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Challenges and strategies of building and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships in sport for development and peace

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ABSTRACT

While sport management scholars have explored inter-organizational partnerships and their associated challenges, they have devoted less attention to inter-organizational partnership development and sustainability in sport for development and peace (SDP), particularly across a wide range of organizations with varied missions and foci. Hence, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine challenges faced by SDP organizations when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships across contexts and partnership types, and to uncover strategies they have employed to overcome these challenges. Common challenges encountered across 29 SDP organizations included competition for resources, skepticism of sport as a development tool, unequal power relations, misaligned goals and mission drift, and implementation issues. Strategies included focusing on building relationships and networks, demonstrating benefits to partner, starting small then diversifying, keeping focused on mission and goals, involving partner, and treating the partnership as a business relationship. Theoretical extensions and practical implications are discussed, along with directions for future research.
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1. Introduction

Sport for development and peace (SDP) is an intriguing direction for scholarship and practice over the last decade, largely due to its social justice focus, potential program outcomes, and opportunities to examine how management of these organizations may be different than in other sport-related organizations (Schulenkorf, 2016; Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, 2016). From its origins in the Olympic movement and programs designed to help wounded veterans after World War I (Burnett, 2001), SDP has, over the past two decades, gained popularity in academic, practitioner, and policy circles as one possible engine of development. That noted, the field is certainly not without its critics within the arenas of mainstream development and critical sociology of sport (Coalter, 2013; Darnell, 2012; Levermore, 2008; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). This criticism has largely been in response to the overly evangelical rhetoric espoused by policy makers and others about the power of sport to evince positive outcomes, without evidence to back up such claims (Schulenkorf, 2016).

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In an integrated review of literature regarding SDP research, Schluenkorf and colleagues (2016) noted the rise in publications and the wide range of methodologies (conceptual, mixed methods, qualitative, and quantitative), research sites, and researcher locations that have evolved in the field. Additionally, they pointed to seven thematic areas of SDP scholarship (disability, education, gender, health, livelihoods, peace, and social cohesion) along with recent multi-disciplinary research efforts in SDP. Some topics of scholarship in this space have included building social capital amongst marginalized populations (Burnett, 2006; Skinner et al., 2008), investigating conflict resolution and peace building programming (Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011; Sugden, 2008), and evaluating social inclusion of disadvantaged groups and individuals (Morgan & Parker, 2017; Sherry, 2010). Beyond this empirical work, others have highlighted a need for critical perspectives and evaluations of the field (Coalter, 2010; Darnell, 2012). In addition, scholars have stressed the importance of factors such as organizational capacity, leadership, and assessment for an SDP initiative to achieve success (Coalter, 2010; Lyras & Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2016). Scholarship has recognized that simply focusing on sport participation will do little to ameliorate social and political inequality (Darnell, 2012). As highlighted by Darnell (2012) regarding the notion of 'the power of sport' and the need to not over-romanticize sport, the importance of critical research "is to contextualize and politicize the role and place of sport in struggles for sustainable and equitable development" (p. 23).

Some sport management research has examined the importance of partnerships and collaborations amongst organizations and governing bodies (for example, see Alexander, Thibault, & Frisby, 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak, 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013). This line of research has also helped shape recent inquiry into SDP initiatives and the nature of inter-organizational partnerships (Burnett, 2008; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Schulenkorf, Sugden, & Burdsey, 2014; Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016). Partnerships are the lifeblood of SDP organizations, and are undertaken for multiple reasons, such as to secure funding, for assistance in program design, delivery, and implementation, and for monitor and evaluation (Burnett, 2008; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). In a broader sense, organizational collaborations and partnerships are common across multiple sectors of society, as it is through effective partnerships that organizations "address societal issues, accomplish tasks, and reach goals that fall outside the grasp of any individual entity working independently" (Woodland & Hutton, 2012, p. 366). Despite the many advantages of inter-organizational partnerships, they are challenging to form and sustain, and many do not succeed. For instance, Vangen and Huxham (2003) noted that "collaborations... are difficult to manage, and the likelihood of disappointing outputs is high. To create advantage, practitioners need to engage in a continuous process of nurturing the collaborative process" (p. 5).

While sport management (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013) and management scholars (see Woodland & Hutton, 2012, for a review) have explored partnerships and their associated challenges, there is limited focus on inter-organizational partnership development and sustainability in SDP, particularly across a wide range of organizations with varied missions and foci. Recognizing the importance and challenges of cross-sector partnerships, Babiak and Thibault (2009) suggested future research highlighting which structural challenges affect behaviors and partner processes along with perceptions of partnerships. Additionally, they called for efforts investigating how "power and trust played a role in both introducing and overcoming some of the competitive–collaborative efforts faced by partners" (p. 139).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine challenges faced by SDP organizations when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships across contexts and partnership types, and to uncover strategies they have employed to overcome these challenges. Our goal was to synthesize rather than compare challenges and strategies across organizational contexts, although we do offer relevant comparisons in the findings where warranted. Two research questions were developed: (a) what are the challenges and barriers SDP organizations have encountered when forming and sustaining inter-organizational partnerships; and (b) what strategies have they employed to address and overcome these challenges and barriers? This research is significant, given that most SDP organizations rely on partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments (local and federal), and other public and private entities in order to survive and carry out their missions (Burnett, 2008; MacIntosh et al., 2016; Welty Peachey & Cohen, 2016). In addition, while Lindsey and Banda (2011) and Hayhurst and Frisby (2010) examined the characteristics and tensions of SDP partnerships by centering on one or two organizations, more partnership research is needed with a broader set of SDP organizations to examine common challenges and strategies.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

As noted by Atkinson (2005), "there is of course no "best" evaluation framework applicable to all partnerships" (p. 9). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an extensive review of all partnership research, we highlight key literature that assisted with the framework of this study. Collaboration theory (Gajda, 2004; Gray, 1989) was utilized as the underlying scheme, along with Woodland and Hutton's (2012) extension of this work. In addition, we review extant literature within the sport management and SDP fields on partnership benefits, capacities, and challenges (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009; Babiak 2007, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Hayhurst & Frisby, 2010; Lindsey & Banda, 2011; Lindsey, 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2012, 2013).

Gray (1989) described collaborations (or partnerships; the terms are used interchangeably) as "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem [or issue] can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (p. 5). Collaboration theory incorporates general principles that

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