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“Public sports policies in Europe: win territories and carry values”.
Introductory session: *Sport, a mirror of our societies?*

Sport doesn't happen by itself. Politics, get moving!

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Figure 1 Olympic Stadion Amsterdam (1928)



Can sport be a response to the societal challenges of our time? In our search today looking for answers I would like to offer a brief insight in the way the perspective on sport is changing in the Netherlands.

For quite some time the focus of national policy on sport was promoting The Netherlands as a brand. In other words, sport as an economic factor. The orange brand, after the name of our royal family and in sports our national colour, should rank high in the international sport podium.

Figure 2 Orange supporters



This policy was not unsuccessful if we look at the Olympic medal table over the last two decades. In the last summer games, we even were 7th and in the last winter games 5th. Not bad for a small country¹, less than half the size of the region Nouvelle-Aquitaine.²

¹ In surface nr 133, in population nr 67.

² Netherlands 41.543 km², Nouvelle-Aquitaine 84.060 km²

Table 1 Olympic medal table for The Netherlands from 1992

Summergames / Jeux d'été						Wintergames / Jeux d'hiver					
Year/ Année	Gold/ Or	Silver/ Argent	Bronze	Total	Ranking	Year/ Année	Goud/ Or	Zilver/ Argent	Brons	Total	Ranking
1992	2	6	7	15	20	1992	1	1	2	4	12
1996	4	5	10	19	15	1994	0	1	3	4	18
2000	12	9	4	25	8	1998	5	4	2	11	6
2004	4	9	9	22	18	2002	3	5	0	8	9
2008	7	5	4	16	12	2006	3	2	4	9	10
2012	6	6	8	20	13	2010	4	1	3	8	10
2016	8	7	4	19	11	2014	8	7	9	24	5
2020	10	12	14	36	7	2018	8	6	6	20	5
						2022	8	5	4	17	6

However, the attention is shifting from an economic towards a social perspective. In the national budget 2023 it is stated that sport and exercise make an important contribution to better health, to improving quality of life and safety, social cohesion and integration, to improving school performance and reducing early school leaving. In reaction to the 2023 Government Statement, the National Olympic committee and Dutch sport federation (NOC-NSF) calls for the link between the sport and physical activity domain and the relevant policy areas. The NOC-NSF links sports to two themes in the 2023 Government Statement. One is equal opportunity for participation. The other is the enhancement of social coherence. They point out the opportunities within the Dutch local sports infrastructure with more than 20,000 associations, supported by hundreds of thousands of volunteers.

Figure 3 Volunteers wanted.



With this appeal NOC-NSF recognises that in The Netherlands sports is traditionally a local affair, rooted in private initiatives, local associations and kept alive by local volunteers. The national government has never played a prominent role in the area of sports. The national sports budget for 2024 is 439 million euro, which is 0.1 % of the national budget. Traditionally the support of sports on a local level has always been the domain of municipalities, where the importance of sports for the local social coherence was always recognised.

Although the awareness of the importance of sport for social coherence is growing, we see that the traditional local infrastructure, depended on municipalities but foremost on volunteers from the communities themselves, are under pressure. Regulations are becoming more complex and put pressure on the associations. Demands on sports infrastructure are becoming higher and therefore more expensive. Finding volunteers who are willing to commit on a weekly basis is becoming more difficult. In the sustainable distribution and planning of scarce public space in a densely populated country, space for sports is still too often forgotten. Sport cannot be seen isolated from other policy areas. Therefore NOC-NSF urges the government not to limit sport to one department, but to actively integrate sport into multiple policy areas. *“Sport doesn't happen by itself. Politics, get moving!”* is the motto with which NOC-NSF made an appeal on Dutch politics ahead of the November 2023 parliamentary elections. The three points of focus that NOC-NSF brings to attention are:

- 1) Funds to enable clubs to employ professionals who can train and support the volunteers in an increasingly complex world, thus making it attractive again to become volunteer and keeping the club vital.

- 2) Take room and opportunity for sports and exercise into account from the earliest stages of spatial planning.
- 3) Strengthen the social importance of top sport. The intention here is not so much as to promote the Dutch brand on an international stage, but as an inspiration for people to be active in sports on all levels in society.

Would a shift towards an emphasis on social importance instead of economic importance mean that at the next Olympics in Paris the Dutch will be less competitive? Probably not. A strong base in society where many volunteers make sports inclusive and accessible to our youth is not only a strong social binder, but also a fertile breeding ground for top talent. It's a win-win.

Figure 4 Sport for all

