

## **Sports participation in the European Union: trends and differences**

### **The overall level of sports participation in the EU is amazingly high**

- Of all European Union citizens 60% takes part in sport or exercise every now and then (271 million people), with walking, cycling, swimming and fitness as most popular sports.
- All over the EU, sport represents a flourishing club life, with 700,000 sport clubs and about 70 million club members. In this context, football, tennis, swimming, tennis, golf, gymnastics, basketball, and volleyball are practiced most of all sports.
- The voluntary participation of citizens in the social sector is nowhere as extensive as in sports.
- The fitness centre has become nearly as popular as the sport club.
- This all adds to the social and health function of sport in the European Union.

### **However, once the frequency norm is raised, sports participation drops considerably**

- 49% of all European citizens participate in sports at least once a month; 38% at least once a week; and 17% at least three times a week (which has been recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine to improve fitness).

### **Moreover, there are structural differences and inequalities in sports participation.**

#### **Both between the member states...**

- There are many differences in the nature and scope of sports participation between the member states of the European Union.
- The highest proportion of the population takes part in exercise and sport in the Scandinavian member states, followed by the western and central European countries. There is a far lower level of sport participation in the southern European member states.
- There is a difference of 62 (!) percentage points between the nations with the smallest (Finland) and biggest part (Portugal) of the population that never exercises or plays sport.
- This structure is found in several surveys, in spite of differing research methods/questions.
- In the north-western part of Europe, club-related sport is dominant, in the southern reaches gyms and fitness centres prevail, whereas sports participation in the new member states occur more than average in a non-organizational context.
- This has led to a fascinating cultural diversity, which is distinctive to Europe, but also to structural inequalities in the opportunities for individuals to participate in sports. The percentage of the population that never participates in sport is significantly related to the degree of affluence in the country concerned. As the GDP per capita for the EU member states increases, so does the percentage of those who take part in sport.

#### **...and within the member states**

- There are patterns of inequality with respect to participation in sports within the European member states. In spite of its popularization, sport continues to be socially structured.
- There is a lower degree of participation in sport within a variety of population groups, such as elderly, women, and immigrants. The chances of sport participation are also greater for those with a higher educational achievement, income and professional status.
- As the level of affluence increases, these differences diminish. In a number of northern and western European countries, the levels of sport participation for men and women have levelled out and the differences between young and old have become less pronounced.

### **Even more alarming, sports participation is stagnating or declining**

- After many decades of growth, sports participation appears to have stagnated in a number of countries, like Finland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Portugal, Spain, and Slovenia; or has begun to decline, as in the UK and, possibly, France; among young adults also in Sweden; and, as regards time devoted to sport, in the Netherlands and Denmark too; also in the context of clubs and competition in Sweden, the Netherlands and Italy.

**The picture of sports participation trends, however, is a differentiated one**

- The fitness branch has experienced a massive growth in most European countries.
- Moreover, the number of participants in sports like golf, equestrian, and the cluster gymnastics/dance/fitness/aerobics has increased. The same goes for football, basketball and floorball in specific European regions. Among youngsters, also various forms of skating and skiing have become increasingly popular. The popularity of sports like tennis and volleyball has declined throughout the past decade, while jogging and badminton have declined in northern Europe and handball and basketball in eastern Europe.

**Key drivers of sports participation are yet not well understood and researched**

- Participation in sport and exercise is determined by a myriad of interacting personal, interpersonal and environmental factors.
- Identified determinants of sports participation are age, gender, education, perceived advantages and barriers, perceived health/fitness, intention, self-efficacy, self-motivation, social support, and experiences of living conditions. These determinants should not be interpreted as statistically proved 'cause-effect' relationships. Complex decision making processes lie behind the choice of whether to take part in sport or not.
- The motives for sport participation differ with respect to both age and gender. Moreover, they are often manifold, conflicting and inconsistent. They should be understood in the context of life stages and social context of those involved. People experience several breaking points during their sporting career, related to key life events and experiences.

**Sport policy interventions**

- Sport policy of sports organizations and governments in the various member states is only based to a limited extent on empirical data and theoretical insights on sports participation.
- The increasing importance of health has changed the character of sport policy. It is less directed at sport and focuses more on bodily movement, which avoid risk and are regularly done in a moderately intensive fashion. This might affect the perception of sport, which has always been 'cool' because of its innovative and unruly aspects.
- Related to the focus on physical activity, sport policy has shifted from young people to the elderly.
- Sport policy also focuses less on the infrastructure and more on changing individual mentalities, attitudes and perceptions. The danger of such an approach is that it lays the responsibility for a lack of physical activity or sport participation at the individual's door, while it is in fact a broader social problem, which requires action to be taken at several levels. Moreover, the premise of this approach is problematic, as interventions in the field of sport that concentrate on knowledge enhancement have proved to be rather ineffective.

**Essential research data is still lacking to improve sports participation successfully**

- It is not a lack of data on sports participation as such that forms the greatest stumble block, but (1) a lack of longitudinal and comparative data and (2) research studies leading to an understanding or explanation of differences and trends.
- There is quite a lot research data on the extent, motives and determinants of sports participation, dropping out, and non-participation, but there is far too little knowledge about the more profound background thereof. There are hardly any data on the dynamics lying behind the turnover in sport, why people leave one sport and take up another, or stop participating in sport altogether.
- Much greater knowledge is needed about the way in which decision-making processes with respect to sports participation take place and how they are related to transitions in the life course.
- We know precious little how young people develop new trends and in which respects the current sport culture fails to relate to their world of experience. Which kinds of sport satisfy their 'quest for excitement' most and what are the effects of the increasing normative approach to sport as something which 'must' be done for health reasons?