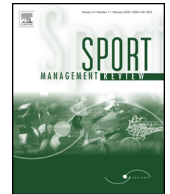




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“Sport for Development” in developing countries: The case of the Vilas Olímpicas do Rio de Janeiro



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ABSTRACT

The benefits of sport for general social outcomes has permeated sport policy in Brazil since the beginning of the twentieth century, but recently the jargon of “development through sport” is more overtly informing public policy and government action in this field. Despite increased uptake of the positive discourse of “sport as a development tool”, the reality for government-funded and -run “sport for development” programs is one far removed from enjoying the attention and financial investment needed to reach their stated development goals. This paper focuses on one such program: the *Vilas Olímpicas do Rio de Janeiro*. When analysing the specific matters associated with the management of this program three themes were identified that encapsulate the main issues that emerged during the analysis: partnerships, conflicting aims, and community involvement. These themes are analysed in light of the literature that discusses the application of “sport for development” programs worldwide and we conclude with some questions on the applicability of well-defined frameworks and approaches to such programs when these programs themselves tend to operate in very ill-defined and unstable environments.

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1. Introduction

The power of sport to provide a plethora of benefits to participants has been a common message used for decades by sport advocates to promote engagement with physical activity and sports. Although these claims of the a priori beneficial nature of sport have been highly contested (Coalter, 2007, 2013), they have nonetheless become the norm in common discourse about sport participation (Coakley, 2011), with supra-governmental bodies embracing the discourse in recent years (Giulianotti, 2011). In this context a dramatic increase has occurred in the development of programs that are entirely or partially funded by international (aid) organizations and which are clearly focused on using sports as a means to directly promote the United Nations’ (UN) Millennium Development Goals (Burnett, 2009; Kay, 2012). These programs and initiatives are collectively referred to as the Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) movement (Kidd, 2008). Although extremely varied in size, focus and type, SDP programs commonly, and arguably often uncritically, accept the premise that sport “is good for you”, has universal appeal, and that through it social and economic development can be achieved (Cornelissen, 2011).

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While present in the developed nations of the global North (and typically funded by agencies based in this part of the world), most programs target the global South. For example, out of 191 projects listed in the International Platform on Sport for Development, maintained by the [Swiss Academy for Development \(2013\)](#), 75 projects are based in African countries with fewer than 30 in Western Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia combined. Interestingly, research data on these programs is largely biased towards SDP projects located in Europe and the USA, probably due to issues related to funding and location of researchers and expertise in monitoring and evaluation, but still about one fifth of reports/articles focus on projects in African countries, reaffirming their significance in the SDP field ([Cronin, 2011](#)).

Despite these geographical issues, sport, as previously mentioned, has long been used as a discursive and practical tool for “development” worldwide. As [Coalter \(2010b, p. 296\)](#) aptly points out, “‘sport-for-development’ has been a consistent theme in most public policies for sport in industrialized countries”, and in at least some developing nations ([Levermore, 2008](#)). In particular, the assumed association of sports practice with improved physical and mental health, reduction of crime, improved participation in formal education, and more general contributions to community bonding and development, has been valorized in globalized discourses of sport and physical education programs for many years ([Coakley, 2011](#)). In fact, “[a]mong a range of social, moral and sports evangelists, sport had (and retains) a mythopoeic status” ([Coalter, 2010b, p. 296](#))—one which assumes such an irrevocable positive standing (see also [Coalter, 2013](#)).

In Brazil, an emerging economy, a similar phenomenon is evident. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the assumed benefits of sport for general social outcomes have permeated sport policy in Brazil ([Reis, Sousa-Mast, & Vieira, 2013](#)), but recently the SDP jargon of “development through sport” is more overtly informing public policy and government action in this field (cf. [Ministério do Esporte, 2005](#)). It can be suggested that this is partially due to the increasing influence of the international SDP movement ([Cornelissen, 2011](#); [Kay, 2012](#)) but, as [Darnell \(2012\)](#) has argued, the current focus on sports as a catalyst for social change in Brazil seems to have gained momentum also as a result of the recent “double” success in securing the right to host two major global sporting events: the FIFA World Cup in 2014 and the 2016 Olympic Games.

Interestingly, however, Brazil has not been much of a target for international aid agencies supporting SDP programs worldwide (cf. [Swiss Academy for Development, 2013](#); [Cronin, 2011](#)), and actions in this field have mostly come from national and local government agencies, often in partnership with local, and sometimes international, non-government organizations (NGOs). As a consequence, the management and governance structure of SDP projects in Brazil are, in important aspects, considerably different from those encountered in other developing nations, particularly in Africa, that have traditionally received significant funding from international aid organizations (cf. [Swiss Academy for Development, 2013](#)) and, as a result, have frequently been investigated and scrutinized by researchers worldwide ([Cronin, 2011](#)). The question that the present paper then addresses is how the management models proposed by researchers from this field can be applied, if at all, to the reality of local government-funded SDP programs in Brazil. In order to do so we explore some of the most common SDP approaches reported in the academic literature and then contrast their characteristics with a particular case from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

2. SDP approaches

In an essay about the problematic assumptions associated with programs aimed at “developing” the “developing world”, [Mintzberg \(2006\)](#) provides a useful framework of approaches to development programs: (1) the *planned development* approach, driven by the state from top to bottom, implementing programs and activities that are uniform despite contextual differences; (2) the *global development* approach, which changes the focus from government-led planning to (international) corporations that, similarly, bring in their set of beliefs and *modus operandi* to communities and projects, frequently with uniform programs across locations that are “cosmetically” changed to increase their local appeal; and (3) the *indigenous development* approach, which is based on growth, leadership and management coming from within the community, or “inside-up”. For Mintzberg, the key to healthy development is a balance between the three approaches, but where indigenous development is particularly promoted since it is the “weak link” in so many of the less economically powerful countries nowadays. The balance comes then with each of the stakeholders, namely the state, foreign corporations and community members, providing their input and “expertise” into the process. For instance, “[f]oreign corporations can bring in fresh ideas, modern techniques, and new processes; they can provide certain financing”; the state can intervene by providing grants and direct government funding as well as by establishing a policy environment that is conducive for local development and entrepreneurship, while all is done “on the host [communities]’ own terms, for only the host [community] can ever look after its own interests” ([Mintzberg, 2006, p. 11](#)).

Although [Mintzberg’s \(2006\)](#) work does not refer directly to SDP projects, his review and critique of the “aid” model of development fits well within the international SDP agenda and serves as a good starting point for discussing models of SDP projects found in the academic literature. As other authors have frequently highlighted (cf. [Burnett, 2013](#); [Cornelissen, 2011](#); [Darnell, 2010](#); [Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011](#)), “the passive importation of techniques, controls, and beliefs, via outside agencies and experts that run around solving everyone else’s problems, may be the very problem of development” ([Mintzberg, 2006, p. 6](#)), as recurrently is the case as conceived in the “sport for development” movement. In this context, different governance and management approaches to SDP programs have been identified by scholars studying this field, some of which try to overcome the problems associated with top-down and outside-in models, and to bring to the fore community voices and ways of doing and managing.

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