

# National sports federations and public intervention: a public-private management between synergies and tensions between actors

*Fédérations sportives nationales et intervention publique :  
un management public-privé du sport entre synergies et tensions entre acteurs*

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## ABSTRACT

This research addresses the interactions between actors from the State (represented, in our study, by the Ministry of Sports) and national sports federations (NSFs) in the development of sports and specifically, in the implementation of the NSF's sports policies. Involving more than 15 million members, NSFs are key in the organization, management and promotion of sports. This study examines the public/private management model used by NSFs that have a public-service mission. The collaboration between the Ministry of Sports and an NSF is studied from the perspective of the actors' strategies. Indeed, as part of an intervention-

research on the French Rugby Union (FFR), semi-structured interviews were conducted with board members and sports technicians, representing the State and working for this NSF. The data analysis, based on three methods of data collection, shows both synergies and tensions around the conception of the FFR's sports policy, both on its content, on the roles of the actors and their relations, and on the managerial philosophy of this tool into the national network.

## Key-words

*national sports federation, State, sport policy, management tool, strategic analysis*

## RÉSUMÉ

L'objet principal de cette recherche est d'étudier les interactions entre des acteurs de l'État (représenté, dans notre étude, par le Ministère des Sports) et des fédérations sportives nationales (FSN), dans le développement du sport et plus concrètement, dans la conduite de la politique sportive de ces fédérations. Regroupant plus de 15 millions de licencié(e)s, celles-ci sont effectivement clés dans l'organisation, la gestion et la promotion de la pratique sportive

fédérée. Par conséquent, il s'agit d'étudier le modèle de management public/privé à l'œuvre au sein des FSN, dès lors qu'elles sont investies d'une mission de service public. Cette collaboration entre le Ministère des Sports et une fédération sportive est étudiée sous l'angle des stratégies d'acteurs à l'œuvre : en effet, dans le cadre d'une recherche-intervention au sein de la Fédération Française de Rugby (FFR), nous avons interrogé des dirigeants fédéraux et agents de l'État placés auprès de cette FSN. L'analyse des données récoltées par triangulation marque des synergies

et tensions autour de la conception de la politique sportive de la FFR, à la fois sur son contenu, sur les rôles des uns et des autres et sur la place que doit avoir ce dispositif dans l'organisation fédérale.

## Mots-clés

*Fédération sportive nationale, État, politique sportive, dispositif de gestion, analyse stratégique*

## INTRODUCTION

### Issues, context and question

Since 1945, the French sports model has been based on “co-management” between the sports movement, represented by national sports federations (NSF), associations (by private law) under the French law of 1901, and the State, through its Ministry of Sports (MS) (Bayle and Durand, 2004; Scelles, 2017). The latter sets out the main objectives and the legal framework (via the French Code of Sport) and ensures that the general interest related to physical and sporting activities is respected. For the NSFs, their purpose, in accordance with Article L. 131-1 of the Code of Sport, is “the organisation of the practice of one or more sports disciplines”. They manage, promote and develop the sport. In this context, it is important to remember that most French sports federations have a public-service mission as soon as the State grants them ministerial approval. Thus, our analysis focuses on these federations, which are recognized by the State and therefore marked by public intervention in their development. In concrete terms, this dynamic of NSF/State cooperation is assessed financially, on the one hand, by an annual grant following a contractualization (agreement on objectives) and on the other hand, by the secondment of sport technical advisors (Scelles, 2017).

According to Bayle and Durand (2004), since 1996, NSF/State relations in France have been marked by ambiguities and paradoxes. By way of illustration, Bernardeau Moreau (2004) indicates that the monopoly position conferred by the public authorities on federations leads to a strengthening of State control and legitimizes its right of inspection, even though the NSFs are legally considered autonomous.

Faced with these realities, the NSFs and the MS are each developing strategies while simultaneously ensuring that they control their “zone of uncertainty” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), i.e., the margin

of autonomy and freedom that these organizations have in the implementation of their actions. For the MS, it is a question of “giving better to enhance and stimulate more” (Bayle and Durand, 2004, p.131), while guaranteeing the regulation that is partially imposed by the State via legislative, financial and political avenues. On the side of the NSFs, we note a wish for greater autonomy not only through the professionalization of their activities, their actors, and their structures and processes (Nagel *et al.*, 2015) but also through the diversification of their actions and their interactions with other stakeholders. The challenge for NSFs is ultimately to manage the ambiguity relating to the different logics that characterize their development (associative, entrepreneurial and public service) and that allow them to increase in power (Bayle, 2010).

Taking these situations into account, NSFs must define and implement their sports policies, i.e., a structured set of objectives aimed at the quantitative (developing the number of licensees, i.e., members) and/or qualitative (better access to practice, public diversification, achievement of nonsporting goals) development of the practice (Jaccard *et al.*, 2016; Viollet *et al.*, 2015). However, for its part, the State, through its sovereign power and its investment in the NSFs, seems able to “orientate [...] in the direction of the national sport policy that it seeks to implement” the NSFs’ sports policy.

Thus, our research question focuses specifically on the dynamics between the public/private management of sport and, in particular, NSF sports policies (or ‘federal’ sports policies). The challenge is to characterize the collective action of NSFs (‘federal’) actors (with a specific focus on political leaders) and the State (through its sports technical advisors) around an NSF’s sports policy. In fact, the question raised is the following: ***What are the synergies and tensions between federal and state actors around the implementation of an NSF’s***

**sports policy?** The results of our study suggest that these synergies or tensions are occurring in several areas at the dawn of the development of an NSF sports policy. This is reflected in terms of relationships, with networks of actors that are changing. In the end, co-construction takes place in an ambiguous and incomplete way.

Before sharing these results, this paper first presents the conceptual foundations of the notion of ‘federal’ sports policy and then the theoretical framework that results from it to better understand the relational and cooperative dynamics in question. This is how we use the framework of the Crozier and Friedberg strategic analysis (1977). Then, we present the case study of the French Rugby Union (or French Rugby Federation - FFR) and the methodology used, based, in particular, on conducting semi-directive interviews. The results are discussed and put into perspective in a multidisciplinary manner and compared with other works, then, in conclusion, with regard to the project currently undergoing a reform of the governance of French sport.

## 1. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

### Theoretical framework

To understand how, given public intervention, approved NSFs implement their sports policies (in other words, define their objectives for developing the practice), it is necessary, first, to fully understand the concept of sport policy applied to NSFs. Callède (2002) identifies five characteristics of a sport policy: according to the author, it is a general framework for action (1), goals and objectives to be achieved (2), concrete measures (3), audiences to be reached (4) and finally, the allocation of resources and/or regulatory requirements including coercive measures (5). In the same spirit, Bayeux (2013) uses four levels to understand and define sports policy: a political level (definition of values and goals) (1), a strategic level (set of coordinated actions, serving specific objectives with regard to the goals) (2), a tactical level (allocation of resources, management and organizational methods) (3) and finally an operational level (concrete implementation of the actions) (4).

Thus, a federal sports policy has a structuring content focused on the development of a sporting practice (in our case study, rugby) on a national territory (a country). It is also a set of interacting actors who are part of a ‘federal’ network (Houlihan, 2000; Bayle, 2007). This network includes structures operating at different levels (the NSF headquarters, its decentralized organizations and its affiliated clubs). The challenge for sports policies lies in the coexistence of several actors (political leaders (elected officials), volunteers, sports professionals - including state sports advisors - and administrative employees), who intervene at different levels in this policy: some are involved in the design of sports policy and/or set up the conditions to achieve the objectives set forth, while others carry out actions on the field (fort Skille (2008, 2015) the latter are “implementer” actors).

Consequently, the entry point of this conceptualization is considering that federal sports policy is a management tool, as understood by Hatchuel and Weil (1992) and David (1998), that an NSF must design and make emerge. Indeed, according to these authors, a management tool is the result of the articulation of three complementary elements: a formal substrate

(or substance, i.e., concrete support on which the tool is based), a managerial philosophy (designating the interests of the organization and the role of this tool) and a simplified representation of the actors' roles (the tool indicating the roles that the actors must play in its design and implementation).

Following Viollet *et al.* (2016), this three-part conceptualization seems to be easily articulated with NSF sports policies as described above because we find its key elements: content (similar to the “formal substrate”), objectives for the organization (the “managerial philosophy” of this policy) and actors registered in a network (which refers to the “simplified vision of the actors' role”, insofar as sports policy is brought about by and for actors registered in a network, in which the roles and relationships are to be defined). Moisdon (1997, p.7) defines the management tool as a “formalization of the organized activity”, which also seems to be appropriate for NSF sports policies and the ‘structuring’ dimension. Therefore, understood as a management tool, our proposal consists of understanding and delimiting NSF sports policies as overlapping a formal substrate, a managerial philosophy and the ideal roles played by the actors. In addition, this is a central management tool for an NSF because it aims to achieve the development objectives of the sports discipline in question and therefore the “core element”. These objectives embody the purpose of NSFs (Bayle, 2000) and the intervention of State sports advisors, who are made available to the NSFs and their regional committees to support them in the implementation of their sporting projects.

Our conceptual framework for analysis is therefore based on this ‘conceptual triptych’. Additionally, since our work is situated in a ‘micro’ perspective (a study of interactions between actors) and focuses on the actors' strategies, the theoretical framework of strategic analysis carried out by Crozier and Friedberg (1977) seems relevant in the context of our research question. Moreover, such a perspective, focusing on the games and strategies of (key) actors is adequate, if not necessary, to closely study public intervention in the sports policy of national federations. In addition, we have highlighted, from a contextual point of view, the existence of areas of uncertainty, strategies and differences in the levels of legitimacy and resources, of NSFs and the MS. The contributions of Crozier and Friedberg (1977) are

enlightening as they make it possible to understand the power relations at work between actors, here, between NSF political leaders (from the headquarters of the NSF) and State advisors (or technical advisors). According to this theoretical approach, the actors are individuals concerned and capable of intervening in a problem, in this case, the design of federal sports policy. This is a common challenge; it is a question of conducting shared, co-constructed reflections about the development of an identified sport discipline. In such a situation, the actors “have margins of freedom allowing them to question the expected functioning of organizations” (Lux, 2015, p.85), ultimately the management tools and systems they put in place. To do this, Crozier and Friedberg (1977) postulate that actors mobilize resources (hierarchical and relational information and know-how) and put in place strategies to preserve their interests. Each actor remains under the constraint of the organization in which he or she is part and his or her managerial culture. In this respect, “the actor is strategic, he is also cultural” (Bernardeau Moreau, 2004a, p.114).

Consequently, the actions and interactions of the actors are centered around power relations; the power that these actors hold leads to the control of their “zone of uncertainty”. In addition, Crozier and Friedberg (1977) use the term “concrete action system” to identify the different strategies, conflicts or alliances that will take shape. This concrete system of action therefore denotes the relationship between influence and/or dependence and the relationships of control and/or collaboration between identified actors.

In the end, the analytical framework aims to identify the interplay of actors and power relating to public intervention within NSFs, specifically when designing their sports policies. The challenge is to understand the synergies and tensions that appear on each identified dimension of federal sports policy: its content (the actors seek to develop their points of view on the policy to be implemented), its managerial philosophy (the actors will give meaning to the policy for the NSF and will assign management objectives to it) and finally, the roles of each actor during this co-construction process. Figure 1 below outlines our theoretical analytical framework.

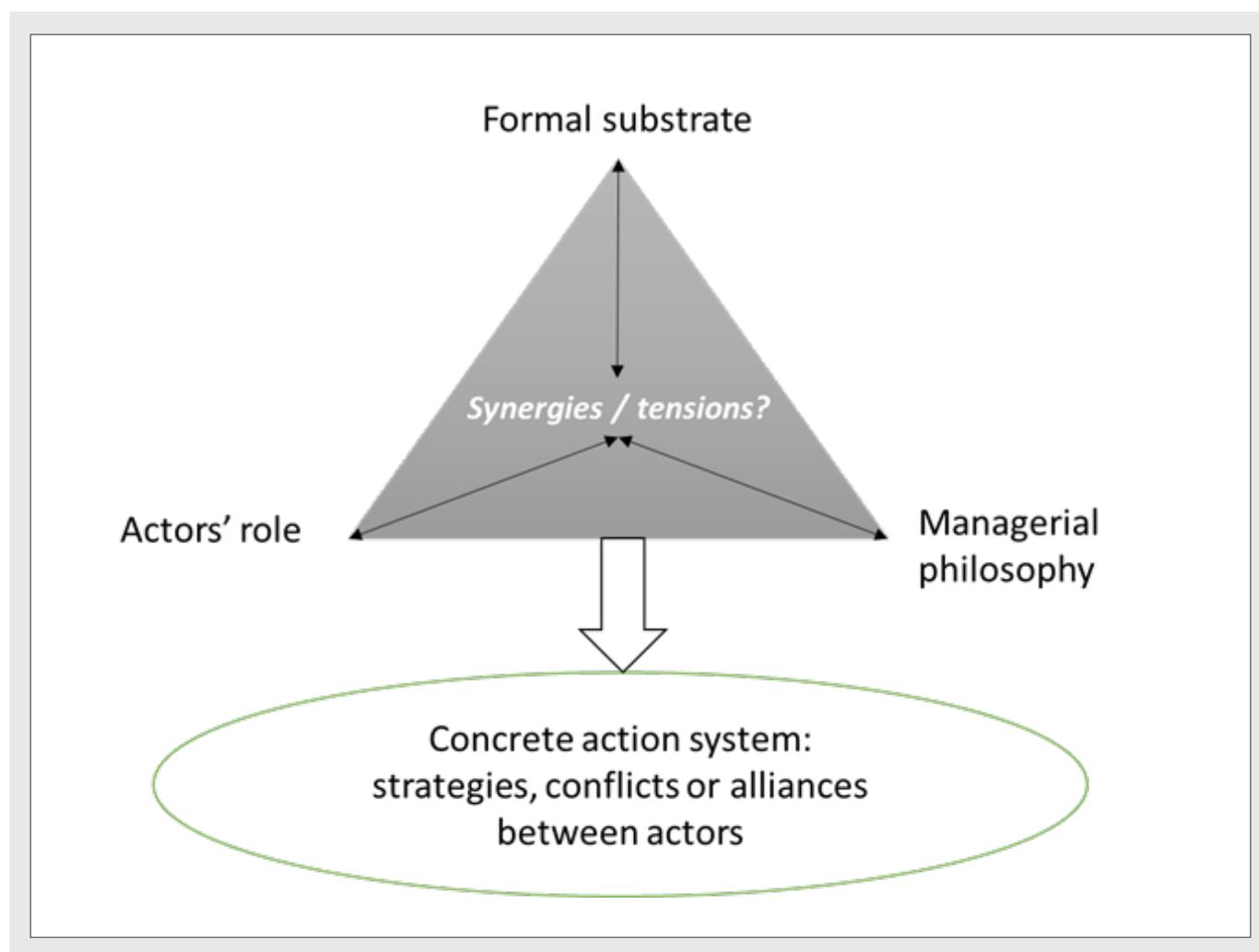


Figure 1 – Theoretical analytical framework: federal sports policy, synergies and tensions to be studied in three dimensions (developed by the author)

## 2. PRÉSENTATION OF THE STUDY:

### Case and methodology

Our research is based on an exploratory longitudinal case study, which is capable of reconstructing the dynamics of the actors. It should be noted that this study is part of a research-intervention project regarding the design of federal sports policy to be carried out retrospectively over the 2013-2016 period in the FFR. Thus, before outlining the modalities of data collection and analysis, we first present this field of research.

### 2.1. Presentation of the field: the French Rugby Federation

The FFR is one of the most important NSFs in France due to its number of members (the seventh sport) and the economic and media rise of rugby. Founded in 1919, the FFR was, three years later, recognized as promoting public interest by the Ministry of Sports and was therefore approved by the Ministry of Sports. As an association created under the French law of 1901, the goal of this nonprofit organization is, according to its statutes, “to stimulate and develop the practice of rugby in all its forms (traditional practice, seven..) in applying rules of the game settled by the International Rugby Board, to guide and regulate rugby and to defend its interests”(translation of the Title 1, Article 1).

Recently, rugby has seen accelerated development in France, with a strong increase in the number of members, especially since 2007 following the organization of the Rugby World Cup. Consequently, this sport has benefited from an increase in stadium attendances and media coverage of its national activities. This quantitative development has been followed by the professionalization of its activities, individuals, structures and processes (Nagel *et al.*, 2015), especially in its headquarters.

The FFR has approximately 140 employees, grouped into six departments; thus, it appears to be a “corporate company”. Two particularities are to be noted at the organizational level: on one hand, a pyramid-shaped hierarchical structure extends from the headquarters to the clubs, including regional (34 in number) and departmental (102) committees. On the other hand, a relationship with the MS has materialized on a human level through the provision of (technical) advisors from the State, both at the national and regional levels. These ‘agents’ are technical sports advisors (Article L. 131-12 of the French Sport Code). Some of them exclusively have missions at the national level (headquarters). These individuals are members of the National Technical Direction under the authority of a National Technical Director.

The FFR is therefore a sports structure, with its licensees, coaches, educators, clubs and teams from France who play at different levels of competition. The FFR is also a management structure, with an executive committee (governing board) that is updated every four years and is composed of 37 elected members, a steering committee that includes 16 political leaders, and other working commissions. We therefore find the three logics that the FFR, as a ‘recognized’ national sport federation, must simultaneously lead and cooperate (Bayle, 2010).

The presentation of this field would be incomplete if the organizational context in which this study was conducted were not taken into account. This context is linked to the strong development of rugby that we introduced above: in the preface of the French Rugby White Paper, written in 2010, in which the President of the FFR announced: “Rugby has reached a stage of its development which undeniably constitutes a new step and we should stop an instant so as to have the means to pursue our progression”.

This excerpt reflects the desire to overhaul the FFR’s sports policy, which is in line with the planned arrival of a new National Technical Director in October 2014, a “lead” actor from the point of view of State intervention. The FFR also wishes to set up new methods of relations with its regional committees, with the implementation a financing model that will provide funding on the basis of strategic regional projects rather than on the basis of numerical data (the number of clubs, teams and members in the region). These organizational and structural dimensions have therefore pushed the FFR to reflect on its sport policy, with roles that need to be defined and coordinated.

## 2.2. Data collection

The nature of this research, its theoretical foundation and our main question favor the use of a qualitative approach (Thiétart *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, the objective is to gain an understanding of a studied phenomenon, as Wacheux (1996, p.15) attests: “qualitative research is first understanding the why and how of events in concrete situations”. In addition to exploring and describing, the objective is to understand and analyze the dynamics of actors.

Using this logic, a case study was carried out to understand the phenomenon in its entirety. This strategy makes it possible to understand the actors at an individual level (Noël, 1989) and, more generally, to perceive dynamics that a survey alone would not allow us to understand (Yin, 2003). Additionally, the case study is a recommended method when changes occur within an organization and to explore a phenomenon not previously addressed (Yin, 2003). The choice of this method was based on a triangulation of data, made possible by the integration of a research-intervention approach: the exploitation of documentary resources, participant observations, informal interviews and finally, 23 semi-structured interviews conducted from May 2014 to February 2015. This triangulation of data made it possible to move back and forth between speeches (interviews) and acts (documentary resources) and to better understand the reality of the actors through participant observation. The objective was to strengthen the reliability and validity of the primary data. In this respect, using back and forth triangulation was

<b>Pseudonym – respondent code number</b>	<b>Interview length</b>	<b>Typology - role</b>
<b>P1</b>	1 hour 8 minutes	Board member
<b>P2</b>	40 minutes	Board member & President of a Regional Committee
<b>P3</b>	41 minutes	Board member
<b>P4</b>	1 hour	Board member
<b>P5</b>	56 minutes	Board member
<b>P6</b>	36 minutes	Board member
<b>P7</b>	54 minutes	Board member
<b>P8</b>	1 hour 32 minutes	Board member & President of a Regional Committee
<b>P9</b>	1 hour 8 minutes	Board member & President of a Regional Committee
<b>P10</b>	45 minutes	Board member & President of a Regional Committee
<b>P11</b>	52 minutes	Board member & President of a Regional Committee
<b>P12</b>	29 minutes	Board member
<b>S1</b>	45 minutes	Regional and national sport technician
<b>S2</b>	1 hour 19 minutes	Regional and national sport technician
<b>S3</b>	1 hour 23 minutes	Regional and national sport technician
<b>S4</b>	1 hour 25 minutes	Regional and national sport technician
<b>S5</b>	1 hour 7 minutes	DTN member
<b>S6</b>	1 hour 5 minutes	DTN member
<b>S7</b>	1 hour 20 minutes	DTN member
<b>S8</b>	1 hour 1 minute	DTN member
<b>S9</b>	56 minutes	DTN member
<b>S10</b>	58 minutes	DTN member
<b>S11</b>	1 hour 20 minutes	DTN member

Table 1 – Interview list of participants

important to control the biases inherent in this qualitative study. The three data collection techniques used are presented below.

First, access to several documents, whether publicly accessible (e.g., data on the website) or internal, makes it possible to deepen our knowledge of several points related to the FFR's activity, or more generally, of relations and cooperation between the State and national authorities. Participant observation allows for the visualization of the organizational context from a global point of view, as well as the behavior of

the actors on a daily basis. This technique also aims to go beyond the provided speeches to unveil the concrete practices of the actors (Gavard-Perret *et al.*, 2008) and thus gain a better understanding of what is happening in the organization.

Finally, this research was largely based on the technique of semi-structured interviews. These were carried out with 11 state advisors (we chose technical advisors whose missions were exclusively or partly carried out at the national level) and 12 FFR political leaders, i.e., members of the executive committee

and/or the steering committee of the FFR. It should be noted that the choice of these interviewees is not insignificant. The choice was made in perfect consultation with the actors who initiated the research intervention, with a double logic: on one hand, to question actors who are likely, by their function, to take part in the conception of the FFR's sports policy and on the other hand, to promote a geographical representation of both federal elected officials with territorial presidential functions and regional technical advisors.

The interview technique allowed us to have a privileged relationship with these actors, which was adapted to explore individual dimensions. This technique also makes it possible to follow a common thread, ask additional questions and leave the interview open (Pomeranz *et al.*, 2015). This type of interview involves the use of a guide that is a collection of topics and questions that the researcher wants to cover. Nevertheless, this list is intended to be more of a guide than an explicit set of questions for which each interviewee must answer (Bernard, 2006). As explained in Appendix 1, this interview guide allowed us to highlight the representations and 'games' of the actors regarding the FFR's sports policy to be designed and then to understand how the actors position this management tool in the organization and how they position themselves with each other, with reference to the sports policy. Table 1 lists the actors interviewed and their functions. It should be noted that to ensure the anonymity of the National Technical Director and the advisors interviewed, we have grouped all the national technical advisors under the name "DTN member".

### 2.3. Data analysis

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the goals of a qualitative data analysis are to "*reflect the complexity of human interactions by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others*" (p.202). Using this logic, a thematic content analysis was carried out by transcribing each interview and using a research notebook. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining the themes that emerge from the data; it is thus conducive to highlighting the views and representations of stakeholders at a given time. Finally, this type of analysis

goes beyond the accounting of expressions and words in a text to the identification of implicit and explicit ideas from the data (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012). Coding is the primary process that precedes interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998) and is used to identify themes from raw data by recognizing important moments in the data.

We conducted two levels of coding and categorization. First, by collecting the representations of the actors, we were able to identify points of tension and preliminary synergies. The analysis of these initial results revealed a first level of categorization with three emerging subcategories. First, organizational complexity around "sporting" projects; second, the importance of transversal functioning and the weight of managerial culture; and third, opposition between technical legitimacy and institutional legitimacy among these actors. In the second step and to solidify the analysis of our data, we proceeded to use deductive logic starting from the four "*sources of power*" of the actors (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977) as a second level of categorization. Figure 2 shows the coding process used in this respect.

In the end, seven subcategories were obtained and assigned to each dimension of the three-part conceptualization ('trptych') characterizing NSF sports policies (reading grid via the management tool used by Hatchuel and Weil, 1992, which provides three basic categories, constituting "metacoding"). These main subcategories are developed in the Results section and illustrated, in particular, by the selection of verbatim excerpts from the interviews. The objective is to provide a better understanding of the convergences and divergences among actors and of their strategies and power relations at work. In other words, these quotations allow us to accurately illustrate the analysis and reflect the ideas and content of each subcategory.

## 3. RESULTS

To develop the results of this research, we first approach the data using the triptych that characterizes management tools. We begin by reporting on the strategies of the actors in relation to their roles and relationships with respect to the design of federal sports policy. Then, we focus on the expression of these strategies around the content of this policy.

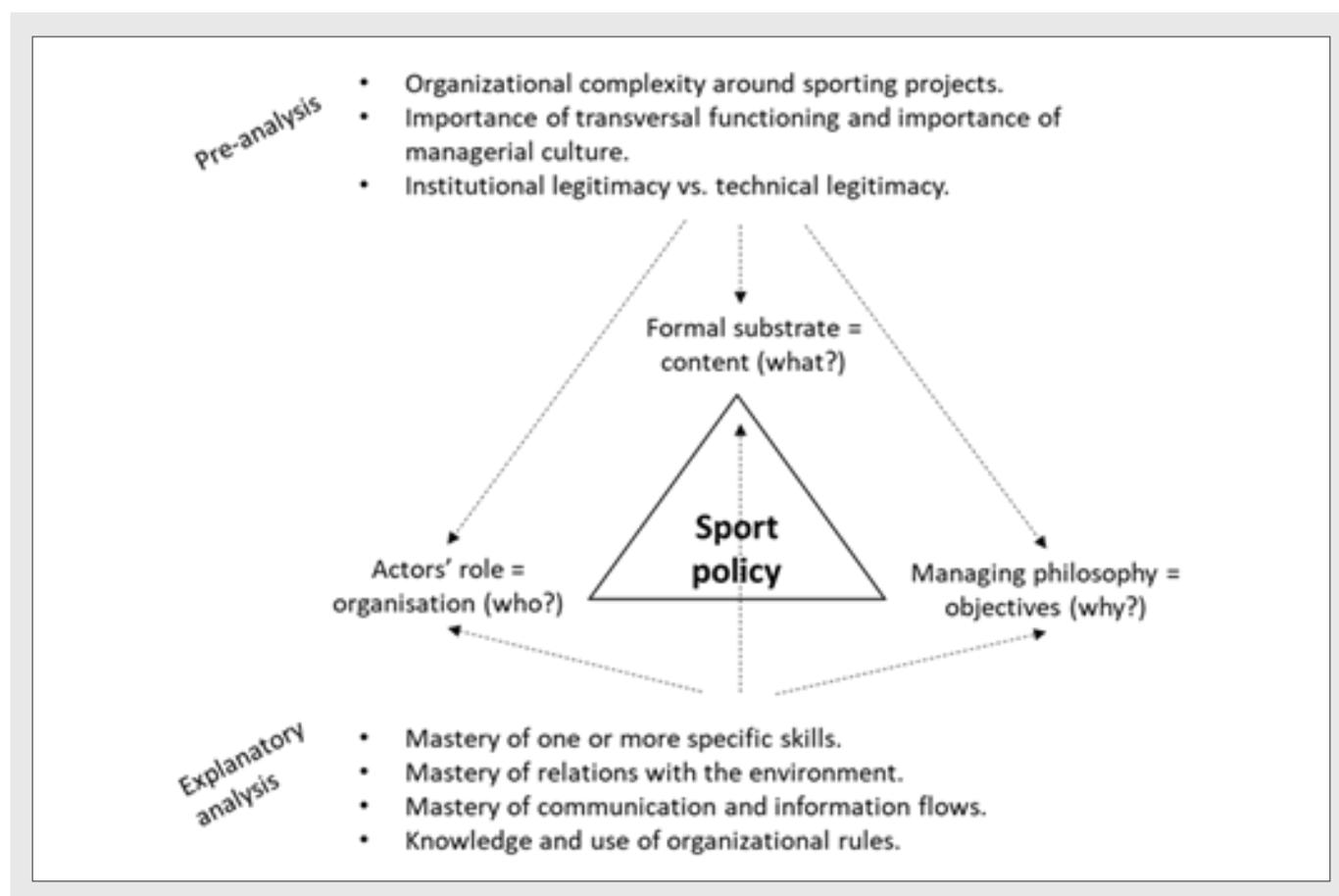


Figure 2 – Coding method: seven subcategories of analysis  
(developed by the author)

Finally, we show how the actors “confront” each other regarding their individual managerial philosophies. In addition, in our longitudinal analysis, we first expose the synergies and tensions of the actors at the dawn of the conception of federal sports policy; then, in a second step, differentiate between those that are effectively expressed during this process and those that reflect the underlying strategies of the actors.

**“Simplified representation of the actors’ roles”: recognition of each other’s skills but ultimately, ambiguous roles and responsibilities**

In the first dimension, the initial synergies between the actors representing the State (technical advisors) and the political leaders indicate that these two parties consider each other as essential and therefore interdependent. For political leaders,

technical advisors undeniably bring added value to the discussions because of their expertise; they are then recognized as having technical legitimacy. On the other hand, leaders are essential to the “political” validation of any structuring project, such as the implementation of a sports policy. This functional legitimacy, specific to the association, is well rooted in the managerial culture and therefore respected. The following verbatim quotes from an FFR elected official and then a member of the DTN, summarize our comments: *“The design can only be mixed. There are people in the DTN who are technicians. Then, politicians who have to assume their own responsibility and the development of their own federation. So it’s a combination of the two.”* (P12, federal elected official); *“The role granted to political leaders, for me what is fundamental is that without them, there is no validation. They are the ones who will validate, who will take responsibility for decision-making through validation.”* (S10, member of the DTN).

If the question of the roles and responsibilities of each party therefore seems to have been resolved, it nevertheless contains some points of tension, first of all linked to the federation's current activity. On one hand, political leaders report a lack of knowledge regarding the activity of DTN members, even more so for regional technical advisors, who sometimes have highly differentiated interventions depending on the region. On the other hand, the technical advisors (national and/or regional) also have a lack of knowledge of the fields of action of elected officials, to which their lack of availability is added. These elements are perceived as obstacles, or at least as speed bumps, to the implementation of shared reflections and, ultimately, collective decisions: *"I am convinced that we have a lot of skills in the Federation, [...] but it is not always optimized, very well exploited, because we do not know each other. Moreover, concerning political leaders, some come once a week, others once a month."* (S3, Regional Technical Advisor).

Based on this difficulty, the roles and relationships between these two bodies of actors are more or less coordinated, particularly with regard to regional technical advisors who intervene occasionally in national missions (on development or training activities). The main initial tension in the process of designing sports policy lies in a divergence of the modalities of this process ("who does what? How do we associate?") and the relationship that the individuals must maintain with each other. A member of the DTN expressed himself in this way: *"For me, there is [...] a lack of information. To know who does what exactly, what you are for, what you do?"* (S5)

In concrete terms, while technical advisors wish to position themselves as a force for proposing this sports policy to federal political leaders, the latter wish to propose sports policy in which the ministerial dimension represents "only one part". Underlying this is the need for political actors to ignore that federal sports policy comes only from actors representing the State (a point of view shared by administrative actors) and ultimately, that this sports policy is "dependent" and "under the supervision" of the State. In other words, the members of the DTN, through their "technical" legitimacy, claim a leading role in defining sports policy. They effectively express the wish to be of creative assistance

to political leaders, which is an opportunity for these actors to acquire a certain 'leadership' in the design of this sports policy. These elements are not perceived as such within the FFR or, for the most part, by elected officials, who see it as a co-construction with several other actors. The two verbatim quotes below highlight this divergence: *"The National Technical Direction is there, it is made to propose a sport policy to the Executive Committee of the federation."* (S6, member of the DTN); *"I am not saying that it should come from the National Technical Direction, I am saying that the sport policy should be defined by the Federation, and for me, the National Technical Direction is one of the components of our Federation."* (P9, FFR political leader and President of a Territorial Committee).

These initial synergies and tensions in the process are reflected during the implementation of sports policy. Indeed, the actors have entered into collaboration by setting up a "Steering Group" with a few political leaders (six) and the DTN, which share responsibility for designing sports policy. On the other hand, sport advisors play a role as a "force of proposal", as their technical legitimacy confers on them: indeed, through a grouping during a seminar (December 2014), all these advisors (national and regional) will proclaim themselves as forming a "National Technical Team" and produce the "Rugby National Guidelines", which is a strong example of federal sports policy, and as dedicated to being set up in all regional committees. Nevertheless, these advances also mark ambiguities and difficulties in the rest of the process because the prerogatives of the actors have already been formalized and communicated. Table 2 shows this ambiguous formalization, insofar as the DTN is held responsible for proposing the "content" and elected officials "propose the sports policy to the Executive Committee".

The question raised when considering these elements lies in the way in which the leaders and the DTN collaborate to validate the effective content of sports policy. In addition, this new situation raises a question regarding the role of decision-making bodies in relation to sports policy and in particular that of the FFR Steering Committee: two validation logics appear (first, the six elected members of the Steering Group and second, the FFR Executive Committee), for political leaders who do not have

Missions	Political leaders	National Technical Director
<b>Definition of the FFR sport policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Suggest the sport policy to the executive committee</li> <li>▪ Construct and validate its implementation</li> </ul>	Suggest the content: operational objectives, action plans

**Table 2** – Stabilized but ambiguous roles through the creation of a steering group  
Source : internal document, "Steering Group of the Sporting Departement - Areas of responsibility"

the same influence. In the end, through these evolutions, we also notice that the technical advisors have been able to operate in a "network" (seminar exchanges) and appear to be a real "collective actors" and so a "collective force" in the sense proposed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977); at the same time, the FFR political leaders seem to be more dispersed.

**"Formal substrate":  
debates on the content of sports policy,  
which are ultimately reduced  
to national guidelines**

With regard to the content of sports policy and the elements on which it is based, we first note that each actor measured the multidimensional nature of such a policy. Thus, the actors' representations converge on the fact that NSF's sports policy can be based both on existing sporting projects, driven by the federation (for which it is a question of establishing structured, measurable and coherent objectives) and that it must be integrated into the federation's existing plan (called "Ambition 2020"). Nevertheless, two tensions can be identified in regard to formalizing the FFR's sports policy. First, some political leaders express their fear of the predominance of national (i.e., French) sports policy over the rugby development: *"The FFR sport policy must not be the ministry sport policy!"* (P11, FFR political leader, President of a Regional Committee).

Second, through our interviews, we were able to report on the differences in approaches used for the future development of rugby. Whether for technicians or political leaders, some share a "conservative" vision of rugby that is centered on basic practice, i.e., competitive club practices and traditional club practice (with fifteen players). On the other hand, other

representations show a real desire for evolution and even openness, with the idea of further promoting rugby for 5, a new form of contactless practice (called "Touch rugby" in UK), rugby sevens, which has become a Olympic discipline, female practice and the achievement of nonsporting objectives (Houlihan, 2011). *"On the one hand, we have some people who think that the most important thing, today, is to develop the Sevens part for the Olympic Games" [...]. But there are other people who think that the main object of the French Rugby Union is the XV de France (the national men's rugby team) and its results"* (S6, member of the DTN).

Finally, in terms of the synergies expressed, we focus mainly on the formalization of national guidelines, which clearly specify objectives that are structured around three areas of action: the development and club life, performance (detection and preparation of the elites) and the protection of players. These guidelines are an added value because they come from DTN members and advisors, whose skills are recognized. They are also "Proposed by the Steering Group of the Sporting Department and validated by the President of the Federation" and "Voted in the Steering Committee" (source: document available via the following link: [https://www.ffr.fr/Media/Files/FFR/actualite/Congres\\_FFR\\_2.2\\_DirectivesTechniquesNationales](https://www.ffr.fr/Media/Files/FFR/actualite/Congres_FFR_2.2_DirectivesTechniquesNationales)), which gives them a certain amount of political legitimacy. In terms of tensions, we note the absence of a clear structure of sports policy in a single document, as the sport guidelines are considered too "restrictive" because they are limited to priorities, year after year, with regard to the action of the regional committees. Moreover, there is still confusion between the "Ambition 2020" plan and these guidelines, with an unestablished positioning of sport policy; the actors do not succeed in converging towards such a clearly established policy and have differentiated

representations regarding its content. Finally, some tensions during the process can be viewed positively: for example, some political leaders asked for a clear document to communicate the guidelines (first revised version) so that, in the end, this technical substance would be readable and understandable.

**“Managerial philosophy”:  
from a desire to give meaning  
collectively to appropriation  
by the state advisors**

The study of this third and final dimension of sports policy was unique because it did not reveal any initial tension because the actors have developed common managerial interests with regard to the design of sports policy. Nevertheless, in the end, this dimension was marked by tensions during the process and a managerial philosophy that has evolved. Let us return to this initial philosophy: for the actors of the State and the political members interviewed, the conception of the FFR’s sports policy makes it possible to “*give meaning to action*” (S4, Regional Technical Advisor) for everyone and therefore allows for a strengthened collective approach. However, to share a vision, whether in the federal headquarters (intra-organizational perspective) or in all the structures of the network (interorganizational dimension), as indicated by an elected official: “*the challenge of these reflections is that with all the committees, common objectives are achieved*” (P3).

The actors also praise the fact that they are “turning to a project approach” (P1, federal elected official) and have precise objectives, which are clarified internally, to communicate them externally and finally, to overcome the problem of a “tome” of actions: “What I find today is that we do a tome...] We need a framework with clear objectives” (P10, Vice President of the FFR and President of a Regional Committee). The actors therefore see where they want to go through the implementation of federal sports policy.

However, as the system is co-constructed, its interest “deviates” from the side of the State advisors and is no longer supported by political leaders, who are outside the process and who no longer work to “value” the idea of this management tool and its contribution to the FFR. For State advisors, the

formalization of content in terms of sports policy (such as national guidelines) allows them to have an annual “common thread” for the entire network of advisors, using a logic of regional deployment, while initially, political members had a medium/long-term vision of sports policy (for one or even two quadrennial mandates). Finally, it is interesting to note the willingness expressed by these technical advisors to promote a logic of efficiency, inspired by New Public Management (Hood, 1991) and made possible by the definition of objectives (first step via sports policy) and the measurement of the results obtained (the next step of defining performance criteria, which is not considered in our study) (Gilbert, 1980).

## 4. DISCUSSION

In view of the results of this research, several elements of discussion can be highlighted. We share them in three stages. First, they are about transforming the network of actors that underlies the design of the NSF’s sports policy. This shows the major role that the DTN plays in the collaboration between State and NSF actors around this process. We are also interested in the nature of this relationship between the actors of the NSF and the public authorities, which seems to contradict preconceived ideas (1). We will therefore propose to extend a conceptual vision of the field of sport management, offering continuity at the key periods in the evolution of the links between the State and NSF outlined by Bayle and Durand in 2004 (2). Finally, the success of the co-construction of such a sports policy seems to depend on the ability of the ‘public’ (from the State) and ‘private’ (from NSF) actors to share the leadership of such a project (3).

### 4.1. **The transformation of the network of actors, which is symptomatic of renewed coordination logics**

The “concrete system of action” obtained highlights above all the transformation of a network of actors, with two emerging groups. On one hand, a National Technical Team, “collective actor” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), resulting from an alliance between national and regional technical advisors who are grouped around the DTN. On the other hand, the

Steering Group of the Sporting Department, resulting from a coalition of a few political leaders and the DTN.

Working for the FFR, the State advisors certainly have partial control over the four sources of power in the sense proposed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977) but clearly manage to influence the process through their expertise, which they make visible in terms of formal substrate (formalization of national guidelines) and, moreover, collectively. Through these guidelines, the area of uncertainty they control is based on the quality of the information provided (structuring objectives); moreover, by making these guidelines annual, they control their evolution. It was also relevant to report on the transformation of the interests they defend through the co-constructed sport policy.

Additionally, the DTN appears to be the “pivot” between technical advisors and managers, which highlights the importance of the proximity it can, or even must, have with these same managers. The role of this actor is decisive on several points. First, its status makes him, from a ministerial point of view, responsible for the application of national sport policy by a federation; this has been confirmed by the formalization of national guidelines. Its dual involvement in two groups of created actors has made it a key actor with a pivotal role between state technical advisors (via the National Technical Team) and political leaders (via the Steering Group of the Sport Department). In the end, he played a role as a spokesperson for technical advisors, which has strengthened its role with political leaders. This study therefore marks a certain presence of State actors, who are well disposed - because they are organized - to ensure that national and federal sport policies co-exist. This organization refers to what Detchessahar (2001, 2013) calls the “work discussion space”. It is about “space of construction through the dialogue of solutions or constructs of collective action between interdependent actors. (Detchessahar, 2013, p.59). By creating a work discussion space bringing together all the State advisors (the DTN members), they have played a major role in the strategic level of sport policy in the sense of Bayeux, 2013.

In parallel with this commitment of the DTN members, the FFR political leaders have not been able to

set up such collective reflections, which would have made it possible, in particular, to define the political aims and ideological values of sports policy (Bayeux political level, 2013). Despite this state of affairs, these elected officials have managed to retain their power of validation, decision-making (in short, the responsibility for choices), and control over the existence of information, then communication, by guaranteeing the implementation of several “times” or validation procedures for what was proposed by the technical advisors: first, through the establishment of a Steering Group, then by mobilizing the prerogatives of the Executive Committee and the political weight of the President. Nevertheless, the multiplication of these moments and decision-making bodies tends to disrupt their “network” of political actors, with fields of responsibility that differ from one political leader to another with regard to the conception of the sport policy. Less active in this process, unable to engage in a work discussion space, they become more neutral in terms of reflection and position themselves in the final stage, the one of validation.

Finally, with regard to such a positioning by political leaders, we are witnessing another trend with regard to the traditional discourses that position the State as the control body regarding the NSFs and in particular their sport policies (Lachaume, 2013; Bayle and Durand, 2004; Zintz and Vaillau, 2008; Reynaud, 2013). Indeed, in the face of this sharing of “sources of power” (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), the roles are distinct between State actors and the elected leaders of an NSF. The former can be revealed by their strength of proposal and their ability to operate in a network, the latter manage to keep a decision-making role. Additionally, as soon as these roles are played by these actors, the results of our research show that within the framework of an NSF’s sport policy, it is not mechanically the “Ministry” that controls, but the latter proposes (like technical advisors) and then becomes controlled (political leaders retain control of key sources of power). This case will be an illustration of the logic of action and coordination that marks a new form of ambiguity in public intervention. Admittedly, it shows that the actors of the State retain an undeniable weight in strategic reflections; for all, the political leaders of an NSF remain masters of the organization of the actors and of the decision, inexorably political.

## 4.2. The relationship between the State and the NSF: from the co-management of sports to the co-construction of federal sports policies?

By relying on the Crozier and Friedberg strategic analysis (1977) into the original field of an NSF, this case study highlights the role of state advisors in defining the NSF's sports policy. Through their technical legitimacy and dynamism, they illustrate the capacity of state supervision to be proactive. Public intervention is therefore not fixed in terms of actions; it is also deployed to participate in strategic reflections.

To understand public intervention within these federations, it is important to recall the three key periods in the evolution of relations between the State and the NSFs. First, Bayle and Durand (2004, p.116) consider the period 1960-1984 to be one of "authoritarian regulation through the affirmation of the public service of sport". The following period (1984-1996) marks, according to the authors, a "crisis of legitimacy of the French model of co-management of sport" (*ibid.*, p.117). Finally, since 1996, the State/NSFs relations have been understood as an "attempt at managerial regulation based on a variable geometry partnership" (*ibid.*, p.121). Thus, the relations are regularly understood and analyzed in power relations that characterize the "co-management" of sport development. This term "co-management" between the State and the NSFs refers to the fact that each party is confined to its prerogatives (the State, its legislative power, the guarantor of the general interest, etc.; the NSFs and their mission of organizing and developing competitive practice), without using a "proactive" logic towards federal sport policies. However, our study shows the great interest for NSFs and state actors to collectively build mechanisms enabling them to define shared objectives, which makes sense from both a ministerial and federal point of view.

From then on, if we tried to give continuity to these three periods outlined by Bayle and Durand (2004), we would say that this relationship moves from the "co-management of sport" to the "co-construction of federal sport policies". In other words, the idea is no longer to talk about co-management between

the State and the NSFs but about the co-construction of management tools, as soon as we move from management logic to a logic of projects that involve and engage both political and technician actors. This implies defining the roles of each party in setting up such mechanisms and ensuring that they make sense for the activity of these actors.

For the NSFs, the challenge is all the greater because these tools have several characteristics. They are both structuring (setting up a set of objectives), mixed / hybrid (because they combine state actors and political leaders) and interorganizational (they are intended to extend into the network of structures, from committees to clubs). Finally, our case relates to one of the most structuring tools - sports policy, and therefore the overall development of the sport practice concerned - and could very well apply to a particular field (the definition of high-level sport, for example).

## 4.3. Sharing the 'leadership' of federal sports policies as a prerequisite for successful co-construction

A sports policy involves multiple issues (Jaccard *et al.*, 2016) and in the context of NSFs, from the point of view of both 'public' and 'private' actors acting on their behalf. This "hybridization" inherent in the design of such policy presupposes that there is "shared governance" between these two types of actors. In this case, this governance of an NSF sport policy is based both on the levels of legitimacy previously co-defined, accepted, and on the ability of actors with different statuses and functions to "share leadership" to form a "collective actor" (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). Already introduced in Anglo-Saxon studies on the governance of national sports organizations (Shilbury and Ferkins, 2011; Ferkins and Shilbury, 2012), this notion of shared leadership introduces the idea that actors (here, political leaders and advisors of the State) must be able to take into account the responsibilities and/or fields of expertise of each one to engage collectively in the construction of a project, in other words, in the design of a management tool. This sharing of leadership and ultimately of the 'governance' of federal sports policy is important in two respects.

First, it ensures that the three logics (associative, market and public service) of an NSF, identified by Bayle (2010), are taken into account. However, failure to take into account one of these three logics can lead to tensions between actors. By way of illustration, the formalization of the national guidelines by technical advisors has been challenged or even called into question by administrative managers and political leaders, particularly because of the absence of a business dimension (resources to be mobilized and resources generated) in the definition of the objectives. As a result, this identified lack has reduced the appropriation of sports policy by some actors. Second, shared leadership promotes the interweaving of the different levels of a sport policy (political, strategic, tactical and operational), as highlighted by Bayeux (2013). Since these four levels are linked, the empowerment of actors working on each of them is important for collective implementation. In concrete terms, this implies that federal sports policy must be supported by actors with different prerogatives engaged at different levels.

## CONCLUSION

Our study makes it possible to report on the evolution between representations and acts intended to design a management tool in a particular environment, a National Sports Federation. In other words, through this strategic analysis, we have sought to reflect the underlying strategies of two very distinct “bodies” of actors, but who must collaborate in the design of a key tool for an NSF, its sport policy. In their article about NSF governance, Zintz and Vaillau (2008, p.33) concluded as follows: *“The coexistence of volunteers and professionals is the rare resource here, undoubtedly a factor of complexity but above all a factor of richness and condition of sustainability of these unique organizations that are sports federations”*. The identification of the actors’ strategies is along these lines; they have generated as many synergies as tensions and ambiguities in the three dimensions of such sports policy. As a result, it is finally becoming difficult to read throughout the network. This shows a clear link between the dynamics of the actors, the content and the place ultimately taken by sport policy in the organization.

This exploratory work has some limitations, which form avenues for reflection and the identification of real research perspectives. First, they stem from the failure to take into account other actors who can interact in this process, such as the administrative employees at the headquarters. The stakeholder approach (Freeman, 1984) used for strategic connections could be descriptive (describe relationships and power relations) and/or instrumental (show relationships of influence or dependence) (Mercier, 2001).

More generally, this case is part of a French sports ecosystem that goes beyond the framework of the NSF and the State, which is undergoing a major transformation, with the rise of new organizations and new modes of practice. Taking these developments into account is clearly necessary in the implementation of federal sport policies, which leads the actors involved in the NSFs to adapt and open up to this environment.

Moreover, at the end of 2017, the Ministry of Sport initiated a reform of the governance of French

sport. In May 2018, the results of the works that called for the creation of a structure to “*guarantee the collegiality necessary to co-construct a common dynamic that respects the policies of each of the actors in sport: the State, the NSFs, local authorities and the economic world*” (source: website of the French National Olympic and Sports Committee: <http://cnosf.franceolympique.com/cnosf/actus/7470-rnovation-du-modle-sportif-franais.html>). These elements finally join our postulate of a transition from a co-management of sport to a co-construction of sport policies, in our case, NSF sport policies.

Additionally, in terms of transferability, it would be relevant to assess, as a multi-case study, the resonance of these results for the most important NSFs (e.g., football, tennis, handball), compared to smaller NSFs, more financially dependent on the Ministry of Sport. In addition, it would be interesting to carry out a territorial application of our study to reflect the similarities and differences in these synergies and tensions within the regional, which must also integrate this public/private management on their functioning. Finally, in terms of perspectives, it would also be useful to assess how the evolution of French sport governance will impact the roles and strategies of the actors gravitating around NSFs. It provides for “*strengthening the responsibility and autonomy of the NSFs, strengthening the role of local authorities, and redefining the role and organization of the State*” (Source: website “Acteurs du sport”).

This reform highlights a new ambiguity. The state, via its MS, was the driving force behind the consultation, which provides for strengthening the autonomy of the NSFs. It will therefore be relevant to assess to what extent the role of the NSF’s sport advisors will be transformed (weakened?). If our study indicates that, independently of the prerogatives of each organization, the actors are still able to retain room to maneuver in the way mechanisms such as federal sports policy is conducted, it will be interesting to keep a close eye on what will happen in the NSFs in terms of the actors’ dynamics and in a comparative logic. Beyond that, it is to be expected that there will be displacements in terms of synergies and tensions

between public and private actors, which it would be useful to analyze for a later update of the results highlighted in our research.

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## APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

**1<sup>st</sup> part: context – General framework**

Themes	Elements tackled
<b>1. Introduction: Presentation of the research and objectives of the interview</b> 5 – 10'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explanation of the intervention research</li> <li>• Objectives of the interview</li> </ul>
<b>2. The FFR sport policy</b> 5-8'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representations and perceptions about an NSF sport policy</li> <li>• Objectives given to the FFR sport policy</li> <li>• Missions, activities or tasks related to the FFR sport policy</li> </ul>
<b>3. Actors' roles regarding the FFR sport policy</b> 10-12'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived role for the success of the FFR sport policy</li> <li>• Roles assigned to other actors</li> </ul>

**2<sup>nd</sup> part: questions regarding the FFR sport policy formulation process**

Themes	Elements tackled
<b>4. Content of the FFR sport policy</b> 15 – 20'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Envisaged content and means</li> <li>• Perceived methods of management and evaluation</li> </ul>
<b>5. Perceived benefits and inconveniences regarding the sport policy process</b> 10 – 15'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived benefits around the FFR sport policy</li> <li>• Possible disadvantages</li> <li>• Actors involved</li> </ul>
<b>6. Conclusion: success or failure</b> 5'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other factors contributing to the success or failure of the FFR sport policy</li> </ul>