sports participation and sports infrastructure, and the challenges we are currently facing with regard to sports infrastructure.

For starters, research on an European level has shown that the citizens of the Netherlands are more satisfied with their opportunities to participate in sport or be physically active in the area they live than the citizens of other European member states (95% in the Netherlands against the EU average of 75%). This provides supporting evidence for the well established sport infrastructure in the Netherlands established thanks to the focus of municipalities on facilitating sports. This could also be one of the reasons why the Netherlands has a high sport participation rate and a high physical activity level among the citizens. However, the social-economical profile of the country explains more of the variance in sports participation between the European member states.

Despite the leading position in Europe on opportunities to participate in sport, the Dutch government still focuses its sport policy on providing sporting opportunities in all neighbourhoods. On the other hand, municipalities are facing the consequences of the financial crisis with budget cuts in various policy areas, including sport. The cuts to the sport budget are mostly related to sports facilities, which is not surprising considering the amount of money that is invested in them. Most cuts are related to postponing the construction of new facilities or the renovation and maintenance of the old facilities. The focus of municipalities is predominantly on making better use of the current sports facilities, which still is a huge challenge considering the current 50% occupation rate for indoor facilities in many municipalities. This low occupation rate is partly due to the separation of education and sport in the Netherlands; facilities for physical education do not meet the required standards for sports use and sports facilities were in the past not generally located near schools to be used for physical education.

To help the policy-makers on a local level to better use their resources to facilitate sport several studies on sport infrastructure have been done. Some of the outcomes are shared below.

We know from research that the use of official sport facilities is decreasing over time, while the use of public space by sports participants is increasing. Related to age, we know that the youth is mostly using official outdoor facilities, while the young adults are mostly using official indoor sport facilities. The age group of 45-74 is mostly using public space to participate in sport. This, of course, relates to the sport preferences for these age groups. Young people mainly practise sport within a sports club context and mostly outdoor sports, such as football, tennis or hockey. Young adults go to the fitness centres, while older adults enjoy walking and cycling in public space.



The big 1 am: usage of open space in the Netherlands is growing

“Given the increase in the use of public space, it is necessary to incorporate sport with the broader need for physical activity-friendly environments and work with other policy fields, such as urban planning and the department for public open spaces.”

These sport preferences and the use of sport facilities by age do have consequences for the sports facilities of the future. In the Netherlands as well as in other countries the average age of the population is increasing. Projections for the number of sport participants in 2028 based on population development, show that cities in particular face an increase of the number of sports participants, while the rural areas, where populations will decrease, face an decrease in the number of participants. In public spaces more sports participants are expected but numbers taking part in indoor sports are also expected to increase in cities.

To find answers to the question of whether distance is an barrier for sports participation, we investigated the motives of non-participation and the actual distances to sport facilities for sports participants and non-participants. The outcomes of these studies indicate that the distance to sport facilities is a marginal barrier to sport participation. Only 2% of non-participants mention the distance to sport facilities as one of the barriers. However, specific groups do stress more often that distance is an barrier, for instance ethnic minorities (8%). A closer look at the distance to facilities show us that in the cities studied sport participants do not live closer to facilities than the non-participants. We do know from other studies that for certain target groups, such as ethnic minorities in deprived neighborhoods, it can be effective to place sport facilities within these neighborhoods and bring sport closer to the people. This relates to differences in the willingness to travel for sports participation, which is influenced by the ability to travel (car possession, safety of neighborhood, etc.) and the intrinsic motivation to participate in sport.

In light of the current financial situation, a few challenges lie ahead of us if we are to encourage sports participation. Given the increase in the use of public space, it is necessary to incorporate sport with the broader need for physical activity-friendly environments and work with other policy fields, such as urban planning and the department for public open spaces. Regarding sport facilities and their current mono-functional use, it is best to create multi-functional sport facilities and cluster facilities in order to make the facilities more profitable (or help reduce losses). There are opportunities to cluster the facilities given the high satisfaction of the Dutch with the current infrastructure and the marginal barrier that distance to facilities seems to create. However, for less motivated groups the aim should be to bring sport closer to the people, with special attention on ethnic minorities, the elderly and deprived neighbourhoods.

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Download Remco Hoekman's Powerpoint presentation at the IDAN conference.

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