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Sport policy in Finland

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide a description and create an understanding of public sport policy, the key actors within the sports system, and the political sphere in Finnish sport. The development of sport policy in Finland has been characterised by a relatively long-lasting, polarised, and highly politicised sports sector and a series of structural reforms. The contemporary sports system in Finland represents a mixed model, in which the state has a strong role in directing sport policy (especially through resource steering), while the role of sports organisations is implementation. Further, municipalities play a central role in creating conditions for sport and physical activity, and all sport policy actors have high autonomy in their operations. In particular, the population's increasing physical inactivity and lack of elite sport success in Finland have driven the central government to seek new solutions, such as centralisation, a cross-administrative approach, and evidence-informed policy-making practices. Sport policy is also impacted by international trends and agreements, such as sustainable development, in which Finland's ambitious goals affect the sports sector. In the future, the unclear roles of different actors and a lack of leadership could cause further challenges to the adoption of effective sport policies.

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Finland; sport policy; sports governance; country profile; sports organisation

1. Introduction

The characteristics of Finnish sports culture contextualise the country's identity as a welfare state. As stated by Esping-Andersen (1990), the foundation of the Nordic welfare system relies on social benefits that are provided to all citizens while also ensuring their safety and well-being. This ideal appears prevalent in both Finnish society and sport, in which the sports system and welfare state have developed in parallel, similar to other Nordic countries (cf. Norberg 1997, Andersen and Ronglan 2012). In this state–civil society alliance, sports and other civic organisations act as a link between the citizens and their government (Alapuro and Stenius 2010, Giulianotti *et al.* 2019). However, regardless of the shared welfare state model, Finnish sport policy differs from that of other Nordic countries (c.f. Fahlén and Stenling 2016, Skille and Säfvenbom 2011, see Lehtonen and Laine 2020). Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide a description and create an understanding of public sport policy, key actors in the sports system, and the political sphere in Finnish sport.

Sport is a popular recreation pastime and constitutes the most common form of civic activity in Finland. Finland is among the most active nations in Europe regarding sports participation (European Commission 2018). By contrast, elite sports success has declined in

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recent decades, causing criticism of Finnish sport policy (Lipponen 2017). Furthermore, as in all Western countries, decreased everyday activity, estimated to cause a cost of at least EUR 3 billion in Finland (Kolu *et al.* 2022), has created another complex societal challenge for sport policy, as most of the population does not meet national recommendations for physical activity (Parikka *et al.* 2021).

The article begins with a historical review of Finnish sport policy development, followed by a description of the current administrative structure, policy guidelines, and funding. Finally, the key contemporary phenomena in sport policy are discussed, concluding with a reflection on the issues and challenges facing the future of Finnish sport.

2. History of Finnish sport policy development

Finnish sport policy and its development can be divided into three distinct periods: the politically polarised sports movement (1917–1993), the domain structure (1994–2012), and the centralised sports structure (2013→) (Figure 1). In the following sections, these periods and their key events are described and analysed.¹

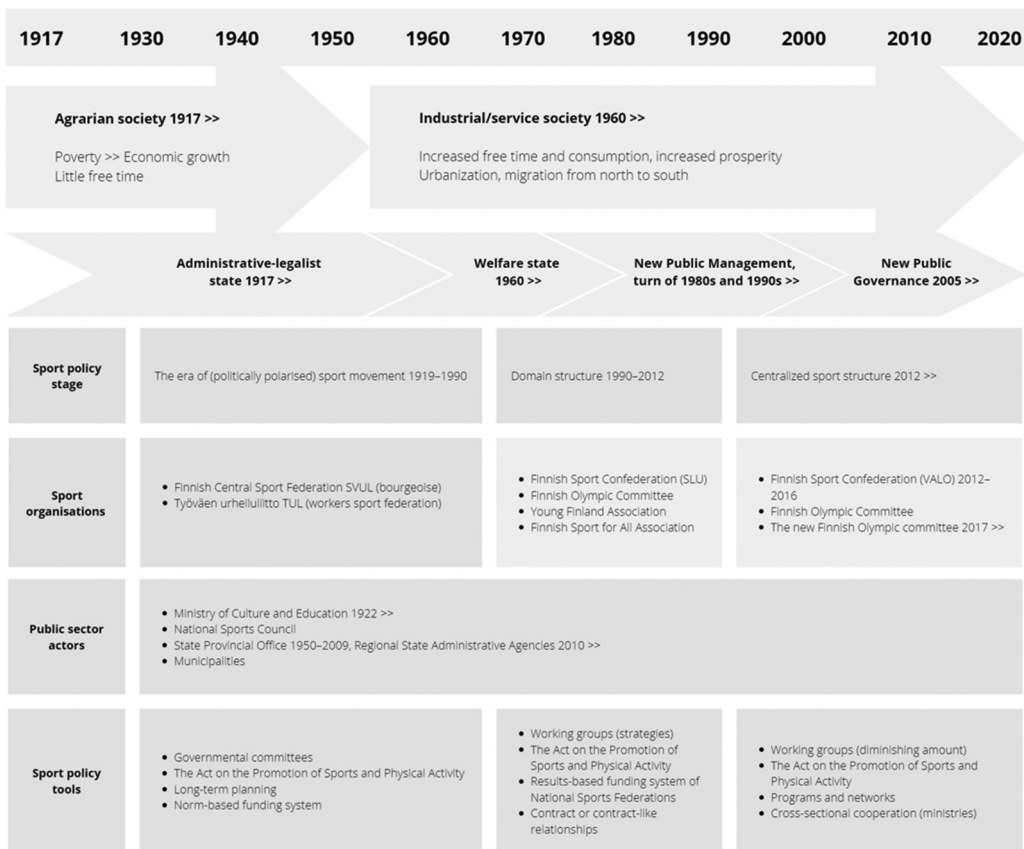


Figure 1. Development of Finnish sport policy (Adapted from Vasara 2004, Stenvall *et al.* 2016, Mäkinen *et al.* 2019).

2.1. The politically polarised sports movement (1917–1993)

Finnish sport and sport policy developed simultaneously against the backdrop of WWI and Finland's declaration of independence in 1917. Therefore, sport policy was tilted towards nationalism with aims such as strengthening national identity, integrating the nation, and maintaining citizens' good military functionality (Juppi 1995). The birth of a deliberate state sport policy occurred between 1919 and 1920. During that time, state subsidies for third-sector sports organisations and the National Sports Council (NSC), which allocates the subsidies, were established. NSC consisted of advocates of the most major sports organisations: the Suomen Valtakunnan Urheiluliitto (SVUL; the bourgeoisie), the Työväen Urheiluliitto (TUL; the workers), the Suomen Naisten Voimisteluliitto (the women), and the Svenska Finland Idrottsförbundin (SFI, the Finnish-Swedes) (ibid.).

The Finnish Civil War (1918) was a critical moment that affected sport policy and its development. The war heralded the start of a long-lasting polarised sports sector with two major central sports federations, each with its own local sports clubs: the SVUL and the TUL. Given that sports was highly politicised and due to the struggle between bourgeois and workers' sports movements, contradictions in sport policy materialised that affected operations of the NSC, funding decisions, and foreign policy with respect to sport (Juppi 1995). This polarisation of central sports federations and their inability to cooperate may have pushed government involvement in sports (Järvinen 1980 in Juppi 1995). After the civil war, the central government attempted to address the fragmentation of Finnish society and gain international recognition through international sporting success (Vasara 2004). At the time, Finland was successful in elite sports.

The MEC was chosen as the leading ministry in sports in 1922 instead of the Ministry of Defence, which was the other option discussed (Juppi 1995). Previous studies have reasoned that sports' educational aspects were already taking over the military aspects. Moreover, in many European countries, sports governance was situated within the Ministry of Education, and the NSC was already situated in the MEC. Among others, the decision may be considered a win for the political centre and social democrats over the right wing (ibid., Vasara 2004).

Despite the poor economic situation after WWII, the state continued to support sports (Vasara 2004). A national betting agency (Veikkaus) was also established in 1940 to fund Finnish sport. Subsequently, a turbulent political climate and shifting power relations between the left- and right-wings hampered sport policy development throughout the 1940s. However, a new subsidy criterion was introduced in 1945, which represented the leftist majority of the ruling parties. The previous (1924) subsidy criteria emphasised the military condition of citizens, discipline, and order as well as Finland's international position; the new statute emphasised the health, well-being, sports, and exercise of citizens, and the financial balance of sports organisations. During the 1950s, the power play between the NSC and the MEC intensified and manifested in many ways, such as the MEC starting to grant state aid directly to stakeholders without the NSC's involvement (ibid.).

During the 1960s and 1970s, Finland changed from an agrarian society towards a more modern industrial and service society, thus increasing citizens' free time. This challenged the sports sector, and the state's attention was increasingly drawn to the promotion of citizens' physical activity (Itkonen 2021). The state perceived the provision of sports services as an important tool for education and public health, thus positively affecting the public economy. However, the relationship between sports organisations and the state was difficult, with the state steering organisations towards health-enhancing physical activity, while the organisations focused on competitive sport. From the 1980s onward, Finnish sports culture widened and scattered, further hampering political steering (ibid.).

The Act on the Promotion of Sports and Physical Activity 984/1979 came into effect in 1980. Initially, the act was unique internationally, as it directed state subsidies to local governments, national and local sports organisations, and research and international activities in the field (European Commission 2016). The act also served as a compromising function between the state and sports organisations, clarifying their responsibilities: the state was now responsible for providing

facilities and conditions for sport and exercise, whereas the sports organisations were responsible for the organisation of sport (Itkonen 2021).

Voluntary sports organisations played a central role in early Finnish sport policy. However, the state's role has also been central, especially through funding. Historically, Finnish sport represented a corporatist system that relies on working groups, committees, and councils comprising a limited number of privileged and politically divided actors that outline and decide on policy (Mäkinen *et al.* 2019). In comparison to Sweden and Norway, sport in Finland is more fragmented because of polarisation, high politicisation, shifting power relations between the bourgeoisie and the working class and power plays between the different government bodies in sport (*ibid.*; Mäkinen *et al.* 2016).

2.2. 1994–2012: Era of the domain structure

During the 1990s, Finnish sports governance experienced one of its largest reforms due to result-based management, and the *New Public Management* (NPM) paradigm (see Temmes 1998), which had affected the general public administration since the end of the 1980s (Mäkinen *et al.* 2016). In 1994, the bankruptcy and collapse of SVUL, which was the largest sports organisation in Finland, ended the prevailing corporatist culture in Finnish sport policy, resulting in long and difficult discussions about new directions for sport policy, including its content, goals, and governance models (Mäkinen *et al.* 2019). The collapse faded away the highly political nature of Finnish sport, which had lasted a relatively long time compared to other Nordic countries, in which it had disappeared already by the 1950s (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). Due to criticism of the old bureaucratic sports movement and the flourishing NPM paradigm, a new multi-centred government model was established that included a new central sports federation – the Finnish Sport Confederation (SLU). There were three domain organisations within the SLU: the Young Finland Association, the Finnish Sport for All Association, and the Finnish Olympic Committee (NOC) (Mäkinen *et al.* 2019). The operations of the TUL and the SFI continued as members of the SLU.

The Finnish reform was distinctive from an international perspective. The sport policy of many other countries shifted towards coordination between various actors, concentration of power, and creating a unified sports culture, which was opposite of Finland's direction (Koski and Lämsä 2015, Mäkinen *et al.* 2016). Most of the sport policy processes in the new model were domain-specific: the three organisations planned and implemented policy through their own ideologies. However, these various ideologies and overlapping tasks, combined with decreasing elite sports successes, elicited criticism of the domain structure (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020).

Another central feature in the 1990s was the gradual shift of power from sports organisations to the state, (Mäkinen *et al.* 2019). Reflecting the NPM paradigm, which had affected all of Finland's central government, a new results-based funding system was introduced for sport in 1995, shifting power relations towards the state (*ibid.*). In the new system, the state controlled sports subsidy policies by directing grants straight to national and regional sports organisations. Previously, the state had allocated resources to national sports federations (e.g. TUL and SVUL), which were responsible for directing the subsidies (Koski and Lämsä 2015). In the 2015 renewed Sports Act, sports organisations were no longer the only actors responsible for organising sport and physical activities (Lehtonen 2017, pp. 45–50).

2.3. Centralised sports structure from 2013 onward

The planning and implementation of the new, more centralised sports system occurred between 2008 and 2013, resulting in a new structure. A new central sports organisation, VALO, was established by merging the SLU and two previous domain organisations (Sport for All and Youth Sport). VALO was responsible for a broad range of activities, such as the promotion of physical activity, sports club activities, and Sport for All. The reform brought the Finnish system (structurally) closer to the Nordic model (Lehtonen 2017, Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020; see Tin *et al.* 2020 for a description

of the Nordic model). In 2013, an independent high-performance unit was established within the NOC. This was followed by another reform in 2017, when VALO merged with the NOC, forming a new NOC. The idealistic proposal involved shifting towards a centralised, non-governmental structure and merging Sport for All and elite sports actions into the agenda of one organisation – the NOC (Mäkinen *et al.* 2019, Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020).

Reflections on the emerging public administration paradigm of *New Public Governance* (see Osborne 2006) also affected sport policy and governance. Since the turn of the 2010s, the MEC and central sports organisations have manifested the importance of networks and (government) programmes in solving the contemporary challenges faced by Finnish sport policy, such as physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour, as well as the lack of elite sports success. Moreover, the Finnish sports system has expanded from an organisational model to an era of network-based national programmes that aim to increase physical activity (Lehtonen and Laine 2020).

In the 2010s, Finnish sport policy was scattered with several reforms, miscommunication between the government and 3rd sector, contradicting aims between different parties, and competition for resources and power (Itkonen 2021). In the latest reform, the NOC is responsible for both elite sport and Sport for All operations. However, this has caused tense discussions regarding the NOC's credibility and legitimacy as a Sport for All organisation and its unstable and unclear role in relation to the state and its members (Lehtonen *et al.* 2021).

To summarise Section 2, despite similar societal systems within the Nordic countries, there are variations in the expression of the Nordic sports model, which includes characteristics such as voluntarism-based sports organisations, democratic decision-making structures, and overall sports systems. The past and present of Finland's sports movement have stood apart, and its sports culture is not as traditional as those of other Nordic countries (c.f. Skille and Säfvenbom 2011, Fahlén and Stenling 2016, Seippel and Skille 2019). What sets Finland apart is the state's strong role as a coordinator of sport, especially regarding funding and guiding sport policy. Moreover, sports organisations are strongly involved in implementing sport policies. Accordingly, the Finnish sports system is regarded as a mixed model (Henry 2009). The reforms undertaken by the Finnish sports system over the last 25 years indicate the instability of its sports movement (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). However, the trajectory of the Finnish sports system reflects and parallels the general public administration in Finland, which is characterised by cyclic development (see Stenvall *et al.* 2016).

3. Contemporary sport policy in Finland

3.1. Administrative structure

As described in Section 2.3, the Finnish sports system represents a mixed model (Henry 2009). According to the Sports Act (390/2015), the MEC has the main responsibility of managing, developing, and reconciling the sport policy. The NSC acts as an expert panel assisting the MEC by, for instance, evaluating the impact of government actions, issuing statements and submitting initiatives to develop sport policy.

The municipalities (309 in 2022) operate at the local level and are responsible for creating the prerequisites of physical activity for their residents by providing physical activity and sports services, and constructing and maintaining sports facilities. Compared to other Nordic countries, municipalities own a vast number (71%) of sports facilities (Norway 54%, Sweden 57% [operator], Denmark 47% [operator]) (Bergsgard *et al.* 2019). Municipalities play an important role in Finnish sports, as they have extensive autonomy to organise sports services as they see fit. Furthermore, they often focus on providing sport and physical activity for groups overlooked by the third sector, such as people with disabilities and the elderly.

The third sector sports organisations include 2 national service organisations (NOC and Finnish Paralympic Committee), 71 Sports Federations, 15 regional sports organisations, and 24 other national organisations that promote physical activity (MEC 2021a). The NOC's operations aim to

cover the development of physical activity of the entire population as well as organised sport and elite sport (NOC 2021). However, the NOC's responsibility as a leader of sport and physical activity seems rather ostensible. As described in this section, Finnish sport is rather scattered and consists of several self-governing actors. The NOC represents organised sport only through its member federations. The lack of legitimacy through representation, combined with the absence of (financial) power, may hamper the development of Finnish sport.

There are approximately 8,500 local sports clubs in Finland, and voluntary-based operations define the overall characteristics of Finnish sports culture. Although most sports clubs still rely entirely on volunteers, many clubs have paid employees (Koski and Mäenpää 2018). Reflecting the NPM paradigm, the increased demands for efficiency have also reached the work of sports clubs. As in other Nordics, professionalisation has been one of the most significant changes in club activities in Finland over the last decade, due to increased expectations and quality demands, as well as difficulties in finding volunteers. This has increased the costs of club membership, which has sparked discussion on whether today's sports clubs act as drivers for socio-economic polarisation. This is critical from the perspective of the welfare state, its values and the ideal of equal opportunities. This may also contribute to further polarisation of healthy lifestyles, and harm elite sport if all potentially talented individuals are not able to engage in sports.

The Finnish education system is based on public schools, where the content of physical education teaching is guided by the national core curriculum. The government funds programmes based on policy objectives (such as *Schools on the Move*) to establish a physically active operating culture in Finnish schools and to reduce differences in pupils' health and wellbeing. In contrast to some countries, schools in Finland have not played a strong structural role in competitive sports. However, efforts have been made to include sports (e.g. morning training) in the school environment in recent years from the perspective of competitive sports (Nieminen *et al.* 2020).

In addition to the strong public sector and civil society typical of Nordic countries, the private sector also plays a role in Finnish sports culture, with private companies owning and maintaining sports facilities besides the municipal facility network. The turnover of companies providing sports-related services (Ala-Vähälä *et al.* 2021) and the number of members in commercial gyms (Laine and Vehmas 2020) increased sharply during the 2010s. Private companies are nowadays important providers of sports services, especially for women (Lehtonen *et al.* 2022, p. 29). However, there seems to be potential for further growth, as in other Nordic countries, where, for instance, health or fitness centre membership is still far more popular compared to Finland (European Commission 2018).

3.2. Administration of elite sport

According to the Government Report on Sport Policy (2018), the MEC defines elite sport as an important part of Finnish culture in the 21st century. The report states that elite sport should operate in an ethical and socially responsible manner while being internationally successful, visible, and valued by citizens.

The management of elite sports systems follows a mixed-model system, in which both the state and sports organisations play key roles (Lehtonen *et al.* 2021). The MEC and the NOC have agreed that the NOC's high-performance unit is responsible for managing and directing Finnish elite sports networks, including Paralympic sports (Target document 2021–2024). However, public funding for elite sport is mainly allocated by the MEC.

In recent decades, several working groups and reorganisations have been targeted at tackling the decline in Finland's elite sports performance. According to the recent evaluation, it seems that the structure around talent identification and development has improved in recent years (Storm and Nielsen 2022). However, criticism has been levelled, especially towards elite sports administration, including notes of inefficiency and unclarity of roles between sports organisations and the state (Lipponen 2017). The NOC, as a leader of elite sport, also currently searches for trust and legitimacy

among its members and other stakeholders (Storm and Nielsen 2022). Furthermore, the links between goal setting, strategy, implementation, and evaluation appear weak (*ibid.*).

3.3. Sport policy guidelines and governmental steering

In Finland, the central government's sport policy is guided by national legislation (mainly the Sports Act), the current Government Programme (2019), the Government Report on Sport Policy (2018), and the impact objectives set for sport policy in the Government Budget proposal (2022).

In addition to the division of responsibilities, the Sports Act (390/2015) outlines the overall aims of sport policy, which are to promote physical activity, elite sports, and related civic activity. Sport is seen as a way of enhancing the population's health and well-being and supporting the growth and development of young people. The crosscutting principles in the Sports Act are equality, non-discrimination, social inclusion, multiculturalism, healthy lifestyles, respect for the environment, and sustainable development.

In 2018, the Finnish Parliament approved the first-ever Government Report on Sport policy, in which a significant increase in people's physical activity in all population groups was outlined as the most important sport policy objective in Finland in the 2020s. Furthermore, all the other previously mentioned Finnish sport policy guidelines share this objective. Other priorities defined in all policy guidelines are to support civic activities and elite sport while developing facilities and conditions for sport and physical activity.

In addition to steering by norms, the central government steers sport policy through resources and information. The objectives and criteria of state grants advance policy goals and the crosscutting principles of sport policy. The state's role has been significant in raising discussions and demands on ethical conduct (Roiha *et al.* 2022). Steering by information is largely implemented through state-funded national physical activity programmes, other networks and stakeholders such as the NOC, the Finnish Centre for Integrity in Sports and research institutes.

The European Union (EU) has no competencies in sport-related matters and can only enact conclusions and resolutions. However, other competences (e.g. in the single market) have impacted sport through measures such as case laws by the Court of Justice of the European Union (e.g. the Bosman case). On a practical level, EU cooperation in Finnish sport policy manifests as the MEC's participation in preparing sport-related matters in the EU and cooperating with international sports organisations. The focus in international cooperation has been on strengthening integrity in sports, prerequisites for civic activity, legislative and administrative development, and issues related to the status of athletes (MEC 2022).

Despite several glorious policy objectives and measures, several evaluations have questioned whether Finland's central government's actions fully correspond to the set objectives and have highlighted that the impacts and effectiveness of the actions have not been sufficiently monitored (e.g. NSC 2015). For instance, it has been suggested that state funding mainly reaches those who are already physically active (Itkonen *et al.* 2018). Therefore, the fundamental question is how to reach the least physically active people, who would benefit the most from increased physical activity. Furthermore, criticisms have been levelled at the level of monitoring fulfilment of grant criteria and their impact, and whether government grants are more like an annual automation that preserves the current structures (NSC 2015, Lehtonen and Stenvall 2019). Lastly, one of the fundamental sport policy dilemmas is identifying the extent to which the government should and can steer civic activity without intervening in its intrinsic autonomy and casting the responsibilities of the public sector to the third sector.

3.4. Funding

Public funding for the sports sector is approximately EUR 700 million annually in Finland, of which municipalities account for EUR 550 million and the state for EUR 150 million (Ala-Vähälä *et al.* 2021).

Table 1. Government funding & trends (not indexed) (MEC 2021b).

Funding object (million €)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Sports civic activity	44.2	44.5	45.7	47.2	45.9
Equal access to sport and physical activity (inc. sports facility construction)	29.9	48.0	44.5	33.7	31.6
Municipal sports services	19.4	19.5	19.5	19.5	19.6
Sports Institutes	19.1	18.7	18.3	18.2	18.2
Elite sports	11.4	13.2	12.3	12.5	12.5
Promoting an active lifestyle	8.8	8.4	8.6	8.7	8.2
Research/development organisations and education	3.9	3.7	4.1	4.1	4.0
Sports science and research	3.6	3.8	3.6	3.9	3.6
Other subsections	14.7	18.9	15.1	11.4	47.1*
Total	154,944	178,562	171,795	159,302	190 729*

*The large increase in 2020 is explained by the additional discretionary government grants awarded due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Until recently, the state sports budget almost entirely consisted of National Lottery funds (97% as of 2019), which is revenue outside the universal state budget. The government funding trends for the previous five years are represented in Table 1. State funding for municipal sports services is granted as an unarmarked central government transfer, meaning that municipalities decide how to use the money independently. Funding by private companies through sponsorship has increased over the last decade, from EUR 95 million in 2009 to EUR 162 million in 2019. However, there was a slight reduction in 2020 (129 M EUR), mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sponsor Insight 2021).

Currently, state funding for sports and physical activity is undergoing a historical change. Revenue from the National Lottery increased steadily from the beginning of the 2000s, increasing resources for the sports sector. However, these proceeds started to decrease slightly in 2017, and there was a significant reduction in 2020. This was mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions and stricter requirements for responsibility and preventing harm caused by gambling² (Liikanen *et al.* 2021). Proceeds from gambling activities are expected to decrease further due to responsible gaming measures and international gaming operators. The central government is currently preparing a reform to be enacted at the beginning of 2024, in which funding of the sports sector, and other sectors funded by the lottery will be transferred to the central government's universal budget. Although dismantling this link between gambling and the funding of civic activities has been widely perceived as positive, the downside could be that the sports sector will need to negotiate for its annual funding as part of the major state budget framework.

Compared to other Nordic countries, public funding for sport and physical activity in Finland is relatively less (€166 per capita) than in Sweden (€185) or Norway (€194) but higher than in Denmark (€139) (Stenbacka *et al.* 2018). The funding in other Nordic countries has a clear focus compared to Finland, where the state funding is rather scattered, reflecting the bigger picture of sport policy. Funding of elite sport accounts for only a marginal proportion (1%) of the state appropriations to sports and physical activity in Finland, similar to other Nordic countries (1–2%) (*ibid.*). Statistics reflect that the focus in Nordic societies, including Finland, is on creating preconditions and promoting the physical activity of the entire population rather than allocating public resources for the search of success in international competitions. In contrast to Finland, other Nordic countries have also achieved extensive success in elite sports, which has been explained, among other things, by larger private investments in performance sports (see Storm and Nielsen 2022).

4. Key contemporary issues in sport policy

All the sport policy guidelines highlighted in Section 3.2 share a strong focus on the need to increase the population's level of physical activity. Although an increasing proportion of the Finnish population engages in sports and exercise, the total amount of physical activity has decreased with diminishing everyday activity. This has led researchers and specialists, slowly followed by sport policymakers, to consider whether this complex challenge can be solved solely by the sports sector

using traditional sport policy measures. Lately, solutions have been sought through a phenomenon-based cross-administrative approach, as well as evidence-informed policymaking practices. Contemporary sport policy at all levels is also challenged by increased demands for sustainable development.

4.1. Cross-sectoral promotion of physical activity

Traditionally, Finnish sport policy has focused on supporting the population's prerequisites for engaging in sports and exercise. However, increased attention has recently been given to intervening in the decrease in everyday physical activity (Government Report on Sport Policy 2018). As people's everyday lives (and physical activity) are mostly beyond the reach of the sports administration's measures, the sports sector has turned to cross-sectional co-operation. Such a systems thinking approach to tackle a population's physical inactivity and sedentary behaviour is increasingly recognised internationally (WHO 2015).

A coordination body for sport policy (including representations from 11 of the 12 ministries) was established in 2020 to compile and work on all ministries' measures related to physical activity (Supplemental material). For example, a method for physical activity ex-ante impact assessment was developed to be integrated into various decision-making processes in public administration (MEC 2020).

The state-financed national *On the Move* programmes have been the main concrete achievement in developing a cross-sectoral approach over the past decade in Finland. The aim of these programmes is to holistically promote a physically active lifestyle for different age groups in the framework of early childhood education, schools, educational institutions, working life, and services for the elderly (MEC 2021b, pp. 105–109). However, several practical barriers, such as the specific responsibilities and budget processes of each administrative branch, confront this cross-sectoral work. Similar observations are from other European countries, for instance Gelius *et al.* (2021) recognised room for improvement in regarding the contribution of sectors beyond sport and health, and Van Hoya *et al.* (2019) indicated cross-sectoral policies being currently at their early stage.

4.2. Evidence-informed policy making

Evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) (e.g. Head 2015) has been discussed for over a decade in Finnish sport policy (Heikkala and Oravainen 2006, Valtonen and Ojajärvi 2013). In addition to the decrease in physical activity, the current decline in National Lottery revenue and the ensuing threat of reduced appropriations for sports have increased the call for better impact monitoring and evaluation.

One objective set by the state sports administration is to strengthen the evidence base in the sector and make use of knowledge effectively in decision-making (Government Budget proposal 2022). At a practical level, many challenges occur in EIPM practices, such as the separate and unclear roles of actors and the lack of public debate and interaction (Valtonen and Ojajärvi 2013). Studies have indicated that the use of evidence is unsystematic and non-transparent (Hämäläinen *et al.* 2015, Korsberg *et al.* 2021). Accordingly, development needs have been identified, especially in monitoring and evaluation (Korsberg *et al.* 2021).

Over the last decade, the MEC has funded the development of a knowledge base on physical activity, with the aim of building a comprehensive research system to monitor physical activity among different population groups. Further, state funding has been used to launch several population research projects, such as the PILO study for small children, Move! measurements and LIITU (a study for school-age children and the youth), and Kunnon Kartta (a study for adults and the elderly).

Research evidence on the amount of physical activity (and any changes) is currently widely available in Finland. However, the knowledge base on the impacts and effectiveness of different sport policy measures remains inadequate (e.g. NSC 2015). Public spending on promoting physical

activity is strongly justified by its effectiveness in reducing societal costs. The Ministry of Finance (2021) has called for higher-quality evidence on the cost effectiveness of different measures, which has created pressure on sport policy to develop EIPM practices. These include broader development related to multiple perspectives, such as human competences, documentation, communication, and monitoring and evaluation (Korsberg *et al.* 2021).

4.3. Sustainable development

Finland has committed to implementing the United Nations' Agenda 2030 aiming for sustainable development. From an international perspective, Finland has ambitious sustainability objectives (Government Programme 2019), which also affect the sports sector.

Environmental perspectives have become inescapable in sports. Traffic related to sports engagement constitutes the main environmental load in the sports sector (Mäkinen 2019). Regardless of urbanisation, Finland is a sparsely populated country, which challenges local governments to consider the placement of sports facilities and event locations based on sustainable transport connections. Due to climate change, warming winters in southern and central Finland present a challenge to certain traditional winter sports, such as cross-country skiing. The changed environment has caused discussions on whether all kinds of sports will be or should be achievable in the future through various artificial, nature-consuming solutions. According to Roiha *et al.* (2022), environmental responsibility is considered in state sport policy, although not comprehensively. Moreover, central government funding and legislation have been identified as key drivers of sustainable development in both the municipal sector and sports associations.

Equality and non-discrimination considerations have received increasing attention since the 1960s in Finnish society, which has also affected sport policy. Changes include *Sport for All* approaches and the MEC's efforts to embed and disseminate gender equality and non-discrimination ideology through means such as policy funding (Pyykkönen 2016) or requiring all sports organisations that receive government grants to create an equality and non-discrimination plan (MEC 2021a). Furthermore, the revised Sports Act (2015) and other sport policy guidelines (Section 3.3) emphasise equality and non-discrimination as cross-cutting principles. Regardless of long-term development work, various equality and non-discrimination problems clearly exist in Finland's sports culture on different levels, such as inequality, harassment, and even abuse. Often, discrimination occurs against minorities, namely people with disabilities, and gender and sexual minorities (Hakanen *et al.* 2019, Kwok *et al.* 2019, Mikkonen *et al.* 2021, Lehtonen *et al.* 2022, Mikkonen 2022). Simultaneously, as the dark side of sport is becoming ever more visible through the media, public authorities, sponsors, and the public are increasingly expecting ethical conduct in both grassroots-level operations and elite sports. This challenges the traditional narrative of sport being morally and ethically entirely good. The legitimacy of (elite) sport may be under threat if the ethical norms of society are not respected (see Storm and Nielsen 2022).

5. Reflection on future dilemmas

By international comparison, Finland has an active population in terms of exercising and volunteering (European Commission 2018). *Sport for All* ideology is widely supported; civic activities are vital, and they are seen as a cornerstone of a democratic state. However, various challenges still exist that may hamper the achievement of sport policy goals in the future.

The development of Finnish sport policy has built on the confrontation of two opposing ideals. This started in the early 1900s between the leftist and rightist sports movements, continued with occasions such as power plays between the state and sports organisations, and now manifests in discussions such as professionalisation versus civic sport. However, tensions and confrontations as such are not unique, constituting a natural backdrop for policymaking in debates and discussions between two or more ideals. Finnish sport policy demonstrates that the content and characteristics

of confrontations can shape the continuum of the political sphere. As confrontations tend to remain in structures and cultures, at least to some extent, unsolved dissents can haunt policymaking in ways that are not always visible or conscious.

Finnish sport policy has been characterised by a series of forced reforms (Section 2), resulting in instability and a rather scattered sports sector. Further, the sector seems to be in a constant reformation process, where structural changes are used as a cure to improve the flaws of the previous system or tackle contemporary socio-cultural and structural challenges, such as physical inactivity or the lack of success in elite sports. Partly explained by the state's strong role in sport policy, the paradigmatic development of the sports government parallels that of the central government, representing cyclic development typical of the Finnish public sector (Stenvall *et al.* 2016). The centralisation reforms of 2012 and 2017 resulted in the NOC's becoming the umbrella organisation for all aspects of Finnish sport (elite sport, Sport for All, children and youth sport). However, the sports sector remains rather scattered, with several independent actors delivering small pieces of Finnish sport policy (Section 3). Furthermore, the roles and responsibilities of the actors remain somewhat unclear. The current context and sports system, in which sport policy is made and implemented in networks, require a shared target setting and responsibility between different actors. However, due to the aforementioned confusion regarding roles, taking responsibility may be difficult. This could cause challenges for policymaking, especially for achieving policy goals in the future (see also Lehtonen *et al.* 2021 in an elite sports context).

Apart from decentralised shared responsibility, the current context and system require leadership (Lehtonen *et al.* 2021). Currently, the state plays a strong role through resource steering. However, its role as a leader of sport policy appears rather weak. For example, the state is the leader of sport policy programmes (e.g. *Schools on the Move*), but its role as a leader in relation to actions, such as influencing others to achieve a change or a common goal, or more concrete measures, such as evaluating the effectiveness of different policy actions or rewarding/punishing through funding, appears mild. However, taking leadership is controversial. Although the government recognises the autonomy of sports organisations as free civic activities, it also seeks to steer NGOs to support the achievement of vast societal objectives.

Currently, the state acts in accordance with what is expected of a modern welfare state (guiding, instructing, and acting more in the periphery). However, current sport policy calls for debate on the changed role and position of the anterior sports movement (after sports organisation reforms) and the role of the NOC. The NOC's position as the leader of all dimensions of sport and physical activity was strengthened in the latest reform. However, the latest reforms faded the democratic elements of the sports movement, and the status of the NOC as the democratic representative of sports organisations diminished (Lehtonen and Mäkinen 2020). Moreover, faced with challenges of legitimacy and with no allocation of further financial resources, the NOC's position as a leader of Finnish sport and physical activity is difficult. The NOC does not have the democratic, bottom-up position of power that is common in the Nordic sports system (Henry 2009) or a legitimate top-down position of power, as the state holds the financial resources and legitimate power. This results in a situation where policy is decided by the state with a top-down approach, although no one is clearly leading or managing the implementation of policy processes or collectively highlighting sports organisations' needs and perceptions. Therefore, it is crucial to improve the openness of discussions between the state and sports organisations and to clearly delineate the roles of different actors in Finnish sport.

Notes

1. It should be noted that adapted physical activity and disability sports have a long history in Finland, which started after WWII. However, a detailed analysis of this sector is beyond the scope of this paper and will be examined in a future publication by Lehtonen and Saari (forthcoming 2022).
2. Since 2020, the decline in gambling revenue for the sports sector has been compensated by central government universal budget funding.

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Authors' contributions

Initial idea MM; MM and MK were the principal designers and writers of the manuscript with guidance from KL and JS. MM wrote the draft of the chapters 2., 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 5. and MK of the chapters 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 and 4. MM and MK together wrote the draft for chapter 3.4. While revising both MM and MK made important contribution to all chapters. KL and JS critically revised the manuscript and made important contributions to the structure and content. All authors have accepted the final version of the manuscript.

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