
Empowering Local Communities: How the 'SPORT na START' Program Boosts Socio-Economic Growth Through Regional NGOs

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Abstract:

Purpose: The article aims to organize knowledge regarding the financing options for microprojects implemented by the NGO sector, targeted at end beneficiaries residing in municipalities with populations of up to 25,000 within the Republic of Poland.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In pursuing the objective, the following research questions were formulated: Definition of selected terms related to the article's topic: a) fostering the habit of active recreation among young people, b) a healthy lifestyle. What are the reasons why implementing social initiatives at the local level is essential for the economic development of regions with populations up to 25,000? The article's structure aligns with these set objectives. The introduction describes the background, research problem, and basic definitions related to local social initiatives, particularly those aiming to encourage physical activity among children. To achieve the defined objective, a critical analysis of relevant literature was used, along with an observational method supported by argumentation to strengthen generalized theses. Additionally, methods of induction and deduction, comparisons, generalizations, and synthesis were applied. In-depth research was then conducted using the Delphi method, a tool for structuring group communication processes.

Findings: The considerations led to the identification of key challenges associated with implementing sports projects for children aged 6-15 in small regions.

Practical Implications: The issues presented in the article highlight the necessity for NGOs implementing projects for primary school children to conduct the recruitment process with particular care.

Originality Value: This article presents the outcomes of original desk research. The topic addressed had not previously been discussed in international forums.

Keywords: NGOs, Public Policy, European funds, social economy entities, regional economy, project management, physical activity, healthy lifestyle.

JEL classification: I10, I12, I18, L31, L38, M19, M21, R11.

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1. Introduction

The third sector, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), plays a crucial role in the development of local economies. They can contribute in various ways, such as initiating projects targeted at children in regional primary schools, supporting entrepreneurship based on an "inclusive" model, or raising public awareness about maintaining a healthy lifestyle. These activities help increase the potential of the local economy, create jobs, and improve the quality of life for residents of local communities.

For this reason, collaboration with NGOs can be an important and effective element in executing local economic development strategies. NGOs can also significantly impact the economies of the smallest administrative units in the country, such as municipalities, by promoting sustainable development, enhancing social services, supporting entrepreneurship, and raising public awareness—for instance, encouraging the habit of active recreation or promoting competition based on responsibility and fairness.

One way NGOs influence the local economy is by initiating and supporting community projects that promote sustainable economic growth. Such initiatives can focus on tourism, culture, sports, and business development.

By providing training, organizing projects, and supporting local entrepreneurs, NGOs can help create jobs and stimulate economic growth. NGOs may also directly or indirectly improve the quality of social services within the community by offering services unavailable through state agencies or private companies, or by assisting in securing essential sports equipment that enables the launch of sports activities.

Moreover, NGOs can promote entrepreneurship and regional economic growth by providing access to capital, business training, and other resources to entrepreneurs organizing sports activities for both children and adults. This can lead to the creation of new businesses, which in turn generates jobs and economic growth.

Finally, NGOs can raise public awareness on important issues, such as encouraging young people to live a healthy lifestyle, providing education through sports and play, fostering the habit of active recreation among youth, and promoting competition based on responsibility and fairness.

By raising awareness and encouraging the implementation of projects that promote a healthy lifestyle, NGOs can help create more engaged, informed, and healthy citizens, which in turn can contribute to economic and social progress and reduce the prevalence of diseases in the population.

However, to carry out all the tasks mentioned above, NGOs require financial support.

2. Literature Review

Non-profit organizations play an important role in managing social, economic, and environmental challenges in regions by utilizing various funding sources to sustain their activities and fulfill their missions. This literature review covers 39 publications that shed light on topics such as strategic planning, management, and funding of pro-social activities in municipalities, the impact of physical activity on public health, especially for children in primary schools, the role of non-profit organizations in these activities, and the influence of external factors such as government collaboration, EU funds, and regional civil society. The review provides insights into the opportunities and challenges non-profits face in securing financial resources and organizing projects.

Strategic planning and management are essential for the success of non-profits. Behrendt and Braun (2020) highlight management structures that form the foundation for effective non-profit management. Funding is a crucial element for sustainable operation, and understanding the dynamics of funding sources is key. Anheier and Daly (2014) provide analytical frameworks for understanding non-profit funding policies, while Eikenberry and Kluver (2016) discuss the commercialization of the non-profit sector and its associated risks.

Projects aimed at supporting sports activities for children are analyzed by Halpern-Felsher (2021), Biddle (2020), and Tremblay (2018). Challenges and opportunities in obesity prevention projects are discussed by Galazka (2017), Sola (2024), and Jasiura *et al.* (2023). Eime (2021) examines the psychological benefits of team sports for children, while Ortega (2019) and Kres *et al.* (2024) explore the impact of recreational activities on children's health, mental, and social development.

The influence of European integration and EU membership on civil society organization funding is studied by Bruszt and McDermott (2013) and Ruta (2014). The globalization of the non-profit sector and its responses to economic, political, and social changes are discussed by Calabrese and Seibel (2019) and Lipski (2010). Kress (2024) examines global changes in children's physical activity levels, showing a decline related to the pandemic and its impact on young people's health.

In summary, this literature review offers a comprehensive view of strategic planning, management, funding, and the influence of non-profit organizations in fostering environments that encourage physical activity among children.

The analyzed publications highlight the challenges and opportunities faced by non-profits in securing funds from diverse sources, navigating the evolving landscape of global civil society, and effectively implementing projects that support health promotion for young people through physical activity.

This review is a valuable resource for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers

interested in understanding and supporting the significant contributions of the non-profit sector to a healthy society shaped from childhood.

3. Research Methodology

As part of the analysis of funding for projects that support physical activity among children, the author based the research on a review of information regarding the "Sport na Start" program, Editions I and II, from 2022 and 2023, respectively. This analysis was further enriched through an expert approach using the Delphi method, a tool for structuring group communication processes.

In the context of the study, the Delphi method was used to assess the local communities involved in microprojects in terms of their effectiveness and appeal to end beneficiaries. Participants and supervisors from the project "With Badminton for Health Around the World" took part in the study. The project "With Badminton for Health Around the World" received funding from the BGK Foundation under the "Sport na Start" program – Edition II.

4. Research Results and Discussion

Evaluating changes in the wealth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is essential for understanding the sector's financial status. To this end, average annual income levels and the percentage distribution of organizations within each income range are often used. Median income serves as the basis for average income, meaning that half of the organizations earn less and the other half earn more than the median value.

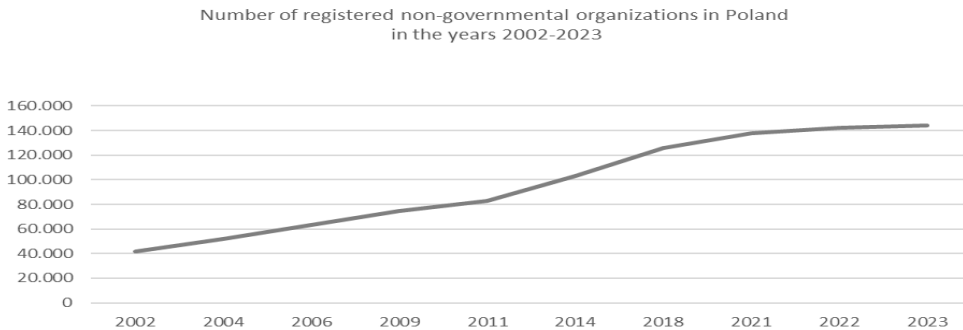
A comparison of the nominal value of average income levels of organizations from 2001 to 2020 shows a gradual income increase, although with some stagnation in growth trends between 2003 and 2007, as well as in 2011 and 2020. However, to gain a more complete picture of the sector's financial condition, it is necessary to account for the inflation rate. When adjusted for inflation, the changes in NGO wealth appear much less optimistic.

The "Sport na Start" program is a response to the need for funding pro-social projects, particularly those encouraging sports and recreational activities. This program targets entities interested in organizing inclusive activities on various topics for children and youth aged 6 to 15. The program's goal is to inspire young people toward a healthy lifestyle, educate through sports and play, foster active recreation habits, promote competition based on responsibility and fairness, and help secure the necessary sports equipment to initiate these activities.

The organizers aim to integrate students with diverse abilities into peer groups based on equal rights and obligations, while providing optimal conditions for harmonious development across all areas of life. This aligns indirectly with efforts to counteract

barriers and exclusions, as discussed by Natkański (2023).

Figure 1. Number of non-governmental organizations registered in Poland from 2002 to 2023



Source: Own elaboration based on REGON and KRS databases.

It is also important to emphasize the long-term goals, which, according to the authors, extend far beyond the program's duration. Building positive health patterns and fostering attitudes such as a desire for active leisure or self-organization in recreation among children and youth will contribute to relationship development in adulthood, positively impacting regional socio-economic conditions. In this context, the strong interest in the program across various regions, as shown in Figure 2, is not surprising.

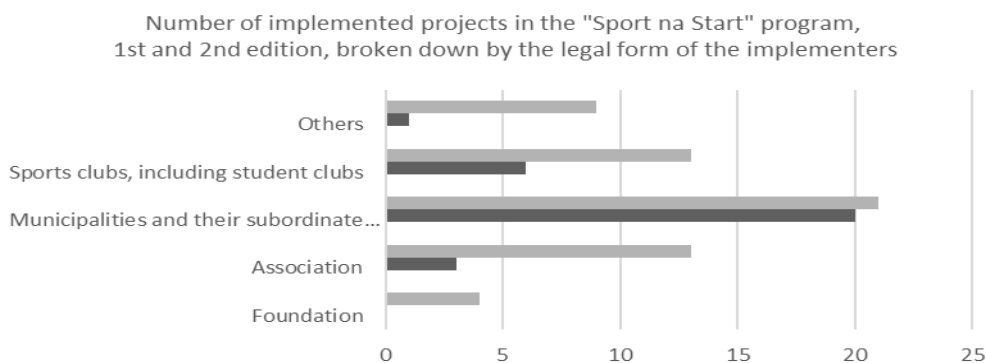
Figure 2. Number of implemented projects in the "Sport na Start" program- 1st and 2nd edition, broken down by voivodeships



Source: Own elaboration based on <https://www.fundacja.bgk.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/WYNIKI-2022-Sport-na-Start.pdf>; <https://www.fundacja.bgk.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/lista-zwyciezcow-Sport-na-Start-II.pdf>.

The interest in the program among non-governmental organizations, regardless of their legal form, indicates wide possibilities for implementing project activities defined in the program's regulations. However, the relatively large number of municipalities and their organizational units as beneficiaries of the program suggests a greater interest in the program from local government organizations than from other NGOs. The structure of the projects implemented, divided by the legal forms of the beneficiaries, is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Number of implemented projects in the "Sport na Start" program - 1st and 2nd edition, broken down by the legal form of the implementers



Source: Own elaboration based on <https://www.fundacja.bgk.pl/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/WYNIKI-2022-Sport-na-Start.pdf>, <https://www.fundacja.bgk.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/lista-zwyciezcow-Sport-na-Start-II.pdf>.

In summary, this literature review provides a comprehensive overview of strategic planning, management, financing, and the impact of non-profit organizations on creating an environment conducive to physical activity among children. The analyzed publications shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by non-profit organizations in securing funding from diverse sources, navigating the evolving landscape of global civil society, and effectively implementing projects that support both organizationally and financially the promotion of young people's health through physical activity.

This review serves as a valuable source of information for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in understanding and supporting the significant contribution of the non-profit sector to a healthy society, which develops its habits in childhood.

As part of the analysis of financing projects promoting physical activity among children, the author based their research on a review of information related to the "Sport na Start" program, editions I and II from 2022 and 2023, respectively. They then deepened this analysis through an expert approach using the Delphi method, which is one of the tools for structuring group communication processes.

In the context of the study, the Delphi method was used to assess local communities participating in micro-projects in terms of their effectiveness and appeal to the final beneficiaries. Participants and caregivers of the project "Z badmintonem za pan brat ruszysz zdrowo w świat" ("With Badminton, You Will Move Healthily into the World") were involved in the study. The project was funded by the BGK Foundation within the "Sport na Start" program – edition II.

Assessing changes in the wealth of non-governmental organizations is crucial for understanding the financial situation of the sector. For this purpose, the average income of organizations in a given year and the percentage distribution of organizations whose income falls within each range are often used. Average income is determined based on the median, meaning that half of the organizations have lower income, and the other half have higher income than the median value.

The actual income levels of organizations have not increased since 2001 and mostly remain at the same level or have decreased, as seen between 2003 and 2011 and in 2020. It is worth noting that the average income of an organization also depends on many other factors, such as the type of activity, organizational form, geographical scope, size of the organization, and many others. Therefore, in addition to average income values, attention should be paid to the income structure in the sector to obtain a fuller picture of the financial situation of non-governmental organizations.

Non-governmental organizations have various sources of funding, including membership fees, grant applications to local governments or central government institutions, and donations from individuals, companies, and institutions, among others. Over the last two decades, several changes in the level of utilization of these five most popular funding sources can be observed. The use of government funds also increased by 10 percentage points between 2001 and 2020, despite a clear interruption in the growth trend in 2011. Revenue sources are crucial for the functioning of NGOs and determine their financial stability.

Additionally, an increase or decrease in the share of a given source does not necessarily mean a change in the nominal value of funds from that source. This is because if the total budget of the organization changes, the percentage of funds from a given source (even if their amount remains the same) is modified. The interpretation of changes in the composition of revenue sources used by organizations over the past 20 years is complicated due to various reservations and data concerning the share of each source in the sector's budget in subsequent years.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

Funding for medium-sized projects in terms of budget plays a significant role in shaping civic attitudes and the development of non-governmental organizations. The "Sport na Start" program, financed by the BGK Foundation, is an example of how grants directed at projects engaging children from the smallest municipalities impact

the activity of local small communities and contribute to the development of the local socio-economic economy by fostering pro-health attitudes. The growing number of applications submitted to the program in the subsequent two editions, leading to a higher number of projects selected for funding in 2023 compared to 2022 (60 vs. 30), reflects the applicants' awareness of project planning. However, this awareness does not always translate into an understanding of the challenges involved in project implementation.

The importance of assistance provided by organizations like the BGK Foundation is closely tied to the development of local economies. This is primarily due to the fact that projects are carried out with the involvement of local businesses, and funds are transferred to them through purchases made as part of the projects.

Additionally, individuals involved in volunteer projects often continue their engagement by returning to work (65+ individuals) or by mentoring young participants who are just entering the job market. This highlights the importance of promoting healthy lifestyles, beginning from childhood and extending into the senior years.

The author recommends that organizations benefiting from support for their non-profit initiatives, especially those involving children aged 6-15, pay particular attention to the pre-project needs analysis of the final beneficiaries. Challenges related to overcoming barriers in the perception of sports or even recreational activity among beneficiaries and their families, particularly in the context of fighting childhood obesity, constitute a significant obstacle to recruiting participants for such projects.

Based on the literature review and practical experience, including the project "Z badmintonem za pan brat ruszysz zdrowo w świat" (With Badminton, You Will Move Healthily into the World), the author also recommends the active involvement of local entities that organize sports and recreational activities for children in the recruitment and implementation processes of these projects.

Support from local organizations is always an invaluable motivation for the project team members as well as the beneficiaries and their immediate environment. According to the author, this approach will help project implementers maximize the expected health benefits of these initiatives.

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