

## Sport Governance and Policy

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*Dr. Shushu Chen, University of Birmingham*

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### Introduction

This section highlights selected papers published in sport-related journals since the last issue that are relevant to the topics of sport policy and/or sport governance. It is fair to say that sport organisations worldwide face intensifying pressure to reform their governance. In recent years, scandals ranging from FIFA corruption to safe sport failures and bidding controversies have eroded public trust and sharpened calls for transparency, accountability, and representation. Governments and sponsors increasingly condition support on demonstrable governance improvements. Advocacy groups demand equity in leadership and participation. Athletes expect policies that support their welfare across career stages. The focus has therefore shifted towards a more demanding test: whether sport organisations can translate reform aspirations into practice.

These tensions are reflected collectively in this section review. Across eight selected articles, the authors examine this translation challenge. A central thread runs through the evidence: governance reforms are widely advocated but inconsistently implemented. Ethiopian federations, for example, score low on governance despite sustained global advocacy. Canadian organisations often espouse values that remain absent from their diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. In Australia, only one-fifth of sporting organisations have policies that support pregnant and parenting athletes. At the community level, some sports clubs engage in defensive organising to resist state-level gender mandates.

At the same time, I read this collection as doing more than diagnosing failure. It also highlights what can plausibly bridge the implementation gap. Transparency emerges as a demonstrable driver of organisational innovation, particularly when it strengthens scrutiny and learning. Strategic management appears to shape governance outcomes most effectively when it is aligned with organisational structure, rather than treated as a standalone exercise. Stakeholder engagement in policy development improves policy relevance and, in turn, the prospects for meaningful uptake. Gender diversity can strengthen board processes, but the evidence suggests that this is most likely when a critical mass is achieved rather than token representation. Finally, several studies point to the importance of policy entrepreneurs, namely committed individuals

in leadership positions who can drive agenda-setting where external mandates are weak.

Let's dive into the detailed argument of each article.

## Papers in This Section Review

### ***Sport policy-related articles***

Sport policy scholarship has focused heavily on policy processes, i.e. how policies are made and implemented, using frameworks like the Advocacy Coalition Framework and Multiple Streams Approach. Yet as Lindsey, Whigham, and Keech (2025) observe, this focus has left a gap: we lack robust approaches for analysing policy content, that is, the actual goals and means expressed in policy documents. Through searches across leading journals, the authors identify four disciplinary approaches: (1) Sport-oriented frameworks (such as SPLISS and the Physical Activity Environment Policy Index); (2) discourse analysis approaches (drawing on Foucauldian and critical traditions); (3) political science policy design frameworks; and (4) political philosophy theories. The authors argue that combining approaches, for instance, discourse analysis with political philosophy to explicate the values underpinning critique, could address individual limitations.

Analysis of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion-related policies continues to be a prominent focus within sport policy scholarship from last year. Lachance, Kerwin, and MacCharles (2025) examine this topic, specifically asking the question: when EDI policies are not grounded in organisational values, whether they risk remaining symbolic gestures rather than drivers of meaningful change. Looking across 757 Canadian nonprofit sport organisations using management-by-values theory, through document analysis, they reveal a disconnect: of 210 unique values identified in strategic plans, 162 were absent from EDI policy content. Values like accessibility, community building, and trust appear in strategic documents but not in policies that should operationalise them. Furthermore, most EDI policies remain at the "institutional" level—internally focused without extending across the federated system. Only four sport systems—Volleyball Canada, Squash Canada, Special Olympics Canada, and Ringette Canada—reached the "inspirational" level where values are communicated inter-organisationally. The study suggests that despite external pressures from government funding requirements, many organisations have not integrated stated values into policy design.

Elite athletes increasingly compete during pregnancy and return to high-performance sport postpartum, yet athletes consistently identify insufficient

organisational support as a barrier. Titova and colleagues (2025) conducted the first systematic mapping of pregnancy and parenting policies across Australian sport, searching 90 national sporting organisations and 17 major leagues. This led to a total of 22 policies from 20 organisations and 2 leagues were included in the final review. The results revealed that: only 22 organisations (21%) had policies with specific provisions. These cover five categories: paid parental leave, job transfers to non-playing roles, "pregnancy pause" provisions protecting athlete categorisation, facility access including breastfeeding support, and travel support for infant and carer. Cricket Australia, Rugby Australia, and Swimming Australia emerge as exemplars. Notably, no policies included childcare provisions despite childcare being identified as a critical barrier in existing research.

Looking into environmental sustainability-related policies, Piller and Nagel (2025) examine what drives environmental policies onto national sport federations' agendas, drawing on the Multiple Streams Approach. They identify two distinct agenda-setting processes with different drivers. Nature conservation policies are predominantly reactive, triggered by national regulations threatening access to outdoor spaces. When protected areas restricted sport practicability, federations had to engage as credible negotiating partners, placing conservation on the agenda by necessity. Climate action policies, by contrast, are predominantly proactive, driven by policy entrepreneurs, committed officials who champion environmental issues from positions of influence. As one official reframed the conversation: "I was no longer talking about sustainability. I was emphasising that if you want to exist, it is a 'licence to operate!'" Agenda-setting depended on executive and board officials willing to invest their resources in promoting change. Where such champions are absent, environmental policies rarely reach federation agendas regardless of broader societal pressure.

### ***Sport governance-related articles***

Governance reform advocacy has intensified following scandals across sport, yet the positive impact of better governance on organisations has been largely assumed rather than demonstrated. Lefebvre and colleagues (2025) address this gap by examining the impact of better governance on innovation. Analysing 150 Belgian regional federations using publicly available data on 32 governance indicators and the Sport Innovation Scan, they employed a two-step cluster analysis followed by regression. The findings provide important validation: better-governed federations were significantly more innovative than poorer-governed ones (mean innovation scores .52 vs .28;  $F=78.85$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Among *transparency*, *democracy*, and *accountability*, only

*transparency* significantly predicted innovation ( $\beta=.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The authors theorise that transparency, in terms of publishing strategic plans, sharing financial information, and enabling external monitoring, creates conditions conducive to innovation by fostering information sharing, stakeholder trust, and organisational learning. This suggests transparency functions not merely as an accountability mechanism but as a catalyst for organisational development. The cross-sectional design cannot establish causation, and the findings from Belgian regional federations may not generalise to other levels or contexts. Nevertheless, this study provides some interesting evidence linking governance principles to concrete organisational outcomes in sport.

Another good governance-related study is led by colleagues from Ethiopia. Garmano, Haddera, Tola and Jaleta (2025) pointed out that, despite global advocacy for good governance in sport, implementation remains weak in developing countries where governance challenges are pronounced but empirically understudied. They therefore examine Ethiopian Olympic sports federations, where athletics faces "lack of genuineness" in youth projects, and football is characterised by "public wrangles for power" and "widespread mismanagement." Using structural equation modelling with 265 officials across six federations, they find strategic management and organisational structure have positive and significant direct effects on good governance in sport, and organisational structure also significantly mediates the influence of strategic management on good governance in sport.

Relevant to board performance, McLeod and colleagues (2025) examined how gender diversity affects board outcomes. Through 36 interviews with board members across 22 Victorian State Sport Organisations operating under the "Balance the Board" policy mandating 40% minimum women representation, they find that gender diversity enhances board performance through specific pathways. Women are perceived to bring cooperative values that moderate the "testosterone base" and "wildly passionate commentary" characteristic of sport governance. Additionally, the scholars find that gender diversity broadens perspectives in decision-making, enhances conscientious documentation, and improves stakeholder engagement through more empathetic, emotionally intelligent communication. However, impacts vary across board roles: effects on strategic planning and risk management are evident, but impacts on CEO supervision are minimal.

The gender quotas may improve governance at targeted organisations, but what happens beyond them, specifically when looking at the community clubs level, where they have substantial autonomy to adopt or deflect state-level initiatives. Bakhsh and colleagues (2025) examine how Victoria's (Australia) Balance the Board policy affected

community clubs not directly targeted by the mandate. Using event system theory and 125 interviews (14 state association leaders, 111 club leaders), they identify three organising processes. Desired organising occurs when clubs with low representation but perceived capacity actively enhance women's leadership through recruitment, policy changes, and pipeline development. Inspired organising extends further: clubs that achieved gender balance began pursuing broader diversity dimensions, countering research suggesting gender initiatives produce only gender outcomes. Most concerning is defensive organising: clubs experiencing "overwhelming anxiety" about meeting expectations engage in deflection ("our constitution requires full membership"), diffusion ("we don't see gender, just people"), and ultimately isolation from the evolving sector. Defensive clubs used low capacity as justification for inaction. The authors recommend graduated expectations, reward systems, and evidence-informed resources to shift clubs from defensive to desired organising.

## Conclusion

A key theme across this collection is the persistent gap between governance aspiration and implementation reality. The evidence suggests that formal policy adoption is rarely sufficient on its own. Effective governance reform depends on alignment between policy goals and organisational structures, credible accountability arrangements, sustained stakeholder engagement, and leadership that is willing and able to carry reform through to practice.

Several papers clarify what enables implementation. Stakeholder engagement emerges as a consistent, cross-cutting mechanism. When policies are developed without meaningful input from those they are intended to govern, they are more likely to be perceived as irrelevant, to face resistance, or to be implemented superficially. It is also worth noting that, if organic adoption is unreliable, reform may require stronger forms of imposition. That prospect raises questions about legitimacy, compliance, and local ownership that warrant more explicit analysis.

The collection further highlights the limits of purely top-down mandates. Where external requirements are weak or inconsistently enforced, change is often driven by policy entrepreneurs, namely committed individuals in leadership positions who invest time, credibility, and organisational resources to advance reform agendas. This reliance on individual agency can accelerate change, but it can also make reform uneven and vulnerable to leadership turnover.

Future research might examine how organisations shift from defensive organising to more constructive and desired forms of organising, and should track

governance reforms longitudinally to assess whether apparent improvements are sustained over time. It is also necessary to test whether findings derived largely from Western contexts transfer to developing country settings where governance capacity and resource constraints may differ substantially.

### Annotated Bibliography

**Bakhsh, J. T., Raw, K., Faulkner, E., Phillips, P., & Rowe, K. (2025). Investigating the cascading effects of board gender quotas: An event system theory perspective. *Sport Management Review*, 28(5), 903-929.**

This study adopts an event system theory perspective to investigate how state-level gender-focused initiatives cascade to affect community sport clubs. The authors conducted interviews with 14 state sporting associations and 111 community sport club leaders regarding Victoria's Balance the Board policy, which mandated 40% women on state boards. Using an interpretative-constructivist lens and inductive approach, the analysis identified how the initiative influenced club behaviours, shaped organisational features, and triggered subsequent events including club gender quotas and election of women presidents. The authors developed a process model illustrating desired, inspired, and defensive organising responses. Findings counter claims that gender initiatives are limited to gender-based outcomes while also revealing negative cascading effects. This research contributes to understanding how policy effects extend across federated sport systems.

**Garmamo, M. G., Haddera, T. A., Tola, Z. B., & Jaleta, M. E. (2025). The relationship between strategic management, organizational structure, and good governance in sport in selected Ethiopian Olympic sports federations. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 10(4), 582-603.**

This study examines the influence of strategic management on good governance in sport via the mediation of organisational structure in Ethiopian Olympic sports federations. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, the authors collected data through structured questionnaires from 265 respondents randomly selected from six sports federations, analysing data using descriptive statistics and structural equation modelling (SPSS AMOS 23.0). Results indicate that both strategic management and organisational structure have positive and significant direct effects on good governance. Furthermore, organisational structure significantly mediates the strategic management-governance relationship. The findings signify the need for alignment between strategy and structure to enhance governance implementation. This study

contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented African context, demonstrating that effective strategic management, supported by appropriate organisational structures, can improve governance standards in national sport federations.

**Lachance, E. L., Kerwin, S., & MacCharles, J. D. (2025). Diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in Canadian nonprofit sport organisations: A management-by-values approach. *Journal of Sport Management*, 39, 434-448.**

This study examines Canadian nonprofit sport organisations' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies through a management-by-values (MBV) approach. Using document analysis, the authors consulted websites of 757 national and provincial/territorial organisations, collecting DEI policies and strategic plans from 69 organisations. Data were analysed thematically to assess whether espoused values are represented in DEI policy content areas. Results demonstrated that values within strategic plans are not adequately leveraged in DEI policies. Most policies remain intraorganizational and at an intuitive level of MBV, with few examples reaching the inspirational level where policies transcend organisational boundaries. The findings reveal a gap between organisational rhetoric and policy practice, contributing to sport management literature by demonstrating that Canadian NPSOs are not strategically embedding values into DEI policy content.

**Lefebvre, A., Zeimers, G., Helsen, K., Corthouts, J., Scheerder, J., & Zintz, T. (2025). Better governance and sport innovation within sport organisations. *Journal of Global Sport Management*, 10(2), 235-251.**

This study examines the impact of better governance on sport innovation within non-profit sport organisations. Using observational desk research, the authors collected publicly available data on governance principles (transparency, democracy, accountability) and innovation from 150 regional sport federations in Belgium. A two-step cluster analysis identified two groups by governance level, followed by ANOVA and multiple linear regression analyses. Results indicated that better-governed federations were significantly more innovative, with transparency emerging as a significant positive predictor of innovation. These findings provide the first empirical evidence of a relationship between better governance and sport innovation. The study contributes to sport governance literature by moving beyond assumptions about governance benefits to demonstrate measurable organisational outcomes, strengthening the case for sport organisations to embrace good governance principles.

**Lindsey, I., Whigham, S., & Keech, M. (2025). Analysing the content of sport policies: Disciplinary approaches and new directions. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 17(1), 43-59.**

This article addresses a significant gap in sport policy research concerning the analysis of policy content. Through a comprehensive literature review across eleven leading sport journals, the authors identify and critically appraise four distinctive disciplinary approaches: sport-orientated analytic frameworks (e.g., SPLISS, PA-EPI), discourse analysis, political science frameworks for policy design, and political philosophy theories. The findings reveal that while sport policy research has predominantly focused on policy processes and implementation, analysis of policy content remains underdeveloped. The authors recommend expanding usage of different approaches suited to specific policy types and combining approaches for more substantive analysis. This study contributes to sport governance literature by providing a foundational resource for researchers seeking to advance methodological rigour in sport policy content analysis.

**McLeod, J., Phillips, P., Rowe, K., Reddan, S., Raw, K., & Swanson, S. (2025). How does gender diversity impact board performance? Insights from Australian sport. *Sport Management Review*, 28(3), 549-574.**

This study investigates how gender diversity impacts board performance in sport organisations, focusing on Victoria, Australia's 40% gender quota effective from 2019. Drawing on resource-dependency theory and self-categorisation theory, the authors conducted 36 in-depth interviews with board members operating within this policy context. Findings indicate that a critical mass of women on boards leads to stronger values promoting collaboration, risk awareness, and stakeholder orientation. Board processes—particularly decision-making and dynamics—benefit most from gender diversity, fostering more respectful and productive interactions. The impact on board roles manifests through enhanced stakeholder engagement, more considered risk management, and stronger focus on welfare issues in strategic planning. This study contributes nuanced qualitative insights into the mechanisms through which gender diversity enhances sport governance effectiveness.

**Piller, S., & Nagel, S. (2025). What makes national sports federations consider environmental sustainability: A conceptual framework on the agenda-setting process based on a multiple case study. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 17(3), 375-400.**

This study explores the key drivers of environmental policy agenda-setting processes in national sports federations. Based on a multiple case study involving eight Swiss federations varying in sports arena, size, and human resources, the research applies Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach to develop a conceptual framework. Findings suggest that nature conservation policies were predominantly initiated through dealing with national regulations, while climate action policies were pushed by committed federation officials acting as policy entrepreneurs. Sports arena type, organisational size, and available resources influence how environmental policies gain relevance. This study contributes to sport policy literature by addressing how environmental sustainability policies emerge in non-profit sport organisations, providing insights for federations seeking to advance environmentally sustainable sports development.

**Titova, J., Davenport, M. H., Williams, S., & Hayman, M. (2025). What support do Australian sporting organisations' policies provide to pregnant and parenting elite athletes? A scoping review. *Journal of Sport Management*, 39, 227-245.**

This article explores the nature and extent of organisational support available to pregnant and parenting elite athletes within Australian sporting organisations. Using Arksey and O'Malley's five-step scoping review framework, the authors searched for policies from 90 national sporting organisations and 17 major sporting leagues, identifying 22 relevant policies. Five categories of support emerged: paid parental leave, flexible work environments, eligibility protection, access to facilities and services, and travel support. Notably, only 12 policies were developed with stakeholder engagement. The findings reveal significant variability across sports and highlight the need for evidence-based policy development. This research contributes to sport management literature by mapping the current policy landscape and offering nuanced examples that can guide future policy development for pregnant and parenting athletes.