Challenges in regulating full contact martial arts and combat sports

Marianne Dortants, Annelies Knoppers and Maarten Van Bottenburg

Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

We use the concept of governmentality to explore how different historically constituted regimes of practice operate to govern the thinking and practicing of full-contact martial arts and combat sports (FCMACS) in the Netherlands and consequently, to resist regulation. After conducting 43 interviews, observing a meeting and various FCMACS events, and analysing media and relevant documents, we conclude that the (traditional) boundaries between (commercialised) sports and government are strained since the government bans certain events and yet implements policy goals through community FCMACS. The public order and safety regime has now becomes relevant in addition to the already existing sport and economic regimes of practice. Each regime shapes constructions of problems and solutions differently and applies varying technologies of power that are historically and culturally appropriate to that regime. The terms ‘dialogue of the deaf’ and ‘power vacuum’ illustrate the resulting impasse. The data show that meanings about regulation of FCMACS are expressed, but not unravelled, discussed, or negotiated. The lack of supremacy of one of the regimes and/or the absence of balance in the adjustment of regimes causes a power vacuum. We concluded that the impasse will remain as long as the traditional order of fragmented and hierarchical regulation is not replaced by a new status quo regulating these sports. The use of the concept of governmentality enabled us to untangle regimes of practice and explain this impasse in the regulation of FCMACS.

KEYWORDS

Regulation sports; governmentality; full-contact martial arts and combat sports; regimes of practice; rationalities; technologies of power

Introduction: the impasse

In recent years, much media attention has been paid to full-contact martial arts and combat sports (FCMACS) in the Netherlands. This attention was often triggered by fights or shootings near fight events and by calls for regulation or governmental intervention in various FCMACS. Occasionally, popular mixed martial athletes or kickboxers are invited to talk shows to give their opinion on the issue of regulation of their sports. The following summarises such a show after a violent incident occurred during a combat sport event held in Zijtaart [a village in the Netherlands] in the fall of 2012.

This incident, and problems related to FCMACS became the focus of a discussion on a late-night TV talk show featuring two prominent male kickboxers and a successful female mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter. The show’s hosts repeatedly suggested that ‘violent incidents are part of martial arts and combat sports’ and pressured the fighters to confirm that premise and to agree that ‘something must be done’ to prevent the occurrence of violent incidents in FCMACS.
The fighters agreed with the host but qualified their responses by commenting that the media’s penchant for reporting on violent incidents and downplaying the positive aspects of the sports served both the public and the sport poorly. In addition, they argued that the FCMACS are particularly successful in the disciplinary effects they have on youth, have produced a successful cohort of Dutch martial arts athletes and have provided entertainment for the general public. However, the talk show hosts stuck to their script about safety concerns and fear of violence and then pushed the issue even further by alleging that criminality was associated with the sports. When the show’s discussion ground to a halt due to the participants’ differing perspectives regarding strict regulation versus the overall benefit of sport, the participants were all frustrated and felt as though they had wasted their time.2

The preceding example illustrates the state of discussion regarding FCMACS in the Netherlands rather well; it is a cacophony of voices with little or no real dialogue. Nor are the problems and heated discussions associated with FCMACS new or confined to the Netherlands. FCMACS require overall regulation because, as Collins (2008) argues, in fights ‘violence is socially organised as fair fights’ (p. 9). Thus, fights usually occur in a specific regulated way and within a social structure that sets boundaries on this violence to ensure the safety of participants.

In 1996, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron were asked by the Minister of Sport to do an extensive research on the history and problems of no holds barred (NHB) events in the Netherlands (see also Berg and Chalip 2013, Brent and Kraska 2013). Publicity about a ‘free fight gala’ in Amsterdam elicited heated discussions about the acceptability of NHB events (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron 2006, p. 261). Van Bottenburg and Heilbron concluded that kickbox organisations had failed to adequately organise and regulate their sports. In their recommendations to the Minister of Sport, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron stressed that the government should change its laissez-faire policy and encourage the FCMACS sector to organise and regulate the sports (1996, pp. 95–113). However, no change in policy occurred. When FCMACS became an issue in public and policy debates, problems were minimised. The national government continued to distance itself from these sports while those involved in these sports continued to organise them as they saw fit.

In 2010, this status quo was challenged when violent incidents occurred during several kickbox events in a few Dutch cities. This time the violence was compounded by accusations that strong ties existed between highly commercialised kickbox organisations and criminal elements rather than the moral debate of 1996 dealing with the acceptability of combat sports (free fight/NHB/MMA). Violent incidents were widely reported by the media and several mayors and members of parliament publicly criticised FCMACS (Kamerman 2011). The mayor of Amsterdam announced a ban of FCMACS events in his city because of their perceived links to criminal organisations (Vugts 2010b).

Notwithstanding the protests of mayors and members of parliament, national and local governments promoted participation in these sports by subsidising programmes, especially in neighbourhoods populated with youngsters from immigrant backgrounds. The support was based on the assumption that FCMACS programmes contributed to community integration and general health of minority groups and to the overall safety of the neighbourhood (see also Dirks 2012). Parallel to this instrumentalisation of sports and the ongoing successes of Dutch fighters in the K-1,3 FCMACS, especially kickboxing, became popular among the young urban population (Breedveld et al. 2008, p. 83; see also, Elling and Wisse 2010).

As a result of this popularity, the agendas of sport sectors and (local) governments were implicitly intertwined. The attempts to ban mega events in several Dutch cities, such as Amsterdam, Hoorn, Leeuwarden, Rotterdam, ongoing bad publicity and the rapid growth of FCMACS pushed local governments to intervene and to involve FCMACS representatives and organizations in the regulation of their sports (Sportraad Amsterdam 2011). Despite incidental local interventions, many initiatives and good intentions especially by local governments and individuals in the FCMACS sector, nothing happened at the national level (De Graaf 2012, document federation 20124). Nothing seemed to be able to break the deadlock and develop a way of regulating these sports.
The current study analyses the background of the resulting impasse and the specific context as to why the regulation of these FCMACS was questioned. The insights gained in the study contribute to the debate about the desirability of governments shaping and regulating sport. The research question guiding the study is: How can an impasse in the regulation of FCMACS be explained and what insights can such an analysis contribute to ending this deadlock?

Mapping the field: stakeholders in regulation of FCMACS in the Netherlands

The FCMACS sector and governmental organisations comprise the two main groups of stakeholders involved in this issue (see Figure 1). The FCMACS sector in the Netherlands consists of many national and international federations. Each martial art form and combat sport seems to have its own federation although no one knows the exact number. FCMACS training most often takes place in the numerous small gymnasiums found throughout the Netherlands. Led by a trainer, fighters of both sexes, all ages and social classes train/work at their own level and mostly for their own benefit as only a few of them go into the ring. In addition to preparing a training regimen for fighters, trainers also often act as manager, promoter and/or manager of a (international) FCMACS federation; consequently roles and responsibilities are easily blurred. The local gymnasiums or sport halls are busy places as trainers organise and host both small and large scale events for prize fights every weekend. The affiliated sport federation provides the required jury, doctor and referees, while a promoter takes care of the logistics and financial aspects of the event. In addition to organising large national events, Dutch promoters also arrange international commercial mega events with light-shows and related glitz.

The NOC*NSF is the national umbrella organisation of and for Dutch sport federations. NOC*NSF allows just one member organisation to represent a sport and sees the FCMACS as one sport with many disciplines. Despite this policy, seven FCMACS federations are member of NOC*NSF and represent a specific (group of) disciplines of FCMACS. Only one recognised federation, the Federation of Eastern Martial Arts (FOG), is involved in discussions on problems in FCMACS like mentioned in the late-night show. FOG was organised in 1982 and is by NOC*NSF seen as the representative of a group of FCMACS that are popular and contested too. It consists of (about) 16 national FCMACS associations each with its specific style or tradition in FCMACS, and each with one or more member organisations. This ‘legitimate’ federation represents just a limited part of all existing FCMACS federations and practitioners in the Netherlands however and many of those participating in the various FCMACS do not recognise its authority in discussions about regulation of FCMACS. The FCMACS sector therefore does not speak with one voice.

The second group of stakeholders are government organisations such as the national (Ministry of Sport and Ministry of Justice) and local governments that act as hosts of fighting events and subsidisers of youth sport programmes. In recent years, police and research institutions that focus

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Figure 1. Stakeholders in regulation of martial arts and combat sports in the Netherlands.
on criminal activity have begun to pay more attention to FCMACS because of suspicions that fighters, trainers and promoters are involved in criminal activities.

The Netherlands does not have a nationwide sports law or policy that regulates sport. Instead, the national government requires the sport sector to be self-governing and self-regulating (Chaker 2004). The scope of the self-regulations includes rules for practice, rules for sport organisation and controlling play and rules during training and competitions. The role of the government consists primarily of the coordination of and encouragement of elite sport and sport for all (Waardenburg & Van Bottenburg, 2013). Dutch FCMACS lack such coordination and a clear social structure with agreed and enforced rules at all levels.

This specific problem of regulating FCMACS is not unique to the Netherlands. Other European countries like Belgium (Flanders), France and Italy also search for appropriate ways to regulate these sports. Despite differences in history, in degree of commercialisation and in the organisation of FCMACS, the common problems associated with having many different federations, fighting styles and long-lasting conflicts (Vertonghen & Dortants, 2014) make it difficult to regulate these sports at the national level.

**Governmentality in sports**

Foucault’s (2007) concept of governmentality as further developed by Dean (2010) forms the central theoretical framework for this study. Dean assumed ‘studies of governmentality are more concerned with how thought operates within our organised ways of doing things, our regimes of practices, and with its ambitions and effects’ (p. 27). His concept of multiple regimes of practice provided an analytic framework that enabled us to untangle different ways of thinking and talking about FCMACS and the multiple and heterogeneous ways of governing of these sports.

A regime of practice is an institutional practice, that is, a routine and ritual way in which people do things in certain places and at certain times. Such an analysis prioritises ‘how’ questions and begins by identifying problems that are situated in ‘particular regimes of practices of government, with particular techniques, language, grids of analysis and evaluation, forms of knowledge and expertise’ (Dean 2010, p. 38). A regime of practice can be analysed by exploring by what means, mechanisms, procedures, instruments, tactics, techniques, technologies and vocabularies authority is constituted and rule is accomplished. This analysis includes questioning forms of thought, knowledge, expertise, strategies, means of calculation, or rationalities that are employed in practices of government (Dean 2010, pp. 41–44). We explored how each regime of practice has been historically and culturally constituted and normalised through the use of technologies and rationalities. We also examined intentions and ambitions related to preferred interventions in self-governance and that of others in these sports. We wanted to know how (a mix of) regimes of practice operate, how people govern and are governed, and the conditions under which regimes of practice emerge, continue to operate and are transformed (Dean 2010, p. 33).

The concept of governmentality is not new to scholarship in sport. Green and Houlihan (2006) used it to analyse the role of the state and government in their relationship to national sport organisations. They argued that the concept of governmentality draws attention to ‘the kinds of knowledge and power through which social activity is regulated and through which actors – citizens, workers, institutions – are constituted as self-disciplining subjects’ (p. 48). Our use of Dean’s approach to governmentality enabled us to analyse how a mixture of regimes of practice operated and what the consequences of changes in that mix were for the regulation of FCMACS.

**Research in FCMACS**

Only a few scholars have focused on the organisation and regulation of FCMACS. Collinet and Delalandre (2013) described how the search for regulation of MMA in France resulted in the creation of a new federation for MMA by the national government. This was possible because
France has laws about the regulation of sport enabling the French government to apply an interventionist sports legislation model ‘that contains specific legislation on the structure and mandate of a significant part of the national sports movement’ (Chaker 2004, p. 9). Vertonghen et al. (2014) described the difficulties in regulating these sports in Flanders.

Berg and Chalip (2013) analysed how a ban of MMA in three states in the USA was transformed into an installation of state athletic commissions to regulate these sports. They concluded that the most influential discourse was an economic one since it eventually framed the policy debate, broke the impasse and made legislation regulating the sports possible. Subsequently, Brent and Kraska (2013) used a sociological perspective to evaluate this regulation of MMA. They concluded that, in addition to creating regulated and legalised events, regulation led to a new illicit scene of unregulated fighting events. This finding suggests that even though the economic discourse was the factor that led to the regulation of FCMACS in most states, the same economic discourse interacted with other discourses about sport such as those about sport being a site for gendered practices and for enabling catharsis facilitated the organisation of these sports in other, less regulated scenes (Brent and Kraska 2013).

The work of Berg and Chalip (2013) provided insight into how stakeholders worked to make the economic discourse as the ruling discourse in bringing about change while muting other discourses like those about violence and safety. We applied a more refined/detailed theoretical framework than used by Berg and Chalip (2013) to understand the resulting impasse and lack of change in the Netherlands. With the resulting insights we contribute to the debate about changes in the regulation of sports and to discussions of issues of regulation dealing with multiple and competing regimes of practice in sports. The process of the regulation of FCMACS in the Netherlands could serve as a case study to demonstrate the added value of the use of governmentality studies for sport.

**Methodology**

In this study, we paid attention to specific situations in which the activity of governing is problematised (McKee 2009). We became aware of and involved in this problem when the Amsterdam city council asked us to conduct research that would help them in their efforts to regulate FCMACS. The local government negotiated access to a diversity of respondents and to documents. We were intrigued by the issues we encountered and continued to focus on this problem of regulation by subsequently expanding our focus to include more respondents at the local and national levels, to use media and websites as important resources of information and to select Dean’s work on governmentality as the frame for situating the study. We used an interpretative research methodology that focuses on how individuals interpret their social world (Robson 2011, p. 24). This required us to use an interactive approach to our research design (Maxwell 2005, p. 3).

This research began in 2012 with an analysis of documents and websites, an inventory of groups of relevant stakeholders, the first series of interviews with people of each group of stakeholders, observations of events and meetings and a literature review on regulating of FCMACS. An analysis of the first round of data collection revealed different ways of reasoning about problems and solutions in ways of (prevailed) governing in FCMACS. The second series of interviews, observations and document and web analyses therefore focussed on other ways of reasoning and governing. We conducted 43 interviews in 2012 with a variety of respondents from the FCMACS sector (trainers, promoters, managers, a referee and fighters), from the umbrella organisation NOC*NSF, local and national government (civil servants, a mayor and one council member), Sport Council of Amsterdam, police and advisors working in the area of justice, in pedagogy and in the regulation of FCMACS. We used the snowball method to select respondents from each group of stakeholders. We asked respondents to give names of key figures in the struggle for the regulation of FCMACS. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 ½ hours and were recorded.
The interviews combined structure by using a topic list and flexibility by enabling the respondent to raise issues (Yeo et al. 2014). Interviewees were asked to talk about their history with FCMACS and to reflect on meanings they gave to their relationship with the sports. In addition, they were invited to comment on any problems they felt were associated with the regulation of these sports. When they named problems, we asked them to explain the background and to provide possible solutions. In order to gain their perspective on how FCMACS in the Netherlands worked, we also asked them to explain how they experienced the field of stakeholders operating in the Netherlands. To further gain insight into what stakeholders considered to be important, we attended three combat sport events to gain insight into proceedings of FCMACS events, a national training, the opening of a gym by a mayor and a meeting of local civil servants and police with representatives of a new international commercial kickbox organisation that wanted to organise mega events in the Netherlands again. Field notes consisted of descriptions of settings, practices and statements during each of these events.

To complement the interviews and observations, we analysed documents obtained from the police, local governments, a local Sport Council, a regional criminal research institute (RIEC) and the existing sport federations in 2012. We also followed news reports covering FCMACS in national newspapers, Dutch national TV, on FCMACS forums (Mixfight.nl; Round1network.nl) and websites of federations, K-1 and Glory World Series on the Internet in 2012. In each case, we analysed the different ways of reasoning in talking and writing about governing FCMACS.

The data were analysed using NVivo. A first reading of the data revealed that the respondents used eight ways of reasoning about FCMACS (Dortants and Van Bottenburg 2013). We further analysed the data of the second series of interviews using topics derived from Dean’s concept of governmentality: history and culture, intentionality (which objectives and goals are sought), construction of problems and the impasse in regulation of FCMACS and technologies of power. We discovered three regimes of practice dominated the discussion of FCMACS.

These three regimes are described below. The results are illustrated with descriptive quotes taken from interviews, media and field notes. Many respondents have various functions and roles. We indicate this with the sign ‘/’.

Three regimes of practice

The results indicate three relevant regimes of practice operating in the issue, namely sport, economics and public order and safety. An explanation of the operation and logic involved in each regime follows.

Sport regime of practice

What we identified as a sport regime of practice represents a way of reasoning (sport logic) that reflects and directs practices of governing and organising FCMACS.

History, culture and intentions

Beginning in the 1970s, kickboxing quickly became popular in the Netherlands. However, its popularity was not without controversy. Gymnasiums were made available by sponsors to trainers and fighters allowing them to work at the sport full time only to have these same gyms and their associated federations disintegrate or break apart due to differences about styles, fighters and money. A trainer/manager involved since 1970 described the culture of FCMACS as ‘little kingdoms [trainers within the FCMACS] with egos, each working with a small group of students, who [each kingdom] all want to be the boss.’

Overall, the goal of those involved in each sector was to train young fighters to be champions. If successful both fighters and trainers improved their chances at earning status, fame and fortune while the sport gained acceptance as a mainstream athletic pursuit. A trainer explained, ‘the main
goal, of course, is the acceptance of our sport and kickboxing becoming mainstream so that when you say to your dad, “I’m going to kickboxing” your father says, “yes, of course” and not “What? Kickboxing?!’. Membership in the NOC*NSF was for many FCMACS the main key for FCMACS to obtain the desired recognition as a regular ‘sport’. This recognition was assumed to validate the federation as a ‘decent’ organisation and also, according to a trainer, ‘membership enables us to go to municipalities to discuss programmes and events’. All FCMACS federations strove to become that one legitimate member of NOC*NSF and the effort to become that federation generated a quite a bit of ill-will among the competing federations. Many stakeholders (trainers, promoters, managers and representatives of government and NOC*NSF) described the federation that currently holds this membership status as powerless and questionable. A trainer/promoter, commenting on the ensuing competing politics of the federations, stated that ‘I’m not talking about those ‘weirdos’ of that federation. If they had done their job well, we would have had one federation 35 years ago already.’ In an attempt to clarify the actions of the recognised federation, an employee of NOC*NSF said that the [federation] also has a history; there are a number of federations that were expelled from that recognised federation for various vague reasons, and it does mean that there are parties that say; ‘yes, great fun, but I’m not going to cooperate with the [federation].’

Trainers, fighters, managers of federations and some administrators have a clear vision about what constitutes FCMACS. Training, intelligence, dedication and aptitude are foundational to and interwoven with FCMACS and, as in any other athletic pursuit, it is only those who excel at all these things who become real champions. And the Netherlands has its own heroes – at least for insiders. Since 1993, Dutch kickboxers have won 15 out of 19 K-1 championships and are role models for other kickboxers. Still others saw FCMACS as extraordinary sports because of the foundational character building traits inherent within each FCMACS. A trainer for example, explained that ‘in FCMACS you learn discipline; you learn to keep your emotions under control’. FCMACS teachers are assumed to teach discipline in addition to leading a very demanding and thorough body workout; showing respect is part of the FCMACS culture and is seen as a positive social value. Trainers and fighters explained that, ‘we are educated in FCMACS so it is so natural to say “Oesh” which means, “yes, you are right and I respect you”’ (also fieldnotes 24 June 2012). Indeed, according to the interviewees the atmosphere of respect is evident in all aspects of the sports as ‘it is impossible to badmouth the referee – no one would do that; there is discipline inside and outside the ring’. Many of the people working for governmental organisations agreed and recommended FCMACS as being highly suitable for youngsters with issues because teachers discipline young people and teach them respect through the use of these traditional norms.

Construction of the problem
According to most stakeholders, the main problem in FCMACS was the fragmented structure of the organisation of these sports. None of the national FCMACS federations, including the recognised FOG, was able to organise an overall registration, education and competition at the national level like in other sports. A trainer/promoter pointed to the individualistic nature of the current federations that focused only on the development of their own fighters; ‘you need small fighting events where beginning fighters can have their first bouts’. Unfortunately none of the federations created overall structures to address the basic needs of the organisation and/or to promote the regulation of safe and fair sports.

Taking a sport rationale position, fighters and trainers also expressed their disappointment that money earned through FCMACS was not reinvested into these sports. The rumour that the sports had a problem with ‘slick guys who are in it just for money and not for the sport or the athletes’ was a common complaint aired among concerned trainers and civil servants. Trainers/managers of federations contended that commercial promoters, who organised most of the matches,
cooperated with the federation that was the cheapest and had the fewest restrictions. This enabled promoters to move from one federation to another and resulted in competition among federations for the organisation of fight events. Each federation then has its own rules and fighting passport, and resulted in fighters competing in several federations. According to an experienced trainer, health and safety issues, such as those associated with a technical knockout (TKO) were very likely. ‘It doesn’t work if you have ten federations and they do not keep each other informed of who has fought or has had a TKO,’ he said. With no federation record, a fighter’s health and safety could be in serious jeopardy even when a mandatory rest has been imposed by a doctor after a TKO because he could fight voluntarily or be expected to fight every weekend. It would also often be difficult to determine how many parties a fighter has fought in each discipline. Some trainers/promoters/managers of federations were also disappointed that, with no clearly defined, approved and regulated federation, no official Dutch champion could be established and publicised in the sport. Rather, federations simply argue among themselves saying ‘my fighter is the Dutch champion because I’m the biggest federation’ clearly not meeting the standard for a legitimate championship.

Overall, a regulatory framework that contained the structure needed to make using violence against others a safe sport was missing. Strangely, we found little evidence of a desire among the vested interests to unite. This lack of desirability therefore enabled the present state of fragmentation to continue.

**Technologies of power**

The institutionalised power routines in FCMACS are expressed in vertical forms of conduct, meaning that, in a gym ‘there’s a complete hierarchical structure’. The overall structure of FCMACS is based on the principle that the teacher or sensei is the boss and students do what the teacher or sensei demands. According to fighters, trainers, civil servants and to several colleagues, this style of governing must predominate in the regulation of FCMACS because there can only be one boss, including at the national level. All those involved in the sport are familiar with, and accept the structure and even suggest that it is ‘an ideal way of working.’ However, although these hierarchical techniques worked in gyms and within each federation, they were not effective in the governing of the plurality of national federations. Each leading figure in these sports had clear ideas of how these sports needed to be organised and they were all willing to contribute to those ideas. While the sector did not lack intelligent and passionate individuals in leadership roles, those individuals could not look beyond their own interests to develop a national compromise that reflected a plurality of interests. A trainer/promoter summarised the dilemma: ‘the people involved are often macho, men with an ego, testosterone, and, let me say, the making of compromises is more difficult to achieve than in other sports’.

In an effort to undermine the authority of some trainers/promoters and to prevent others from being seen as THE leader and representative of their sport at the national level, certain trainers, promoters and managers of federations used techniques such as blaming and shaming of others to discredit their rivals through interviews in the media and the use of social media. The most common blaming and shaming techniques used consisted of accusations that the rival trainer, promoter or manager was a substandard professional and was involved in criminal activities. Most accusers were quite open about their intent since they would begin these statements with phrases such as ‘I will not mention any names, but...’ One interviewee even asked that the recorder be switched off so he could explain the involvement of others in criminal activities. Another technique used to gain power was used by FOG: it excluded other federations from its membership. Other FCMACS federations can now only gain indirect admittance to NOC*NSF if they are accepted by and into this federation. Its managers function as gatekeepers granting membership to favourite groups. Although there was one NOC*NSF recognised federation, all other federations attempted to become the single representative of the sport and the sole spokesperson that negotiates agreements with mayors and the national
government (document federation 2012). Of course producing champions in the sport was helpful, but that was not the major way to become the only primary, trusted and respected federation.

Using a sport rationale the national government expressed its preference to remain at a distance from regulating FCMACS. According to a national civil servant, the government position regarding regulation was that ‘sport regulates itself with its own rules and the government only intervenes when a sport goes out of control.’ The national government used its power to determine that institutional settings of sports and government should be kept separate, as long as this does not create social, legal and/or political problem for the Minister of Sport. A national civil servant explains ‘Regulation at national level was not an option as it was not only a time for deregulation [in society], but also because the government allocated the problem to the responsible local government’ (email, 31 July 2012). Similarly, the umbrella organisation NOC*NSF did not consider the problems of regulating these sports as their problem because they are an organisation of members and most FCMACS federations are not members of NOC*NSF. An official argued that ‘this goes beyond the way we structure our membership, and we cannot take responsibility.’

Constructions of the impasse
The deadlock was constructed as reflecting the inherent nature of these sports. An employee of NOC*NSF argued that ‘fighters are used to taking a fighting position, saying “come on” and then “attack”. That’s not the most constructive basis for cooperation.’ Every federation involved in this sector has a history filled with conflicts; they have little experience in working together. Furthermore, all strive for their own success and to dominate the field. According to a NOC*NSF employee, attempts to construct one umbrella federation for martial arts and combat sports, especially for all the administrative work, failed because ‘it was all about people, positions and autonomy of the federations. Whenever a possible solution emerged, the discussion centred on which position was taken on this issue, and who would become the director of such an organisation?’

NOC*NSF also had an interest in maintaining the impasse however; they were afraid of approving federations as ‘legitimate’ that could cause image problems and would be repugnant to important sponsors. So the impasse remained due to a lack of accepted leadership and cooperation, but also because the national government and NOC*NSF had little interest in regulating these sports.

The economic regime of practice

History, culture and intentions
The use of the economic rationale in FCMACS is less explicit than the sport rationale. A trainer, involved with kickboxing since its inception, explained that traditionally, FCMACS were not about making money. They became almost completely commercialised however when karate and tae kwon do started to grow. ‘Trainers thought, “let’s organise it properly so we can earn some money”. The whole belt system you have in judo and karate is commercialism.’ Many of those involved in FCMACS seemed to be competitors in search of a living. A trainer/promoter summed up what many respondents concluded ‘It is all about money. You have great promoters, small promoters; everyone fights for his own business and wants to earn his own money’. Trainers and promoters used this economic rationality to argue that money has to be found to pay trainers, fighters, doctors, referees, transportation, equipment and so on. They need popular fighters and well-matched fights to turn events into exciting shows. The spectacular and showy fighters are more popular than the robust and decent fighters (field notes 30 June 2012, comments on Mixfight.nl and Round1network.nl in 2012). A trainer/promoter argued that to ‘offer value for money’ is important to attract the audience. We observed that money is also invested to create attractive and spectacular events with light shows, music, stages, popular ring announcers and attractive
young women who dance and announce the next round (field notes 30 June 2012 and 02 August 2012).

Kickbox events in the Netherlands are a risky business that needs sponsoring according to the trainers/promoters we interviewed. ‘Without those hash shops we would have had no events, because without the revenue from them such shows are not affordable’ they explained. Trainers and promoters argued that the drive for earning money was stronger than ensuring a respectable reputation of their sports. Adhering to very strict rules was not always profitable because the FCMACS scene functioned like a free market without rules and control. A trainer/promoter explained that ‘as soon as money is involved it becomes difficult to give priority to common interests. As federation you are dependent on promoters; it’s a very free market.’

Representatives of the new international commercial kickbox organisation used the economic rationale during a meeting about sport and safety with civil servants and police in a large Dutch city. They emphasised that the market of kickboxing is growing by 5% per year, that in part because of successes of its fighters, the Netherlands is a natural market for mega events, and a return of mega events to Dutch cities would be lucrative for both the cities and the sport (Field notes 18 June 2012).

Construction of the problem
The economic rationale was used extensively by our respondents who argued that cooperation among FCMACS is difficult because trainers, federations and promoters are all competitors who try to earn a living from their sport. According to a NOC*NSF employee

A lot of people in martial arts and combat sports have different roles simultaneously – owners of dojos gyms etc. All depend on earnings in these sports. This creates a different dynamic of how people act and that’s very different than, say, a sports club or a football club.

This multirole combination within an unregulated market makes these sports difficult to regulate.

The promoters think organising FCMACS events has become a risky venture, especially since mayors have become more critical about licensing them.

In Rotterdam they had to cancel the event. He [promoter] had invested much money but he [promoter] had to cancel everything, because he did not get a license. And now no one dares to begin to organise an event anymore…

Promoters may have to take many risks when they organise an event, but according to a trainer, promoters have also become too influential: ‘And now we have an undesirable situation that promoters are more important than federations because the federation is totally dependent on the promoters and they know it.’ Trainers also use the economic rationale when they talk about the importance of having good fighters because good fighters attract other good fighters, which is lucrative. ‘You have clubs where you have really good fighters. Those trainers also get extra money for fights of their fighters’. It is a loss for trainers when successful fighters go to another gym because a ‘trainer’s income is reduced when a successful fighter leaves’ explains an ex-fighter/member of Sport Council.

Trainers did not see money as a problem in these sports. ‘I think that it is good that top athletes earn quite a lot of money,’ a trainer/civil servant explained. ‘But it is a problem when some clever commercial men make good money and then forget that it is about sport.’ This suggests the ideal trainer/promoter knows exactly how to balance the values of economics and sports.

Technologies of power
With few if any rules and little regulatory control, free market forces have become technologies of power in this economic regime of practice. This means the only way for promoters to organise an event is to create and attract good fighters and to offer spectacular, thrilling events. Promoters tend to prefer federations that are not too strict in following normative and general safety rules. For example, money can be saved when promoters engage in scheduling many fights during an event, including those for children. This was done to attract more public and generate more
revenue through admission fees. Furthermore, promoters create VIP tables that are financially very lucrative. They tend not to require medical blood tests, drug tests or mandatory checks of medical records of fighters that might prevent them from fighting after a knockout. They do not reveal transparency about finances, funding and sponsors and save money on security and on the absence of certified medical doctors. A referee states

Big federations do not always use a doctor, perhaps for financial reasons. When I come to the gala, I ask, ‘where is the doctor?’ and they say ‘no, I don’t have a doctor’ but I have a first aid [certificate] I am against it. I tell them you’re playing with lives.

Managers of federations consider these more lucrative events as less safe and less ‘honest’, due to the lack of regulation of (the market of) these sports.

The civil servant of the ministry of sport used an economic rationale to argue that the laissez-faire strategy of the national government is appropriate saying that ‘the galas we are dealing with are commercial events. The municipality can give a license for this event or not’ (email, 31 August 2012). It seems attractive to frame fight events as non-sport activities. Since the national government wants to achieve policy goals through sport organisations, a strategic way to cope with regulations and subsidies of the government is a technology of power related to the economic rationale. Those who succeed in generating these funds award licences and often have a financial advantage (Sportraad, 2011; document local government).

Constructions of the impasse

Respondents who use an economic rationale suggest the impasse is due to a lack of enforcement of regulations that should govern the market. There are no market rules that pay attention to basic measures that contribute to safety and integrity. A trainer/promoter argues that ‘rules that require all to comply are missing’. Trainers/promoters/managers explain that there is no pressure on them from any regulatory institution to make the gym or events safer and fairer. Consequently, no one can afford to be strict because ‘we will lose income while others profit’.

Public order and safety regime of practice

History, culture and intentions

Trainers, promoters, fighters, police and governments reasoning from a public order and safety rationale, consider FCMACS as activities and organisations linked to criminality with ‘some bad apples’ directly or indirectly involved in criminal activities like the laundering of money, violence, blackmail and liquidations. An active trainer described his trainer as follows

Anyway, all these boys are not innocent. My trainer, he is deceased, but he was one of them too. I didn’t care because he was my coach, he was my mentor in kickboxing and he taught me everything. So even when he went to jail again, I followed him....

Trainers/promoters contend that they like others chose the easiest way to find money for their organisation and events by accepting sponsors who were active in the grey/black economy such as hash and sex shops. Fighters also earned extra money by working as security officers in those kinds of companies.

With this history in mind, trainers/promoters want FCMACS to be free in the future from criminal links and safe for fighters and audiences. ‘We become mainstream only if the image of FCMACS changes into an image where you go with your whole family to an event on Saturday afternoon.’

Construction of the problem

A public order and safety perspective sees FCMACS as activities and organisations that have two serious problems: relationships with criminal organisations and a seeming lack of concern for the
safety of fighters and their public. Eradicating criminality from FCMACS is difficult according to our respondents. Trainers tested the boundaries of the law to gain fighting opportunities for their fighters and were not critical of who sponsored them even if they had a criminal record. A trainer/promoter confessed that

As a fighter, I didn’t care about who financed the events, I only cared about being able to fight. This has given our sports a bad reputation, but uhm uhm …Sony or Philips or whatever or Unilever will not sponsor our events…

Trainers and promoters admitted that too many people with criminal backgrounds were involved in FCMACS, but attributed this to a lack of trustworthy sponsors and little government intervention. The media reported (Vugts 2010a) and a trainer/promoter acknowledged that ‘behind some events, there is a man who is in prison; this creates a negative image. But on the other hand, the government gives them the possibility to organise these events’. Others think that the accusations of criminality are exaggerated ‘those rumours you hear constantly, may be right, but there is no proof money is being laundered.’

Politicians and other stakeholders use this rationale to call attention to the safety problems for the public and fighters with the use of national media (see for example Vugts 2010b, Binnenlands Bestuur 2011). They claimed that these sports are a threat to society because people learn fighting techniques that could be used outside the ring. National newspapers used this rationale in their reporting of incidents during events in Hoorn, Veghel and Zijtaart (Noordhollands Dagblad 2011, Schildkamp 2012). Fighters use these techniques when intimidating and committing crimes (Smilde 2012). Trainers, promoters and fighters blamed journalists for biased reporting because only criminal action and violence related to FCMACS are covered. They also blamed the government for not interfering. A trainer/promoter summarised the safety and public order position by declaring that ‘if the government regulated our sports a little bit more, then it would have had a completely different image’. The Netherlands is not unique in this use of this rationale. Berg and Chalip (2013) found similar use of the public order and safety rationale in their study of regulation of MMA.

Trainers and managers also use the public order and safety rationale to construct the safety of fighters as a problem, especially fights involving children; currently there are no rules about the age of participants. Some doctors, child safety organisations (mailings from CPSU11 and Stichting Dimitri) and trainers/promoters stress that it is proven that FCMACS cause brain damage and therefore fights between children should be banned. Currently these sports do not have rules requiring the registration of all fighters in a national registry, the presence of a doctor, the administration of medical tests, or a follow up after a TKO. Due to the lack of regulations fighters can fight every weekend, even if they were knocked down in a previous fight, something that is clearly risky. A trainer described the FCMACS sector as ‘loose grains of sand’ that together are unable to create a safe athletic environment and image: ‘If you intend to work for the regulations that facilitate the safety of fighters, they [fighters] go to another federation where they are not stopped from fighting. So that [initiative] was doomed to fail.’

Despite the discussions about criminality and lack of safety, the Dutch national government has adhered to its policy that sports must regulate themselves, a position that is consistent with its policies towards sports in general. According to a civil servant, there are no real problems as sport and government each have their own system of (disciplinary) law and local governments have the authority to tackle excesses that occur during events in their cities. The sport sector has also always been very ambivalent about government intervention. The call for government intervention is therefore two sided; overall, both government and sports organisations would prefer the status quo continue; however, the loud voices calling for government action to address problems remain. Most local governments followed a laissez-faire strategy similar to that of the national government until problems with fight events occurred. Local mayors met in 2012 (document local government 201212) to discuss the problems and realised they needed to apply stricter, local
legislation to curb incidents and criminal activities in their cities. The laissez-faire policy of sport self-regulation was therefore partially abandoned at the local level. Consequently, this rationale directed a different use of technologies by local and by national government.

**Technologies of power**
The public order and safety rationale relies on the use of technologies of power such as the law, regulations, licensing, record checks (police), investigations and grant and subsidy requirements. Technologies of power, based on the law, are used and proposed especially at the local level. Members of the police described the investigations they conducted in past years to analyse the involvement of FCMACS organisations in criminal activities but found no such evidence. A RIEC conducted an exploratory investigation in these sports and concluded that further research was needed (RIEC 2012). At the local level, authorities applied existing legislation or extended the application of local laws that allowed the local government to conduct background checks into the criminal affiliations of those who organise martial arts and combat sport events (VNG 2012). Promoters then avoided these cities by going abroad or holding events in cities with fewer rules (Verseput 2012). This practice is called the waterbed effect. In an effort to reduce water bedding, some mayors and city managers have used their connections with like-minded politicians at the national level to make this a national issue.

Similar to the sport regime of practice, technologies of power, such as blaming and shaming trainers, fighters and promoters of criminal involvement and unsafe sport practices are also used in the public order and safety regime of practice. The local and national governments involved FCMACS clubs in their sport participation programmes; in so doing they underlined the importance of the public order and safety rationale for organising not only events, but also in the sports themselves. Now the local government demands that certain (safety) standards be met before it allocates grants. This technology of power means that only FCMACS organisations with a special ‘fight right’ quality label can apply for local government support and subsidies.

**Constructions of the impasse**
Trainers and promoters, using the public order and safety rationale, criticised the local governments’ ad hoc rules and interventions saying ‘the national government should come up with rules – we want clarity!’ According to the critics, this lack of clarity and coherence will continue, as will an impasse, if the national government does not take binding measures; ‘the Dutch government has to intervene… we’ve tried for more than 40 years to arrange things and we didn’t succeed.’ Local government and FCMACS sector representatives also attributed the impasse in regulation of FCMACS to the absence of a national policy that clearly describes the rules, rights and obligations for all those involved. The mayor and the councillor of Amsterdam saw this problem as one that required intervention by the national government to produce change. Since the likelihood of this happening seemed small, he was determined to make it a national issue and ‘to put it on the national agenda’

**(Inter) acting of three regimes of practice**
All three regimes of practice reflect the combination of specific ways of reasoning and governing in these sports. We explained the logic in each of the three regimes of practice by giving insights into the emergent (history) and routinised (culture) ways of thinking (rationality) and practicing (technologies) presupposed in each regime of practice. We briefly analyse the (inter) action of these regimes to understand the current impasse in regulation of FCMACS.

The results show that before the government began to ban events and implement policy goals through sport, commerce/sport institutions and government functioned almost totally independently. FCMACS regulated themselves using a mix of the sport and economic regimes
of practice. The FCMACS sector was fragmented by conflict. Each gym/federation with its own set of hierarchical leaders used the economic and sport regime of practice to govern their sports. Very few rules were applicable for all at the national level. Federations made their own choices and only dealt with each other when they organised events. During the event, differences in regimes became visible in critical moments that required an immediate decision, such as when a fight needed to be stopped; who decided this and which rationale dominated (sport-safety or profit–excitement).

Until 2010, the public order and safety regime of practice was foregrounded incidentally and disappeared again to the background. It rarely played a role in governing these sports. People from the sector could ignore this regime of practice because there were no obligations, controls or sanctions. Consequently, these sports were directed by only two regimes that required minimal cooperation with others, including local and/or national governments. It was a sport in which financial survival of the fittest counted. Figure 2 depicts this situation.

The number of regimes of practice that are relevant for governing FCMACS increased however, due to further instrumentalisation of sports and the problematisation of fight events. This increase disturbed the status quo that consisted of a balance of fragmented internal hierarchies that regulated themselves. Government requirements and rules for subsidising activities in gyms and organising fight events made the public order and safety regime thinking about and practicing of these sports relevant and impossible to ignore. This rationality and its related way of governing and problematising issues have entered into (public) discussions about how to regulate these sports. More stakeholders with different institutional backgrounds have become relevant making the regulating of these sports more complicated.

While traditionally characterised by internal hierarchical conduct, FCMACS have been challenged to look beyond their boundaries for ways to agree on elementary rules about safety and public order at the national level. Their former hierarchical manner of governing has become problematic and a more horizontal way based on equality and cooperation is needed to respond adequately to new challenges in these sports.

**Dialogues of the deaf**

In this new situation, as in the late-night show described in the beginning of the paper, three intermingled and intertwined regimes of practice have become relevant in discussions about these
sports. Such dialogues seem to be quick and superficial and can be described as ‘dialogues of the deaf’ as shown in Figure 3.

Three regimes of practice about FCMACS were expressed but not unravelled, discussed, or negotiated. This suggests that thus far no clear way of thinking, problematising and intervening in these sports has emerged.

**Power vacuum**

Governmentality studies explore how regimes of practice operate and how forms of domination, relations of power and kinds of freedom and autonomy are linked (Dean 2010). Our study indicates that until the government started to ban events and to implement policy goals through sport, a mix of two regimes regulated FCMACS. In this mix none of the regimes became dominant or leading. This meant that choices had to be made as to which rationalities and technologies were to prevail in a specific situation. In the current situation, with its increase of stakeholders and regimes of practice, none of the regimes has become dominant nor has a method been found to make decisions using all three regimes of practice.

We conclude that no authority has been able to impose a definitive way of reasoning in this field of new interactions. Both the FCMACS sector and the Dutch government are unwilling and too fragmented to begin to take steps to enable the regulation of these sports at the national level. The use of different technologies in a few municipalities makes this issue even more complicated, especially for people from the FCMACS sector who want clear rules to minimise financial risks. The fragmentation and ambivalence in governing these sports creates a power vacuum at the national level. It seems that all govern, but no one actually governs the sector as a whole.

**Discussion: why the impasse is maintained**

We conclude that the impasse in the Netherlands can be explained by using the analogy of ‘dialogues of the deaf’ and the existence of a ‘power vacuum’ due to a new mix of regimes. The use of Dean’s conceptualisation of governmentality has revealed how different rationalities and technologies of power have become so entangled resulting in a lack of clarity as to which rules need to be created and which (mix of) rationalities should be followed. Power, traditionally exercised in a vertical hierarchical manner by the Dutch government and inside the FCMACS

![Figure 3. Dialogues of deaf.](image-url)
sector, is not applied. At the same time, new collaborative, cooperative ways of regulating these sports, using all of the relevant regimes of practice with its necessary, implicit horizontal conduct has not yet been developed. Consequently, the ‘traditional order’ of separate and hierarchical regulation that functioned as a status quo for many years still remains in place.

As indicated at the beginning of the paper, in other countries new institutional settings positioned between federations and the state were created to facilitate dialogues, discussions and decision-making in these sports (Berg and Chalip 2013). The solutions have consisted of the formation of state commissions (USA), of a combat sport platform (Flanders) and the creation of a new sport federation by the government (France) (Berg and Chalip 2013, Collinet and Delalandre 2013, Vertonghen et al. 2014). Dutch contemporary institutional settings in sports, commerce and government have thus far failed to organise, facilitate and coordinate the existing regimes of practice to move towards a way of regulating these sports. This impasse will likely remain in place until a new way of governing these sports using all relevant regimes of practice is accepted and institutionalised.

The use of the concept of governmentality as suggested by Dean (2010) gave in-depth insight into revealing how mixes of regimes of practice can work in regulating sports and in maintaining an impasse. The use of this concept of governmentality enabled us to discover the detailed historical and cultural background of these regimes of practice. This approach enabled us to analyse the complexity of this issue and to move beyond the ‘relatively straightforward assumptions of resource dependency and “simple domination” that underpin many meso-level frameworks available for investigating policy processes and relationships between government, its agencies, and in this case, NGOs’ (Green and Houlihan 2006, p. 66). So its use proved to be essential to uncovering the complexity of various conflicting interests and ways of governing that fit in these regimes, not only for analysing the deadlock, but also as a starting point for looking for ways to breaking the status quo. Our study made clear that issues of regulation of sports at a national level need in depth insight into regimes of practice and (recent) changes in their relevance.

We conclude that Dean’s (2010) approach to governmentality was useful in our analysis of the complex issue in regulation of FCMACS in the Netherlands. Furthermore, we argue that use of this theoretical frame can shed new light on long-lasting, complex issues or recent challenges in regulation of sports in other countries and even at the international level, because it enables the disentanglement of various ways of reasoning and governing in its specific historical, cultural context. The use of the concept of governmentality as delineated by Dean (2010) may prevent researchers from unintentionally focusing on only one visible regime of practice and may help them to uncover the various layers that enable a complex situation to continue.

Notes

1. We are aware of discussion about the use of specific terminology in full-contact martial arts and combat sports (FCMACS). However, the discussion about the terminology goes beyond the purpose of this paper (see for example, Martínková and Parry 2016). In this paper, we therefore chose to refer to ‘full contact martial arts AND combat sports’ because both designations are relevant in discussions on regulation of FCMACS.

2. Talk show on TV Pauw & Witteman, 30 November 2012; Also available on the internet http://pauwenwittenman.vara.nl/Artikel4215.0.html?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=28300&cHash=44761bc1fe03a18a71c0e80c29ac1abf/) [Accessed 4 April 2014]

3. K-1 is a Japanese martial arts organization that combines techniques of Thai boxing, tae kwon do, karate, kung fu, kickboxing and traditional boxing. Each year a world K-1 tournament is held to determine which eight fighters may participate in K-1 World Grand Prix in Japan.

4. Document: Letter [federation] in 2012 to all mayors in which the federation presents itself as a reliable partner for municipalities. They offer advice about which gyms municipalities can work with.

5. Admission Regulations, membership NOC*NSF (Article 34 paragraph 1 sub b of the statutes of the NOC * NSF) (I.2.a) reads: A sports federation must be representative and act on behalf that sport at the national level, that is to say that the sport federation represents the majority of athletes in the respective discipline of sport, as well as representation in distribution and number in the Netherlands.
(I.2.b) The federation needs to be recognised by the international organisation. In the opinion of the NOC*NSF this organisation must. This organization must not only represent the sport at world level and as such be a member of SportAccord, as the Dutch representative of the sport.

(I.7) In principle, only one federation per sport or a combination of disciplines of that sport is allowed. The, in the distinguish itself sufficiently from other disciplines of sport or sports, to be recognised as a specific discipline of sport. http://nocnsf.nl/cms/showpage.aspx?id=505

6. Aikido Netherlands; Dutch Boxing Association; Judo Association Netherlands; Karate Do Association Netherlands; Taekwondo Federation Netherlands; Dutch Power sports and Fitness Federation; Federation of Eastern Martial Arts (FOG)

7. See http://fogevechtskunsten.nl/styled/styled-7/index.html

8. In 2014, this FOG consisted of 8186 individual members, had 14 sections and had 16 member organisations (see http://fogevechtskunsten.nl/styled/styled-7/index.html)

9. Document: Letter [federation] in 2012 to all mayors to present themselves as the reliable partner for municipalities and their willingness to offer advice.

10. Letter of the councillor for sport to the Council of sport, 08 November 2011.

11. Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) of National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK

12. Memo Gemeente Amsterdam aan de burgemeester 19–04-2012, onderwerp: Overleg inzake vechtsport d.d 20 April 2012 op verzoek van een aantal burgemeesters uit de provincie Noord-Holland. [Memo city of Amsterdam to the mayor 19 April 2012 in reaction to a request from several mayors in the province of Noord-Holland.]

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