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## **Perceptions of stakeholders regarding National Federation Sport Policy: The case of the French Rugby Union.**

*Bastien Viollet, Brian Minikin, Nicolas Scelles and Alain Ferrand*

### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this article is to develop a framework of how a national association sport policy is operationally formalised in relation with the various perceptions of its internal stakeholders. Considering such a sport policy as a management tool, a case study of the French Rugby Union (FFR) was built using archival material and interviews. We demonstrate that this management tool is the consequence of a conceptual framework, consisting of: a formal substrate, a managing philosophy and a simplified representation of the actors' role (Hatchuel & Weil, 1992). As part of an intervention-research within the FFR, 45 semi-structured interviews were conducted with both federal and regional actors with various statutes. The analysis of these interviews shows both agreements and controversies, categorized through our conceptual framework. In conclusion, the case study emphasises on issues that this conception reveals for the national federation.

**Keywords:** sport policy, national federation, management tool, Actor-Network Theory.

## INTRODUCTION

*Do we want more players? Can our game be more appealing to female players? Should we have more community leaders? Do we need more clubs? What level do we aim for our national teams?*

The answers to these questions are a matter of choices that are made in accordance with defined strategies that are based on the formulation of an appropriate sport policy. For a national sport federation, the challenge is to be able to define how sport is practiced in the future and what development it must undergo in order to achieve that practice. Therefore the processes that lead to the conception or formulation of a national French federation sport policy by the actors located both at the headquarters and the regional committees that affiliate to it, needs to be better understood. Even though the concept of sport policy has existed since 2000, researchers in sport management have not mobilised it to understand how these choices are made within a national federation, but rather treat it as *a posteriori* of the design process. Therefore, our starting point is about trying to conceptualise sport policy in the framework of a national sport federation. To do so, we have used the concept of a management tool (David, 1998; Hatchuel & Weil, 1992). We consider a sport policy to be a management tool and show that this tool is the outcome of the link between three complementary elements (our conceptual framework), consisting of: a formal substrate (content or documentation, ‘what?’), a managing philosophy (objectives or ‘spirit’, ‘why?’) and a simplified vision of the actors’ role (context, ‘who?’).<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to examine the case of a national sports federation to determine, on the basis of this conceptual framework, how its actors perceive its sport policy. As some other national sport federations, the French Rugby Federation (FFR) was recognised as promoting public interest by the Ministry of Sport, and has known, over the past 10 years, professionalization of its activities, individuals, structures and processes (Nagel et al., 2015). Given its development, it may be considered as representative of other national federations. The FFR has reached a peak of development pushing it to commit to a reflection on its sport policy.

The opportunity was to identify how its actors, who have different positions and responsibilities, may have similar or opposite perceptions, and how their different viewpoints about the FFR sport policy which they have to design, could impact their collaboration.

First, this paper presents the literature on sport policy, which has to be conceptualised in the case of a national federation. This is followed by the methodology used in the case of the FFR, aiming to collect and analyse the actors’ perceptions. The results are presented according to our conceptual framework. They emphasise strategic, human resources (HR) and managerial elements of the national federation, both at an intra-organisational level (its headquarters) and an inter-organisational level (its relations with regional committees and club affiliates).

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

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<sup>1</sup> From then on, our conceptual framework focuses on a sport policy, understood as a ‘vision statement’ including the ‘what?’, ‘why?’ and ‘who?’ questions, and so is different from a strategy (‘how’) (Camy & Robinson, 2007). The strategic, then operational planning appears subsequent and dependent on the sport policy (Robinson & Minikin, 2011).

## **Sport policy concept and its application in national federation**

As our contribution focuses on the conception of a national federation sport policy (called ‘federal sport policy’) and its elements, we are first interested in the concept of sport policy. This concept has known an accelerated academic interest over the past 20 years (Bergsgrad et al., 2007; Bloyce & Smith, 2009, Houlihan, 2000; Hylton & Bramham, 2008; Skille, 2008).

Previous research interested in one or several sport policy(-ies) at national level can be categorised into three approaches: exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. Firstly, the literature provides an understanding of a sport policy as part of exploratory approaches. The authors (Bayle, 2007; Bayle & Durand, 2004; Houlihan 2000; Houlihan & White, 2002; King, 2009, Mezzaderi et al., 2015) are deeply interested in the causes of any particular sport policy and the environment in which it operates. These works analyse a sport policy in terms of **content**, in relation with external impacts such as environment and history. Secondly, some other authors focus on the characterization of a given sport policy (descriptive approaches). They describe a sport policy in terms of **objectives, resources and results** (Bravo & Silva, 2014; Fahlén & Stenling, 2015; Houlihan & White, 2002; Skille, 2008, 2015; Winand, 2009). It is in this framework that Bergsgrad et al., (2007) then Hallman and Petry (2013) endeavoured to compare national sport policies. Thirdly, some works aim to explain sport policy(-ies) (explanatory approaches) using a managerial and/or sociological approach (Bernardeau Moreau, 2003, 2004; Bloyce & Smith, 2010; Gasparini, 1997). These authors make the **connection between governance, actors’ games, power relationships and the sport policy** in place. These reflections are regularly part of studies on organisational performance (Winand, 2009).

The common point of these works is that authors tend to examine existing sport policy(-ies) and the impact of the environment on the development of the sport in question. Consequently, there has been a lack of attention towards the formulation of the policy itself and the factors that lead to its formulation. It is necessary to understand the factors leading to the formulation of a sport policy, in order to examine the perceptions of key stakeholders of the policy itself. It is also necessary to understand to what extent the perceptions of key stakeholders can impact the formulation of a sport policy. Yet, it is necessary to propose a conceptualisation of a federal sport policy.

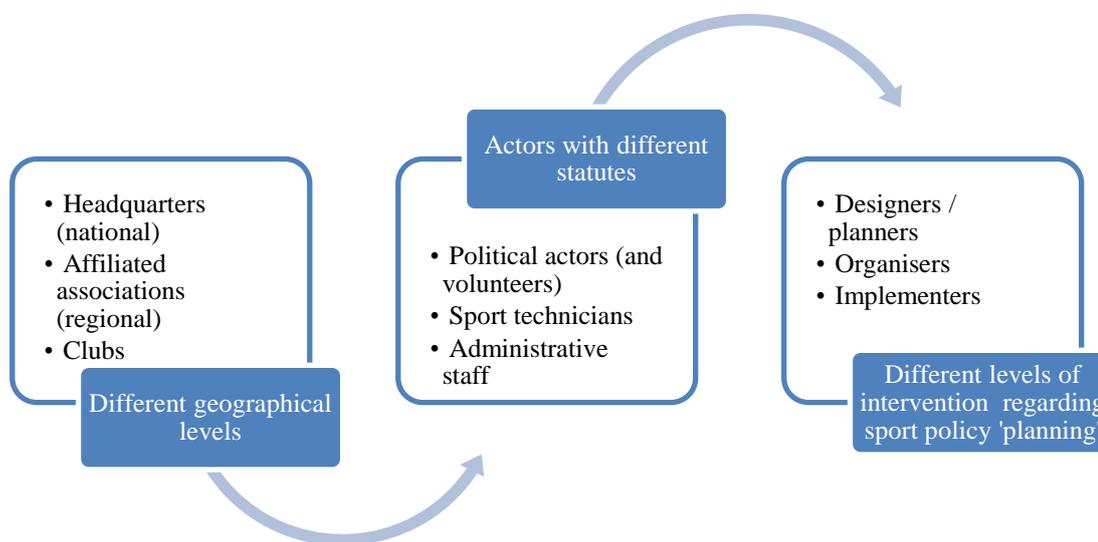
### **Conceptualising federal sport policy: elements to be considered**

The starting point for conceptualising federal sport policy is to rely on the main characteristics of a sport policy. Bloyce and Smith (2010, p.13) provide the following elements:

*All policies can be viewed as involving the following overlapping and interrelated features: human action aimed at achieving certain objectives; [...] at resolving, or at least ameliorating, an identified ‘problem’; and [...] at maintaining or modifying relationships within an existing organization, between different organizations, or a human figuration of some other kind.*

These elements are relevant for a federal sport policy as it integrates several **actors**, operating in different organisations at different levels. Given the characteristics of a national federation, the types of actors can be understood through three dimensions (Figure 1):

- The network is constituted by organisations located in different geographical levels: headquarters or national level, affiliated association, or regional level and clubs or the community level. (Bayle, 2007).
- These organisations are composed of political actors, volunteers, sport technicians and administrative staff. All of them can be involved in and/or affected by the federal sport policy (Houlihan, 2005, 2011)
- Actors take part at different levels regarding the sport policy ‘planning’: some of them are in the conception of the sport policy, while others organise the conditions to achieve the objectives, and the others make the action ‘on the field’ (Skille (2008) calls them the *implementers*).



**Figure 1.** The federal sport policy: several actors operating in a network.

The federal sport policy also presents elements in terms of **‘content’** as underlined by researchers interested in exploratory approaches. Therefore it is a **managerial dimension**, because actors are dependant and have influence on each other. Consequently it may be beneficial to understand how the federal sport policy is conceived, not from a methodological perspective (‘step by step’) but through the dynamics of the relationships between the actors and their perceptions. Indeed, our proposition is to emphasise our elements of conceptualization (actors, content and managerial dimension) with an existing theorization: the management tool (Hatchuel & Weil, 1992).

### **Sport policy as a management tool**

The framework proposed by Hatchuel and Weil (1992), which has been tested on several occasions (Gilbert, 1997; David, 1998; Oiry, 2012), appears particularly robust and promising to comprehend a federal sport policy. The authors indicate that a management tool is the

articulation of three heterogeneous elements: a formal substrate, a managing philosophy and a simplified representation of the role of the actors (Hatchuel & Weil, 1992) (Figure 2):

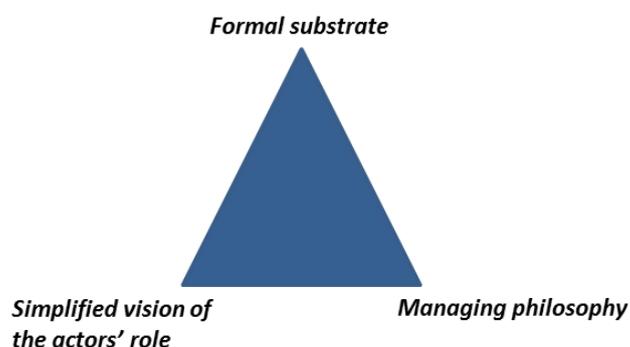
1/ The formal substrate designates the documentation and so the **content** in which the tool is embodied. This documentation gives a reality to the tool and may include written documents, numerical data and measurable indicators.

2/ The managing philosophy behind the tool refers to the ‘spirit’ in which the tool is conceived; in other words, it describes the **objectives** allocated to the tool.

3/ The simplified representation of the **role of the actors** corresponds to the fact that, during the design of the tool, the actors (especially the designers) are necessarily led to make hypotheses on how the users should behave in order that the tool ‘works’ well and thus is both effective and efficient, reflecting good governance.

The federal sport policy conception is thus understood to be a management tool that is applied to a federal network. David (1996) then Moisdon (1997) define a management tool as the “formalisation of the organised activity”. In other words, the federal sport policy comes about, through the evolutions of the three interdependent dimensions of the management tool.

This characterisation of a sport policy as a management tool gives a theoretical status to the concept of federal sport policy. It also enables, in an empirical perspective, to stabilize the fact that the federal sport policy can be (de)composed of three dimensions when presenting it to the actors. In fact, during the design process, this stabilisation enables an “inter-definition” of the sport policy content, the allocated objectives and everyone’s roles and relationships.



**Figure 2.** The federal sport policy as the articulation of three interdependent dimensions

Two main questions are asked: how the federal and regional actors perceive the federal sport policy while they are designing it? What are the consequences for the federation of these perceptions?

## METHODS

### The Case of the French Rugby Union

The French Rugby Federation (FFR) is the governing body for rugby in France. It represents one of the most important French sport federations, as it counts around 438 000 members<sup>2</sup>, deployed within 1,898 clubs, 34 regional and 102 departmental committees. Founded in 1919, the FFR was, three years later, recognised as promoting public interest by the Ministry of Sport, the French federations' relevant ministry. The goal of this non-profit organisation (association under French law of 1901) is, in compliance with its statutes, "to stimulate and develop the practice of rugby in all its forms (traditional practice, seven...) in applying rules of the game settled by the International Rugby Board<sup>3</sup>, to guide and regulate rugby and to defend its interests" (translation of the Title 1, Article 1).

The FFR is above all a member based sporting body, with its players, coaches, volunteers, its clubs and its different national teams, which play and perform at different levels. It has a complex governing structure, with an 'executive committee' (governing board), updated every two years and composed by 37 elected members, including a steering committee with 16 political leaders. At the administrative level of the headquarters, the FFR is constituted by six departments: general management, sporting project department, sporting activities and legal department, financial department, and human resources and territories' development department. In spite of its associative status, the FFR thus appears like a real company, with the management of more than 140 employees at the headquarters.

Two characteristics can be raised at the organisational level. On the one hand, the FFR is a pyramidal structure operating from headquarters to the clubs via both regional and departmental committees. On the other hand, the relationship with the Ministry of Sport is realised, on the human resources level, by the secondment of sport technical advisers (Article L. 131-12 of the French Code of Sport). These actors are, at the national level, members of the National Technical Direction, under the authority of a National Technical Director.

The French sport system relies on this 'co-management' between the national sport federations and the State, which materialize through a convention of objectives (Bayle & Durand, 2004). A Ministerial Directive of 2006 even specifies that:

*The State is responsible for the management of the sport policies in France. It delegates to the national federations the power to organise and promote the practice of their sporting disciplines and it supports them by means of conventions of objectives and the secondment of sport technicians (Instruction n°06-169 JS of the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2006).*

Over the last few years, rugby has known an accelerated development in France, with a strong increase in the number of members, especially since 2007 and the organisation of the Rugby World Cup. Thus, this sport benefits from an influx in terms of stadium attendances and media coverage. This quantitative development has been followed by the professionalization of its

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<sup>2</sup> Data from April, 2016. Rugby is the seventh sport for the number of licensees in France.

<sup>3</sup> Now "World Rugby"

activities, individuals, structures and processes (Nagel et al., 2015). These dimensions – entrepreneurial, “co-management” with the State and professionalization – have to be taken into account, given that this study was realised during a transition phase in the sport of rugby.

First of all, this phase was characterised by a certain ‘peak of development’: in the preface of the *French Rugby White Paper*, written in 2010, the President of the FFR announced: ‘*Rugby has reached a stage of its development which undeniably constitutes a new step and we should stop an instant so as to have the means to pursue our progression*’.

In line with this type of reflection involving several actors with different functions and realities, the FFR has changed its organisational and management structure as illustrated by the arrival of a new National Technical Director in October 2014. Last but not least, the FFR wish to establish more appropriate relationships with its regional committees, through the implementation of a financing model, which will provide funding on the basis of strategic regional projects. Rather than on the basis of numerical data (number of clubs, teams and members in the region), as has been the case in the past.

Accordingly, these organisational and structural dimensions push the FFR to commit to a reflection process around its sport policy.

### **Data collection**

A qualitative design was chosen, which as Wacheux (1996, p.15) describes: ‘qualitative research is firstly about understanding the Why and the How of some events in concrete situations’. Qualitative techniques are useful for exploring and describing elements of a problem in depth and detail, by examining situations with characteristics that may not be easily represented in numerical format (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Patton, 2012). According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), the goals of qualitative data analysis are ‘to reflect the complexity of human interactions by portraying it in the words of the interviewees and through actual events and to make that complexity understandable to others’ (p. 202). More than exploring and describing, our aim was to understand and analyse the actors’ perceptions of a federal sport policy.

A case study approach was conducted to comprehend the phenomenon as a whole, but also to detect dynamics (even in the short-term) that a survey could not identify (Yin, 2003). A case study approach is recommended when some evolution within the organisation occurs and furthermore when exploring a phenomenon not covered so far (Yin, 2003). This case study is considered as unique (Stake, 1995); the headquarters and the regional organisations that make up the federal organisation are understood to make up a network organisation / an actor network. It utilised three methods of data collection: documentary resources, participant observation, and 45 semi-structured interviews with both regional and national actors.

Access to several documents, that are publicly accessible (e.g. information from the FFR website) or from sources internal to the FFR, provides information on the formal substrate of the federal sport policy and includes elements: at the financial level (e.g. annual budgets and details on expenditure taken from annual financial reports and accounts), at the organisational level (e.g. organisation chart), about the governance (e.g. executive and steering committees

composition, responsibilities description from the constitutional documents and by laws), concerning strategic elements (e.g. strategic planning documents, old and current) and finally regarding 'current' activity (e.g. from documentation describing sport programs description, annual activities and numerical data). These elements also enabled a retrospective analysis, to understand the historical context.

Participant observation was used to discover the organisational context, from a global point of view, as well as the daily behaviour of the actors. This method also aimed to go beyond the conventional discourses, so as to access the actors' concrete practices (Gavard-Perret et al., 2008) and thus, to know more what happens, how the different projects and activities are conceived and how the decisions are taken. As such, this provided an idea about the managerial philosophy behind the decisions taken. In short, this observation enabled the researcher to refine both his understanding and analysis.

Finally, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted (Table 1). The aim of semi-structured interviews is to collect the viewpoints, thoughts and observations of some persons who have a special knowledge about a subject, a special status and/or information about which the researcher cannot have any access with other means. Semi-structured interviewing enabled the researcher to follow leads, ask additional probing questions, and let the interview take its course (Pomeranz, Needham, & Kruger, 2015). This type of interview requires the use of a schedule, which is a collection of questions and topics that the researcher wants to cover (Bernard, 2006). Nevertheless, this schedule is intended more as a guide than an explicit set of questions that each respondent must answer (Bernard, 2006). Interviews ended when no new information was forthcoming (i.e. saturation point).

The schedule was structured in order to question actors on each dimension of the conceptual framework (our federal sport policy framework): 1) an introductory part, so as to explain the study and the aim of the interview, 2) the definition of a federal sport policy, 3) the perceptions about what the FFR sport policy should be, 4) the actors impacted and their roles, 5) the perceived benefits and 6) the conclusion, with the factors of success or failure for this process.

A total of 45 interviews were conducted from May 2014 to February 2015. This is a relatively large number of participants for a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews (and other data sources), and none of the individuals declined after having been asked to participate (Bernard, 2006; Patton, 2002). Interviews lasted between 29 and 95 minutes, averaging approximately 60 minutes.

Respondents were selected because of their influence and the important roles they may play in relation to the FFR sport policy; this selection was made in collaboration with federal actors behind this research (1 board member, 1 sport technician and 2 administrative managers). Interviews were conducted with both federal and regional actors with various statutes (16 board members, 16 sport technicians and 13 administrative managers), given that the objective was to have a balance between these different 'types' of actors and a geographical representativeness (representative actors of the north/south and east/west of France) (Table 1).

It is worth noting that some board members of the FFR also simultaneously held a senior position with a regional association. We find again this characteristic with the sport technicians (especially those who depend on the Ministry of Sport), with some of them undertaking activities both at national and regional level. We also questioned sport politicians and technicians who act only at the regional level. These differing status and geographical levels may impact the access to the formal substrate and perceptions about it, the interpretation of the managing philosophy and the vision of the actors' role. As a consequence, our method and sample allow us to address the elements of our conceptual framework.

**Table 1.** Interview List of Stakeholder Participants

<b>Pseudonym – Respondent code number</b>	<b>Interview length</b>	<b>Typology - Role</b>
<b>P1</b>	<b>1 hour 8 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P2</b>	<b>40 minutes</b>	<b>Board member &amp; President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P3</b>	<b>41 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P4</b>	<b>1 hour</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P5</b>	<b>56 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P6</b>	<b>36 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P7</b>	<b>54 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>P8</b>	<b>1 hour 32 minutes</b>	<b>Board member &amp; President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P9</b>	<b>1 hour 8 minutes</b>	<b>Board member &amp; President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P10</b>	<b>45 minutes</b>	<b>Board member &amp; President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P11</b>	<b>52 minutes</b>	<b>President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P12</b>	<b>29 minutes</b>	<b>Board member &amp; President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P13</b>	<b>1 hour 12 minutes (in pairs with S12)</b>	<b>Vice-president of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P14</b>	<b>1 hour 1 minute</b>	<b>President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P15</b>	<b>1 hour 8 minutes</b>	<b>President of a Regional Committee</b>
<b>P16</b>	<b>42 minutes</b>	<b>Board member</b>
<b>S1</b>	<b>45 minutes</b>	<b>Regional and national sport technician</b>
<b>S2</b>	<b>1 hour 19 minutes</b>	<b>Regional and national sport technician</b>
<b>S3</b>	<b>1 hour 23 minutes</b>	<b>Regional and national sport technician</b>
<b>S4</b>	<b>1 hour 25 minutes</b>	<b>Regional and national sport technician</b>
<b>S5</b>	<b>1 hour 7 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S6</b>	<b>1 hour 5 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S7</b>	<b>1 hour 20 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S8</b>	<b>1 hour 1 minute</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S9</b>	<b>56 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S10</b>	<b>58 minutes</b>	<b>Regional and national sport technician</b>
<b>S11</b>	<b>1 hour 20 minutes</b>	<b>Regional sport technician</b>
<b>S12</b>	<b>1 hour 12 minutes (in pairs with P13)</b>	<b>Regional sport technician</b>
<b>S13</b>	<b>39 minutes</b>	<b>Regional sport technician</b>
<b>S14</b>	<b>53 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S15</b>	<b>55 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>S16</b>	<b>53 minutes</b>	<b>National sport technician</b>
<b>A1</b>	<b>58 minutes</b>	<b>Administrative manager</b>

A2	1 hour 2 minutes	Administrative manager
A3	1 hour 16 minutes	Administrative manager
A4	49 minutes	Administrative manager
A5	1 hour 10 minutes	Administrative manager
A6	1 hour 11 minutes	Administrative manager
A7	59 minutes	Administrative assistant – Sport Dpt
A8	1 hour 45 minutes	Administrative assistant – Sport Dpt
A9	56 minutes	Administrative assistant – Sport Dpt
A10	1 hour 8 minutes	Administrative manager
A11	54 minutes	Administrative manager
A12	56 minutes	Administrative manager
A13	1 hour 14 minutes	Administrative manager

## Data analysis

A thematic content analysis was performed, by transcription of each interview and by holding a research book. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes within data; this is thus appropriate to highlight actors' viewpoints and representations at a given time. Thematic analysis goes beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text and moves on to identify implicit and explicit ideas within the data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Coding is the primary process for developing themes within the raw data by recognizing important moments in the data and encoding it prior to interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998).

A first level of analysis and coding was made with a deductive approach (*a priori*) with three 'macro-codes' from the conceptual framework: a formal substrate, a managing philosophy and a simplified representation of the role of the actors. Following this meta-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), a categorization of data was used, according to the frequencies and redundancies of answers (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Thus, thanks to the categorization, we obtained a practical procedure for the raw data processing.

In total, 10 subcategories emerged from the interviews and the different log notes. A horizontal approach was favoured (searching the agreements and controversies per subcategory). For example, from one interview to the other, this involved identifying the recurrent themes and opinions. Then, a vertical approach was followed to determine agreements and controversies by types of actors. *This vertical approach should be developed further in a process analysis.*

These main subcategories are developed in the following results section and were illustrated, in particular, by selected verbatim quotes from respondents. In other words, these verbatim quotes enabled us to illustrate the analysis and reflect the ideas and content for each subcategory.

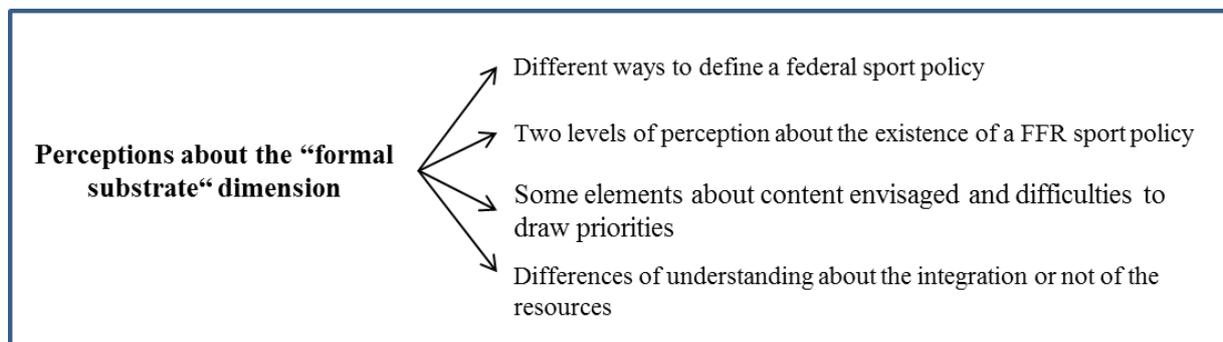
## RESULTS

### Formal substrate dimension

When the actors expressed themselves on the 'formal substrate' dimension of the FFR sport policy, it first appears that they have different definitions on what a sport policy is for a national federation and so have different representations in terms of content. Thus, these initial elements may explain the fact that they do not have the same view on the situation of the FFR, regarding its sport policy. These differences in positioning, may influence the content that each actor

contributes, based on what the federal sport policy is perceived to be, according to them. This ‘causal’ logic has represented three first subcategories of analysis. Finally, the fourth emerging subcategory was about whether resources should be considered or not when dealing with the formal substrate: does the federal sport policy depend on resources or should it be considered independently of the resources available to implement it?

Figure 3 summarises actors’ perceptions about the “formal substrate” dimension.



**Figure 3.** Actors’ perceptions about the “formal substrate” dimension

The first component highlighted was the *definition of a federal sport policy* by actors. A convergent dimension was that of ‘project’: actors, when they attempted to define a federal sport policy, saw it as a project, with objectives and a time scale. From that, the characterization of this project differs depending on each actor, and their daily reality: it is interesting to notice that, for a political actor (e.g. a regional committee’s President), it is about ‘the main priorities that the federation is giving itself for the next four years, for a mandate, even more’ [P15]. For a sport technician, it is above all ‘a shared sports project between the Federation and the DTN [National Technical Direction] [...] These are shared objectives’ [S1]. Finally, the federal administrative manager defined it as ‘a proposed working organisation’ [A13].

Beyond this general definition, actors distinguish themselves by the way they present the content of the FFR sport policy. Three different representations emerge: into three areas (‘development’, ‘training’ and ‘high-level’), into types of practices to be developed (‘Rugby with 5 players’ - called ‘touch rugby’ in the UK –, ‘Rugby Sevens’ and ‘Traditional Rugby’), or between two ‘worlds’, ‘grassroots sport’ and ‘professional/elite sport’.

More generally, these distinctions on both form and substance fall within two levels of *perceptions about the existence of a real sport policy* in the FFR. Opinions were divided, between those actors who judge that there is no FFR sport policy, because ‘I do not see any framework for action, with specific goals’, ‘I do not see any common thread and a well-defined and clear strategy in terms of sport policy’ [P10]. For others, the FFR is conducting de facto, as a national association, a sport policy, but ‘it lacks a global communication about the FFR sport policy’ [P15].

This controversy about the perception of an effective content can be explained by a general assessment; the fact that the perceived content is ‘heavy’ (many actions developed at the same

time such as rugby development) and so the actors expressed difficulties to draw priorities. The sport policy studied thus appears even more difficult to comprehend that its perimeter covers several policy areas, as this verbatim reveals: “the framework of the sport policy is not stable” [A2].

This content, perceived as heavy, impacts the *content that is envisaged for the sport policy*, because the actors’ propositions are broad, as they expressed themselves on several points. Nevertheless, they all highlighted the importance of the ‘*XV de France*’ (the national men rugby team) results, and so the necessity to consider this element. However, as a respondent mentioned: ‘We have some people who think that the most important thing, today, is to develop the Sevens part for the Olympic Games’ [S6].

In addition to this ‘performance’ part, federal as regional actors converged for some forms of stability. The stability of the number of licensees, first of all: ‘if we have a decrease of our numbers, it is difficult’ [S14]; ‘With 100,000 licensees, the sponsors will leave’ [A1]. Actors generally agreed for a ‘stability of the reforms, stability of the competitions: finally find a guiding line’ [S14]; those points are the core activity of the federation. An interviewee added that these forms of stability enable to ‘match the practice itself – through the competitions – [...] but also all the training courses, all the infrastructures’ [P8]. Thus, whoever advocated for a stability of the actors who lead and allow the practice: ‘we should enable stability into the management of our clubs: leaders, trainers, referees’ [S5].

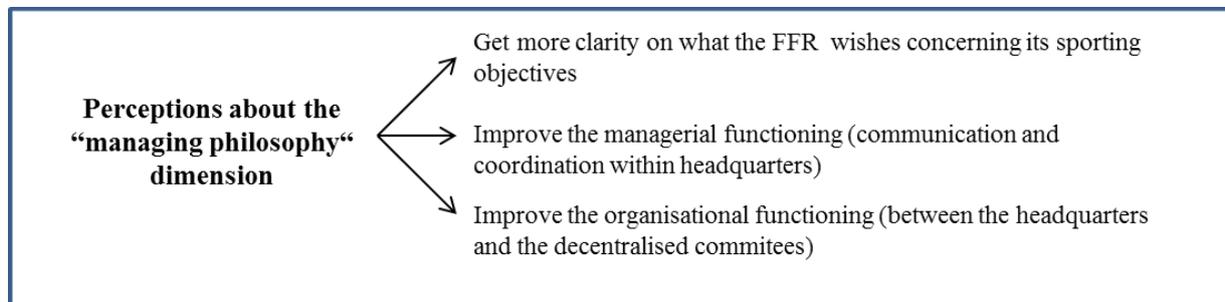
The analysis of the semi-structured interviews with regional actors shows a disparity between regional committees in the south of France, where rugby is culturally more developed, and the northern part of the country, where the room for growth appears to be more important. Respondents converged on this heterogeneity on the country: ‘Us, for example, in our region, we are not in an expansion policy, but in a qualitative one’ [P9].

This complexity is felt at the national level with a discourse which aims to favour, especially in the South, a qualitative development only (performance, diversification of players, health and safety promotion), combined with the idea to still increase the number of licensees in some areas of the north. As a central theme and so as to face this duality, an important place is given to clubs: ‘to promote clubs as key actors for good citizenship’ [P16] fall within this qualitative logic, as well as the concern regarding their human resources: ‘we must become interesting and attractive again for the volunteers’ [P7].

The last emerging subcategory for the formal substrate dimension is about the *resources related to the sport policy*. The main controversy is about the question of the integration or not of the resources. For some people, sport policy can be considered and thought apart from the resources, especially the financial resources, which so constitute an other subject. For others, ‘we cannot separate, today, the federal sport policy and its resources’ [P13]. Beyond these two different viewpoints, actors expressed a disparity regarding the resources available for headquarters and regional committees; the latter, less professionalised (Nagel et al., 2015), acknowledged their difficulties to ‘follow’ the federal projects and implement actions (‘we try to apply with our resources’ [P14]). Besides, regional actors insist on inequalities when they spoke about the resources of each regional committee.

## Managing philosophy dimension

When the actors expressed on what a well-defined federal sport policy can provide, three possibilities are highlighted (and so sub-categorised). Figure 4 sums up these actors' perceptions about the 'managing philosophy' dimension.



**Figure 4.** Actors' perceptions about the 'managing philosophy' dimension

Firstly, the sport policy may have the benefit to give more *clarity on what the FFR wishes* (where it wants to go), especially concerning its sporting objectives. Consistent with some perceptions raised in the formal substrate dimension, the observation is that 'there are things that occur, but [...] it is difficult to see the purpose' [P15]. Furthermore, respondents agreed on a lack of clarity and so effectiveness: 'maybe we lack a unity of vision and currently [...] we are doing a little bit of everything and so we are missing power in what we should do' [S6]. A board member went beyond, speaking about motivational factor: 'I think we should re-motivate the overall system, on sporting goals' [P5]. The sport technician added the opportunity to evaluate these objectives: 'it is important to have measurable objectives' [S5].

The second aspect raised by actors is to *improve the functioning of the internal organisation* (headquarters management), which is one of the organizational performance dimensions (Winand et al., 2010). From the administrative actor's point of view, the conception of the sport policy may be the opportunity for an evolution of the organisation. At the level of the administrative managers, a better teamwork between sporting and administrative activities / actions sought: 'I sincerely think that having somebody who makes the connection between the "sporting" and administrative professions [...], it could be good' [A3]. Moreover, some sport technicians see the opportunity to know more about the contribution of each on a project, and so to give sense to their action. A DTN actor insists on this: 'having a clear sport policy, well-defined, in which people exactly know what they have to do, there is a multiplier effect on energy' [S16].

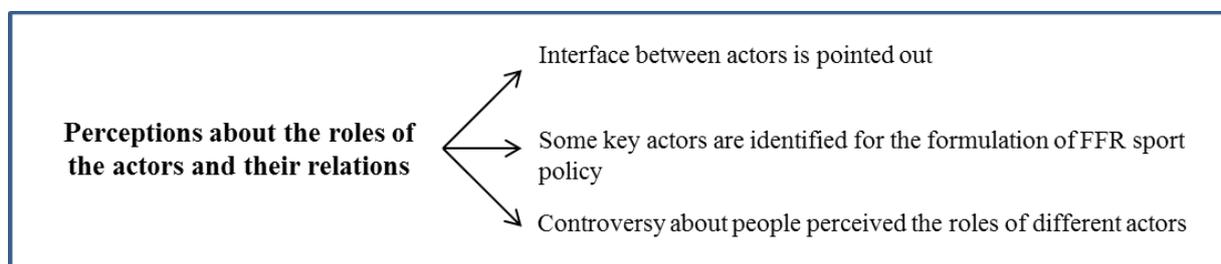
Thirdly, the federal sport policy represents, for the actors, an opportunity *to improve the function of the organisation, that is to say between the headquarters and the decentralised committees*. The analysis of the interviews emphasises a wish from the regional actors to have more exchanges and relationships; two quotes illustrate this: 'It could be good that there is a discussion: for example, that periodically, they (the DTN) come to the committees and tell us what they expect from us' [P14] and 'I think it lacks a relational structure between the headquarters and its regional committees and between regional and departmental committees' [S7].

The other dimension highlighted is the feeling of collective belonging that the sport policy enables, and which is also meant as a condition of success: ‘the main idea is to have a framed project that associates all the stakeholders’ [S14].

From a general point of view, what emerges in terms of a managing philosophy is a convergence of the opportunity to optimize headquarters action, with a positive impact for the network.

### Perceptions about the roles of the actors and their relations

As indicated above, the question of the roles and responsibilities of each actor, as well as the relationships, is essential. The actors highlighted the importance of working relationships. Then, some key actors were identified, but perceptions were diverging about the roles allocated to each. Figure 5 provides an overview on actors’ perceptions about the role of the actors and their relations.



**Figure 5.** Actors’ perceptions about the roles of the actors and their relations

First of all, respondents of the federal level relied on both *relational and organisational dynamics*, such as: ‘we do not have any exchange between us, this is too compartmentalised’ [P14]. Perceptions converged towards a need for more shared information and working methods more “standardised”: ‘Now, the developmental factors, especially for the headquarters, will be to get even more coordination and lateral development’ [A1]; ‘A project can be accepted if and only if it is shared by everybody. We will agree on it only if we will appropriate it’ [S7].

In the same vein, some sport technicians indicated a lack of knowledge about everyone’s activity. For example: ‘for me, there is [...] a lack of information. To know who does what? What are you exactly working on? Why are you doing this?’ [S5]. These perceptions on the interface between actors must be taken into account during the conception process of the sport policy; they appear as conditions of success as much as improvement of work efficiency, with the idea of getting people onto the same page.

*The identification of key actors* constitutes an essential point in this study and showed actors’ agreements; a controversy was the *roles allocated to each*. These two elements constitute the two other emerging analysis subcategories.

It clearly appears that several actors with various positions (as indicated in Figure 1) have a role in the design process of the sport policy. First, the role of the executive committee, in particular the Chairman, appeared to be important. Among these federal board members, some of them also hold a position such as the presidency of a regional committee, which will confer them an additional role in the implementation, the follow-up ‘on the field’ of the sport policy (‘We

cannot deny ourselves of the Presidents of the Committees, because they are the ones who daily implement the actions, the policy' [P15]). This dual role of President of a regional body as well as sitting on the federal board may be normal as the board is elected from regional officers through club officers (the latter 'give' their voices to the first). However it may actually raise issues around conflict of interest. Concerning the sport technicians, an important role is given to the DTN and its regional sport managers, as a proactive force.

This topic about the place of the DTN is subject to perceptions more or less moderate: for the sport technicians, it appears that 'The DTN [...] exists to propose a sport policy to the elected members, who have to approve it' [S6]. For others, in particular for politicians, 'The DTN is one of the components of the Federation, which must take part in a reflection on the federal sport policy [...] so, there is not only the DTN' [P10]. This form of divergence shows a tension regarding the DTN, as its actors are considered as legitimate (thanks to their high expertise) but with a limited power: 'At the end, it is elected members who decide. The DTN can influence decisions only if they agree with them' [P16].

These perceptions about these key actors identified and their roles reveal some stakes in terms of power and question the persuasiveness of the sport technicians, so as to influence the choices in terms of sport policy. The other striking point of divergence is about the relationship between the headquarters and regional committees. Some of the respondents believe in centralisation, while others prefer decentralisation. Paradoxically, regional actors appeared 'awaiting' for a sport policy coming from the headquarters: 'It is up to the headquarters to prioritize its actions, define which ones the committees must carry out. Define the content' [P10]. Whereas the federal actors are in favour of more propositions from committees: 'This is to them to know what is their degree of involvement, in the development and elite of their sport, inside their territory' [P16]. From this, it seems that this is up to the regional committees to define their own sport policy, in accordance with their specific features. Consequently, actors play a game of 'cat and mouse', putting the 'superior' or 'inferior' level in front of its responsibilities to contribute to the conception of a federal sport policy.

In summary, this dimension 'roles and relationships between actors' questions, according to the actors' perceptions, the shared leadership and decision-making power, and also the modes of relationships and exchanges between organisations (federal-regional) and actors (especially politicians-sport technicians).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of findings**

Considering a federal sport policy as a management tool, we have a reading grid – a matrix – that enables the conception of a sport policy according to three dimensions. Thanks to this framework, actors not only expressed themselves about the content of this policy, but also about the roles and relations between each other, and the objectives they allocated to such a process.

It is important to stress the fact that this study is about a process involving actors with different realities, who do not have the same sensitivities, convictions, motivations and interests. Each

one has her/his own knowledge and levels of expertise and experience. Lastly, they distinguish themselves by their different level of responsibilities and where they are located within the hierarchy of a network organisation made up of regions and clubs..

Findings highlighted both agreements and controversies between the actors. As a whole, they converged on the ‘managing philosophy’ dimension, as they point out some elements perceived as defects that the federal sport policy can improve, such as the clarification of the sporting objectives, the internal functioning of the headquarters and the relations between the latter and the decentralised committees. The two other dimensions – formal substrate and visions about the roles and relations – appear more controversial. Indeed, some actors expressed different views about the future of the sporting discipline and the influence of each actor within this collective reflection.

Given that the methods in this research are qualitative and based on interviews with a sample chosen in a purposive manner, results may not be statistically representative of a particular population. These findings, however, may be applied to other bodies, which have a similar context and with similar characteristics (Yin, 2003).

Through their perceptions, respondents told us about the importance of the context, both political (referring to the governance), economic (they raise the question of the means), sporting (influence of the last results) and in particular the impact of the federation organisation on the federal sport policy (in particular the functioning of the headquarters and the relations with the committees). Besides, actors were anticipating the impact of the sport policy on these relational and organisational dynamics.

This circle reveals some implications for the federation, for its headquarters and its relationship with regional committees.

### **Main issues raised**

The issues raised are firstly strategic: aiming to define choices in terms of ‘prospects/perspectives’ of development of rugby and organisation around. Once these choices are made, they have an impact on the future of the sport. Moreover, the conception of the federal sport policy may be accepted as the basis for the establishment of a strategic or operational plan, for the envisaged development of the practice of rugby.

Regarding the regional committees, one issue of the sport policy is, to provide an organised framework for actions, throughout the country. Nevertheless, the actors’ perceptions show some form of heterogeneity: on the one hand, through the human relationships (affinity between each one); on the other hand, in the levels of development of each regional committee (as rugby development and associated means). The main challenge is to implement a homogeneity throughout the country, a ‘governing principle’, for which the challenge is to ensure that the federal sport policy could be practicable and adaptable everywhere (Donaldson, Leggett, & Finch, 2012), to make possible a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

The implication of this will be on a managerial level, as the sport policy informs the capacity of the organisation to establish coordinated activities, that function together around a project.

The objective is to make actors work jointly, in giving sense to their activities for the success of achieving the aims and objectives of the sport policy.

Finally, the establishment of an agreed federal sport policy conception also creates implications for human resource management, both within the headquarters and as part of its relations with the regional committees. Analysis of the interviews emphasised the importance of allocating roles and responsibilities (e.g. for the headquarters, such a reflection is suitable for adjusting the structure of the organisation). This study also revealed the importance of the quality of human relations. Finally, regarding the relations with the regional entities, the methods and principles of communication (who, how and when?) are elements that appear important to structure, according to the actors, as they are numerous involved in the federal sport policy conception, then implementation (e.g. discovery activities of rugby for young female).

### **Limitations and perspectives**

Findings presented here have the limit of being ‘static’ as they are only at a given moment, at the beginning of the conception process. In order to understand and master the ‘trajectory’ of the federal sport policy, but also to focus on the dynamics of the actors who build it together, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) may need to be used in further research (Callon, 1986; Akrich, Callon & Latour, 2006). Dreveton (2011) then Oiry (2012) rely on ANT to appreciate the design process of a management tool after having considered the latter as a social construct (Grimand, 2006). ANT highlights the principle that each actor has his own translation of the tool - the ANT is also called ‘sociology of translation’ - and is in interaction with non-human elements (e.g. artefacts) which also have their role through the process. An actor’s translation always includes three elements of perception: his vision about the aim of the tool, the role that he plans to play and the roles he plans for the other actors (Oiry, 2012).

ANT, through the notion of ‘translation’, gives an explanation about the progress – or not – of the co-construction process and appears as a methodology of intervention. The tool expands only if the roles prescribed for others are accepted by them.

Our analysis focused on the three dimensions of the management tool and not about the progress through the different phases given by ANT. Dreveton (2011) indicates that the design process of a management tool requires four successive phases, consistent with ANT: identifying the problem, establishing interest, developing a solution and mobilising allies. A problem takes shape when it is formulated and the organisation has to use the tool. It is about a question / a problem that requires actors to converge. The study presented here corresponds to this specific phase. Further research may need to focus on the next phases. This will be about understanding and analysing 1) if the final content of the federal sport policy that can be anticipated corresponds to what actors have planned, 2) how each actor manages – or does not – to ‘incorporate’ its translation into the tool and so to make it evolve. The Interest phase is successful when each actor has developed a specific interest that – can be applied to the problem (Oiry, 2012). So as to understand the integration of the translations, it will be necessary to check three elements: firstly, that the aims predisposed to the tool (e.g. more clarity) are fulfilled. Secondly, that an actor is in a position allowing her/him to take the role that (s)he wanted to play. Thirdly, that the roles allocated to others are accepted by them. Given these elements and

considering that actors are not all 'equal' in front of the translation, Oiry (2012) relies on the notion of 'prescriptive relationship' so as to raise the fact that some actors will attempt, through their power and/or their knowledge, to impose their interpretation and to reject others.

As a consequence, a second series of interviews will be necessary so as to understand the operational progress of the project and the constitution and stabilisation of the network, that is to what extent actors are interested, recruited and mobilised after the formulation of the problem (problematization). The Actor-Network Theory will enable reflection of the constitution of the network through its four phases.

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