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# 9 Swedish Sports Clubs and Events during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Impacts and Responses

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## Introduction

Sweden has 10 million inhabitants of which more than 30% are members of at least one sports club. Typically, sports clubs are organized under the Swedish Sports Confederation (*Riksidrottsförbundet*). On a national level, approximately 19,000 sports clubs exist, distributed over 72 specialist sports federations. Each club usually stages one or several sport events every year. For example, specialist sports federations organize all championships at national and international levels. From a sports club perspective, these events constitute important sources of income. From a societal perspective, clubs and events create considerable economic impacts, foster public health, and facilitate integration contributing with substantial social values (Brown et al., 2015; Pettersson & Wallstam, 2017; Wallstam, Ioannides, & Pettersson, 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, most governments restricted individuals' possibilities for gatherings and movements. On March 12th the Swedish government responded to the pandemic by limiting the number of participants to events to no more than 500 people. Starting March 29th gatherings were limited to 50 people. During the end of year 2020 and the second virus wave, further actions were taken. The government limited the number of visitors and participants to eight people. These restrictions had considerable negative effects on many sport-related activities, events, and thus clubs.

While many clubs arguably suffer from event cancellations, little is known about the degree to which they are actually affected. What economic and non-economic (e.g., monetary, social and health-related) effects arise due to restrictions and subsequent event cancellations? This chapter describes and

analyses consequences of cancelled events, organized by sports clubs in economic and non-economic terms. Previous research indicates that clubs are affected by factors such as size, type of sports, location or organizational form. A second objective of this chapter is therefore to describe how different clubs are affected, depending on a number of club characteristics.

The governmental restrictions that affected sports clubs as well as the event industry can be described in terms of a disruptive power. The theory of resilience concerns these powers which lead to changes. According to Lew et al. (2020), "*change is fundamental*" (p. 455) and positive since it implies development. Ideally, strategic changes incur through external powers such as the Covid-19 pandemic. In extension, this may result in innovations, which ultimately benefit the event industry. Such a development can create economic, social, hedonic values in the long-term, many of which also relate to sustainability (Lundberg et al., 2017). Recognizing the Covid-19 pandemic as a crisis and as a power affecting event organizers, this chapter describes important strategic reactions of Swedish sports clubs in response to the crisis. It ends with a description of the support that sports clubs need in order to meet existing challenges related to the pandemic. Adaptive capacities and vulnerabilities of the clubs are discussed, together with the question to what extent event managers can make use of these empirical results.

The chapter contributes to the field of event studies and crisis management by describing and analyzing a national case study that builds on extensive survey data. It provides a snapshot of the heavily affected event industry in Sweden during the pandemic.

## **Theoretical background: Crisis management and resilience**

An external happening such as the Covid-19 pandemic urges the importance of crisis management and resilience. Both concepts lend useful perspectives to interpret the effects of the initial pandemic for Swedish sports clubs. The concepts also help us understand what factors are important when responding, and ultimately reviving the sport event sector in Sweden.

Managers, including event managers, need to deal with a new business environment. In a more globalized event economy, organizations are increasingly exposed to economic, political, social, and technological risks. When crises or disasters are linked to disruptive changes, they are difficult to foresee. Despite this, all organizations can work with crisis or disaster management in order to be prepared when the crisis arrives (Ritchie, 2004). Organizations that manage risks related to disruptive changes can reduce both negative economic and non-economic impacts. This capability of organizations to handle

changes and recover is known as resilience (Hall, Timothy, & Duval, 2013; Lew, 2014; Shipway & Miles, 2020).

Resilience was originally used in system models within mathematical sciences and is today implemented to understand issues in a wide range of areas such as psychology, physics, engineering, and organizations. Within tourism and event studies, resilience has largely been used to explain reactions to changes caused by disasters and crises (cf. Lew, 2014). Examples of this are tourism actors' reactions to global climate change, previous pandemics, the tsunami in 2004, or earthquakes. The perspective supports our understanding of responses to slow and fast changes, respectively (e.g., climate change vs. natural disaster). It is also open to various adaptive behaviors for different individual actors and geographical scales. In a tourism context, actors' major concern to a shock like the pandemic is the critical loss of resources and primary tourist markets (Lew, 2014).

In recent research (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020), disaster management and resilience have received increased attention. Shipway and Miles (2020) introduce an International Sports Events (ISEs) resilience continuum, which is an attempt to classify major sport events and how actors can work strategically with managing resilience, depending on their position on the continuum. In this context, resilience can be defined as the "*capability of a system to recover after undergoing significant disturbance*" (Shipway & Miles, 2020, p. 186). In the current study, this refers to the capability of sports clubs and federations to recover and organize sport events at a similar level as pre-Covid-19. The capability to recover varies between sports clubs and federations, depending on factors such as adaptive capacity, vulnerability, preparedness, responsiveness, learning processes (Biggs, Hall, & Stoeckl, 2012; Koronis & Ponis, 2018) and characteristics such as size or context (e.g., type of sport or geographical context). In the ISE resilience continuum, Shipway and Miles (2020) suggest that size and scale are imperative factors to develop greater resilience. While Shipway and Miles (2020) focus on large scale sport events, the model is underpinned by a bottom-up approach, which is beneficial for small-scale event organizations as well (as most actors in the current Swedish case). It focuses on the sport organization, the sport event, community aspects, the individual participants and event visitors in order to develop greater resilience. The context is therefore vital and we can assume that sports clubs, depending for instance on their level of resilience, need different types of support and resources (financial resources, support for innovation and change etc.) in order to recover.

In the current study, we analyze economic and non-economic impacts during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focus is on the initial crisis strategy of the sports clubs (i.e., impacts and measures), and on their perceived needs of external support. In this initial phase, focus is particularly on sports clubs'