**From Standard to Directive: A Case Study on the Peculiar Policy Processes of Danish Stadium Funding**

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**Abstract**

In 2003, the Danish Football Association introduced a new club licensing system for its first-tier clubs. Among the criteria for the system was a requirement for clubs to play at a stadium with a minimum capacity of 10,000 spectators. This paper aims to understand how the Danish Football Association and the Danish league clubs have succeeded in their efforts to make their licensing criteria a public concern by standardizing them at a municipal level. It presents a case study examining how the policy process surrounding the decision of building a new stadium in the Danish village Hobro changed – in a peculiar way – what in institutional theory is understood as a (voluntary) standard into a directive for Mariagerfjord Municipality. The case is illustrative of policy processes regarding stadium funding in other parts of Denmark and most likely in other Scandinavian countries.

**Keywords:** Danish professional soccer; public stadium funding; institutional theory; standards; directives

**1**. **Introduction**

The majority of the stadiums utilized by first and second tier professional soccer clubs in Denmark are publicly owned (Bang, Alm, & Storm, 2014) for historical, political, and financial reasons (Mortensen, 2004; Wøllekær, 2007). As many municipalities are stadium owners, stadium requirements issued by the Danish Football Association (DBU) have become the responsibilities of local politicians because the Danish clubs are generally not in a financial position to fulfil them (Alm, 2014; Storm, 2013). As a consequence, many Danish municipalities have made major stadium investments despite the requirements not being in line with local needs (Alm & Storm, 2014). As can be seen in the figures below, the average attendance at Danish first tier soccer games is much lower than the centralized DBU capacity requirement of a 10,000-spectator minimum, which has been a prerequisite for obtaining a club license since 2003 (DBU, 2014).

**[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]**

Even though the average figures fluctuate, FC Copenhagen and Brøndby IF increase the overall average as they are the most popular clubs in Denmark. However, these clubs own their stadiums and are not relevant to the discussion on utilization versus the use of public funds. Breaking down the numbers reveals that spectator averages are low for the rest of clubs.

**[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]**

The clear-cut discrepancy between the capacity requirements and realistic local capacity needs is illustrated to an extreme degree by the Hobro IK (HIK) and Mariagerfjord Municipality case. HIK made its first ever entry into the first tier in the 2014/15 season with average attendance figures of 3,847 per match and had 2,486 the following season. Although HIK’s home ground did not meet the capacity requirements at the time of its promotion, the club was given a dispensation from DBU in its first season in the league, which was extended to the following season. By then the club had already started upgrading its stadium. Otherwise, it would have been forcibly relegated.

In December 2014, Mariagerfjord Municipality decided to contribute DKK 17.5 million to the project (Mariagerfjord Municipality, 2014a). Seen from the outside, it could be argued that the politicians felt obliged to help fund HIK’s compliance with the requirements to prevent it from being relegated.

This case is representative of a general trend in Danish soccer in the sense that a private organization, DBU, is capable of exercising a great deal of power – through the local clubs – over local public authorities. In doing so, it bypasses public considerations of broader welfare implications and optimal use of local taxpayer funds. This paper aims to analyze how this is possible. By posing the question of why politicians are willing to invest millions in stadiums that are not going to be fully utilized, we aim - through an institutional theoretical perspective - to understand the peculiar ways in which policy processes can result in democratically legitimate, but arguably inefficient decisions. The paper is structured as follows: First, a brief literature review on existing research on stadium funding is provided, leading to a presentation of our theoretical framework focusing on the institutional concept of standards. Then the study’s methodological approach and data collection process are presented, followed by the analysis section. Finally, the paper reflects on the perspectives and practical implications of the findings and suggests pathways for future research.

**2. Study Background**

Public authorities have taken, and still take, great financial responsibility for stadiums used by professional sports teams (Alm, 2016; Alm & Storm, 2014; Crompton, 2004; Crompton, Howard, & Var, 2003; Delaney & Eckstein, 2003; Lee, 2002; Long, 2005, 2012; Owen, 2003). Commonly, it is argued that direct or indirect public subsidies for professional sport and stadiums create jobs, growth and other positive externalities (Crompton, 2004; Noll & Zimbalist, 1997b; Storm, Thomsen, & Jakobsen, 2016). However, this view has been challenged by a number of scholars (Baade & Sanderson, 1997; Coates & Humphreys, 1999; Humphreys, 2006; Noll & Zimbalist, 1997a; Siegfried & Zimbalist, 2000, 2006; Storm et al., 2016; Värja, 2016). Baade and Sanderson (1997), for example, highlight that the creation of jobs through subsidizing professional sport and stadiums is done in an inefficient and costly manner. Further, Siegfried and Zimbalist (2006) state that sports facilities do not stimulate the local economy. Authors such as Bennett (2012) and DeMause and Cagan (2008) show how the allocation of public funds to stadiums for professional teams turns public money into private profit for teams and team owners. In addition, Long (2005, 2012) points out that public subsidies to major league sports facilities usually are much higher than anticipated.

It is often possible to build or renovate stadiums for professional sport with public subsidies due to the influence of stakeholders within the local business communities (Delaney & Eckstein, 2003, 2006, 2007; Paulsson, 2014). Paulsson (2014) states that economic and non-economic exchanges between municipalities and private actors often result in involuntary reciprocity and compulsiveness, which in turn leads to political decisions in favor of new facilities. Delaney and Eckstein (2003, 2006, 2007) highlight the strength of local growth coalitions (local corporations, local government and local mainstream media) to explain why the approval of publicly financed stadiums is possible in some cities but not in others. In contrast to Delaney and Eckstein, Henriksson (2008) states that local business networks – or growth coalitions – do not play such a significant role in pushing for new facilities for professional soccer clubs. Instead, he argues that it is primarily the local clubs and their lobbying efforts that have the biggest influence.

In addition, Scandinavian literature on sports facilities point to stadium requirements developed and issued by sport governing bodies (SGBs) as being the driving force behind the construction of new stadium with public funds (Alm, 2016; Alm & Storm, 2014; Rafoss & Troelsen, 2010; Tangen, 2004, 2007; Wøllekær, 2009). Rafoss and Troelsen (2010) state that Danish sport facility policies are characterized by the influence of the SGB’s stadium requirements. Wøllekær (2009) notes, for example, that the stadium requirement from DBU was one of the reasons why the Danish municipality of Odense decided to allocate public funds to refurbish and upgrade the old stadium for the local team OB. Crompton, Howard and Var (2003) highlight that many team relocations to new facilities in the beginning of the 21st century were not done because the facilities were ‘physically obsolete’, but because they were ‘commercially obsolete’. This was also why the soccer stadium was upgraded in Odense with public subsidies. Alm and Storm (2014) conclude that coercive and mimetic isomorphism has led Danish municipalities to comply with DBU’s stadium requirements and has thus given rise to a homogenization process.

Overall, the literature mentioned above points to the notion that, depending on the context, different stakeholders can play varying roles in policy processes when they enforce their demands and interests on their local governments. In the section below, we will outline how the policy process in Mariagerfjord municipality was affected by outside demands and how the institutional concept of standards can be used to gain insight into the decision to upgrade Hobro stadium. The concept of standards as institutional regulation has been used to understand and interpret governance and homogenization within the fields of organizational studies, public policy and business administration (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brunsson, Rasche, & Seidl, 2012; Frankel & Højbjerg, 2007, 2012; Gustafsson, 2016; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). However, to the best of our knowledge, standard as institutional regulation has not been applied to the context of soccer stadia with sport management literature before. Therefore, this article contributes to the body of literature on policy and decision-making processes regarding sports facilities and to how we can understand political decisions in such contexts.

**3. Theoretical framework**

***3.1 Standards as institutional regulation***

In order to answer the question of how municipal politicians decide to build or refurbish stadiums although there is a discrepancy between local needs and the stadium requirements, one must deploy a theoretical approach that does not assume that actors make (only) rational decisions. Institutional theory emphasizes other explanations than economically rational ones and it should be defined as a frame rather than a unified theory (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009). It highlights how organizations’ actions and behavior follow what is taken for granted, how they are influenced by other organizations and the surrounding environment, and why they comply with formal and informal rules even if they seem irrational (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2009; Lundquist, 1987; Røvik, 2008). This is particularly apparent within markets characterized by monopoly (cf. Paul J DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In regard to this study, Borland (2006) and Kurscheidt (2006) argue for example that SGBs as sole supplier of the organization of leagues and events decide the institutional structures and thereby control the supply and demand.

The concept of standards is a part of the broader institutional framework that is used in this study to understand why Mariagerfjord Municipality decided to comply with the stadium requirements. A standard is a type of soft institutional regulation outlining what the target adopter should do (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). The purpose of the standard is to create uniformity and coordination, but adopting and implementing the standard is in principal voluntary (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b; Gustafsson, 2016; Tamm Hallström, 2000).

The development and issuing of a standard – standardization – is an active action (Brunsson et al., 2012; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). Jacobsson and Sahlin (2008) emphasize that ‘regulation does not just happen; it is produced by organizations and is often directed towards other organizations’ (Jacobsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2008, p. 248). Furthermore, standards are usually directed towards actors who have the possibility to decide if they are going to be implemented or not (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). This corresponds to the case of Mariagerfjord Municipality, as the financing of stadiums for professional sport is an optional task for Danish municipalities (Naundrup Olsen, 2012), in contrast to its core, mandatory tasks related to public welfare areas such as daycare and schools.

With this is in mind, the stadium requirements developed and issued by the Danish FA, can, from a municipal perspective, be defined as a standard and as a form of soft regulation. This assertion is due to the voluntary aspect of the implementation, given that no explicit hierarchy exists between the issuer (DBU) and the adopter (municipality). Thus, DBU does not have any formal power to impose sanctions against the municipality if it decides not to implement the requirements. However, for clubs, the requirements are explicit rules that they need to follow if they wish to compete at the tier for which they have qualified. If they do not, they risk forced relegation to a lower tier. Thus, the requirements take the form of a directive and constitute a form of hard regulation where there is an explicit hierarchy between issuer (DBU) and adopter (club).

Even though the stadium requirements were defined as requirements to the clubs, in practice, they were passed on to the municipality, which had limited room to refuse to follow them. We will return to this point in the analysis section.

***3.2. Why are standards followed?***

The central aim of this study is to understand why a municipality decided to follow a particular standard set by an external organization. The theory of standards offers some relevant explanations. First, standards – in this case, the stadium requirements – are most likely to be implemented if they can be justified on the basis of rationality and effectiveness (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005a). If building a new stadium can serve needs other than those required by a soccer club, the proposal may gain more acceptance from politicians. In addition, an organization’s willingness to implement a certain standard often depends on its identity and situation (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005a).

According to Brunsson and Jacobsson (2005a), standardizations are usually directed towards adopters that have defined their *identity* in general terms. As general definitions of identity are open to interpretation and discursive practices specifying identity, those issuing the standards may try to persuade the adopters that their standards are relevant because they help the club or municipality to establish the identity they desire (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005a). Sørensen and Torfing (2000) also highlight identity as a concept which can help to understand why stakeholders act in particular ways. They claim that an identity is a dynamic entity shaped through individual and collective learning, whilst being influenced by *situations* and changes within the social, political and economic surroundings. This point is relevant to this study as well. In the analysis section, we will show how the construction of identities among the stakeholders involved in the policy process promoted the municipal politicians to approve the standards in question.

Finally, and in relation to *situation,* Brunsson and Jacobsson (2005a) state that standards are not only intended for certain actors, but are also attached to certain situations. A situation is an incident that is defined on the basis of a problem from which the standards have been developed (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005a). Danish soccer’s situation of being asked to comply with the stadium regulations imposed by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) in relation to European club tournaments (Interview DBU, 2013), as well as an increase in club revenues (DBU, 2014), was central to the decision to implement the standards. In the analysis section, we will explain this by showing how the voluntary nature of standards was reshaped in this case, and reflect on the general power the standard issuer holds as regulator of (soccer) stadiums. As an introduction, we will describe our data collection process and address interpretational issues connected to the study.

**4. Methodology**

***4.1. Case method approach***

This study is inspired by the case method approach (George & Bennett, 2005; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Michelsen, 2013; Yin, 2014). The case of HIK and Mariagerfjord Municipality can be categorized as an extreme one (Flyvbjerg, 2015). Seen in contrast to the average number of spectators and the number of inhabitants in Hobro, the case is one of the most obvious examples of underutilization brought about by complying with the SGB’s standards. Flyvbjerg (2015) states that when a study aims to obtain as much information about a given phenomenon as possible, the use of a representative or random sample is not necessarily the most appropriate strategy. Instead, he argues that atypical or extreme cases often provide the best information as they involve more actors and reveal more basic mechanisms than a typical sample does. Thus, using the case we have chosen has the potential to provide information about policy process behind public stadium funding in general and in depth (Michelsen, 2013; Yin, 2014).

***4.2. Interviews***

In our case example, Mariagerfjords’s policy process regarding stadium funding was subject to influence from various stakeholders such as politicians, local fans, the club itself (HIK), the media, sponsors and the municipality’s taxpayers in general. These actors can be seen as the core stakeholders in Mariagerfjord Municipality’s stadium funding decision. External to the core, but highly relevant to this study, is DBU, which is the governing body of Danish soccer, and the association of Danish professional elite soccer clubs (Divisionsforeningen), which is a lobby organization dealing with the general interests of the Danish top tier clubs. An interesting factor here is that DBU and Divisionsforeningen are setting standards for Danish soccer stadiums even though they formally have no power over the municipalities, which are the prime financial contributors to – and usually owners of – the stadiums. However, in choosing a focal point for our study, we decided to focus directly on the adopter of the standards, Mariagerfjord municipality. We conducted nine interviews in total. Six of these were made with members of the city council. Three of the interviewees represented the municipality in its negotiations with the soccer club, and one was the only politician who voted against the project. We were in contact with another two who had considered voting against allocating public funding to the project but changed their minds at the last minute to vote ‘yes’. However, they did not wish to participate. We also approached Local Government Denmark, the interest organization for the 98 Danish municipalities, for an interview. At the time of writing, the organization is negotiating with DBU to change some of the standards. However, it declined to participate in the study. Representatives from Divisionsforeningen also agreed to be interviewed, plus the chairman of the local club HIK. Thus, our interviews cover the most important actors in this process.

All the interviews were conducted during the Northern Hemisphere spring and winter of 2016 except the interview with a representative from the club, which was conducted during the autumn of 2016, and the interviews with DBU and Divisionsforeningen, which were conducted in November 2013. All interviews were conducted by telephone, lasted between half an hour to an hour and were recorded and later transcribed. We took inspiration from the snowball sampling approach (Friis & Ottesen, 2013; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Halvorsen, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2000), in that we continued to interview members of the city council until the interviewees pointed at the same persons who were relevant to the case. This ensures that all relevant interviewees regarding the case in question are identified. Furthermore, on the basis of saturation, we continued to conduct interviews until the same arguments and reasons appeared (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015; Friis & Ottesen, 2013) as to why the municipality chose to comply with the standards. All interviews followed a semi-structured guide (Eriksson-Zetterquist & Ahrne, 2015; Gratton & Jones, 2010; Kvale, 2007) that was based partly on our theoretical framework and on our primary and secondary written sources. However, it is of importance to underline that the developed interview guide only served as a checklist and frame for the interviews.

***4.3. Documents***

As mentioned above, we gathered primary and written sources for the analysis in addition to the interviews. All of the documents from and to the municipality concerning the stadium project were made available to us by Mariagerfjord Municipality, relating to the time and place of the municipal meetings, political decisions regarding the case, cost estimates for the stadium, e-mail correspondence between the municipality and the club, and sketch drawings of the new stadium. As a result, we avoid limitations in obtaining documentation such as biased selectivity, access and retrievability (Yin, 2014). In contrast to the interviews, the documents from the municipality are not to be considered as a result of the present study, but as a historical illustration of the decisions made by the municipality and HIK regarding the stadium, all of which add to the strength of the evidence base (Halvorsen, 2006; Yin, 2014).

**5. Analysis**

***5.1. Empirical background***

HIK[[2]](#footnote-2) was the initiator of the stadium project. A couple of months before the political decision resulting in the financial contribution, the club approached the municipality with a project plan aimed at complying with the requirements. The municipality found the project too expensive and declined to participate, but said that it was interested in contributing if the project was scaled down financially. Later, the club developed two different stadium project plans. The budgeted costs for the two projects were DKK 35 million and DKK 41 million respectively (Mariagerfjord Municipality, 2014b). On December 18, 2014, 28 of 29 city council members voted in favor of co-funding the project and contributing to 50 percent of the total construction. However, it constrained its decision to a maximum financial contribution of DKK 17.5 million (Mariagerfjord Municipality, 2014) and the club then moved on with the least expensive option.

It is clear from the data that it was important to the interviewees that the funding of the project was restricted to a non-recurring amount and did not entail (future) operating costs. The best solution was not to influence overall municipal operating costs because the municipalities were under pressure and constrained due to Danish laws on municipal budget growth in annual spending. Crompton et al. (2003) emphasize that it is generally easier for politicians to finance a stadium project through capital investments rather than operational budgets as it does not increase the annual operational budget. Thus, it was easier to help the club through a non-recurring amount of funding. However, not all politicians within Mariagerfjord Municipality agreed to this. The politician who voted against public funding for the project said:

My argument was that [by spending] DKK 17.5 million you hinder savings in other areas in the municipality for several years ahead. I know it was a non-recurring amount, but it is just a very typical counterargument in local political discussions – that it is not possible to mix operating costs and non-recurring payments. It is almost a self-reinforcing truth. However, you have *one* bag of money, that is my opinion. (Interview Informant 4, 2016)

It is important to note that the interviewee may have had an interest in securing money for core welfare activities. The point, however, is that certain technical arguments were used in the process to rationalize the decision and counteract oppositional views.

***5.2. Standard as institutional regulation***

Avoiding the club’s relegation from the first tier was one of the key arguments behind the municipality’s decision to allocate public funds to the stadium project. In this sense, the politicians felt obligated to help the club comply with the standards – a task that formally belonged to the club.

DBU has a set of rules. You must comply with those if you want to participate in the first tier, and we had a desire for our team playing in the first tier to continue to do that. So, that was one of the reasons why we chose to participate. (Interview Informant 1, 2016)

The worst-case scenario was if DBU relegated HIK because the stadium did not comply with the requirements. (Interview Informant 2, 2016)

The above statements illustrate that standards constitute a form of institutional regulation and can influence the governing and coordination of a society (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). Organizations without the formal authority to regulate a certain area use standards as a way of governing by leading decision-makers in the directions of their own interests (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). DBU has formal authority over the organization of soccer in Denmark. However, as it lacks this kind of formal authority over the municipalities, using standards is a way to obtain control that they would not have had without them.

DBU has succeeded in coercing the municipalities to undertake their standards as a mandatory public task, even though it is essentially an optional one. Several of the interviewees expressed that compliance to the stadium standards was a solution to a “problem” that they simply had to deal with.

The argument was that if they did not get that stadium, they would have been relegated and that was not our intention. (Interview Informant 3, 2016)

Brunsson and Jacobsson (2005a) argue that decisions to comply with standards are usually connected to situations and how identity is determined. One circumstance that appeared in the data, which can help explain why the municipality chose to allocate money to the project, was, as the above quotation illustrates, the sporting situation. The politicians took into account the sporting system, and the fact that the dispensation from DBU only applies for one plus one year (DBU, 2014). However, the sporting situation alone cannot explain the action of the municipality. It is also related to the financial situation for the municipality. One of the politicians interviewed stated that 2014 was a year when the municipality had an unusual amount of money left in financial reserves. This meant that the politicians could afford to allocate money to the project. If the club had been promoted one year earlier or later, there would not have been the same possibility for the municipality to allocate the money because its financial situation would have been different. The chance to financially assist was thus, from the politicians’ point of view, the right *situation*, a “once in a lifetime opportunity” (Interview Informant 1).

***5.3 Standards as a way of creating uniformity***

However, although the politicians showed a willingness to assist the club with public funds to comply with the standards, this did not imply that they agreed that the standards – issued by DBU – were all fair or necessary. All of the politicians interviewed questioned the standards and expressed that they were disharmonious in relation to local needs.

I think it is outrageous to build a 10,000-capacity stadium when there are 11,000 inhabitants in Hobro. The whole village needs to be on site every time. (…) If I am going to build a school, I will build a school for the number of students that are going to be there. I won’t build it 2.5 or three times as big as needed. (Interview Informant 1, 2016)

From a small village’s point of view, it seems to be completely insane to set such large-scale requirements. (Interview Informant 5, 2016)

One of the characteristics of standards is that they are directed towards general categories and not individual actors (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). The generality of the stadium requirements has meant that they are not suitable for every municipality and club, which the attendance rates in Figure 2 illustrate. However, the representative for the club expressed that ‘I can certainly understand that you have minimum requirements and I actually think they are reasonable’ (Interview club, 2016). Further, one of the aims of standards is homogenization (Brunsson, 2005b) and the issuer of a standard may have different arguments to justify why the standard is issued (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). One argument behind the standards from DBU is the ambition to achieve higher attendance figures.

We aim to have 10,000 spectators on average and therefore you cannot build a 4,000-seat capacity stadium. We need to set the bar according to the aims and wishes we have and 10,000 is really not a high capacity. (Interview DBU, 2013)

It is obvious that DBU did not have the local conditions in mind when they set their target. The subsequent problem of utilizing the stadiums is not only an issue for the local club in Mariagerfjord, but a problem for almost all clubs in the Danish first tier. In relation to the stadium in Hobro, the club is the only tenant and no concert or other cultural events have taken place at the stadium since the upgrade.

Although the decision to allocate money to a stadium that is most likely going to be under-utilized could be defined as irrational and inefficient, rationality and efficiency also played a role in the arguments that led to the decision of financially assisting the HIK stadium project. Besides being part of the identity construction of the municipality in general, this specific way of approaching the question of stadium funding shows how the decision is framed as an investment embedded in a broader municipal growth strategy. Over the years, notions of growth through the development of experience economy activities have gained general acceptance among Danish politicians. Sport has, to many municipalities, become a tool for attracting new residents and businesses (Bille & Lorenzen, 2008; Storm & Brandt, 2008). By framing the stadium project in a context that connects the soccer club to growth potential and branding, the municipal spending is rationalized and framed as an investment. Some of the interviewees argued that not only would the investment help the soccer club prosper, it would, in turn, create more employment in the municipality. It might also attract new residents to the community thus improving the municipal tax base (Interview informant 3). The in-migration argument is also present in the interview with the club. However, the one politician voting against assisting the club did not believe that this was the right way to use public money.

(…) Throwing away tax money for experience economy as professional soccer is – I really do not think that it is a good idea. (…) I think that is stupid. In addition, the argument that success on the soccer pitch would result in increased migration to the municipality – I just do not believe in that. I thought and think that good public service, good schools and good daycare centers are essential values when a family chooses to move to another part of the country or to another place. What kinds of schools are located in the area? What kinds of daycare centers are there? Overall, public service matters. That is my opinion. I mean that the municipality should concentrate on public service; it should not focus on professional soccer. (Interview Informant 4 2016)

The fact that the idea of creating growth by supporting a professional soccer team, in general, is not based on scientific evidence in this field of research (Storm et al., 2016; Värja, 2016) does not pose a practical problem as long the idea is institutionalized as an appropriate and legitimate discourse in the organizational field in question, as seems to be the case here.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Forsberg and Hedal (2016) indicates that spectators are rarely inclined to attend soccer games in another municipality. But they did visit other facilities when it came to their own participation in sport or physical activity. While only 10-17 percent of those questioned in three different municipalities had attended a soccer game in another municipality within the last year, between 35 and 44 percent had visited a swimming pool or waterpark in another municipality during the same year.

Further, the choice to support the stadium project was backed by another central argument: branding. This is done by both the municipality and club.

We must say that the PR [branding] we have got in the municipality [from the soccer club] is impossible to buy. (Interview Informant 1, 2016)

If you look at it from a financial perspective, it has been a cheap investment for the municipality versus the publicity gained. There is no doubt about it. (Interview club, 2016)

The whole time our opinion has been that this has been a major thing for the visibility of Mariagerfjord Municipality and Hobro, and it was something that we absolutely wanted to support if it was possible. (Interview Informant 2, 2016)

The branding argument is commonly used by municipalities to justify public investments in stadiums (Delaney & Eckstein, 2003; DeMause & Cagan, 2008; Sjöblom, 2006; Wøllekær, 2009). The situation was that the municipality and the club use the same argument to legitimize the public involvement, which is in line with Wøllekær (2007) who states that municipalities and clubs have tended to use the same arguments to justify the use of public funds. It is also in line with Brunsson and Jacobsson’s (2005a) notion of *identity*. It seems clear that the municipality’s willingness to help the local club to comply with the requirements was a way of building a certain identity and trying to show that they are a certain type of organization (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005a). It is obvious from the interviews that the club has played and plays a crucial part in the municipality’s image.

***5.4. The power of the standard issuer: from standard to directive***

The *de facto* situation in which the municipality chooses to allocate funds to a stadium project despite questioning the rationality of the standards, illustrates that a certain balance of power is institutionalized in Denmark. The power of DBU stems from the fact that the organization acts, in accordance with Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), simultaneously as a market, civil, and public regulator (Meier & García, 2015), and that the organization, therefore, has the monopolistic power over the “product” of soccer (Kurscheidt, 2006). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) state that the high degree of homogeneity within organizational structures derives from the fact that the organizations have few options, or at least believe this is the case, as the citations below indicate.

(…) Well, when the rules are like that, then I thought that we had to do it. (Interview Informant 3, 2016)

DBU has these rules. If you want to play in the first tier, then you must comply. And we wanted a team that could play in Superligaen (the first tier, ed.). This is why we applied for the funding. We simply had to. (Interview Informant 1, 2016)

DBU’s position of power was further illustrated when the politicians interviewed suggested that their municipality was not able to influence the standards. Only one of the politicians said that it might be possible for the local politicians to challenge DBU through their MPs (Interview Informant 5). The same informant reflected on the dispensation’s influence on the municipality’s compliance, stating the timeframe of the dispensation’s validity does not allow an appeal to be launched against DBU. Further, when you have complied with the requirements – or are in the process of doing so – there is no real interest in working to achieve a change in the overall rules (Interview Informant 5). The club pointed at UEFA as the issuer and another politician argued DBU should not be the one to blame, since FIFA ultimately sets the rules, and FIFA is too big to challenge (Interview Informant 2). Interestingly, the Danish case seems to be a national variant of the international case of FIFA described by Meier and García (2015). They argue that FIFA is an example of how completely private organizations can form, administrate and enforce global policies even in relation to public authorities. This is exactly what happened in relation to the standards in Denmark. The only difference is that DBU has not yet used its enforcement mechanisms and relegated any clubs (cf Meier & García, 2015). So far, the threat of relegation has been enough to make Danish municipalities comply with the stadium requirements.

There are two factors that are central to DBU’s power. The first is that that the stadium standards are largely institutionalized in Denmark (Rafoss & Troelsen, 2010). New clubs entering the first tier without sufficient stadiums stand more or less alone and have limited power to oppose the standards. This is equivalent to the situation in which the dissemination and institutionalization of, say, certain technological standards, come to dictate how future actors must act in order to comply with their environment (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2005b). The interest from other municipalities in joining in on opposition is weak because they have already applied the standards. Opposing them would make these municipalities look foolish because it would render their prior investments meaningless.

The second factor is the obscurity of where the standards are issued from. In terms of power, DBU benefits from the fact that it is unclear to the municipal politicians whether and how they can oppose the standards: ‘As with monopolistic markets, standardization sometimes concentrates power but dilutes responsibility,’Brunsson notes (2005a, p. 28). The issuer of the standards is peculiarly invisible and difficult to hold responsible for the standards and, especially, their institutionalization.

When confronted with the question why they issued the stadium requirements, DBU usually argues that the standards were prompted by the clubs. When the clubs were asked the same question, they pointed towards DBU and/or UEFA. This makes it difficult to work out who was behind them. Even though the rules are explicit, the reference to the issuer remains unclear in the same sense as stated by Brunsson (2005a). Divisionsforeningen argues in defense of the standards that they are voluntary because it is the municipalities who decide whether they want to field a club in the best tier or not. As the director of Divisionsforeningen argued in a press interview in the Danish Daily, Jyllandsposten:

They [the municipalities] are free to send their club down to the second tier if they do not want to pay [to fulfil the stadium requirements]. We do not decide for them. (Henriksen, 2015)

Even though the standards in principle are optional, the rhetoric here is that these are the rules and there are clear consequences for not following them. DBU and Divisionforeningen’s perceived power over the club’s fate meant that Mariagerfjord Municipality’s decision was dictated by the issuer of the stadium requirements rather than being a calculated decision based on local needs.

**6. Discussion**

This paper has aimed to understand how standards affect local policies in regard to the funding of stadiums. Using an institutional theory framework, we have tried to identify how standards, which are technically voluntary, can be turned into directives. Using an example of stadium funding in Mariagerfjord Municipality, we have shown how stadium standards have been followed by Danish municipalities despite questions being raised about irrationality and the inefficient use of public resources on projects that exceeded the local community’s needs.

Our study reveals that several factors were at play when the decision to help HIK meet the stadium requirements was taken by politicians in Mariagerfjord Municipality. First, elements of *identity* played a significant role. HIK’s status as a first-tier club was attached to its municipal identity to such an extent that it leveraged the politicians’ willingness to participate in the stadium project. *Situation* was also a factor. The municipality’s financial reserve meant that it had funds available to help the club in the year it needed support. The politicians in the municipality saw it as a “once in a lifetime” opportunity to assist HIK in its sporting endeavors.

One more significant aspect is the degree to which the stadium standards have been institutionalized in Denmark. It is clear from the data that DBU held a lot of power when it issued its standards, and this finding is in line with previous research. Our examination shows how a private organization can regulate areas in which they have no formal authority. DBU is Denmark’s national equivalent to FIFA, and the threat of relegation is a powerful tool to turn standards from something voluntary into (coercive) directives.

The interests of DBU, Divisionsforeningen and the clubs in this matter are straightforward. According to Brunsson and Jacobsson (2005b), organizations use standards to develop and enhance their capacities beyond their own organizational means. Even though Danish soccer is a highly commercialized product and Danish clubs absorb a relatively high amount of financial resources from their environment, they generally do not have enough funds to build and operate their own stadiums.

However, a main point in the institutional theory on standards is that organizations have internal drivers for survival, development and growth (P. J. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Standards are a way of fulfilling their goals and utilizing resources that are external to the issuer of the standards. Our study reveals how this works in practice. In a strategic partnership, the Danish soccer clubs, DBU and Divisionsforeningen used the standards as a kind of institutional regulation in order to secure and develop their own product with funding from the public purse (the taxpayer), which was released by politicians who they had convinced to follow the standards. All of this happened even though the project from an outside perspective may look like an irrational and inefficient decision. However, the national and international significance of soccer helped push this development forward in Mariagerfjord.

The concept of standards has been used within other academic fields to explain and understand uniformity, homogenization and actors’ behavior. However, the institutional concept has been absent from the field of public stadium funding and facility policy. This study adds to this body of literature and reveals how standards – as a form of institutional regulation – can be used to understand and interpret why public subsidies are being used to fund stadiums for professional soccer. Furthermore, the findings are in line with previous research on public funding of stadiums and facilities for professional sport, which shows that private actors are successful in obtaining public funds and using them to fulfil private aims.

However, there is a need for more studies to examine the connection between municipalities with professional sports teams and the institutional concept of standards. Our study has focused on the municipality as the adopter of the standards. A deeper analysis on how the voters and the actual funders of the standards relate to the power of soccer and their standards could also be interesting. Would they have the same positive approach as the municipalities? Protests in connection to the World Cup 2014 in Brazil indicated the discrepancies between the wishes of those elected and the voters.

Future studies should also aim to study cities and municipalities that have declined to make investments in line with standards issued by sporting governing bodies. What are the logic and forces behind turning down an event or a professional team? With only two cities bidding to host the Winter Olympics in 2022, and several other cities withdrawing their applications in the bidding process, it is evident that there are many public authorities who are challenging sports organizations’ demands. Finally, more studies on the decision-making processes in developing the stadium requirements are needed. Who decides how the standards are formulated? In an era in which the civil, commercial and public sectors are more interconnected than ever, and when standards like these concern other actors outside the sporting world it would be of interest to find out which other stakeholders have a voice in the process of developing the requirements.

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Figure 1



Figure 2



1. Jens Alm is the corresponding author of this paper: jens.alm@idan.dk [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. At the time, the club had initiated a process to incorporate the first team and separate it from the youth department in order to differentiate between each section’s economies. This is the common organizational structure among Danish professional soccer clubs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)