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Better Governance and Sport Innovation within Sport Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the impact of better governance on sport innovation. Observational desk research collected publicly available online data on better governance principles and sport innovation in sport federations. The sample included 150 regional sport federations in Belgium. First, a two-step cluster analysis identified two clusters of sport federations according to their governance level. Next, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare sport innovation between the two clusters. Finally, a multiple linear regression analysis was used to identify better governance principles impacting sport innovation. Results indicated that better-governed sport federations were significantly more inclined to innovate. Multiple linear regressions showed that transparency significantly and positively impacts sport innovation. These findings are the first empirical evidence of a relationship between better governance and sport innovation. This study empirically highlights the often-assumed but little-tested positive impact of adopting better governance principles on sport organizations.

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1. Introduction

Non-profit sport organizations such as sport federations are urged to improve their governance (Geeraert, 2021a) and innovate (Corthouts et al., 2021a). Since the end of the 1990s, many sport scandals have come to light (e.g. the Salt Lake City Olympic Games scandal, FIFA financial corruption, and sexual misconduct in USA Gymnastics). In addition to tarnishing sport's image, these scandals have raised awareness of many governance failures within sport organizations. In response, supra-national sport organizations, governments, and research groups developed good governance principles.¹ These principles are policies and procedures that sport organizations are expected to develop and implement to improve governance structures and processes and ultimately preserve the integrity of sport (Thompson et al., 2022). However,

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these expectations are mainly assumptions conveyed by scholars and practitioners to convince sport organizations to embrace these principles (Geeraert et al., 2014; McLeod et al., 2021). Empirical evidence supporting this relationship is still missing in the sport management literature (Parent & Hoye, 2018). Hence, developing more knowledge on the potential impact of better governance on sport organizations and their activities is needed to contribute to fostering changes to address continuous failures of governance across the sector (Kihl et al., 2021; McLeod et al., 2021) and to overcome resistances and barriers to better governance (Geeraert, 2021a).

Meanwhile, sport organizations are under pressure to innovate to cope with an increasingly changing and competitive environment (Corthouts et al., 2021a, 2021b; Hoeber et al., 2015; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Tjønndal, 2017; Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Sport organizations develop innovations in various areas such as strategic knowledge management, entrepreneurship and cooperation, knowledge sharing, digital presence, mobile deployment, and commercialization (Corthouts et al., 2021b). These innovations take many forms, such as the use of social media and websites, the development of mobile applications, the sharing of strategic information, the development of partnerships, the publication of journals, or the engagement in research and development (Corthouts et al., 2021b). Since innovation contributes to the organizational performance of sport organizations (Delshab et al., 2020), understanding what fosters sport innovation is fundamental to sport management research. So far, studies have identified determinants of sport innovation (understood as innovation in the sport context) at the managerial, organizational, and environmental levels (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Winand et al., 2013). However, while the relationship between governance and innovation is established outside sport (Becker-Blease, 2011; Jaskyte, 2012, 2015, 2018), knowledge of the governance-related determinants of sport innovation is still limited.

Specifically, the relationship between better governance and sport innovation remains unknown. Yet, some research focusing on for-profit organizations has identified an impact of better governance on innovation (Asensio-López et al., 2019). This impact is mainly explained by the fact that several governance structures and processes commonly targeted by the principles of better governance, such as shared strategic vision, information sharing, diversity, or board composition, have been identified as determinants of innovation (Jaskyte, 2012, 2015, 2018). For example, compliance with recommendations in codes of better governance impacts innovation through changes in the board composition of companies (Asensio-López et al., 2019). Thus, it is likely that adopting governance principles such as transparency, democracy, and accountability by sport organizations should impact sport innovation. Nevertheless, to date, there is no empirical evidence of the impact of better governance on sport innovation. Because of the pressing needs of sport organizations to adopt better governance and sport innovation, it is timely and relevant to examine the relationship between these two concepts to understand their interconnections and the potential role of better governance as a determinant of sport innovation.

This study aims to examine the impact of better governance on sport innovation. Our study responds to two research questions: Are better-governed sport federations more innovative than poorer-governed ones? What are the better governance principles impacting sport innovation? The contribution of this study is twofold. First,

it contributes to the sport governance literature by providing empirical evidence of the positive impact of better governance on sport organizations. Second, our research brings new knowledge on governance-related determinants of sport innovation. This study identifies better governance principles such as transparency as sport innovation determinants.

The following section presents a literature review on better governance and innovation. Next, we describe the methods used to test our hypotheses and answer our research questions. Then, we present and discuss our findings. Finally, we outline the research's theoretical and practical contributions, implications, and limitations, providing future research avenues.

2. Better Governance and Sport Innovation: A Literature Review

2.1. Better Governance in Sport

Governance refers to how organizations are directed, controlled, and regulated (Bevir, 2011). In recent years, sport governance gained growing interest from sport practitioners and academics (Dowling et al., 2018; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2019; Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2019). Three perspectives are recognized in the sport governance literature: systemic, political, and organizational governance (Henry & Lee, 2004). Recently, organizational governance, and significantly the sub-research domain of better governance, which concerns 'normative, ethically informed standards of managerial behavior' (Henry & Lee, 2004, p. 1), has become very topical (Geeraert, 2021a). While no agreement on its definition exists (Geeraert, 2021a), better governance is understood as 'the ethical standards underpinning the relationships, methods, and instruments of relationships inside and between organizations better governance' (Zintz & Gérard, 2019, p. 55). Overall, better governance 'aims to ensure that the board and management seek to deliver outcomes for the benefit of the organization and its members and that the means used to attain these outcomes are monitored effectively' (Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007, p. 10). Numerous better governance principles (also called indifferently 'indicators' or 'dimensions') that sport organizations should implement have emerged over the last decade (for a systematic review, see Thompson et al., 2022).

While acknowledging the existence of other principles (e.g. social responsibility, integrity, and solidarity), this study focuses specifically on transparency, democracy, and accountability because these are the three overarching principles in all better governance codes (Thompson et al., 2022). According to Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch (2012, p. 563), transparency is 'the disclosure of information by an organization that enables external actors to monitor and assess its internal workings and performance.' This implies, for example, developing and sharing the organization's missions, vision, and values or reporting the organization's activities. Transparency is the most common principle in better governance codes and is found in almost all codes (Thompson et al., 2022). In recent years, sport organizations and in particular national sport federations are under increasing pressure from governments and other stakeholders to be more transparent. As Parent et al. (2018) pointed out, some sport federations have understood the importance of transparency and are

making it a core value of their actions. Democracy entails a ‘system of rules that establishes competition (electoral competition between political alternatives), participation (affected actors’ influence over collective decisions), and deliberation (fair and open debates aimed at mutual understanding)’ (Geeraert, 2021b, p. 159). The democratic principle involves, for example, a description of the process for electing the board of directors and the structures and processes for decision-making. The principle of democracy ensures that members can express their interests through the fair election of their representatives. This principle also implies a deliberative decision-making process (Geeraert et al., 2014). Finally, Geeraert (2021b, p. 159) defines accountability as ‘a clear separation of executive, judicial, and supervisory powers on the one hand, and an internal system that enables independent entities to monitor decision makers’ compliance on the other hand.’ This accountability principle aims to adopt rules that control decision-makers’ actions, such as a code of ethics, a regulation on conflicts of interest, and obligations relating to the composition of the board of directors and its activities. This principle is sometimes referred to as ‘checks and balances,’ (Geeraert et al., 2014) which emphasizes its two major aspects: control over the actions of decision-makers and balanced representation in governing bodies. This principle ensures that decisions are made in the overall interest of the organization and its members, not a few individuals.

Better governance research has, until now, predominantly focused on the codification and assessment of better governance principles (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2019; Geeraert, 2019, 2021b), the impact of governance structures and processes (Parent & Hoyer, 2018), and more recently, the process of governance convergence (McLeod et al., 2021). So far, evidence suggesting that better governance principles have a positive organizational impact largely comes from outside the sport context and remains mainly implicit for sport organizations (McLeod et al., 2021). For example, scholars have shown how transparency effectively addresses corruption (Kolstad & Wiig, 2009). More transparent operations and decision-making also increased stakeholders’ trust (O’Boyle & Shilbury, 2016). Moreover, Geeraert et al. (2014) pointed out that the lack of accountability principle constitutes a breeding ground for corruption, the concentration of power, lack of democracy and effectiveness. Furthermore, more democratic processes allowing a better representation of women in board decision-making led to more effective governance (Terjesen et al., 2009). These findings reinforce the need to more explicitly examine the potential positive impact of better governance principles on sport organizations (Parent & Hoyer, 2018) and their activities, such as sport innovation.

2.2. Innovation in Sport

According to Hoeber and Hoeber (2012), a commonly cited definition of innovation is ‘any idea, practice, or material artifact perceived as new by the relevant unit of adoption’ (Zaltman et al., 1973, p. 10). In the sport context, Tjønndal (2017) more precisely defines sport innovation as ‘proactive and intentional processes that involve the generation and practical adoption of new and creative ideas, which aim to produce a qualitative change in a sport context’ (p. 293).

According to Tjønndal (2016), sport innovation research is divided into six main themes, namely innovation outcomes (e.g. Balmer et al., 2012), processes (e.g. Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012), entrepreneurship (e.g. Ratten, 2016), typologies (e.g. Corthouts et al., 2021a, 2021b; Tjønndal, 2017; Winand et al., 2016), strategy in sport organizations (e.g. Hoeber et al., 2015; Wemmer et al., 2016), and determinants of innovation (Corthouts et al., 2020, 2021a; Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Winand et al., 2016, 2013). By examining sport innovation through three stages (i.e. initiation stage, adoption decision stage, and implementation stage), Hoeber and Hoeber (2012) highlighted several determinants fostering sport innovation at the managerial, organizational, and environmental levels of sport organizations. Respectively, they identified leadership commitment and pro-innovation characteristics as managerial determinants, organizational capacity and simple organizational design as organizational determinants, and involved and interested external stakeholders as environmental determinants. Winand et al. (2013) found five additional determinants using the same level of analysis. At the managerial level, they identified the attitude of managers towards contemporary (as opposed to traditional) management and the attitude favoring change and newness. Finally, they also highlighted the perception of financial capacity and organization size at the organizational level and the perception of the environment competitiveness at the environmental level. More recently, examining the determinants of social sport innovation, Corthouts et al. (2020) found that positive managerial attitudes and public support through financial and infra-structural resources are essential determinants of sport innovation. While these studies have advanced our understanding of the determinants of sport innovation, the role of (better) governance structures and processes (e.g. strategic planning, board representation, stakeholder communication, and the board election process) remain under-researched in the sport management literature. We theoretically discuss why this should be further examined in the following section.

2.3. (Better) Governance and Innovation

Outside the sport context, the literature offers some evidence of a relationship between (better) governance and innovation (Asensio-López et al., 2019; Becker-Blease, 2011; Jaskyte, 2012, 2015, 2018; Zhong, 2018). Research has mainly focused on examining the impact of governance on innovation within for-profit organizations (Asensio-López et al., 2019; Becker-Blease, 2011). Reviewing the management literature, Asensio-López et al. (2019) stated that despite no consensus about the relationship between governance and innovation, compliance with the code of better governance is expected to positively impact innovation. For example, Zhong (2018) found that transparency fosters firm innovation by facilitating resource allocation and increasing managers' efforts in investing in research and development. Within the non-profit context, Jaskyte (2018) noted that research on governance and innovation had developed very little in recent decades. Few studies have demonstrated the impact of governance on innovation in non-profit organizations (Jaskyte, 2012, 2015, 2018). These studies have mainly focused on the board of directors. For example, governance attributes and processes such as shared vision and human capital (i.e. the presence of people with

skills, expertise, and experience) have been shown to positively impact innovation (Jaskyte, 2018). As Jaskyte (2018) suggested, defining a shared vision creates a common direction for board members and fosters an ideal environment for finding solutions through innovative ideas to achieve organizational goals. Similarly, greater diversity on the board positively impacts innovation by providing a broader pool of knowledge, skills, and information, as well as a better understanding of the external environment and broader perspectives on a variety of problems and ways to solve them (Adobor, 2004; Carter et al., 2003). On the contrary, information sharing between board members has a counter-intuitive negative impact on innovation (Jaskyte, 2018).

These findings provide insight into whether and how governance structures and processes, such as board composition, can contribute to non-profit innovation. However, knowledge remains missing about the relationship between better governance and sport innovation. As better governance principles (i.e. transparency, democracy, and accountability) target governance structures and processes related to innovation, it is likely that sport organizations that adopt better governance principles could be more likely to innovate. In particular, these principles of better governance could have an impact on the different types of innovation identified at different levels (i.e. managerial, organizational, and environmental) by Corthouts et al. (2021b): strategic knowledge management, entrepreneurship and cooperation, knowledge sharing, digital presence, mobile deployment and commercialization. For example, sport federations that operate democratically ensure that decision-making power is distributed among all members and that decisions are made through fair and transparent processes. This could create a more inclusive environment where different perspectives and ideas are heard, and where innovation can flourish, especially in the development of commercialization, mobile deployment and digital presence which remain limited for some organizations (Corthouts et al., 2021b). Also, sport federations that are more transparent about their activities, decisions, finances, and resources should also find it easier to gain trust and attract sponsors or investors to develop innovation and strengthen cooperation with other partners. As indicated by O'Boyle and Shilbury (2016), transparency is an essential element in building trust in cooperation with external stakeholders, which is identified as a type of innovation by Corthouts et al. (2021b). Finally, sport federations that are accountable take responsibility for their actions and are open to scrutiny and feedback from their members and stakeholders (Geeraert et al., 2014). This accountability could create a space where innovation is more likely to be adopted, as there is a greater willingness to learn from mistakes and experiment with new ideas. In addition, accountability could ensure that innovation is driven by the needs and priorities of the organization and its stakeholders, rather than self-interest or bias.

However, to our best knowledge, no study has established these assumptions. Therefore, examining better governance and sport innovation through the main principles generally associated with better organizational governance (Parent & Hoye, 2018; Thompson et al., 2022) would help to fill this gap.

Accordingly, we formulate the following hypotheses:

1. Better-governed sport federations are more innovative than poorer-governed ones;
2. Transparency significantly and positively impacts sport innovation;

3. Democracy significantly and positively impacts sport innovation;
4. Accountability significantly and positively impacts sport innovation.

In the next section, we present the methodology for testing these hypotheses.

3. Method

3.1. Data Source and Sample

This study is part of a larger longitudinal project collecting data on better governance and sport innovation within sport federations in Belgium. The present study used data from a data collection conducted in 2018. The research focused on regional sport federations due to the central role of these organizations in the Belgian sport system (Claes et al., 2017). Belgium is a federal state where the three linguistic regions called communities (i.e. Flemish, French, and German-speaking communities) are in charge of the sport competencies. Consequently, regional sport federations have primary responsibilities in strategy definition, regulation, promotion, and organization of competitions, sport activities, and elite sport policy (Lefebvre et al., 2021; Zeimers et al., 2019).

We gathered publicly available data through an online observational research desk between July and November 2018. Observational research proved to be a suitable and effective method to measure better governance and sport innovation that overcomes traditional survey data collection weaknesses (Geeraert, 2019; Thompson et al., 2022). Three researchers collected data on the websites and social media of regional sport federations in Belgium. Due to the heterogeneity of the websites and social media of the sport federations in our sample, data collection required extensive exploration of each publicly available page to extract information or documents. One researcher collected data related to the French-speaking sport federations, and two collected data related to the Flemish and German-speaking sport federations. Before collecting data, researchers performed several cross-checking rounds on a small sample of sport federations to ensure coding reliability. During this pre-test, researchers thoroughly discussed and defined questionable items they disagreed with.

In total, we collected 351 items for each sport federation. The sample included 150 regional sport federations: 74 Flemish-speaking federations, 62 French-speaking federations, and 14 German-speaking federations. This sample represents all recognized regional sport federations in Belgium, except two German-speaking federations for which no public data were available online.

3.2. Measures

Following Scheerder et al. (2015) and Geeraert (2015), we used 32 dummy items to calculate a score for three major principles of better governance: transparency (16 items), democracy (8 items), and accountability (8 items). Previous work identified those three principles as relevant indicators of better governance within sport organizations (Geeraert, 2019, 2015; Zintz & Gérard, 2019). Then, we computed a score for each principle by summing the dummy items. Finally, we normalized the scores between zero and one so

Table 1. Items used to measure better governance principles (presence of information on the website and/or the statutes on...).

Variable	Item	Description
Transparency	Item 1	...number of board members
	Item 2	...name of board members
	Item 3	...name of board chair
	Item 4	...name of CEO
	Item 5	...strategic plan
	Item 6	...statutes
	Item 7	...financial report
	Item 8	...year of the organization creation
	Item 9	...location of administrative headquarters
	Item 10	...contact details: email
	Item 11	...contact details: phone number
	Item 12	...focus on recreation and/or competitiveness
	Item 13	...number of sport clubs
	Item 14	...number of members
	Item 15	...number of partnerships within the sport sector
	Item 16	...number of partnerships outside the sport sector
Democracy	Item 1	...application for board members and chair
	Item 2	...election process for board members and chair
	Item 3	... procedures and secret ballots established by the bylaws
	Item 4	...by whom are board members elected
	Item 5	...by whom is board chair elected
	Item 6	...by whom is general secretary elected
	Item 7	...quorum established for GA in decision-making process
	Item 8	...quorum established for board in decision-making process
Accountability	Item 1	...term limit for elected board members
	Item 2	...maximum age limit for elected board members
	Item 3	...gender equality guidelines for board members
	Item 4	...agreement to code of ethics for (board) members
	Item 5	...GA meets at least once a year
	Item 6	...major policy decisions are made by voting during GA
	Item 7	...policy decisions can be challenged through internal channels established by statutes
	Item 8	...presence of conflict of interest rules

that each principle had the same weight in the analysis. [Table 1](#) provides details about items used to measure better governance principles.

Concerning sport innovation, we collected 21 managerial, organizational, and environmental items (see Corthouts et al., [2021b](#)). These items referred to the six sport innovation types identified by Corthouts et al. ([2021b](#)): strategic knowledge management (6 items), entrepreneurship and cooperation (7 items), knowledge sharing (2 items), digital presence (3 items), mobile deployment (1 item), and commercialization (2 items). For example, items were related to mobile app development, social media activity, presence of an innovation person or committee, number of partnerships, or commitment to research and development. Following Corthouts et al. ([2021b](#)), a sport innovation score was computed using the weighted average of the mean score of each sport innovation type.

3.3. Data Analysis

Using IBM SPSS Statistics 27, we analyzed the data in three steps. This section provides details about the analyses.

First, we conducted a two-step cluster analysis to identify poorer and better-governed sport federations (Everitt et al., [2011](#)). Two-step cluster analysis is a method used

to identify similar groups or ‘clusters’ of cases based on multiple variables. This method is considered more accurate than traditional clustering methods such as k-means clustering (Tkaczynski, 2017). The analysis involves two phases. First, based on the three better governance variables (i.e. transparency, democracy, and accountability), the SPSS algorithm groups the cases (i.e. sport federations) into pre-clusters. For each case, the algorithm decides whether the case is assigned to an already formed pre-cluster or a new pre-cluster should be created. Next, the pre-clusters are grouped in clusters using the traditional hierarchical clustering algorithm. This phase produces a range of solutions with different numbers of clusters that are, then, reduced to the best number of clusters based on Schwarz’s Bayesian information criterion (Tkaczynski, 2017). Before the analysis, we verified the distribution normality of each predictor using skewness and kurtosis.

Next, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to compare sport innovation between the poorer and better-governed clusters. The sport innovation score was the test variable, and the two clusters were grouping variables.

Finally, we built a multiple linear regression model to examine the impact of three better governance principles on sport innovation. Transparency, democracy, and accountability were independent variables, and sport innovation was the dependent variable. The sport federations’ size was added as a control variable. Due to the lack of information on this control variable for 20 federations, 130 federations were included in the analysis. Based on the recommendation of Field (2018), the interdependence of residuals was tested. The Durbin–Watson test presented a value of 1.99, which means that residuals were not autocorrelated. The multicollinearity was also checked using the variation inflation factor (VIF). All variables had a VIF value below 1.53, indicating no multicollinearity problem (Field, 2018).

4. Results

The two-step cluster analysis identified two clusters of sport federations based on their adoption of better governance principles: poorer-governed sport federations and better-governed sport federations. After setting the number of clusters to two, three, four, and five, two clusters were chosen because they presented the best silhouette measurement of cohesion and separation, indicating a good quality of the analysis (.05). The poorer-governed cluster included 103 sport federations (68.7% of the sample). In contrast, the better-governed cluster included 47 (31.3% of the sample). Besides, among the three predictors, transparency (1.00) and democracy (.93) were more important predictors than accountability (.10). Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for each cluster, and Table 3 details these clusters.

Regarding the comparison between the two clusters, the one-way ANOVA indicated a significant difference in sport innovation score between poorer and better-governed sport federations ($F=78.85$, $p < .001$). Better-governed sport federations ($M = .52$, $SD = .14$) were significantly more innovative than poorer-governed sport federations ($M = .28$, $SD = .16$). These results support our first hypothesis (H1).

Table 4 provides the results of the multiple linear regression testing the relationship between better governance principles (i.e. transparency, democracy, and accountability) and sport innovation. These findings revealed that not all principles were

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of each cluster.

	Poorer-Governed Sport Federations					Better-Governed Sport Federations				
	N	M	SD	Min	Max	N	M	SD	Min	Max
Transparency (1)	103	.47	.21	0	.92	47	.90	.09	.75	1
Democracy (.93)	103	.72	.23	0	1	47	.84	.13	.50	1
Accountability (.10)	103	.40	.13	0	.71	47	.72	.16	.43	1
Innovation	103	.28	.16	0	.83	47	.52	.14	.22	.8
F					78.85*					

Predictor importance in the two-step cluster analysis is in parentheses.
* $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Details about the two clusters.

	Poorer-Governed Sport Federations	Better-Governed Sport Federations	Total
N of French-speaking SF	57	5	62
N of Flemish SF	32	42	74
N of German-speaking SF	14	0	14
N of Olympic SF	42	33	75
N of non-Olympic SF	61	14	75
N of mono-sport SF	76	33	109
N of multi-sport SF	27	14	41
N of SF created before 1980	44	24	68
N of SF created after 1980	59	23	82

Table 4. Results of the multiple regression analysis predicting innovation from transparency, democracy, and accountability (* $p < 0.001$).

Variable	Innovation	
	B	B
Transparency	.30*	.44*
Democracy	.02	.02
Accountability	.13	.15
Size (control)	.05*	.26*
R ²	.47	
F		27.23*
Durbin-Watson d		1.99

impacting sport innovation. Only transparency ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) was significantly and positively related to sport innovation. Democracy and accountability were non-significantly related to sport innovation ($p > .05$). These results support our second (H2) hypothesis but refute our third (H3) and fourth (H4) hypotheses.

5. Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Nowadays, pressures from various stakeholders push sport organizations to adopt better governance principles and become more innovative to cope with unstable and competitive environments. Our study bridged the gap between better governance and sport innovation by examining the relationship between these concepts. First, it involved identifying better and poorer-governed sport federations. Then, based on the innovation typology of Corthouts et al. (2021b), we compared sport innovation between these two clusters. Finally, we looked more specifically at which better governance principles impact sport innovation.

Two main results emerge from our study. On the one hand, our research highlighted that better-governed sport organizations are more likely to innovate. These findings extend previous studies, mainly outside the sport literature, examining the relationship between governance and innovation (Asensio-López et al., 2019; Becker-Blease, 2011; Jaskyte, 2012, 2015, 2018). Specifically, our study is consistent with the findings of Asensio-López et al. (2019), indicating that compliance with better governance codes could positively impact innovation. On the other hand, this study highlighted the transparency principle positively impacting sport innovation. This result is significant given that transparency is the most common principle in better governance codes (Thompson et al., 2022).

The relationship between better governance and sport innovation was largely unknown until now. This study contributes to the sport governance literature by identifying positive impact of better governance on sport innovation. Our results reinforce the often claimed but overlooked impact of better governance principles on sport organizations (McLeod et al., 2021; Parent & Hoye, 2018). By providing strong evidence of this positive impact, this study responds in part to Parent and Hoye's (2018) call to thoroughly examine the impact of better governance and offers additional arguments for encouraging change toward the adoption of better governance principles (Geeraert, 2021a). This new knowledge development has two main theoretical implications. First, scholars should investigate this relationship between better governance and sport innovation more deeply to uncover whether better governance impacts each sport innovation type similarly. Second, by providing empirical evidence of the positive impact of better governance, our study encourages scholars to investigate its impact on other sport organizations' aspects, such as communication, organizational capacity, or, more broadly, their organizational performance.

In addition, our research contributes to sport innovation literature. So far, knowledge on determinants of sport innovation has focused on managerial, organizational, and environmental levels (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012; Winand et al., 2013). Although some specific factors, such as leadership and the president strategic thinking have been raised (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012), very few studies focused on governance structures and processes as determinants of sport innovation. Our research identifies governance as a sport innovation determinant by examining better governance principles that aim to modify and improve governance structures and processes (Thompson et al., 2022). This significant new knowledge implies that further research is needed to understand how and why governance structures and processes impact sport innovation.

Specifically, our research identified transparency as the main better governance principle positively impacting sport innovation. These results align with Zhong (2018) that found transparency directly impacts innovation by facilitating efficient resource allocation. Although our study does not examine the mechanisms by which better governance impacts sport innovation, Zhong's (2018) findings offer a potential explanation for our results. Furthermore, the principle of transparency aims to develop a more transparent report on the organization's activities and, in particular, a clear definition of the strategic plan, including the organization's missions, vision, and values (Parent et al., 2021). As Jaskyte (2018) identified, the shared vision created through strategic planning defines a common direction that guides (board) members'

actions and nurtures their enthusiasm to pursue common missions. This commonality of purpose leads to a higher capacity to innovate because (board) members are more open to new ideas and respond more quickly and favorably to adaptations to achieve the common goal (Jaskyte, 2018). Finally, as O'Boyle and Shilbury (2016) found, transparency is essential to building trust with external stakeholders. Thus, sport organizations can more easily develop and maintain relationships by defining who they are and reporting on their activities more transparently. In particular, trust facilitates the investment of financial and other resources by stakeholders (O'Boyle & Shilbury, 2016). Therefore, through transparency, sport organizations can attract public (Vlaamse Regering, 2016) or private funds, which are critical financial resources to implement innovations (Hoeber & Hoeber, 2012). While transparency is the most frequently mentioned principle in better governance codes (Thompson et al., 2022) and sport federations are increasingly being asked by their stakeholders to be more transparent (Parent et al., 2018), our research emphasizes the importance of this fundamental principle and empirically identify a concrete benefit that should encourage sport federations' decision-makers to be more transparent.

Beyond our results, a critical perspective is needed on the direction of the relationship between better governance and sport innovation. The literature overwhelmingly indicates an impact of governance on innovation, and this study builds on that direction to examine the relationship between better governance and sport innovation. However, it is also important to consider the impact of sport innovation on better governance. Innovation is intrinsically related to organizational change (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004; Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017). Organizational change is 'the introduction of practices that are different from those currently in use and that impact the whole organization, its structure, strategy, human resources, operations, and even culture' (Winand & Anagnostopoulos, 2017, p. 3). Implementing better governance principles inherently requires organizational change from some governance structures and processes to others (Corkery & Schoenberg, 2021) or even a complete change of the value system (Girginov, 2021). As Winand and Anagnostopoulos (2017) found that sport innovation positively impacts organizational change, it is relevant to believe that an innovative organization will more readily adopt better governance principles because it is more inclined to change. Therefore, while this study follows previous studies outside the sport literature emphasizing the impact of governance on innovation, it is important to move beyond these studies and examine the impact of innovation on implementing better governance principles.

Practically, we encourage sport organizations managers to adopt better governance principles, particularly transparency, as identified by the results. Beyond the fact that public authorities increasingly use better governance criteria to grant funds that encourage or obligate sport organizations to adopt these principles, our study indicates that better-governed sport organizations are more likely to innovate. These results are significant because recent events such as the COVID19 crisis have shown that sport innovation is crucial as sport organizations adapt to their changing environment (Byers et al., 2022). While some principles of better governance require resources that not all sport organizations possess, others only require the willingness of the organizations' representatives to apply them. Regarding better governance, there is no 'one size fits all' recipe (Parent et al., 2021). For example, some easily applicable principles could

be the publication of the board meetings' minutes, the establishment of formal procedures of risk management, a skill-based composition of the board, a focus on diversity and inclusion issues, or a clear and transparent definition of the values, vision, and missions of the organization. The adoption of these better governance measures should have a positive impact on their innovation, whether by building trust with partners, attracting new sponsors and investors, or generating new ideas through a more inclusive environment.

Nevertheless, our study has some limitations that open up new research avenues. First, by collecting publicly available online data, we measured better governance through three main principles (i.e. transparency, democracy, and accountability). The measurement of better governance could differ depending on the principles observed and how they are measured. For example, there could be a disconnect between what the organization publishes online and its actual level of governance. While observational methods are relevant to measuring the adoption of better governance principles (Geeraert, 2019), other methods exist (Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013b; Parent & Hoye, 2018; Thompson et al., 2022). Future research could examine the relationship between better governance and sport innovation using different measurement methods, such as auto-evaluative methods, which could reveal different results by overcoming the limitations of not having data online (Zintz & Gérard, 2019).

Second, our research focused on recognized regional sport federations in Belgium. With a sample comprising almost the entire population, we ensured that the results of our study were generalizable to the specific Belgian regional context. However, better governance is culturally (Girginov, 2019) and organizationally (Parent et al., 2021) context-dependent. Consequently, the relationship between better governance and sport innovation might differ through organizations (for example, local, provincial, regional, and national organizations) and countries or regions (notably depending on the policy directions and the governance culture). Consequently, we encourage future research to examine better governance and sport innovation within different contexts to understand better the contextual influence on the relationship between these two concepts.

Finally, as Thompson et al. (2022) identified, 258 unique better governance principles exist. This study only focused on transparency, accountability, and democracy. This choice is relevant because of the predominance of these three principles (Thompson et al., 2022). Nevertheless, findings could differ if focusing on other principles such as social responsibility, integrity, solidarity, or autonomy. Future studies should include these additional principles to have a different perspective on better governance.

Note

1. As suggested by numerous scholars, in this manuscript, the term better governance is preferred to good governance to move away from the good/bad dichotomy (see, for instance, Chappelet & Mrkonjic, 2013a, 2019; Parent et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2022).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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