

PROVIDING PUBLIC SPORT FACILITIES IN POST-SOCIALIST TIMES: THE CASE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract: *The paper aims to investigate current approaches to the management of public sport facilities by local governments. In the Czech Republic, local clubs traditionally played a key role in providing sport to the public. With decreasing participation in organized sport, a significant number of clubs have been forced to transfer their facilities to local governments and the sport position of local authorities has strengthened considerably in recent years. In consequence, there have been alterations in the management of public sport facilities. The findings of statistical analysis emphasize an increasing role of specialized organizations at the expense of in-house management or external provision (facilities hired out to sport clubs). Moreover, local population and type of facility were found to be the possible reasons for different approaches. In-house management is associated with smaller municipalities whereas most of their facilities have the character of public goods. In contrast, publicly funded organizations and municipal enterprises appear in municipalities with larger populations providing sport facilities of regional importance in the form of mixed goods. Finally, clubs, as representatives of external provision, mostly provide sport facilities primarily intended for their own purposes – club goods. In the context of recent works and contemporary trends in sport participation, the research findings indicate that different forms of management may have significant effects not only on efficiency of public budgets but also on conditions for sport at local level – especially on targeting those who would participate in sport if they had access to new opportunities or leisure programs.*

Keywords: *sport facility, municipality, local government, public services, sport services, efficiency*

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INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the variations in the management of public sport facilities in the Czech Republic at the municipal level. Although some works talk about a minor impact of sport infrastructure on participation in sport (e.g., Rütten, 2000; Flemr, 2009; Špaček, 2011), uneven availability of sport facilities is widely considered one of the key determinants of differences in (or lower) participation (Seefeldt, Malina, & Clark, 2002; European Commission, 2008; Wicker, Breuer, & Pawlowski, 2009; Veal, 2010). Considering both the variety of sport activities and a growing individualization in sport (Slepičková, 2009; Špaček, 2011), the demands on sport facilities and their providers are still increasing.

Structures for providing sport facilities and services in the Czech Republic now fall into four broad segments: local governments, schools, the voluntary sector (clubs) and the private sector. Nevertheless, recent trends led to a new situation when sport clubs transferred their own facilities to local governments (Hobza & Novotný, 2008). This was arguably caused by the lack of strategic public support for the clubs, gradual dilapidation of their sport facilities, trends in sport participation (European Commission, 2010; Špaček, 2011), decreasing number of volunteers in sport (Hobza, Dohnal, & Mitáš, 2009) and/or the single-purpose character of most of the club facilities.

Thus, in recent years, municipalities have strengthened their position (or even got involved for the first time, in some cases) in sport (Slepičková, 2009; Sekot, 2010), with more than 70% of net local government expenditure on sport directed to the provision of sport facilities recently (Hobza, Skoumal, & Schwartzhoffová, 2013). Along with further changes in the legal framework (e.g., the Lottery Act No. 250/2000 Coll.), municipalities have become a major provider of sport facilities at the local level and sport services are ranking high among the public services provided by local authorities.

Despite some pilot studies such as Hobza and Novotný (2008) or Neuls, Kudláček, Vašíčková, and Hamřík (2013), there is still uncertainty about which management options municipalities are now using and which municipalities

are better placed to provide sport facilities to the public under current circumstances. Thus, the paper tests the statistical significance of the effects of local population size; and analyses the structure of local sport facilities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The position of the public sector in sport has not always been dominant in the current territory of the Czech Republic. Initially, the voluntary sector (clubs) played the main role in providing opportunities for sport. The basic network of sport facilities was established between 1870 and 1945. The majority were managed by the *Sokol*, sport clubs or schools, the rest belonged to local governments (Novotný, 2000, p. 127). It was the *Sokol* with its gymnasiums which covered even the smallest municipalities.

After 1948, the sport movement fell under direct control of the Communist Party. The *Sokol* was abolished and its property transferred to the state. At the same time, the status of local governments changed too. Their property, including sport facilities, was nationalized as well. Thus, the state controlled the overall sport movement, characterized as unified, serving the needs of organized sports and the goals of the Communist Party (Riordan & Krüger, 2007; Kössl, Štumbauer, & Waic, 2008).

Since the 1960s the development of sport facilities was planned centrally, through the State Planning Commission. Urban requirements for sport facilities were specified by ambitious, yet never fulfilled indicators for different sport areas. The unified concept of the sport movement determined the future direction of facilities development, with a privileged position of organized sport (Sekot, 2010; Špaček, 2011). Thus, while the development of sport facilities in the 1960s and 1970s was associated with decentralization and depoliticization of public administration within Scandinavian countries or the United Kingdom (Rafoss & Troelsen, 2010; Kung & Taylor, 2010), sport facilities in the current territory of the Czech Republic arose from central planning during the same period.

Sport facilities developed at a considerable pace until the early 1980s. The construction of facilities such as swimming pools, sports halls and ice arenas was emphasized. Economic conditions in the mid-1980s caused a decline in the development of sport facilities throughout the country (Kössl et al., 2008: 151-152). Nevertheless, despite their deterioration, the above-mentioned facilities still represent a substantial element of sport infrastructure at the local level.

Responsibilities for sport changed in the period of transition after 1989. The majority of sport facilities were transferred back to local clubs which bore, partly along with local authorities and schools, the main responsibility for pro-

viding sport for the public. Regarding the (re)emerging voluntary sector, clubs naturally focused on organized sport and thus served their club members – largely people already participating in sport. In many cases, their program did not reflect the needs of the wider population or new trends in sport participation.

Moreover, the concept of *sport for all* was not central to government policies: the state did not declare any sport policy until 2001. This may relate to the fact that sport was characterized by centralized control during the socialist era and was a source of pride for the Communist Party (Riordan & Krüger, 2007). To this day, leisure sport continues to be conceptualized as an unorganized activity and is not among the main topics of sport policy at the national level (Špaček, 2011).

As a result of the attitude of the state, declining participation and a lack of experience with sport facility management in the market environment, clubs were finally forced to transfer their facilities to municipalities and local governments themselves have come to determine their approaches to the management of public sport facilities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An economic rationale for public provision of sport

In order to discuss the role of public authorities in providing sport facilities, this section briefly highlights arguments for their involvement in sport in the context of market failure theory. The failures relevant to sport primarily include health issues, externalities, public goods, mixed (club) goods, economic development, imperfect information, merit goods, tradition or natural monopoly (Gratton & Taylor, 2000; Veal, 2010; Novotný, 2011; Downward, Dawson, & Dejonghe, 2009).

Gratton and Taylor (2000) summarize two broad *categories* of market failures as the arguments for government involvement in sport: efficiency-related and equity-related. Regarding the former, it has been argued that the market is not necessarily efficient for society as it fails to take account of additional social (non-market) benefits of sport. Equity-related arguments are based on the assumption that certain goods and services represent a certain quality of life and should be available for all as a right (Gratton & Taylor, 2000; Veal 2010).

For several reasons, governments often fail to eliminate the above-mentioned market failures. These *government failures* are discussed below in more detail in the context of public sport services.

Government failure and sport

Low efficiency, size of government, poor adaptability and flexibility, lobby groups or absence of competitive incentives are named among government failures (Le Grand, 1991; Osborne, 2006; Veal, 2010; Downward *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, in the case of local authorities, problems in management complexity or tendencies to enforce personal interests may occur (Potůček, 2005).

Concerning the area of public sport services, current evidence suggests that public provision of sport at the local level may be limited also by favouritism of local sport clubs, personal interests and relations of politicians, relations with club representatives, or the fact that a single person holds both roles (Numerato, 2009; Slepíčková, 2009). With regard to sport facilities, the contradictions between the roles of municipality as a direct provider or a facilitator are also discussed (Veal, 2010).

Moreover, Robinson (2004) argues that public sport services differ from other public services in several aspects: they are offered in competition with the commercial sector and clubs, the provision is discretionary, and it is susceptible to budget cuts and political priorities. Furthermore, public sport services have the ability to generate revenue for local authorities which may be in conflict with social objectives, as these providers need to deliver both operational and social objectives (Robinson, 2004: 6–7). Sekot (2010) also refers to limited financial resources, expertise, priorities or limited responsibilities of municipal officials which determine the current character of sport provision in the Czech Republic.

Against an international background of decentralization and new trends in public administration (e.g., new public management, good governance), new approaches have occurred in the Czech Republic as well (Hoós, Jenei, Potůček, Pomahač, & Vass, 2005; Hendrych, 2007; Veselý, 2012). Thus, municipalities have been forced to focus on the demand side, i.e. to understand users' expectations and needs as well as to allow them to influence the scope and quality of the service. In very broad terms, public authorities have consequently tried to find the most efficient ways of service provision. However, with these new trends in public services, new failures have appeared, some of them similar to market failures. Particularly, the issues of democracy, social exclusion or equity are discussed, namely by Hobza and Novotný (2008), Neuls *et al.* (2009) or Sekot (2010). The authors point out that the primary emphasis on efficiency could prevent certain groups from equitable access to sport facilities and criticize that the approaches of individual municipalities vary significantly in the Czech Republic.

Although an overwhelming majority of relevant Czech scholars paid attention to the supply side of public sport services, their conclusions are often un-

clear and divergent, sometimes not based on evidence. For example, Neuls *et al.* (2013) refer to inappropriate management and favouritism towards organized sport as reasons why facilities are not used by the general population. They see contemporary management of local sport infrastructure as unsustainable and propose that responsibilities should be transferred to the private sector. In contrast, Hobza and Novotný (2008) find it necessary to focus on the needs of the consumer, better coordination and services reflecting the needs of citizens in the case of municipal enterprises in municipalities with larger populations.

Despite differences in the authors' orientation and academic background, the above-mentioned works clearly show the complexity of the area of interest. Therefore, we have focused on just one *sub-area* – management of sport facilities owned by local government. Moreover, primary school sport facilities were not subject of our research because they are managed by schools themselves, often not available to the public.

Last but not least, there is evidence of a decreasing role of traditional sport facilities (Rafoss & Troelsen, 2010; Špaček, 2011). A significant part of sport activities have shifted to an informal environment; and the changing nature of sport activities affects the area of sport facilities as well. In consequence, some of the existing facilities which municipalities operate can represent a strong economic burden that does not meet the requirements of local citizens.

Legal framework

The aims of this section are to analyze different legal options for the municipality as a provider of public sport facilities, and to match them with the existing knowledge discussed above. The legal framework within which public sport facilities and services are delivered is defined by Act No. 250/2000 Coll. and Act No. 128/2000 Coll. Municipalities may manage their property directly by their employees or through specialized organizations. Particularly, they may establish:

- a) organizational units;
- b) publicly funded organizations; or
- c) municipal enterprises.
- d) Another option is to hire the facility out.

In consequence, some municipalities directly provide sport facilities while relying on their employees of organizational units – in-house management (a), other have established publicly funded organizations (b) or municipal enterprises (c). The rest provide their facilities externally through sport clubs (d).

Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics of the four most common forms of sport facilities provision in municipalities.

Table 1 Characteristics of forms of public sport facilities provision in municipalities

	In-house management	Publicly funded organization	Municipal enterprise	Sport club
Legal status	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal control	High	High	Medium	Low
Highest authority	Municipal assembly	Municipal assembly	Municipal council	Members assembly
Budget	Municipal	Municipal	Own	Own
Ownership of facilities	No	Yes	Yes	No
Commercial activities	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Strategic decisions	Municipal assembly	Municipal assembly	Board of directors (managing director)	Members assembly
Flexibility	Low	Medium	High	Low
Staff motivation	Low	Medium	High	Low
Goods provided	Public	Mixed	Mixed	Club

Now we will focus on the characteristics of each form in more detail. A distinctive feature of in-house management is direct influence of local publicly elected representatives on managers and employees. This fact eliminates any individual interests which may not be consistent with the interest of the authority (Rousek, 2011). On the other hand, such a high politicization of sport services could pose a disadvantage. The close link to local authority is not very flexible, competencies of the management are limited and even operative actions are subject to decisions of local authorities. Moreover, the employees (organizational units) are obliged to provide just the services related to the main purpose – sport services.

Compared to in-house management, publicly funded organizations have legal personality and the right to own facilities as well as to perform additional

commercial activities. Directors of these organizations have more competencies and discretion compared to in-house management. However, their budget is still part of the municipal budget and local authorities make decisions about salaries and bonuses for employees.

Municipal enterprises' activities are also, a lesser extent, controlled by local politicians. However, unlike in the case of publicly funded organizations, municipal enterprises have their own budgets. Thus, they can benefit from personal motivation of staff as their wages are not determined by tariffs for municipal employees (Pospíšil, 2012).

Both publicly funded organizations and municipal enterprises are encouraged to carry out other commercial activities so that they can provide their services more efficiently. Such activities may consist of direct sales of goods, membership cards for multiple facilities, hiring out a facility or using some areas for advertising. However, municipal representatives should ensure that these additional activities do not restrict the main purpose for which the facility is provided and that the organizations keep a reasonable level of access for everyone.

Compared to all the previous forms, clubs are formally independent from municipal representatives. This gives rise to several characteristics as outlined in Table 1. Club facilities serve primarily club members who are well-established in sport. Regarding other citizens, clubs may (legitimately) prevent them from equitable access, for example through different pricing policies or access restrictions during prime time. The use of clubs as providers of public sport facilities may be due to decisions of political representatives who also represent the clubs or, in other cases, personal relationships between municipal and club representatives (Numerato, 2009; Neuls et al., 2013). Thus, there may be significant differences between the amounts of funds allocated to the support of organized sport and unorganized leisure activities of other people

Given the current state of knowledge and the above-discussed conditions, we have set the following objectives to establish an evidence base for future research.

1. Investigate which forms of provision municipalities use and what kind of facilities they provide.
2. Examine the relationship between forms of provision and local population size.
3. Examine the relationship between forms of provision and the structure of sport facilities in municipalities.

METHODOLOGY

Population

The research sample comprises representatives of municipalities with extended powers (N = 193), namely either heads of local administration units responsible for sport facilities or directors of organizations providing sport facilities. We have purposefully omitted the regional capitals and the city of Prague (N = 12) with regard to their population density, large proportion of commercial sport services and sport facilities serving larger catchment areas.

Data collection and analysis

To collect the research data we conducted our own empirical survey in 2014 by means of a web questionnaire entitled, *Municipal Sport Facilities*. Initial telephone interviews with the representatives served to introduce the questionnaire and were followed by an emailed link to the questionnaire to all respondents from the sample (N = 193). The return rate exceeded 92%. Finally, the dataset with which the analysis is conducted comprises of 172 completed questionnaires (89%). The twenty-one municipalities which did not return the questionnaire were represented in all population size categories (Figure 2), and therefore we had no reason to expect any significant biases due to this incompleteness.

Descriptive statistical analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA) represent the main methods of data analysis. Through ANOVA, we investigated whether the form of provision relates to population size. One of the assumptions for using ANOVA was normal distribution of data. To test the distribution, we used the Kolgorov-Smirnov and the Shapiro-Wilk tests. Based on the results, we applied the method of logarithmic transformation to the 'population size' variable. Another prerequisite for using ANOVA was homoscedasticity – homogeneity of variance. Thus, we carried out the Levene statistics to determine whether the forms exhibit a statistically significant variance with population size.

Findings

The primary objective was to define the organizations that municipalities use for providing public sport facilities. Table 2 demonstrates the structure of these

organizations in 172 municipalities.² A significant finding is that only 21 municipalities use an external provider for a majority of their facilities and all of those providers are local sport clubs.

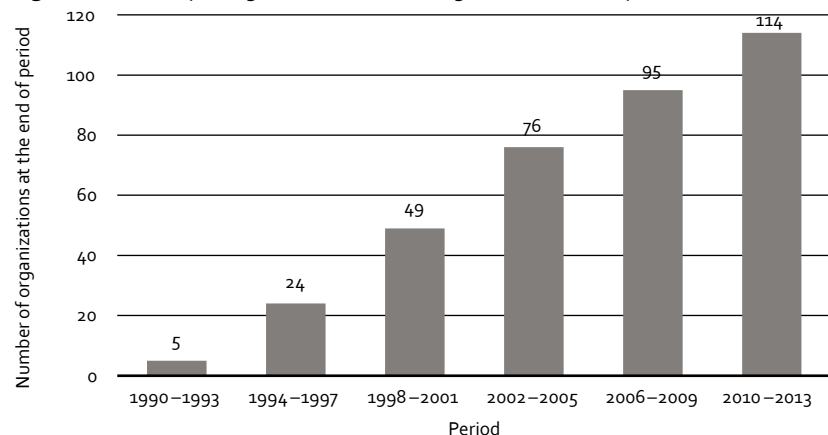
Table 2 Types of organizations for provision of public sport facilities

Organization	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Municipal employees	25	14.5	14.5
Organizational unit	12	7	21.5
Publicly funded organization	58	33.5	55
Municipal enterprise (> 50% share)	56	32.5	88
Sport club (external)	21	12	100
Total	172	100	

Furthermore, we tried to capture the rise of publicly funded organizations and municipal enterprises by examining the dates of their incorporation. We explored the websites of all these 114 municipal organizations. The time period between 1990 and 2013 was divided into six time slots (Figure 1). Figure 1 below shows a steady increase in the number of professional organizations for providing public sport facilities. Moreover, the data indicate that two-thirds (114) of all the examined municipalities (172) established their own organizations after 1990 and the number more than doubled in the last 12 years.

² Thirty-two out of the 172 municipalities (18.5%) used two organizations for the provision of sport facilities. Nevertheless, "the second" organizations provided only 41 facilities in total, and all of these organisations are local clubs. Therefore, we further analysed the organizations that provided most of the municipal sport facilities. That is why each municipality is represented by one single type of organisation.

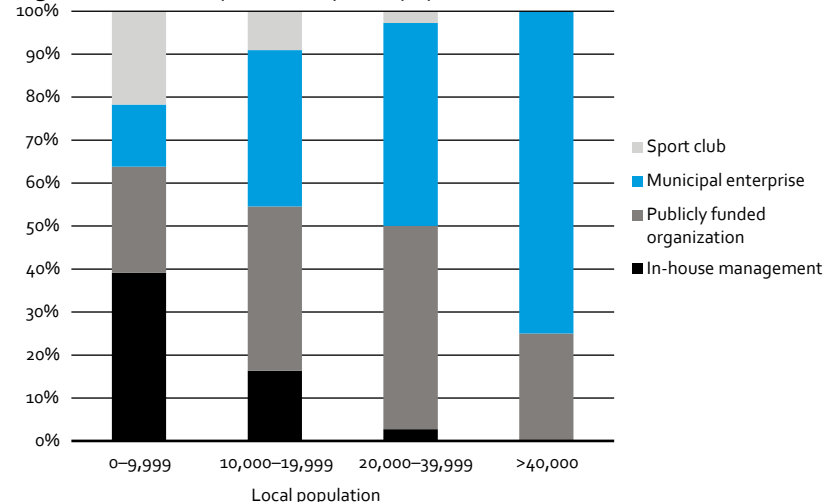
Figure 1 Municipal organizations according to date of incorporation



For further analysis, we divided all the municipalities (N = 172) into four categories representing four different forms of sport facility provision. We merged municipal employees and organizational units (*in-house management*). The next group represents *publicly funded organizations*, the third group consists of *municipal enterprises* and the last group indicates municipalities providing sport facilities externally through local *sport clubs*, via rental contracts. This order also reflects the falling rate of dependence of the organization on local publicly elected representatives.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of these forms according to local population. While sport clubs and in-house management play a significant role in municipalities with a population under 20,000, these forms are not represented in municipalities with more than 40,000 citizens where only publicly funded organizations and municipal enterprises provide public sport facilities.

Figure 2 Forms of provision by local population



Then we proceeded to an analysis of variance to determine whether the differences in population size between these forms are significant. First, we examined a global ANOVA test. The test confirmed a significant relationship between form of provision and local population (Table 3). Thus, we realized post-hoc tests (Table 4) to examine how these forms differ from one another.³

Table 3 Global ANOVA test between form of provision and population size

	SS	DF	MS	F	p	Partial eta-sq.	Non-central.	Obs. power (α = 0.05)
Intercept	12784.2	1.0	12784.2	35345.9	0.000	1.0	35345.9	1.0
Form	21.1	3.0	7.0	19.5	0.000	0.3	58.4	1.0
Error	60.8	168.0	0.4					

³ We used the Bonferroni test (Hendl, 2004).

Table 4 Post-hoc tests: The effect of provision form on population size

		ln Population size			
		8.956	9.578	9.837	9.086
Form of provision	In-house		0.000 **	0.000 **	1.000
	Publicly funded	0.000 **		0.136	0.009 *
	Municipal enterprise	0.000 **	0.136		0.000 **
	Sport club	1.000	0.009 *	0.000 **	

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$

The difference in population size was significant between publicly funded organizations and in-house management as well as between municipal enterprises and in-house management ($p < 0.001$). The difference between sport clubs and municipal enterprises was significant on the same level, while the difference between clubs and publicly funded organizations was less significant ($p < 0.01$). Nevertheless, there were no statistically significant differences in population size between municipal enterprises and publicly funded organizations as well as between sport clubs and in-house management. The insignificant difference between in-house management and clubs may illustrate the situation in smaller municipalities where close relationships between local actors may play an important role, while larger municipalities use municipal enterprises or publicly funded organizations for the management of sport facilities serving larger catchment areas.

The total number of public sport facilities within the sample is 765. The examined organizations most frequently provide swimming pools, outdoor swimming pools, ice arenas, sports halls and artificial turfs (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Sport facilities managed at the local level

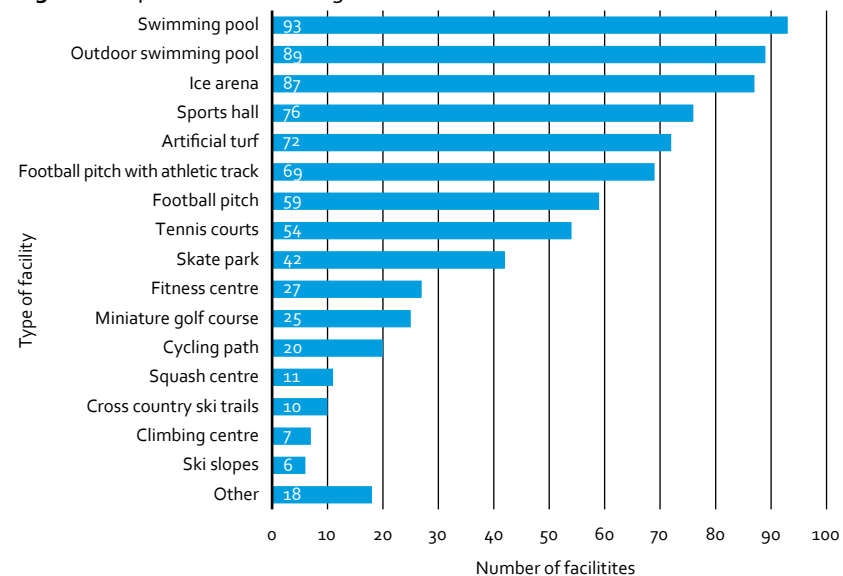


Table 5 demonstrates the six most common types of sport facilities by forms of provision. Facilities with the character of mixed (club) goods are italicized while the rest correspond to the character of public goods.

Table 5 Types of sport facilities according to forms of provision

Frequency rank	In-house	Publicly funded	Municipal enterprise	Sport club
1	Football pitch	Football pitch	<i>Swimming pool</i>	Football pitch
2	Outdoor swimming pool	<i>Swimming pool</i>	<i>Ice arena</i>	<i>Sports hall</i>
3	<i>Sports hall</i>	Outdoor swimming pool	Outdoor swimming pool	<i>Artificial turf</i>
4	Bicycle path	<i>Ice arena</i>	Football pitch	<i>Tennis courts</i>
5	Skate park	<i>Sports hall</i>	<i>Sports hall</i>	<i>Ice arena</i>
6	<i>Artificial turf</i>	<i>Artificial turf</i>	<i>Artificial turf</i>	Skate park

The table indicates that in-house management is typical for the provision of sport facilities with the character of public goods. Football pitches, outdoor swimming pools, bicycle paths or skate parks are often available free of charge and can be simultaneously used by a large population. Such a management alternative and legal framework indicate that these organizations tend to be more concerned with their administration (repairs, cleaning and maintenance) rather than programming, pricing policy or targeting specific social groups (Rousek, 2011; Pospíšil, 2012). Statistical analysis confirmed that this form is characteristic of smaller municipalities which do not provide facilities of regional importance such as indoor swimming pools, sports halls or ice arenas. There, the *space for delivering commercial services is limited*, which might affect the efficiency of facilities. On the other hand, their potential could remain unrecognized due to low motivation or insufficient skills of municipal employees.

The results also showed that publicly funded organizations are the most common form of provision of public sport facilities among Czech municipalities with extended powers (58 out of the 172 municipalities). These organizations often provide sport facilities with high operational costs (Table 5; Hobza & Novotný, 2008; Popelka, 2014). Thus, the facilities are available for a fee and additional commercial activities may also cover a part of the operational costs. This is especially the case of year-round indoor sport facilities such as swimming pools, ice arenas or sports halls. However, the absence of a competitive environment may cause lower efficiency (Pavel, 2006; Ochrana, Fantová Šumpíková, Pavel, Nemeč, et al., 2007). Similarly, municipal enterprises mostly provide swimming pools and ice arenas. It can be assumed that the choice of this form is determined by the monopolistic position of the above-mentioned facilities of regional importance.

Finally, clubs mostly provide football pitches, sports halls or tennis courts, i.e. the facilities which serve primarily their own needs. This form of provision is profitable for clubs as the running costs are covered by municipal budgets. As with the case of in-house management, this form is characteristic of smaller municipalities with low numbers of sport facilities.

CONCLUSION

Although the way public sport facilities are managed has changed significantly since 1989, the results indicate that the current state may still be shaped by the period before 1989 (Novotný, 2001; Kössl *et al.*, 2008) as it is primarily the structure of sport facilities which apparently determines the choice of forms for provision of public sport facilities. On the one hand, the majority of smaller

municipalities with local population under 10,000 (those that were not district towns before 2002) use in-house forms or local sport clubs as *the only possible* providers of municipal sport facilities. In these cases, the facilities may be provided in a bureaucratic manner, under what Ochrana and Fantová Šumpíková (2007) call a *supply-side system*. The character of these organizations may result in a lack of incentives for physically inactive residents (Popelka, 2014). Inefficient facilities may limit the total coverage of public support of sport and, moreover, there is also a risk of complete shutdown of these facilities. This situation could be one of the possible explanations why the residents of smaller municipalities are more often dissatisfied with local conditions for sport, compared to larger towns (Špaček, 2011; Eurobarometer, 2010).

On the other hand, the use of publicly funded organizations or municipal enterprises could be an indication of “demand side” or “market-oriented” services. These organizations are motivated, with regard to the legal framework, to move sport closer to the needs of the general population, and look for new opportunities (Hobza & Novotný, 2008; Ochrana & Fantová Šumpíková, 2007). However, publicly elected local authorities should enforce equitable access for everyone and ensure that other commercial activities do not limit the main purpose to which the facilities are designed.

The use of an organization that can flexibly respond to the increasing demands, the ever-changing sport environment and the different preferences of the population seems to be an appropriate approach regarding current trends in sport participation (Hobza & Novotný, 2008; Popelka, 2014). Such a provider should have sufficient expertise, powers and discretion in order to be motivated to actively provide sport facilities with a focus on the needs of the citizens. The provider should also have the right to decide about the use of sport facilities for non-sport activities because multi-purpose facilities often ensure efficient use of operationally demanding sport facilities.

In the case of external provision, the provider should be selected in a *tender* procedure in which local clubs and private firms may compete. Thus, contracting out public sport facilities represents a potential solution for smaller municipalities whereby the meeting of social aims could be guaranteed through contracts between the municipality and direct provider. Unfortunately, smaller municipalities have lower demand that probably does not attract private providers.

The paper provides an initial evidence base on public sport services in the context of the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the results indicate the need to focus on different organizational forms in more detail to capture their potentials and limitations from a user perspective. Thus, case studies from several municipalities, as representatives of different approaches to public sport facilities,

might provide valuable insights not only for future research but also for the providers themselves.

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