
# Organisational learning for corporate social responsibility in sport organisations

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Dear Editor and Guest Editors of the European Sport Management Quarterly (ESMQ),

We would like to thank you for this third round of revisions on our paper entitled 'Organisational learning for corporate social responsibility in sport organisations'.

In response to your comments and those of the reviewers, we have revised our work accordingly. We have taken the opportunity to provide a more ambitious future research agenda as recommended by one reviewer.
Also, we have sent the manuscript to a professional proofreader for writing/grammar check.
The marked changes are indicated in blue in the text.

Once again, we would like to thank the reviewers for their comments, and guidance with respect to the development of the paper during this submission.

Sincerely,

The authors.

Running head: ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

# Organisational learning for corporate social responsibility in sport organisations

**Research question**. Although the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) may require changes at the strategic, organisational, and operational levels, studies fall short of investigating the role of organisational learning (OL), which is key to grasp how CSR occurs in organisations. This study fills this gap by exploring the dynamic interaction between different levels of the learning process through which sport organisations implement CSR.

**Research methods**. Drawing on Crossan et al.'s 4I Framework, we examine the learning sub-processes characterising CSR implementation in a sport federation. This study uses a single-case-study research design and analyses interviews ($n$ = 18) and organisational documents ($n$ = 20).

**Results and Findings**. This study reveals that OL for CSR is a critical multilevel and dynamic process that consists of learning subprocesses at the intra-organisational and inter-organisational levels. CSR requires both learning new ways of incorporating CSR practices, as well as embedding into the organisation what has already been learnt. Informal and formal groups were identified as strong repositories of learning, while external stakeholders are essential sources of learning intertwined within the organisation alongside the work of inter-organisational boundary spanners.

**Implications**. Theoretically, this paper extends the discussion of CSR implementation by highlighting the critical role of. It does so by revealing patterns of learning institutionalisation for CSR in a particular European sport federated setting. These findings highlight that the level of institutionalisation of learning influences the integration and sustainability of the CSR strategy. Practically, managers should consider these learning subprocesses as appropriate platforms on which to instill the CSR construct within their organisation.

**Keywords**: corporate social responsibility; organisational learning; sport organisation; implementation; sport federation.

In recent years, sport organisations have increasingly been embracing corporate social responsibility (CSR) principles and practices (Breitbarth, Walzel, Anagnostopoulos, & van Eekeren, 2015). CSR has become an important concern of sport organisations, given their strong connection to the community and the importance of the relationships with stakeholders (Trendafilova, Ziakas, & Sparvero, 2017). Moreover, the social nature of sport (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007) and the European sport context (Breitbarth et al., 2015) compel sport organisations to respond to wider social issues and demonstrate their responsibility to delivery social good both within and outside the sporting sphere (Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013).

However, there is still little understanding of the processes involved and dynamics experienced within sport organisations when implementing CSR (Breitbarth et al., 2015). CSR studies have noted that engaging in CSR is a complex undertaking, because its development may require changes at the strategic, organisational, and operational levels (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010). Sport studies also advocate the complexity of integrating CSR within sport organisations (Kolyperas, Morrow, & Spraks, 2015).

To date, despite the growing interest in sport-related CSR studies, the extant literature does not provide sufficient insights to understand the multilevel dynamics of implementing CSR within a sport organisation. Analysis from a multilevel perspective that highlights the interaction between individual, group, organisational and interorganisational levels is missing. Although CSR implementation has attracted a significant body of literature on this very topic, studies have not yet investigated the role of organisational learning (OL) as it relates to CSR at different organisational levels. It is important to develop a better understanding of the process by which CSR knowledge and ideas are acquired and how CSR becomes institutionalized in these organisations.

The present study partially fills this gap by examining CSR implementation from an OL perspective. It is our contention that studying the intersection between CSR and OL is important to

grasp the cognitive and strategic microprocesses through which sport organisations progress when implementing CSR. In this respect, OL enables delineation of the dynamic interaction between different levels within and outside the organisation of CSR. Despite the acknowledgement of OL significance in CSR (Fortis, Maon, Frooman, & Reiner, 2016) and, overall, of knowledge creation for any sport organisation (Girginov, Toohey, & Willem, 2015), sport management literature has failed to explicitly address how sport organisations engage in an OL process when implementing CSR.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the process of OL that occurs in the adoption and implementation of CSR by sport organisations. Accordingly, this study addresses the research question*:* how does the process of OL operate when sport federations implement CSR in a federated model? We do so by drawing on one regional sport federation that constitutes the empirical setting of the present study. Sport federations are nonprofit organisations (NPOs) responsible for the organisation and regulation of their sport discipline. Scant research has examined CSR-related programmes in this organisational context. Building on the *4I Framework* developed by Crossan, Lane and White (1999) and extended by Jones and Macpherson (2006), we examine the intraorganisational and interorganisational learning processes experienced by these sport organisations when implementing CSR.

Consequently, this study contributes to the current body of knowledge by providing a broader, dynamic, and multilevel perspective of the OL process reported by sport organisations implementing CSR. Analysing such dynamics in the sport setting is central to improvement of understanding the challenges sport organisations face when implementing CSR programmes.

Furthermore, by investigating this sport federated and collaborative learning setting, this study shifts the focus of current sport research on CSR implementation from the individual and organisational levels to the interorganisational level (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013), which

appears to be a promising unit of analysis in the general CSR literature (Benn, Edwards, & Angus-Leppan, 2013; Oelze, Hoejmose, Habisch, & Millington, 2014). To date, despite some exceptions – which only implicitly infer the relationship (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013; Heinze et al., 2014; Kolyperas et al., 2015) and investigate cross-sectoral social partnership implementation both in CSR (Walters & Anagnostopoulos, 2012) and through CSR (Dowling et al., 2013) – studies have fallen short in investigating how sport organisations collaborate within their network to implement CSR. Indeed, the interorganisational level of analysis unveils gaps in our understanding of how the sport structure influences the learning cycle for CSR implementation. Moreover, Babiak, Thibault and Willem (2018) have recently pointed to the lack of interorganisational sport research using OL theory. This present study offers a better understanding of how a network of sport organizations in a federated structure (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, De Bosscher, & Cuskelly, 2017) may have a bearing on CSR implementation.

## Theoretical background

### *Corporate Social Responsibility*

In essence, CSR represents one component of the broader social role of sport and refers to "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society" (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). Over the past decades, CSR has become a taken-for-granted concept or "institution" within Western society (Bondy, Moon, & Matten, 2012), and has subsequently spread outside the classical business spheres. As such, although the word "corporate" has typically been associated with social responsibility and large business organisations, "CSR" as a term is now being used and embraced by organisations of all types and sizes.

Thus far, professional sport organisations such as major professional leagues and clubs have been the dominant research settings within the sporting sphere (Breitbarth et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, expecting social involvement solely from such organisations overlooks an important role that can be played by NPOs through the application of CSR programmes. Notwithstanding their very strong socially responsible nature, NPOs implement CSR programmes beyond their main purpose and scope of activities for strategic, altruistic, and institutional logic reasons (Misener & Babiak, 2015); research in this domain, however, remains limited.

***CSR implementation***

Several models of CSR have been developed within the sport context (Walker & Parent, 2010; Heinze et al., 2014; Kolyperas et al., 2015). For example, Kolyperas and colleagues (2015) examined the progressive strategic and cultural organisational change required to embed CSR in football clubs. Similarly, Kolyperas, Anagnostopoulos, Chadwick, and Sparks (2016) explained how some sport organisations may alter their structure by creating charitable foundations and appoint new organisational actors in charge of delivering these initiatives. Eventually, these studies have suggested that sport organisations face challenges to define what constitutes meaningful CSR (Kihl et al., 2014)

Overall, most of this empirical scholarly activity has focused on either an individual or an organisational level of analysis. For example, Heinze et al. (2014) examined mechanisms that enabled a professional team to manage CSR in a strategic and integrated way. Other individual-level studies have documented the decision-making process of CSR in football charitable foundations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2014). However, "the organisational complexity, specifically related to CSR, is increasing as is the need to capture elements at both the cross-organisational and individual level" (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013, p. 269). To date, sport management research in this domain has overlooked an analysis from a multilevel perspective that would reveal the dynamic interaction between individual – group – organisational and interorganisational levels. In

the next section, we frame the theoretical underpinning, OL, through which we elaborate this first in-depth, multilevel examination of CSR implementation.

***OL as a multilevel process***

Learning commonly refers to a relatively permanent change in knowledge or skill resulting from experience (Weiss 1990). As such, OL is defined as a process referring to the ways in which organisations as collectives learn through interaction within their internal and external environment (Cybert & March, 1963). Vera and Crossan (2004) posit that OL is a process of change in thought and action, both individual and shared, which is embedded in and affected by the institutions of the organisation. At the heart of OL theories lies the consensual assumption that OL includes individual-, group-, organisation-level processes (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Crossan et al., 1999; Huber, 1991).

To date, OL has been largely underexplored in sport management. Only a handful of studies have examined broader knowledge, knowledge management, and related processes such as knowledge creation and transfer (Girginov et al., 2015; Halbwirth & Toohey, 2001; Parent, MacDonald, & Goulet, 2014). Overall, these studies support that the survival and success of any sport organisation is based on the systematic generation of new information, knowledge, and innovation (Girginov et al., 2015). While Halbwirth and Toohey (2001) noted the importance of a culture of learning, Parent et al. (2014) suggested that learning was connected to the knowledge-management process. A deeper understanding of OL could thus contribute to the existing knowledge literature, because "effective knowledge management and transfer processes and research (…) require both organisational theory and behaviour perspectives" (Parent et al., 2014, p. 215).

Although a variety of theoretical models have been used to analyse OL, Crossan et al. (1999) provide a particularly well-developed comprehensive and multilevel model. Integrating and

extending previous seminal studies (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Daft & Weick, 1984; Huber, 1991; Nonaka, 1994), the *4I Framework* (Crossan et al., 1999) allows for the analysis of complex process dynamics. This model identified four interconnected processes of *intuiting, interpreting, integrating,* and *institutionalising* that occur at individual, group and organisational levels (Crossan et al., 1999). Accordingly, *intuiting* and *interpreting* take place at the individual level, while *integration* occurs at the group level and *institutionalisation* at the organisational level, which makes this process multilevel.

*Intuiting* is the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent to a personal stream of experience. Crossan et al. (1999) distinguish between entrepreneurial intuition, (which makes novel connections to innovate), and expert intuition, (which draws upon past knowledge to recognise familiar patterns). *Interpreting* is the explaining, through verbalisation and/or actions, of an insight or idea to oneself and to others. It extends to the group level when individuals engage in sensemaking and shape intuitions through conversations, metaphors, and imagery. *Integrating* is the process of developing shared understandings along individuals and of taking coordinated action through mutual adjustment. *Institutionalising* is the process of ensuring that actions are routinised into the institutions of the organisation through systems, structures, procedures, and strategy. OL, therefore, occurs when new knowledge is interpreted, distributed, and institutionalised in organisational routines.

The *4I Framework* is commonly presented in a sequential form. According to Crossan et al. (1999), these four learning processes interact dynamically and are connected through feedforward and feedback flows. *Feedforward* refers to the process through which new ideas and actions flow from the individual to the group, and to the organisational level. *Feedback* refers to the process through which institutionalised learning affects the individual and group learning levels. Key in these processes is the interaction between different levels. It is important to understand that learning

transcends levels, instead of occurring *within* the levels. The core idea of this is the continuous process of knowledge (rather than a linear process).

Crossan et al. (1999) encouraged other scholars to refine their preliminary framework of OL processes. As such, many studies have shown that learning can occur at a fourth interorganisational level (e.g., Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003; Zollo, Reuer, & Singh, 2002). This interorganisational learning focuses on how organisations learn from each other through formal collaborations or from informal communities of practices (Jones & Macpherson, 2006), such as could be the case in a network of sport organisations in a federated model. This collaboration can indeed facilitate creation of new knowledge, knowledge sharing, and transfer of existing knowledge (Hardy et al., 2003; Brown & Duguid, 1991).

Therefore, Jones and Macpherson (2006) suggested an extended version of the *4I Framework* by adding a fourth interorganisational level and the process of intertwining recognising the intersection of learning between organisations and not just within organisational boundaries. They highlight that "external organisations have a significant role to play in institutionalising the feedback processes by which new knowledge and procedures become embedded within the firm" (Jones & Macpherson, 2006, p. 167). In other words, external actors are key in helping acquire and institutionalise learning at the organisational level. Moreover, Jones and Macpherson (2006) identified three types of learning –mimetic (adopting and adapting best practices), coercive (enforced learning), and normative (adopting industry standards).

### *OL and CSR implementation*

The intersection between CSR and OL has recently been subject of both conceptual (e.g., Fortis et al., 2016; Antal & Sobczak, 2014) and empirical studies (e.g., Burchell & Cook, 2008; Oelze et al., 2014). The existing scholarship suggests that OL is central for implementing CSR because it is fundamentally challenging conventional ways of thinking and doing (Antal &

Sobczak, 2014; Cramer, 2005; Fortis et al, 2016; Maon et al., 2010). Organisations must adapt and develop novel attitudes, competences, and ways of working within their organisation and with individuals, groups, and organisations that evolve within their network (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Fortis et al., 2016). These studies suggest that the changes ascribed to this undertaking call for more attention on the role of OL in the implementation of CSR (Fortis et al, 2016; Oelze et al., 2014. In other words, CSR and OL should be considered to be interrelated because CSR implementation entails substantial learning processes for the organisation and its members in order to successfully unfold CSR within the organisation (Fortis et al., 2016).

Fortis et al. (2016) reviewed the nascent and fragmented body of literature central to CSR and OL. In their conceptualisation of OL, learning processes can be found inside the organisation (learning from within) (e.g., Antal & Sobczak, 2004), from knowledge located in their external environment (learning from others) (e.g., Oelze et al., 2014) and by actively engaging with stakeholders through collaboration (learning with others) (e.g., Burchell & Cook, 2008).

Fortis and colleagues (2016) encourage additional empirical studies with a focus beyond an organisational-centric perspective (i.e., intraorganisational level), and in particular, on the 'learning with others' process (i.e., interorganisational level). Moreover, the adoption of a multilevel perspective was only studied in a fragmented way (i.e., integrating the different unit of analysis of OL). Oelze et al. (2014) have demonstrated that the learning processes underlying implementation go beyond an intraorganisational focus and comprise external channels through which organisations can generate knowledge. This multilevel, dynamic, and integrative gap in the literature is surprising considering the interorganisational context that typically characterises CSR development in the broader literature (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Rasche, Morsing, & Moon, 2017) and sport management literature (Dowling et al., 2013) in particular. Therefore, we contend that more

research is required to examine the multilevel process of learning in a network of sport organizations in a federated sport structure.

## Method

We conducted a qualitative-oriented study using interviews as the principal data collection technique, with an interpretative single-case-study design. Single-case studies allow the development of a rich theoretical framework enhancing theories' robustness through replication (Yin, 2009). The research was conducted in one sport federation. Case selection was tailored with a purposive sampling approach (Patton, 2002). This involved identifying an NPO that implements CSR programmes that fall within and beyond its social mandate. We selected this case based on established CSR records from extant studies, websites, and official reports. This case is relevant because of the organisation's commitment to CSR, their sport federated network, and their professionalization.

The rationale for the selection is also underpinned by the fact that sport federations remain an under-researched area for CSR. Considering the traditional European sport federated structure (Sotiriadou et al., 2017) and the multilevel context of CSR implementation in the sport context (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013), sport federations, as governing bodies for sport, are centrally positioned in the OL process with their organisational members, their member clubs, their national sport federation, and their external stakeholders.

### *Empirical Setting*

The French Field Hockey Federation (hereafter LFH) was established in 2012 after the regionalisation of hockey and has recently introduced some CSR initiatives. Their CSR strategy is not yet well defined, and it is not formally embedded in their structure. The LFH mainly collaborates within the Belgian hockey network, which is mainly composed of various sport clubs,

the national hockey federation (hereafter ARBH), and NPOs within and beyond the sport sector. The LFH has developed three main projects: *Hockey Together*, *Stick to Fair Play*, and *Green Hockey*. These projects provide the basis for exploring LFH's OL process. Table 1 briefly outlines these projects.

INSERT TABLE 1

***Data collection***

*Semi-structured interviews*

The lead author conducted 18 interviews from May 2016 to May 2017 either in person or via telephone. Organisational actors from the sport federation and from different stakeholder groups were interviewed through snowball and purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). Interviews stopped when saturation of data in each stakeholder group was reached. The study participants were representatives from the ARBH (2), LFH (6), hockey sport clubs (6), disability sport federation (LHF) (1), NPOS (2), and minister of disability (1). These individuals were presidents (10), treasurer (1), general secretary (2), managers (3), and board members (2). These well-placed informants were selected based on their capacity to oversee CSR strategy, given their organizational position, their experience, and active role played in implementation of these initiatives.

Previous research acknowledged that OL can be difficult to identify because learning takes place both consciously and unconsciously (Crossan et al., 1999; Oelze et al., 2014). At the heart of this challenge lie the dual perspectives of learning: behavioural (i.e., routines, actions, and structures) and cognitive (i.e., cognitive maps, beliefs, and understanding). To overcome the methodological limitations inherent to learning study and qualitative research (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011), we conducted our research by posing semi-structured and open questions regarding how the individuals personally experience CSR implementation, thereby approaching both conscious and unconscious learning. This approach opened the way for the informants to express

their respective vision on hockey's contribution to society and conception of the process in their own terms and to expand on events that were important to them. Interviews enable an in-depth understanding of the meanings an interviewee may attach to a particular issue (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008).

Specifically, the interview protocol included a more historical perspective that consisted of asking the informant to give his/her perceptions on the changes the organisation has undergone in the past decade regarding CSR. Informants were asked to reflect on their experience, understanding, and their involvement with the implementation of the CSR projects (see Appendix 1).

The interviews ranged from between 47 to 106 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. This resulted in a database of more than 310 pages of single-spaced transcribed text and total interview time exceeding 21 hours.

*Documentation*

Documentation provided background information about the sport federation's social responsibility background, orientation, and actions. This material included strategic programmes, annual reports, strategy notes, meeting reports, presentations, brochures, promotional materials, and press releases. These secondary data were directly provided by some informants or were publicly available organisational documents retrieved from the Internet. In total, 20 documents were collected and triangulated by an examination of the webpages from all organisations.

***Data analysis***

Consistent with Miles and Huberman (1994), we iteratively analysed the data using both deductive and inductive reasoning. First, the transcripts were read several times, and case reports were established to identify the major CSR development and phases as well as the key features and implementation mechanisms of CSR initiatives. This first-step coding originated from the review of

the literature on OL and CSR (Cramer, 2005; Fortis et al., 2016; Maon et al., 2010). In a second step, Crossan et al.'s (1999) model provided a priori categories to analyse the data. As the aim of this study was to examine the learning process, we initially built on the four processes along the three levels identified in the *4I Framework*. These included identifying expert and entrepreneurial patterns as well as the nature and the extent of institutionalisation. In a third step, the refinement of themes occurred, the development of alternate themes appeared and were added to the coding scheme during the analysis.

For example, interorganisational learning emerged as an important theme. Sport clubs and external stakeholders were identified by informants as external learning sources. New codes also emerged, such as the different formal and informal groups within the intraorganisational level. Analysis of the data was performed with NVivo 11 software. After coding all data according to the themes, these were carefully reviewed and further scrutinised for relationships and linkages.

Consistent with established guidelines on qualitative research quality (Lindgreen Xu, Maon, & Wilcock, 2012; Patton, 2012), this study adopted several methods to improve its validity and reliability. These techniques include data triangulation, standardized interview guide, multiple interviews, data coding protocol, independent coding, and follow-up interviews with key informants from ARBH, LFH, and Hockey Together, to allow feedback on our initial findings.

## Results

This study examines how CSR-related ideas emerging at the individual, group, interorganisational levels have been embedded into the organisational level. In this section, we report how the LFH has been involved in five feedforward learning subprocesses (i.e., intuiting, integrating, interpreting, institutionalising, and intertwining) throughout the CSR implementation process.

*Expert and entrepreneurial intuiting*

Key individuals capitalising on both expert and entrepreneurial intuitions could often be identified from the data as the source of the intuitive process. Our findings indicate that these individuals have actively built on their previous experience, educational background, and on their instinct for innovation to bring about change for CSR. They are representatives of the LFH as well as the ARBH and member clubs that can be considered internal stakeholders. These individuals occupied higher-level functions (i.e., strategic) and middle-level functions (i.e., operational) within these organisations. They have initiated a review on hockey's contribution to society through CSR projects.

The results showed that ideas arising from both LFH and ARBH's presidents have significantly influenced the way CSR has been integrated in the LFH. As explained by a manager:

> This, I believe, also stems from the personalities, the educational background of the board members who often have responsibilities in other companies, small and large. Social responsibility has become a trending topic, and this is something that they are really trying to instil here. (…) The added value brought by these board members lies in the actual transfer of their models. To our president, this issue has become a real priority and I think that he is really good at managing it. (Informant #1)

The president of the LFH has built on his current professional experience as a CSR manager. "So I am in charge of the social responsibility program at [name of the organisation], and it is clear that organisations, no matter who they are, must now reflect on their social role and question what they can possibly do on a larger scale" (Informant # 2). As illustrated by this quote, this individual wishes to apply his expertise in the implementation of the LFH's CSR strategy. In addition, the ARBH's president has demonstrated entrepreneurial intuition characterised by a specific sensibility to environmental issues, as well as an overall instinct for change.

> This is something that makes sense to me since I am a child. There are sentences I have remembered: "the earth does not belong to us, we let it to our children". And it is quite clear to me that I would like everything, and I really mean everything beyond hockey itself, to get better for the next generations, yours and the next ones. (Informant # 4)

In the case of *Stick to Fair Play*, one operational manager primarily initiated the project. Conversely, *Green Hockey* and *Hockey Together* emerged in a bottom-up approach from the intuition of member clubs. All interviewees reported that there was one key individual behind the disability project. Its founder explains how this started: "Nobody ever told me: act or do something. I just told myself: Look, we have space available now [a new field], so let's make some room for everybody. So that's what the idea boils down to." (Informant #3).

*From Individual to Collective Interpreting*

Sharing these intuitions with others refers to individuals verbalising their ideas about CSR by engaging in discussion with other organisational members from LFH, ARBH and club members. Interviewees conveyed a message of sport doing good for society. The discussions were therefore mostly about the relevancy and the extent to which LFH should engage or not on these matters. Noticeably, the language used by the individuals did not systematically relate to CSR *per se,* suggesting that the sensemaking mainly occurred about what should be the social responsibility of the LFH and how it should enact this, rather than on the meaning associated with the use of the concept. Therefore, the language was imprecise and related to the specific projects implemented.

Overall, the idea was to build on the existing strong values behind hockey to develop an overall vision for the LFH. The LFH's president explains this message:

> So we have positioned the whole image of sport in a much more general manner to break the old image and then, by drawing from the values, defend the idea that: "moreover, this is a sport in which you are going to do things in a certain way. (Informant #2)

The boundary-spanning nature of the key intuitive individuals has emerged from the

interviews as important to further develop CSR. These individuals communicated with other key entrepreneurial and expert individuals within the hockey network (i.e., from ARBH and LFH's strategic and operational levels and from member clubs).

Discussions therefore started among several key change agents on particular CSR projects. In the case of *Hockey Together*, the founder received important support in the hockey network:

> In 2009, the first move consisted of presenting the initiative to the general assembly (…). I directly obtained a lot of support. (…) So there was an entire group of backers that formed completely informally. So there was no president, no meetings. And we started this together. (Informant #3)

Using his social network, the ARBH's president built on the expert intuition of a member-club to design *Green Hockey*.

> Now, concretely, what I have suggested was based on an initiative from the president of a club, who is board member of a nonprofit organisation, [name of the organisation]. He came to me because he wanted that we compensate the ecological footprint, carbon dioxide footprint of our players in Rio. (Informant #4)

For *Stick to Fair Play*, the manager took the initiative and the lead with other federations' members. He explained that to implement the project:

> I consulted. I first called up a meeting with my president of the Board of directors and the three secretary generals [i.e., national and two regionals]. I told them that there was something to do concerning fair play and ethics. (…). Generally, I asked them how they saw things, what were the problem. It was a really open discussion. I took a lot of information, then I structured my project based on this feedback. (Informant #3)

*Integrating and developing a shared understanding of the CSR trajectory*

The process of developing shared understanding of CSR and taking coherent collective (CSR) actions within a group, occurred through formal and informal groups of both sport federations. Based on the coding of the interview data, we identified two formal groups, namely the

board of directors and general assembly, and an NPO and one informal group, namely a coalition of change agents.

Overall, the general assemblies and the board of directors of both ARBH and LFH were key forums for exchanging views, sharing knowledge and eventually stimulating the design of a common vision of CSR strategy, guiding principles and projects. The ARBH's president noted the importance of these structures to spread his individual learning within the organisation: "We talk increasingly about corporate social responsibility. CSR has become a trending topic. Not that long ago, at the extraordinary General Assembly, I introduced two or three projects in this respect." (Informant #4).

In the case of *Stick to Fair Play* and *Green Hockey*, discussions took place also inside these formal structures. Mutual adjustments among the LFH and ARBH's levels were reported. As illustrated by the following quotation, the manager in charge of the former project realised that changes were required within the board:

> Some board members indeed said that this may not be their priority as they have bigger fish to fry. Actually, they are also club presidents and what they say is: above all, I have difficulties finding coaches, dealing with my growth and the infrastructures. So you have to prove its impact (…). Now, they are all convinced, and it is awesome. (Informant #5)

While board members were sometimes relatively sceptical about the projects, *Stick to Fair Play* was accepted while *Green Hockey* was dismissed in its initial form. For *Green Hockey*, mutual adjustments between the president of the ARBH and the initiating member club finally resulted in the decision to collaborate with an external environmental NPO on a one-off project and in the member club rather than starting with a broader project.

For the disability project, following the informal support received by the founder of the initiative, more individuals within the LFH also took a more active part in the project and

participated to the creation of the NPO called *Hockey Together*. As such, it has moved from a very informal to a formal joint collaborative project, with the creation of a new organisational form. A board member explains why the LFH stepped in: "There are often projects which are warmly welcomed because they correspond to our values. Let me take the example: *Hockey Together* (...). We absolutely want this to keep on developing all through the entire field of hockey" (Informant #6).

Additionally, entrepreneurs, experts, managers, and member clubs have informally created a coalition of change agents who attempted to develop some projects and a vision for CSR in the long term, as exemplified in the previous section. In this respect, top managers were essential to guide the participative process and encourage the contribution of all organisational member. LFH and ARBH's leaders oriented the strategic change of CSR through proactive management. Board volunteers from both sport federations acted as a supportive mechanism to the learning process, convincing other organisational members and engaging in collective interpreting was a challenge. While these individuals have succeeded in developing some sustainable projects through formalised mechanisms, resistance from some board members successfully prevented the implementation of one CSR program.

*Institutionalising learning at the organisational level*

The interviews showed that although some individuals aimed to bring a sport-adapted notion of CSR *per se* to the agenda, the LFH lacked a consistent overall CSR strategy. As the president of the LFH noted: "I think we are on the right track, but we now have to make it sustainable and there are two ways to do so. One is to design a working group here. [Second] is to appoint someone who will be in charge of that at the federation." (Informant #2).

Moreover, the understanding of what CSR means to the individuals remains fuzzy and dispersed between separate projects and ideas that coexist. Reaching a common CSR meaning and vision within the LFH constitutes a barrier to a higher institutionalisation of CSR.

However, while CSR has not yet been fully developed within the organisation, we found a low level of institutionalisation, which corresponds to local institutionalisation through a newly formed entity called *Hockey Together* with other strategic and processual forms of institutionalisation.

*Hockey Together* has been formally institutionalised within the LFH through its inclusion in its communication and in its strategic plan. Such structures resulted in fostering knowledge embedment and accelerating the learning process within the LFH. Conversely, the LFH has been formally integrated in the decision-making process of *Hockey Together*. Specific strategic and communication documents have been published that reinforced the institutionalisation.

Moreover, the strategic formalisation of two initiatives in the strategic plan as well as the appointment of managers in charge of the CSR-related projects, were critical for institutionalising *Stick to Fair Play* and *Hockey Together* as explained by the manager of the former project:

> Formalising this project by the board of directors on a real document was needed. The fact that this is formalised in the strategic plan, that somebody works on it, that he gets it to grips, and structures it well (…) It is really important. (Informant #5).

Ongoing learning procedures exist within the LFH through discussion platforms for the staff and the clubs. This interactive platform for the exchange of ideas seeks to define a vision and a shared understanding of the CSR-related projects. Yet, no specific CSR learning programs have been implemented at the organisational level.

However, *Green Hockey* showed that the overall level of institutionalisation in this case remains relatively low, as this resistance by some individuals has threatened the continuity of the

broader environmental project. This failure illustrates the need to allow time for learning to filter through to the different levels. One informant explained the implementation pace:

> I think what matters is that people claim ownership of the project. I think it came too fast and people were wondering what it was. (…) I think that all this, as coffee, it must percolate [filtering down process] and at a certain time, people in the clubs and in the federations, will say yes, it is evident we have to do it. Presently, we have certainly not reached this level. (Informant #7)

Given the absence of a fully institutionalised inter-organisational learning, the LFH's CSR commitment also relies on its inter-organisational relationships.

*Intertwining: External sources of learning*

The results showed that learning across levels of the hockey network was important in CSR implementation by the LFH. The sport federated structure and collaborative setting provided opportunities to engage in learning flows with other organisations, of which sport clubs and the ARBH are direct preferred partners.

Along with their close collaboration with the ARBH due to their recent effective and cooperative approach to regionalisation, the LFH collaborated with multiple stakeholders. These included specific stakeholders for each project (an NPO responsible for fair play issue, a local NPO partners involved in disability issues, LHF, and an environmental NPO) and established stakeholders (such as the ARBH, member clubs, public authorities, and sponsors).

The results showed that key individuals have built on their social and professional networks to transfer knowledge within the LFH through collaboration. Boundary-spanning individuals actively connected the LFH with these partners. In particular, this facilitated the involvement of sport clubs in collaborating in CSR initiatives. One participant explained just that: "We receive information informally, by discussing with people, because we know many people in the clubs, we move along from left to right, and we hear some things" (Informant #8). This interrelation is also

facilitated by the fact that several sport clubs' presidents are also board members of the LFH and/or ARBH. This indeed resulted in the diffusion of local initiatives at the federation level. Moreover, these stakeholders are important sources of learning and knowledge for the LFH, as illustrated by *Hockey Together* and *Green Hockey*.

Public and private stakeholders were important in the development of CSR in hockey through the provision of technical and financial support for the *Hockey Together* and *Stick to Fair Play* projects. For instance, as the general secretary explains: "We obtained very positive feedback because the project itself has been supported by the minister of sport (…). We have received a specific subsidy to develop this project." (Informant #8)

Furthermore, interviewees reported that these interorganisational relationships enabled knowledge exchange, networking, and dialogue among key stakeholders. The LFH collaborates on *Hockey Together* with the LHF to provide support and learning. As the treasurer of this NPO explains:

> They are the ones specialising in sport people with disabilities. There are idiosyncrasies that we, we know hockey. (…) They can help us with equipment and financial resources. (Informant #9)

A partnership agreement was signed by the LFH and LHF, which states that: "the valid federation is committed to promoting sport for people with a disabilities-through-awareness campaign in their member clubs. The LHF can, when requested, advise valid clubs in this process." (Partnership Agreement)

## Discussion

Beyond presenting a rich description of the different trajectories of OL for CSR, this study provides several original findings. Below, we discuss the implications of these results for the literature on CSR in sport and the role of learning in the implementation of CSR.

*Individuals' profiles and positions*

By confirming the existence of both *experts and entrepreneurs* (Crossan et al., 1999), our findings reveal that sport organisations go through both exploitation and exploration of learning, which could eventually lead to tensions between pre-existing knowledge and new learning. A major finding is the *group-level* and *interorganisational-level boundary-spanning* profiles identified throughout these overlapping learning processes.

*Group-level boundary spanners* have emerged from the case study as important enablers of learning from individual to group level, as well as connectors between individuals' intuitions within the LFH. Furthermore, in this sport-federated setting, these individuals proved to be particularly influential in the informal groups because they coordinate the "coalition of change agents."

*Interorganisational-level boundary-spanners* have been important in embedding CSR more deeply in the LFH through collaboration and learning exchange with external partners. Their relational ties with other organisations facilitated the intertwining process between existing institutionalised learning and external learning. A shortcoming associated with these key organisational actors is that staff or volunteers' departure might induce a change in the relationship and in the feedforward-feedback flow.

Overall, results have shown that CSR implementation required the active involvement and support of all organisational members, for learning flows between levels to occur. These findings confirm previous studies acknowledging the influence of sport federation leadership support in the institutionalisation of a structured approach toward CSR (Hamil & Morrow, 2011; Cramer, 2005). The present study also highlights the importance of operational managers, not only for the work force they represent in coordinating CSR-related programmes (Cramer, 2005), but also for their awareness, personal values, vision, hands-on expertise, and knowledge to induce CSR ideas within the whole organisation. Although these individuals are not CSR managers, their dedication and specialist knowledge have been influential in implementing CSR. Particularly, this finding suggests

the importance of attracting high-quality individuals at the strategic and operational levels (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013) as well as engaging with learning platforms to define a shared understanding of the CSR-related projects. Yet, no specific CSR learning programs that could further complement the multiple competences required for CSR (Fortis et al., 2016) have been implemented at the organisational level.

*Structural repositories of learning*

Considering Crossan et al.'s (1999) model, the study suggests that formal and informal group structures exist in the group learning processes. The choice of informal structures might be explained by the recent CSR involvement, the small size of the LFH and the collaborative nature in a small federal country such as Belgium (Sotiriadou et al., 2017).

However, the LFH has also participated in the creation of a new formal collaborative structure to further develop their CSR. While Kolyperas et al. (2015; 2016) highlighted potential structural challenges and opportunities of foundations and "in-house" structures for CSR implementation, our results reveal that challenges also exist in the creation of these formal collaborative structures. This formal group represents an important learning platform because it includes key internal and external stakeholders' views and skills and facilitates the flow from the learning interpreting and integrating processes. However, we contend that such structures might create an isolation trap that could lead to a lack of institutionalisation of OL. As such, although creating formal structures may improve CSR integration within the organisation, this could also isolate learning at a group level and restrict feedforward towards additional CSR embedment.

It became also evident that, in these structures, organisational members engage in defining a shared understanding of their organisation's social involvement and taking coherent collective (CSR) actions; a testament of a sensemaking process (Benn et al., 2013; Djaballah, Hautbois, & Desbordes, 2015; Van der Heijden et al., 2010). Certainly, the capacity of organisational members to develop a collective frame of reference is particularly important in driving CSR development

(Van der Heijden et al., 2010), in alignment with the shared aspect of OL and sensemaking (Crossan & Berdrow, 2003). In turn, this interpreting process leads to a shared vocabulary, definition, and ideas (i.e., different boundary objects (Benn et al., 2013)) that are important for embedding CSR in the organisation.

*Interorganisational learning*

Internal and external stakeholders act as knowledge providers, intertwining knowledge to support institutionalisation of learning throughout the federation. In other words, interorganisational learning influences the learning cycle by interfering with the organisational and the individual and group levels through key boundary spanners, informal structures and formal collaborative learning platforms. These stakeholders importantly influenced the intuiting process of sport federation's individual members in the early beginnings of the CSR projects.

While Cramer (2005) suggests that the more an organisation is involved in CSR the more open it is to knowledge generated by others, results show that even though CSR is not as embedded as in companies outside sport or even in professional sport teams, this sport federation relies heavily on interorganisational learning. This study suggests that the sport federation has engaged with various stakeholders through interorganisational relationships, knowledge exchange, networking, and dialogue, echoing findings of studies in the general CSR literature (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Fortis et al., 2016; Oelze et al., 2014). Moreover, this extends sport-related CSR studies that consider that collaboration and bottom-up learning from the community facilitates CSR implementation (Heinze et al., 2014).

Therefore, these results reveal that the *4I Framework* should be complemented by an interorganisational level to fit with the sport-federated state model (Sotiriadou et al., 2017). Sport federations are centrally positioned in a dense sport network to engage in learning with other stakeholders and to draw on mimetic learning (Jones & Macpherson, 2006) from their member clubs to implement CSR.

Our study also highlighted important sources of learning within hockey and the broader sport network. Contrary to findings of previous studies about the fact that learning from external partners depends on prior experience with the partners (Jones & Macpherson, 2006; Zollo et al., 2002), our results show that new partners were also involved in the learning process. The findings suggest that the hockey case has not used all the possible input identified by Jones and Macpherson (2006), which could lead to different outcomes and learning strategies. For instance, a CSR-related community of practices, in which knowledge providers that establish standards and monitoring schemes gravitate, has not been identified yet.

However, results also suggest that integrating external stakeholders should be managed carefully because informants have identified risks of misunderstanding and commitment issues. This could also lead to contradiction between existing learning (feedback) and new learning (feedforward) (Crossan et al., 1999). The findings have revealed that conflicting views within the sport federation between managers and board volunteers on the collaboration with external partners represented an important barrier to the feedforward process.

*Organisational learning for CSR in sport organisations*

Our findings indicate a low level of institutionalisation of internal learning and some evidence of institutionalisation of external learning. Importantly, the study has shown a dominance of individual and group levels of learning. The ongoing process of institutionalisation of some structures and processes (i.e., formal organisation, strategy, communication, and learning platform) were important features of the learning process.

This confirms what Crossan et al. (1999) argued by saying, “Often, by the nature of their small size, their open communication, and their formation based on common interest and dreams, individual and group learning dominate in young organisations” (p. 529). The interorganisational level of the sport federation, however, affects the learning cycle and provides additional learning pathways through an intertwining process.

The low institutionalisation of CSR throughout the organisation is partly due to challenges to OL. Feedforward-flow and feedback-loop failures, and misalignment between organisational and interorganisational learning, are significant barriers to OL institutionalisation. For instance, the findings suggest that failure of the environmental project might be due to a lack of flow between individual- and group-level learning. It is likely that the shift from intuiting to interpreting occurred too soon (Crossan et al., 1999) and therefore prevented the opportunity to create a shared vision by a group of individuals, which created resistance (Schilling & Kluge, 2009) and precipitated the failure of the project.

Overall, drawing from the *4I Framework*, findings suggest that implementation of CSR in the case of hockey exploited institutionalised learning and explored new learning opportunities. Therefore, OL for CSR involves both new ways of incorporating CSR awareness and practices in addition to embedding what has already been learnt into the organisation as a whole. More importantly, organisations have to learn internally and externally to develop CSR. That is, CSR requires the intervention of multiple stakeholders within and outside sport organisations. In particular, it is of critical importance for sport federations to maintain a dialogue with sport clubs as well as with the rest of the sports pyramid using the sports collaborative assets for this purpose. Therefore, we understand the learning process for CSR as a complex, multilevel and dynamic process that involves the integration of learning at the intraorganisational and interorganisational levels. Figure 1 depicts the extended *4I Framework*.

INSERT FIGURE 1

## Conclusions and future research directions

This paper has revealed how OL occurs when a sport federation implements CSR. This paper has analysed how a sport federation manages to implement CSR through the institutionalisation of learning from individual, group, and interorganisational levels. Three main

conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, key individuals capitalising on both expert and entrepreneurial intuitions are influential to impulse CSR. Second, informal and formal structures are strong repositories of group learning. Finally, external stakeholders are essential sources of learning alongside interorganisational boundary spanners, facilitating the integration process. Therefore, institutionalisation of CSR within the organisational setting requires assimilation of learning from organisational members and from interorganisational relationships through formal entities, strategies, collaborative structures, and learning platforms.

The study makes four important contributions to the sport management and CSR literature. First, it expands integrative, dynamic, and process research, responding to recent calls for such scholarly activities in the area of CSR in sport organisations (Anagnostopoulos & Shilbury, 2013; Breitbarth et al., 2015). Second and relatedly, it moves beyond monodimensional approaches by employing a multilevel perspective for the study of CSR implementation through OL, while bringing about the interorganisational level to existing models (Crossan et al., 1999). As a result, it responds to further calls that point out the need to consolidate multilevel process research on OL and CSR (Fortis et al., 2016) Third, in doing so, it moves away from examining CSR *per se* and considers it as a 'contextual platform' upon which concepts and processes from organisation theory and behaviour are examined (in our case, OL). Finally, this study draws attention to the neglected field of OL in the sport management field, opening new research opportunities to unpack its influence in contexts other than CSR.

From a practical perspective, sport managers should be conscious of the unique assets sport federations have as networks and organizations working in a network. Particularly, managers could compensate for the lack of internal knowledge by leveraging external sources of knowledge from their sport discipline and enlarged network, such as learning platforms and professional networks, recruiting individuals with a diversified set of knowledge to complement the multiple competences

required for CSR. Managers should also be aware of some conflicting dynamics characterizing these networks that make them complicated to manage and eventually challenge the delivery of CSR programs. Managers' recognition of this network's complexity could facilitate the learning process. For instance, working in a network means overcoming the political resistance both between clubs and federations and with the federations.

The implications of this study should be tempered by an understanding of its limitations. First, from a methodological perspective, the study of OL is challenging (Crossan et al., 1999). We attempted to address this weakness by adopting a critical approach in the analysis and through our longitudinal data. This allowed us to capture the learning experience from its context and get closer to individuals' experience, knowing the socially constructed and context-specific nature of knowledge and learning. Yet, despite the use of several techniques to ensure the quality of research and strategies to tackle these methodological limitations by employing a semi-structured interview guide with space for openness, this approach remains limited, given the unconscious nature of learning. Investigating the learning from an end-user perspective (Girginov et al., 2015) – how all organisational members learn – would provide significant insights into the present endeavour. In this respect, while OL theory contends that knowledge is developed through interaction and within practice, exploring the contribution of CSR training to learning from an individual perspective could provide complementary insights to the present endeavour. Moreover, further empirical research could examine the CSR-related competencies and skills needed by sport managers to support learning and implement CSR.

Second, it should be noted that the research setting is nonprofit and European, which has unique characteristics regarding CSR (Breitbarth et al., 2015). Future studies in different contexts would provide rich opportunities for cross-cultural and organisational comparisons. For instance, different learning schemes might occur in different structures and in larger sport organisations.

Although no universal applicability of the framework can be claimed, we assume that its generalisability to other organisational settings is likely to occur as some microprocesses can be seen in other types of nonprofits due to some common characteristics with their sporting counterparts. However, these findings acknowledge the importance of the interaction of learning between the federation and its member clubs, given the sport federated setting. Further research could focus on the relationship between sport federations and clubs. With this in mind, studies may investigate how sport member clubs perceive the learning strategies deployed by sport federations to encourage and develop good CSR-practices toolkits and training directly for member clubs.

Moreover, different learning schemes might occur in different structures and in larger sport organisations. Empirical research is therefore needed to generate a more comprehensive understanding of how OL system and structure can influence the OL process. Indeed, informal structures are increasingly used by sport organisations as networking platforms to gather sport professionals and experts, which could be regarded from the perspective of OL. Consequently, further research could, for instance, in a network perspective, investigate the role of communities of practice (Willem, Girginov, & Toohey, 2018).

Insights on the emergence and the impact of CSR consultants on CSR implementation in the sport sector could be gained through further empirical research. Future studies should examine how sport organisations use these strategies to develop their initiatives and how they contribute to CSR implementation.

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ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

| | *Hockey Together* | *Stick to Fair Play* | *Green Hockey* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Mission* | Integration of disabled people through the practice of hockey | Promote the intrinsic values of hockey and fair play | Donations to compensate hockey's ecological imprint |
| *Stakeholders targeted* | Disabled people | Hockey players and parents | None directly |
| *Nature of CSR* | Integration | Fair play | Environmental |
| *Actions* | Training sessions | Awareness campaign | Donation and awareness campaign |
| *Background* | Bottom-up initiative by one club in 2009 | Top-down initiative by the LFH in 2014 | Bottom-up initiative by one club in 2016 |
| *Stakeholders* | 9 clubs, LFH and ARBH, Hockey Together, public partners and local stakeholders (i.e., education and health) | ARBH, LFH, Flemish regional federation (VHL) and clubs | ARBH, LFH, VHL, clubs and NPO |

**Table 1. Case studies 'characteristics**

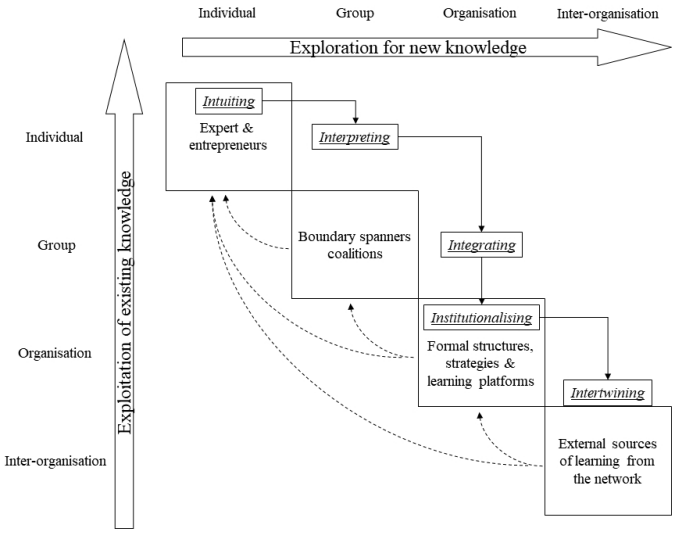


Figure 1. Extended 4I Framework

338x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

## Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview protocol

(1) Tell me about the job you do here
(2) What does corporate social responsibility (CSR) mean to you?
(3) What does CSR means for your organisation?
(4) What is your organisation doing in terms of CSR?
(5) What is your role in the organisation to implement CSR - a CSR-related project in particular?
(6) When and how did this start? How was it decided? Who decided?
    a. Did someone initiate this CSR idea or this project in particular?
    b. What was the role of the staff?
    c. What was the role of the board of directors?
    d. Did you receive support from external stakeholders?
(7) How did your organisation integrate these objectives into the management (i.e., its strategy; operations; communication; *etc*.)? Were changes needed? If so, which ones?
(8) What was needed in terms of learning? Did you develop specific learning strategies?
(9) What sources did your organisation use to develop its expertise to implement CSR?
    a. Internally (i.e., learning from its own people and experience)?
    b. Externally (i.e., among partners such as through training session)?
(10) Why was knowledge needed for your organisation to undertake these projects and the related changes?
(11) What kind of knowledge did you obtain?
(12) How was this knowledge obtained?
(13) How was this knowledge used in your organization? By whom?
(14) Do you share knowledge with any individual or organisation?
(15) How do you put your knowledge in the service of your organisation or other partners?
(16) What have you personally learned through the development of these CSR projects?
(17) Why do you think learning is important to implement CSR?
(18) What has your organisation learned through the implementation of CSR?
(19) What have you learned from working with these stakeholders?
(20) What internal challenges do you personally face regarding the implementation of CSR? How did you overcome these challenges?
(21) What are the facilitators and challenges your organisation faced regarding the implementation of CSR?
(22) Is there any other information that should be noted?