

Social utility: how can the social functions of sport be measured and recognised?

General definition

Social utility is a very difficult concept to define because it is eminently subjective. Moreover, it competes with many other concepts that are close to it: common good, general interest, social responsibility, happiness, well-being and public utility. It is therefore necessary, on one side, to define the nature of social utility and, on the other, to specify its content.

- ***Nature of social utility***

Researchers agree that the term 'social utility' attached to an association or a project refers to the collective benefits they bring, thus making it possible to justify tax exemptions or diverse forms of support:

- The first collective benefit is macroeconomic: the social disutility avoided. The first example is the activation of passive expenditure on unemployment. An unemployed person returning to work pays taxes, pays social contributions and consumes. It no longer costs society to do nothing. The expenses incurred can thus generate a net social benefit. The value of the service provided by a rehabilitation association is measured by this benefit. Then there is the example of structures for the integration of young people in difficulty, which will make it possible to avoid the social costs associated with delinquency, drugs, dropping out of school, etc. Finally, there is the example of ecological associations which generate social benefits thanks to the actions carried out against environmental degradation.
- The second collective advantage is microeconomic. It is the production of local social ties in a given area. For example, when a social integration enterprise opens a solidarity restaurant in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, beyond the meal provided, it recreates a public link of conviviality. This is an externality attached to the meal sold. The same could be said of various local shops, which then produce social utility alongside their economic activity.

- ***Content of the social utility***

Social utility refers to various activities belonging to different fields. From an economic point of view, activities that make it possible to satisfy the essential needs of people who are not able to pay (housing, training, childcare, etc.), or to contribute to the development of a territory are considered to be of social utility. From a social aspect,

these are all activities aimed at fighting exclusion and inequality, improving social ties or improving participatory democracy. From an ecological point of view, social utility activities include all actions in favour of the preservation of natural resources or the fight against global threats (global warming, biodiversity crisis).

It is in this very general context of defining social utility that the collective benefits of sport must be placed.

The social function of sport

- ***European white paper***

In its White Paper on Sport (2007), the European Commission defined the societal role of sport - for the development of this sector in the Member States - around eight objectives: improving public health through physical activity; joining forces to fight doping; fostering the role of sport in education and training; harnessing the potential of sport for social inclusion, integration and equal opportunities; strengthening the prevention and repression of racism and violence; sharing our values with other parts of the world and supporting sustainable development.

We find in these objectives all the elements characterising the general approach of social utility as a collective advantage: either at the macroeconomic level with the social disutility avoided since sport can help avoid delinquency, drug and alcohol consumption, as well as various pathologies such as obesity, or at the microeconomic level since sport generates social ties, integration and education, beyond its main function around competition or physical activity.

The implementation of this White Paper will be based on new partnerships, with new audiences and in new territories.

- ***New partnerships***

There could be four institutional privileged partners: health, education, social action and urban policy, and justice. In France, it is historically difficult to implement transversal policies that transcend strong administrative cultures. It will therefore be essential to reflect on the ways in which a sporting culture, which is too self-centred on the sole purpose of competition, can be opened up. It will be necessary to raise awareness through training operations, with stakeholders of the sporting movement, on the social utility of sport. If the future of sport is to be based not only on competition but also on its social utility then new project leaders will be needed in sports associations. This implies new training courses for sports managers to allow for the diversification of club activities, contrary to the current hyper-specialised and competition-oriented diplomas.

- **New audiences**

An improvement in the knowledge of the accessibility to sport of a certain number of the underprivileged public seems essential. There are indeed black holes in the precise knowledge of social categories with limited access to sport: senior citizens, prisoners, young people from the neighbourhoods, unemployed, immigrants, disabled people, sick people, etc. Field surveys or local observers should be promoted to fill these information gaps. On this basis, it will then be possible to evaluate the social utility of the sporting practice.

- **New territories**

This is the challenge for sport and intercommunality. In this perspective, a typology of these territories is necessary to take into account their respective specificities: deep rural; rural in the area of attraction agglomeration; rural structured by a small town; medium-sized cities; agglomerations; metropolises. Territorial plans for sport are to be developed at each of these levels for equipment, training and supervision. The objective is to maximise the social utility that each territory will be able to derive from it given its specific issues.

Key lessons

- ***A problem of evaluation***

The recognition of the social utility of sport will require an improvement in the evaluation of its effects. We must be able to determine the total economic value created and therefore the profitability of public funds invested in sporting policies. Moreover, this would make it possible to avoid falling into a certain angelism. It is not enough to assert that sport is favourable to social inclusion; it must be proven and measured. Studies using labelled methods would be necessary on this point.

This brings us back to the eternal problem of knowing how to measure the qualitative, the subjective, and the non-market. Moreover, what sense can we make of a monetary evaluation of social utility? Perhaps we need new benchmarks for other policies in the service of a new social project. Social utility is at the heart of this debate with three conditions to be fulfilled: an ethical requirement around the idea of social justice; a democratic requirement around a citizen construction of indicators plus an experimental requirement around the integration of field innovations.

- ***A problem of culture***

If we leave a purely economic logic in terms of efficiency and competitiveness, the problem of the social utility of sport becomes fundamentally cultural. The welcoming of new audiences or the development of new types of activities is a matter of debate within the sporting movement. First of all, it is necessary to know if the sector is

capable of being efficient in taking care of very specific audiences. Interesting experiments are currently taking place in the health and social integration fields. There are still many other groups to be integrated. The question is then to know if it is fundamentally the role of the sporting movement to provide such services that are more oriented towards social utility than competition. A double debate will certainly need to be pursued: on the legitimacy of using sport to serve other functions and, on the capacity of the sporting movement to adapt to such a social demand.

In the end, the challenges for sport in the coming years seem to be clear. The social functions fulfilled by sport are recognised. Hence the question: how can these new social utility missions be linked to the services traditionally provided by the sporting movement around competition?

Further information:

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