



## **CORPORATE GOVERNANCE IN ALPINE CLUBS: RESEARCH ON UMBRELLA ASSOCIATIONS**

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**Abstract.** Corporate Governance is a “system by which companies are directed and controlled” (Cadbury 1992). This topic came into the field of high interest because of many worldwide crashes of corporations. The origin of this idea is to find in the for-profit area but there exist already some researches to transfer this idea to nonprofit-organizations. The challenge to transfer the idea of corporate governance to nonprofit-organizations is their distinctive features. The chosen research field in this paper to transfer the idea is Alpine Clubs in Europe. These clubs face the challenges of the legal framework as associations. Alpine Clubs consist of an umbrella associations as well as a certain number of legally independent branches, called sections. All organizations are guided by voluntary boards.

The empirical research is designed as qualitative explorative study. The main results are to find out the specialties of the governing systems of Alpine Clubs. Within this paper the research results are concentrated on the umbrella associations. Their governance system consists of voluntary boards and installed head offices providing paid staff to come across with the number of tasks. Communication and distribution of power between these two bodies are the challenges. The importance of stakeholders and their integration within the system will also be discussed within this paper. This research adds value to science by proving the practicability of the idea of Corporate Governance within the field of nonprofit-organizations.

**Keywords:** *corporate governance, nonprofit organization, voluntary board*

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### **1. Introduction**

The original meaning of corporate governance was established around corporations listed on the stock exchange: “*Corporate governance is the system by which companies are directed and controlled*” (Cadbury 1992 #210). Corporate governance came into the field of high interest because of many worldwide crashes of corporations. It seemed to be that the existence of balance sheets and their rules to establish them should be enough to show investors a “true and fair view” of a business. It did not. Corporate governance is a relatively new topic in nonprofit-research. There exist some researches concerning the transfer of this idea to nonprofit organizations, see for example Schnurbein (2008) or Bachert (2006). It has to focus on different core objects to those of for-profit organizations.

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For the discussion within the nonprofit-area Anheier presents a more widespread meaning of corporate governance considering all stakeholders: “*Corporate Governance is the system by which organizations are directed and controlled. The corporate governance structure specifies the distribution of rights and responsibilities among different participants in the corporation, such as the board, managers, shareholders, and other stakeholders, and spells out the rules and procedures for making decisions on corporate affairs*” (Anheier 2005, p. 230).

Corporate governance refers to arrangements of guidance and supervision (Siebart, Reichard 2004, p. 271) of an organization whether for profit-organizations or nonprofit-organizations.

## 2. Corporate governance in nonprofit organizations

As already mentioned corporate governance in nonprofit-organizations is different to those of for-profit-organizations based on several distinctive features of these organizations: Nonprofit-organizations have founders but no owner as natural or legal person who could be entitled to a part of the organization’s profit (Jegers 2009, p. 144). Instead of an owner, stakeholders play an important role in nonprofit-organizations. Furthermore nonprofits’ distinctive feature is the nondistribution constraint (Hansmann 2010, p. 61). There is no pie to divide (Speckbacher 2008, p. 313) between owners and consequently all stakeholders contribute to a common goal. The performance of a nonprofit-organization cannot be described by profit and loss compared to for-profit organizations. There are several bottom-lines (Schröder 2009, p. 148), they concentrate on task goals and the economic performance is only the basis (Schuhen 2005, p. 230).

In nonprofit-organizations there are people who wish to contribute their time, assets and idealism in order to achieve an objective in cooperation with other people. Nonprofits’ personnel are volunteers in all levels of the organization, i.e. the board, too. An important part of corporate governance discussion in for-profit organization, the remuneration of board members, based on profit or loss of the corporation can be missed out.

Doing research on corporate governance in nonprofit-organizations the governing body is an important part to look at: The members of this body are not employed and consequently the governance of these organizations will be different. Most of the nonprofit-organizations in Europe are governed by a **voluntary board**: This structure does only exist in nonprofits where voluntary board members are in one and the same person executive and supervisory director (Siebart 2006, p. 230). This model corresponds to the one-tier model with executive and non-executive directors (Siebart, Reichard 2004, p. 275) but in this mere model members are either executive or non-executive directors. A very common structure to build the board in for-profit organizations is the two-tier model: There exists a clear separation between management and supervision by an executive board and a supervisory board (Mallin 2010, p. 122). According to the laws on associations it is possible to install such a supervisory board in nonprofits’ governance system but the composition and size of the board matter more than the separate supervisory board (Hopt, Hippel 2010, p. 545).

Big nonprofit-organizations, as umbrella associations in this research, have installed additionally head offices with paid staff to come across with the big range of tasks. Paid staff is definitely rare in Alpine Clubs being contradictory to the philosophy of these clubs and besides that not to afford. The umbrella associations assist their members, the sections, in working voluntarily. They offer services which can be done very cost-effective for the total organization. Further, it provides the only full-time workforce throughout the total club and therefore can be aware of overall strategies, problems and current developments in all special fields of activities. The danger is the concentration of knowledge and possibility to influence the voluntary board. The communication between these two bodies and the distribution of power are the challenges within the governance system of nonprofit-organizations.



### 3. Research design

Alpine Clubs were founded as small associations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea to explore the mountains was very popular and so many small clubs were founded to spread this idea (Gidl 2007, p. 38). Today these clubs consist of a several number of sections which are legally independent associations and one umbrella association each which represents itself an association. The individual members are members of the sections. The sections are the members of the umbrella association.

The Alpine Clubs under research represent more than 1.5 millions of members, today. Following table shows these Clubs with its number of members, its spoken languages and the year of their foundation.

Table 1

**Alpine Clubs under research**

<b>Club</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Number of members in 2011</b>	<b>Year of foundation</b>
Austrian Alpine Club (OeAV)	German	414,833	1862, Vienna
German Alpine Club (DAV)	German	939,063	1869, Munich
Swiss Alpine Club (SAC)	German/French/ Italy/Romance	135,448	1863, Olten
Alpine Club of South Tyrol (AVS)	German	57,421	1869 as section of DAV, 1946 refoundation
<b>Total number of members</b>		<b>1,546,765</b>	

Source: author's construction based on data of Alpine Clubs

### Hypothesis and Research questions

The research is based on a qualitative empirical study. Personal interviews are chosen as the adequate method to explore the knowledge according to the research questions. Honorary managers and paid managers are classified as experts within this system in the umbrella association. Interview-guidelines in slight variations helped to focus on certain questions and also to create other valuable information.

Following hypothesis is the basis for this research. The purpose of these questions is not to falsify hypotheses but to gain valid and reliable knowledge (Eriksson, Kovalainen 2008, p. 5) from these organizations.

***“To meet the expectations of various stakeholders nonprofit-organizations change their corporate governance when passing critical structural factors”.***

This hypothesis will be explored by following questions:

- What are the specialties of the governance system in Alpine Clubs? What is meant by corporate governance in Alpine Clubs?
- Which are the critical structural factors for umbrella associations?
- How can stakeholders be integrated in the governance system in the umbrella association?

Within this paper the presentation of research results will be focused on the challenges of the governance system of the umbrella associations of these clubs. Within this frame the critical structural factors, the integration of stakeholders and the specialties of the governance system are presented.



## Data collection

Table 2

Data collection for empirical research

Organization/ interview partner	AVS	DAV	OeAV	SAC	Interview guideline
<b>Umbrella association</b>					
President = president of the umbrella association and of each Alpine Club	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	Interview-guideline 1a
Vice-presidents = members of the voluntary board	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	Interview-guideline 1b
Paid managers = Secretary General or executive manager	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	Interview-guideline 2

Source: author's construction

Above table shows the number of qualitative interviews done in this research. The interview-guidelines for the president and the vice-presidents and paid managers are slightly different. All interview-guidelines contain an introduction and three main groups of questions, i.e. questions regarding the governance system of Alpine Clubs, the qualifications for their function and questions on the decision-making process. Any group of interview has also some special questions.

## Analysis of interviews

The method to analyze the qualitative interviews is content analysis (Schreier 2012). Considering the different interview-guidelines, the analysis is first done on each group of interview-guideline. The answers to certain questions have been clustered. Secondly the answers of all groups are analyzed and interpreted according to the research questions. As the Alpine Clubs under research are located in different European countries also specialties on that are to find out.

## 4. Critical structural factors for umbrella associations

The analysis of the interviews with the members of the voluntary board and also the paid manager result in vital answers to the governance structure of the voluntary board and also managing committee of the head office. The members face different challenges in doing their job for these big organizations voluntarily. It is to consider if the actual governance system is useful or practicable for the future.

### Structural factors – voluntary board

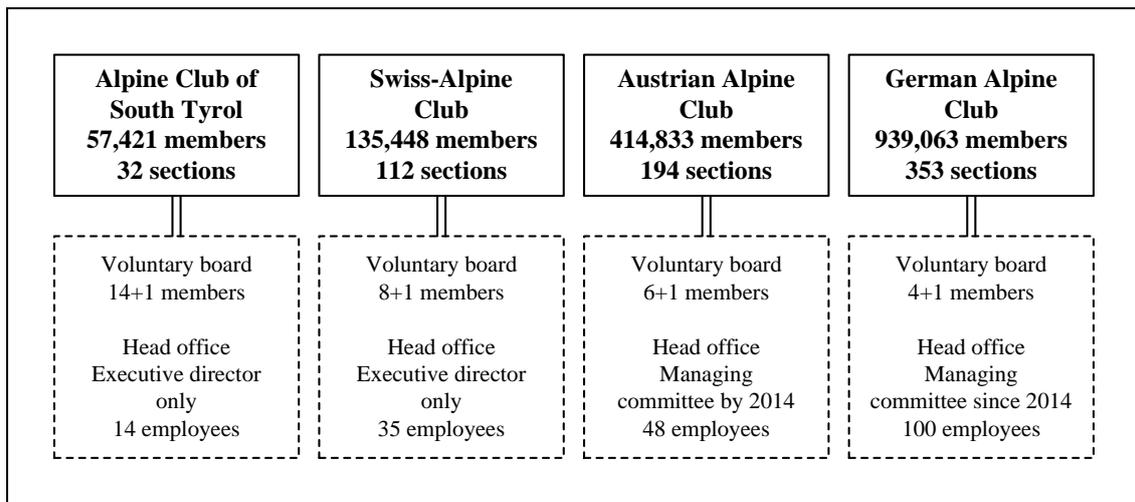
The voluntary board is the governing body of a nonprofit-organization. This refers also to Alpine Clubs. Volunteer leaders are responsible, accountable for the performance of an association as well as they represent legally their organization. This responsibility is laid down in the constitution and basically in the law on associations, see for example (Kossak 2009, p. 82).



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Following figure shows the comparison of the umbrella associations of the four Alpine Clubs. The bench mark between them is their total number of members which are organized in sections. Obviously the number of sections will rise with the number of members. The number of members in the voluntary board declines surprisingly with the overall size of the Alpine Club. The number of projects, tasks, duties causes the number of employees and the structure of the operative management in the head office. It is either an executive director only or a managing committee.



Source: author's construction based on data of Alpine Clubs

Fig. 1. Umbrella Associations (membership numbers per Dec 2011)

The interviews done on all levels of the umbrella association show that the voluntary board with its structure and size is a crucial factor (see Figure 1). Actually all members of these bodies see themselves as members of a steering committee, suited in between an executive committee and a supervisory committee. According to the respective constitution this body “is” the governing body of the organization. But the execution of this function cannot be compared to an executive committee of a for-profit organization. Members of a voluntary board are not available on normal working hours. They are not in a position to do a similar job as their counterpart in for-profit organizations. One President described the function with its inherent dilemma very perfectly: The voluntary board has to execute tasks which could be done by the paid staff of the head office, but it is not the will of the sections. The work of the voluntary board has to be subordinated to the actual system. That means that the members of the voluntary board have to cope with a lot of operational tasks which could be transferred. The strategic part of their job will be missed out to a certain extend. It is a challenge for the members of the voluntary board to do a good job according to the constitution and the will of the sections and in reality not to end in a “rubber stamp board” (Herman 2005, p. 156).

Most of the members work within their function nearly part-time. Some did or do even more. The crucial factor is the availability of members who are willing to work voluntarily nearly part time for minimum one term of office. One interview-partner came to the point: “If you want to have younger people within this function and not only elderly or retired people than it is necessary to change the temporal involvement on these functions”.



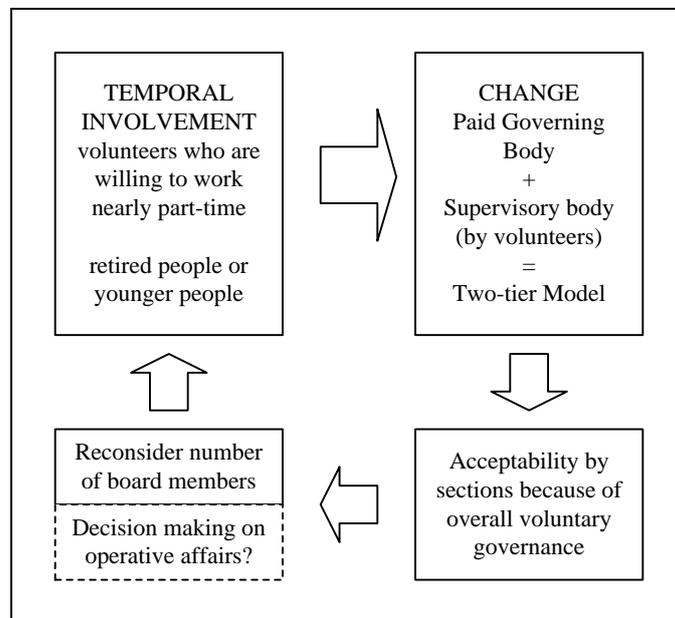
## The volume of time and the size as crucial factor

The dilemma of the voluntary board members is the restricted time they have because of working voluntarily on the one side and the number of projects and tasks on the other side. As mentioned above the workload for an honorary manager is already on a high limit. The members of the voluntary board are not only the governing body of their organization they also legitimate the work of the head office done by paid staff and are role model for the voluntary work in the sections.

The size of the board is further crucial to the quality of decisions. The advantage of a small voluntary board is certainly the quality of the opinion building process and the time to make decisions. The disadvantage is according to the interviews the number of projects and tasks they have to take care responsibly as honorary manager. The Alpine Club of South Tyrol with its big voluntary board started a process to restructure this body: The number of members of the voluntary board will be reduced but at the same time another body will be installed. The German Alpine Club started a discussion to enlarge its body by one member.

## A paid governing body as a solution?

The only possibility to cope with the big scope of tasks and the inherent complexity might be to change the governing board from working voluntarily to getting paid. But the installation of a “paid governing body” might be a dramatic change of the actual system and could have consequences on the legitimacy of the honorary guidance of the sections. A supervisory board made by honorary managers could be installed additionally to keep the described legitimacy. The operative power would be handed over to paid managers. The system may be similar to those of a two-tier model (Siebart 2006, p. 225) of for-profit organizations.



Source: author's construction

Fig. 2. Structural performance factors for the Voluntary Board



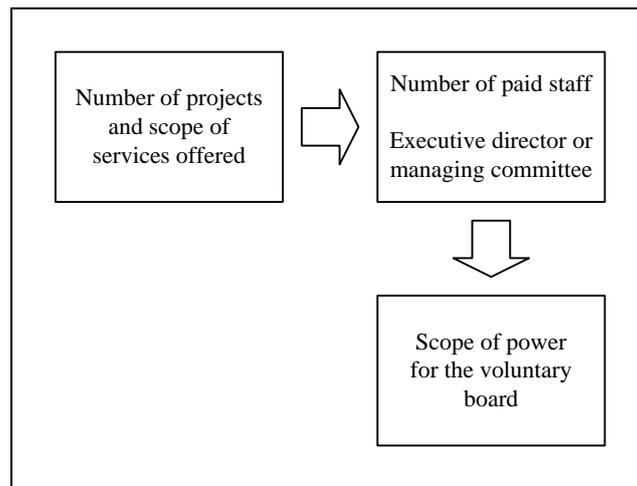
Above figure shows the consequences on the mentioned temporal involvement. The willingness of honorary manager working nearly half-time for this position is crucial to the governance system. The request not only working with retired people in this function may also be an important argument for a possible change. The complexity of tasks, the quickness of necessary reactions could have influence on the presence on normal working hours. The solution could be a change to a two-tier model with an executive board made by paid managers and a supervisory consisting of honorary managers.

Actually, sections do not want to hand over power to paid managers. The power should be with honorary managers. For this reason the acceptance of the described two-tier model is doubtful. Changing the constitution on it would be very controversial. The solutions within the actual system could only be to reconsider the number of board members, to reconsider which decisions are really to be made by the voluntary board.

The overall discussion might also be on the difference of the voluntary work as Chairman of a section and the voluntary work as board member of the umbrella association. This would help sections to overcome the actual border of thinking.

## Structural factors – head office

Looking at all four Alpine Clubs with their umbrella associations a development can be seen of course. The total size of the club causes a different governance system according to Figure 1. All four umbrella associations have installed their head offices. The function they have to fulfill for their sections and the number of projects made it necessary to install them. The number of paid staff is dependent on the total size of the club and consequently the number of services they provide. The head offices of the Alpine Club of South Tyrol and the head office of the Swiss Alpine Club are guided by an executive director only. The Austrian Alpine Club will install a Managing Committee by beginning of 2014. The German Alpine Club has already installed a Managing Committee since 2003. The installation of a Managing Committee will change the tasks of the members of the voluntary board. The presidents and vice-presidents of the Austrian Alpine Club are evidence that the number of projects and decisions they have to do enforce the reduction of the operational workload.



Source: author's construction

Fig. 3. Structural performance factors for the Voluntary Board



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Structural factors for the head office means the number of offered services and projects, see Figure 3. This goes hand in hand with the function of the umbrella association. The overall size of the clubs shows that on a certain volume of projects it is even necessary to install a managing committee provided by paid managers than an executive director as one-person otherwise the voluntary board cannot be released from operative tasks. It is not to forget that even the managing committee is provided only with limited power but with wider power than those of an executive director. The voluntary board remains the governing body representing the Alpine Clubs outside and it holds the ultimate responsibility. This formal power is laid down in the constitution. The law on associations provides no limitation on a possible paid governing body.

### **Cooperation between voluntary board and head office and the distribution of power**

All interviewees agree to the fact that the actual cooperation is only possible if the voluntary board trusts in the work the head office provides. All presidents and vice-presidents know that they are not in a position to work operational, they have to rely on their paid experts. The voluntary board is built as collegial body but the members are also responsible for minimum one special area, e.g. huts and tracks or mountaineering. Professional communication will be done directly by the respective member of the voluntary board and the head of the department.

These circumstances are not so different from paid managers of a for-profit organization. The heads of department are the experts in their field and assist the management. The vital difference is that the honorary managers are not available at normal working hours as they do their job voluntarily. They miss the inside information on topics which are discussed on the meetings of the voluntary board which may be a disadvantage in decision-making. In case of an installed management committee this disadvantage is compensated by the presence of the heads of the departments in several meetings.

The most important link to the head office for the voluntary board is the executive director. He is responsible for the distribution of information to the voluntary board. The presidents' communication channel to the head office is the executive director. The preparation of the agenda of meetings is also done between them and there the executive director can bring in a lot of informal power by suggesting the topics.

Siebart (Siebart, Reichard 2004, pp. 287) see the interaction between the voluntary board and the executive director more like a partnership than a superior-subordinate relationship. It goes without saying that the official power relates to the voluntary board. The principal is the president with its voluntary board members, the agent the executive director (Hung 1998, p. 106). The informal power is on the side of the executive director. The distribution of power is the cause or effect of a certain information asymmetry (Caers et al. 2006, p. 26). The information asymmetry of members of a voluntary board is inherent in the system and can be reduced only by a formalized structure of information and again by trusting each other. Power playing by paid managers can easily be done on this.

### **Stakeholders of the umbrella association and their integration**

Stakeholders represent the missing owner and it is the board members who should be representatives of different stakeholders of the organization (Siebart 2005, p. 859). Consequently the board is accountable to their stakeholders. According to the definition of Freeman a stakeholder is "*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives*" (Freeman 2010, p. 46). Critics to the stakeholder theory say that it is not possible to consider all stakeholders as equal important (Sternberg 1996, p. 4). The question is which stakeholders are to be considered as important for the non-profit-organization. Within the literature there exists no unique suggestion to find out the important stake-



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holders for an organization. The first step is the knowledge of “who” are the stakeholders of an organization. A brainstorming will provide a lot of stakeholders who will be clustered in a second step.

Speckbacher has developed a valuable method to reduce the number of stakeholders. First he narrows the general definition of Freeman by using the theory of incomplete contracts: A stakeholder of an organization is a party, a group that contributes specific resources that create value for the organization. There are at least two groups of stakeholders: primary stakeholders and ordinary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders are those, whose contractual claim on their return from the investment is incompletely specified and hence unprotected. To protect them from this “hold up” Speckbacher suggests to endow them with residual rights of control (Speckbacher 2008, pp. 302). Following table shows a corresponding overview with primary and ordinary stakeholders applied to Alpine Clubs and their umbrella associations.

Table 3

### Primary and ordinary stakeholders of umbrella association of Alpine Clubs

Stakeholder Group	Stakeholders	Right to make decisions
Primary stakeholders	Voluntary Board	yes
	The sections	yes
	Federal Committee	yes
	Regional Committee	yes
Important ordinary stakeholders	Members – directly for selected services according to the principle of subsidiarity	no
	State’s authorities for subsidies	no
	Friendly Alpine Clubs	no
	CAA – Club Arc Alpin	no
	Several sponsors	no
	Interested public domain	no
	Various stakeholders for any division in the head office, e.g. Mountaineering	no
	National important associations	no
etc.		

Source: author’s construction based on Speckbacher, 2008

The integration of stakeholders first is again along the constitution: The sections as members of the umbrella association can execute their residual right of decision making in the General Assembly of the umbrella association. There is a difference to the individual members of the sections. If they are not satisfied with the provision of services of their section, they may leave the club or change to another section. If the sections are not satisfied with the provision of services of the umbrella association they cannot easily leave the club because they may lose the status of being a section of the Alpine Club and the numerous services. Without them they are not able to offer the services on a professional level to their members.

The connection between section and the umbrella association is very crucial within this system: On the one side the sections are dependent on the provision of services of their umbrella association. On the other side it is the sections which are responsible to attract new members. The umbrella association will support by advertising material but it is above all the services of the local sections which motivate members to stay or leave. A so called “hold up” (see above) is not only on one side of this “contract”, it is twofold. Sections get a lot of professional information from the umbrella association all over the year. In preparation of the General assembly they are also get the balance sheet and the budget. Nonetheless the



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influence of the sections as members of the umbrella association is limited to their voting rights. It is above all a limitation that large sections cannot overrule small sections with their wishes and requests.

The possibility to discuss strategic lines deeply is not given on the general assembly because of the large number of members. Nearly all Alpine Clubs under research have therefore installed an additional body, the Federal Committee. The members of this committee have to represent the sections of special regions so the leaders of these Regional Committees are also members in it. Within the Federal Committee topics with importance for the total Club are discussed. Its decisions are mostly recommendations to the General Assembly and make the sections sure that decisions are going into the right direction. Besides this it has also several formal responsibilities.

As discussed primary stakeholders have their rights to make decisions. But there are a lot of ordinary stakeholders being important for the cooperation and communication within the Clubs but along the constitution they have no rights to make decisions. It may be dangerous to integrate further stakeholders in the decision making process but there are already installed bodies, e.g. the Federal Committee where some of these stakeholders could take part at least in communication and discussion of several topics. The question is which groups of the listed ordinary stakeholders should become a member within the mentioned Federal Committee. It could be helpful to install a supervisory committee (Madrian 1998, p. 205) where these groups of stakeholders could take part in communication and discussion.

Above table shows a lot of stakeholders with divergent expectations which should to be managed to preserve the effectiveness. It is not enough for the umbrella association to know who are their stakeholders, their “stakes” and their role sets (Freeman 2010, pp. 57), even after the reduction of their number. It has to take care of the relationship to them. Communication, information to stakeholders as they represent the missing owner is vital to the system. At the end of the day the performance of the umbrella association is based on the responsiveness to their stakeholders’ concerns (Balsler, McClusky 2005, p. 296).

### 5. The umbrella association and corporate governance – conclusion

The umbrella association plays an important role within the system of Corporate Governance, but cannot stand alone for corporate governance in its Alpine Club. It has to enroll its sections as only the total club can credibly represent this set of rules to the public. In public the community of solidarity, i.e. the umbrella association together with its sections is not divided into these parts as people are not insider of this system.

The voluntary governance throughout the system is a challenge within this “nonprofit governance”. Alpine Clubs are very successful these days, they steadily grow and may have to change their structure above all those of the umbrella association. The biggest Alpine Club under research will be the first to deal with the question if the voluntary board of the umbrella association is still the effective form of governance. The outcome of such a change might be not conceivable for the total system as the voluntary board is today the legitimacy for the motivation working voluntarily in any function in the sections. It also legitimates the work of the head office done by paid staff. A supervisory board by volunteers could become an important link between the umbrella association and the sections.

The discussion within the umbrella association is also about the division of power. The formal power is clearly defined in the constitution and also formally executed this way. The reality might be upside down as the complexity of some topics need professional know-how which cannot be provided by honorary managers. The laid down function of the voluntary board as governing body of the umbrella association is just as well to discuss as the decision making power by the sections as members at the General Assembly.

The big value of the discussion of corporate governance in Alpine Clubs is to have a deep look onto the historical grown system, its strengths and weaknesses. It has not yet been started officially. In the end



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the aim might be a corporate governance code for Alpine Clubs. The first step might be an evaluation of the system to answer the question if Alpine Clubs are already prepared for corporate governance or if there are some adaptations necessary to the principle of “direction and control”.

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