Sport and Sustainable Development: Designing, Managing and Leveraging Opportunities

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Introduction

Over the past 15 years, the field of sport-for-development (SFD) has increased its visibility and legitimacy in the context of local and international development work. Where at the beginning of the 21st century it was difficult to find dedicated projects that used sport as a strategic vehicle for positive change in disadvantaged community settings, the number of SFD initiatives has since grown substantially (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). In contrast to traditional sport development activities that focus on skill, talent and pathways, SFD represents the intentional "use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialisation of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution" (Lyras & Welty-Peachey, 2011, p. 311). In short, SFD employs sport as a vehicle to achieve wider development outcomes rather than focusing on sport as an end in itself.

Back in 2001, the creation of the United Nations Office for Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) was a first significant step towards official recognition and legitimacy for SFD. Subsequent assertions, such as the Magglingen Declaration in 2003 and the United Nation's International Year of Sport and Physical Education in 2005, further raised awareness of SFD as a philosophy underpinning aspirations for positive change (Burnett, 2015; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2014). Overall, this increased awareness of potential social, health and economic benefits resulting from SFD led to the creation of thousands of local and international development projects supported and/or implemented by NGOs, government departments, sport associations, aid agencies, and funding bodies around the world (for specific details, see www.sportanddev.org).

While in the past, SFD has at times been accused of "uncritical 'evangelical' accounts and assumed myopic powers of sport in the absence of robust evidence" (Burnett, 2015, p. 386), today SFD programs and events can build upon on a solid evidence base (see, e.g., Schulenkorf et al., 2016; Svensson & Woods, 2017). SFD research has established itself as a credible field of academic enquiry; moreover, it has been enjoying increased theoretical and empirical prominence in areas such as sport sociology, management, cultural studies, gender studies and community development. Against this background—and in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—it is timely to reflect on how the SFD field, with its many supporters and critics, has developed and evolved. In doing so—and in line with the brief presented by the United Nations (UN) Division for Inclusive Social Development—in this paper I refer back to key research studies and my own SFD experiences that have previously been published elsewhere (see, e.g., Schulenkorf, 2017). In

particular, I focus on critical management-related aspects of SFD with the aim of contributing to the creation of an updated action plan for SFD-related initiatives of the UN.

Evidence-Snapshot of Scholarly Development in SFD

In 2016, our multi-disciplinary research team conducted an integrative review of academic SFD literature (see Schulenkorf et al., 2016). Our goal was to rigorously examine scholarly contributions to SFD in an effort to portray a holistic picture of the field. In total, we identified and analysed 437 peer-reviewed journal articles that were published between 2000 and 2014; these articles highlighted that SFD research is a fast growing field with steadily increasing publication outputs. Much of the research work employs qualitative techniques, i.e. interviews, focus groups and observation. While many practical SFD projects are based in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), few researchers from developing nations were identified as authors of publications. In fact, there is an intriguing paradox between the geographical context of authorship and study location: while the majority of SFD projects are carried out in Africa, Asia and Latin America, a remarkable 90% of SFD authors are based in North America, Europe and Australia. This suggests that there is significant need for more inclusive approaches to managing, researching and evaluating projects, and a requirement for additional capacity building initiatives in the research domain.

In regards to specific SFD activities, general physical activity and football (soccer) were found to be the most common intervention vehicles. Social cohesion and education are the predominant themes, with less emphasis on disability-, gender- and livelihood-oriented research. Looking forward, our team suggested that opportunities exist for programmes to use a broader range of culturally appropriate sports to engage participants; to refine monitoring and evaluation procedures; to develop local staff and researcher capacity in developing nations; and to target disability, gender and livelihood issues through SFD programming and research.

SFD from a Sport Management Perspective

Building on the findings from the integrative review—and reflecting on the growing body of sport management work that has been conducted on SFD projects in both theory and practice—I will now focus on showcasing practical experiences and conceptual advancements in SFD that broadly relate to three key areas: research-assisted program design, inclusive management, and strategic leverage (see also Schulenkorf, 2017). I do so because these three areas are considered central in our efforts to create, implement and sustain SFD programs for the long-term benefits of society. They also allow for new and creative ways of advancing SFD research and practice in the future.

Research-Assisted SFD Design – Programming for Positive Impacts, Outcomes and
Legacies

As indicated above, scholarly engagement in and around SFD has been growing in recent years. This development is a critical step towards knowledge creation and the subsequent employment of evidence-based program design. For instance, a number of empirical research studies have investigated the programmatic features and activities of SFD programs, and the way in which they have been conceptualised to increase opportunities for beneficial societal outcomes. From an *ex ante* perspective, studies have combined important contextual information and qualitative research to inform the design and structure of future SFD projects (see e.g. Sawrikar & Muir, 2010). On the other hand, ex post studies have focused on the 'lessons learned' from existing SFD programs in regards to their structures and overall ability to contribute to inclusive community development (see e.g. Hanlon, Morris, & Nabbs, 2010; Holmes, Banda, & Chawansky, 2016; Olushola, Jones, Dixon, & Green, 2013; Thomson, Darcy, & Pearce, 2010). In the context of SFD programming and management, both approaches hold significant value when attempting to identity the mechanisms and processes needed to increase the potential of staging impactful initiatives that leave a positive legacy.

Two brief examples are provided here to illustrate the importance of design to achieve desired outcomes. Firstly, Welty Peachey et al.'s (2015) research revealed that special events or festivals—if they provide both formal and informal opportunities for social interaction through various sport and non-sport activities such as opening/closing ceremonies, parades, musical entertainment, fan mix-zones, barbeques, and so on—can create *communitas* as well as opportunities for social inclusion and wider social leverage. This suggests that from a strategic planning and design perspective, festivals should be encouraged as part of SFD work. In regards to specific design, the best results may in fact be achieved if these festivals are indeed 'nested' within a wider program of development activities (see Schulenkorf, 2016; Schulenkorf & Adair, 2013). At the same time, it remains unclear if larger standalone initiatives including mega or hallmark sport events will lead to sustainable development outcomes. This finding has important policy implications for funders or supporters of SFD initiatives who have to decide between merely raising awareness (pure events angle) and achieving tangible community benefits ('nested' approach).

Second, in his ethnographic research with Somali refugees in Australia, Spaaij (2013) highlighted that specific programming, commitment, and a design for reciprocal learning were key factors in the management of inclusive SFD environments. Spaaij argued for a "two-way process of mutual accommodation" (p. 29) to establish an environment conducive to social engagement and inclusion. Overall, Spaaij's research—in line with many studies in the SFD programming and design space—provides evidence of a strong scholar-practitioner link to achieve positive impacts, outcomes and legacies. Today, many SFD researchers use different types of 'action research' through which they are closely involved with the project they are examining—something that can be identified as a major strength when trying to

provide a nexus between theory, policy and the realities of practice (see also Chalip, 2015). Professor John Sugden—Co-Founder and Honorary Life President of *Football 4 Peace International*—provides an excellent example for this, especially because of his long-term involvement and focus on sustainable support in SFD design.

Inclusive SFD Management – Combining Local Knowledge with External Management Expertise

Building on the previous category, a critical managerial challenge relates to the planning for locally relevant and sustainable SFD programs. This acknowledgement and the increased focus on local engagement is perhaps a response to the many early SFD programs that have started with great fanfare, but have failed to sustain themselves once external funding had ceased. Against this background, strategic management discussions around community engagement, power relationships and local capacity building have been the focus of many critical management research projects published (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2012; Collison, Darnell, Giulianotti, & Howe, 2017; Harris & Adams, 2016; MacIntosh & Spence, 2012; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Whitley, Forneris, & Barker, 2015).

While there is general agreement that strategic, contextual planning should underpin any serious attempts to achieving sustainability in SFD, the preferred road to success varies considerably. For example, research has reported on SFD programs that have started out as a *partnership* between local communities in LMICs and different external development providers from high-income countries, and that have successfully maintained programs under a power-sharing arrangement for many years (see e.g. Svensson & Hambrick, 2016). Other research—including both theoretical and empirical studies— suggests that if we are serious about sustainable growth of SFD initiatives, then management power and responsibility needs to shift progressively away from external 'change agents' to local communities in an attempt to empower the latter as independent owners of *their* programs (Edwards, 2015; Schulenkorf, 2010, 2012). This process is often more difficult than anticipated and many SFD programs have struggled to achieve this transition smoothly.

Either way, the cooperation and knowledge sharing between technical experts and local community seems to be central for long-term success. From a management perspective, this suggests a dedicated approach towards community participation and the inclusion of local custom into project planning and implementation. If this cannot be facilitated—and projects are instead initiated, guided or dominated by outsiders—there is the danger that they may employ a culturally inappropriate, paternalistic or even neo-colonial approach to management (Darnell, 2007; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011). As such, the change agent may unconsciously or consciously have the feeling of 'knowing what's best' for communities, which may result in local input being undervalued.

On the other hand, external change agents may well have a critically important role to play in SFD projects. As funders, management experts, co-organisers, consultants, coaches or volunteers, they often provide much needed human, financial or social

resources. More importantly, however, they can add important elements of impartiality, excitement, trust and confidence to a project (Schulenkorf, 2010; Stidder & Haasner, 2007; Sugden, 2006). Without these elements, certain SFD projects would struggle to be accepted and supported across communities, particularly in the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives in which external change agents hold the role of negotiators, facilitators, or mediators between groups (see, e.g., Schulenkorf, 2010; Schulenkorf, Sugden, & Burdsey, 2014).

Strategic SFD Leverage – Building on Partnerships to Sustain and Grow Programs

SFD programs are generally designed with specific intentions, project goals, and objectives in mind and many of these can be classified as desired impacts and outcomes. In the context of managing SFD programs for sustainable community benefit, the concept of *leverage* applies (see Chalip, 2006). Here, SFD programs can be strategically used (i.e., leveraged) to grow immediate impacts into extended and more sustained outcomes. Increasingly, researchers have focused on analysing leveraging strategies and tactics for a wider range of intangible and "soft" impacts. In particular, studies on social and cultural leveraging have emerged, painting the picture of a more complex field of research that relates to the potential for SFD projects and events to contribute to a wide variety of societal benefits, including community connectedness and pride, social capital and community building, physical activity, and sport participation. (Misener & Mason, 2006; Misener, McGillivray, Gayle, & Legg, 2015; Smith, 2009; Taks, Green, Misener, & Chalip, 2014; Taks, Misener, Chalip, & Green, 2013). Here, leveraging strategies, such as facilitating social contact through designing open spaces and providing informal social opportunities, can be useful approaches towards maximizing an event's social potential (Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries, & Cohen, 2015). At the same time, using event-related festivities to enhance the celebratory atmosphere around SFD programs serves to both attract a larger audience and draw non-attendees (Schulenkorf, 2016). This way, fertile connections can be created between program participants, supporting stakeholders and community subcultures that may allow for ongoing engagement—and the building of social capital—to occur (see also Irwin & Ryan, 2013).

The key towards achieving positive leverage outcomes is genuine partnerships between stakeholders. Evidently, SFD managers rarely work in isolation when designing and implementing specific interventions. To achieve their intended goals and objectives, they must be strategically designed, implemented, and supported by key partners who are experts in their area of work (e.g., Banda, Lindsey, Jeanes, & Kay, 2008; Gallant, Sherry, & Nicholson, 2015; Sugden, 2006). Research from a healthy-lifestyle SFD program in the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu serves as an example here (see Siefken, 2013). The program organisers of the *Wokabaot Jalens* [Bislama for Walking Challenge] cooperated with influential stakeholders to attain valuable tangible and intangible support. For instance, the World Health Organization's South Pacific Office and Vanuatu Ministry of Health officially endorsed the program and supported the planning and strategic communication of

messages on radio, television, and local newspapers. Moreover, health experts from these two significant institutions provided their expertise and thus additional credibility and legitimacy that could be strategically leveraged. In particular, the Director of Public Health was approached to champion the idea of putting women at the center of all health promotion campaigns. In other words, the Director's involvement provided the program and its focus on women with some extra gravity—something that can and should be used to widen program reach, i.e. attract and involve greater numbers of participants in future initiatives.

This example suggests that, from a management perspective, SFD programs can benefit from reciprocal engagement and genuine support of stakeholders. It is therefore recommended that in the management of SFD initiatives, a partnership approach should underpin the strategic planning towards sustaining and growing programs in the long-term.

Summary

Over the past 15 years, the field of SFD has experienced significant growth and sophistication among sport practitioners and researchers. Given its increased evidence base, SFD scholarship today enjoys a much stronger reputation in the academic community, especially in the fields of sport and development studies. On the practical level, contemporary SFD programs are generally more strategically planned, pedagogically designed, and conceived for the long-term when compared to the flood of ad-hoc SFD projects that entered the social development space at the beginning of the millennium.

Upon reflection, partnerships between SFD programs and key stakeholders have proven central to get programs approved and activities designed in a culturally relevant and meaningful way—a particularly important consideration if projects are conducted or supported by external 'change agents', given the unique value and belief systems of many local communities. Moreover, strong partnerships between organizers, local communities, and external partners has proven to increase the likelihood of implementing, managing, communicating, and sustaining programs in an efficient and effective way.

Back in 2001, the UN was one of the driving forces behind the newly established "SFD Movement" through its Office for Sport for Development and Peace. To maintain an influential role in the future, the UN system should continue to officially acknowledge and support SFD initiatives as important enablers of sustainable community development. In line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the UN has a responsibility to contribute to identifying and promoting the best ways sport can deliver towards the achievement of the SDGs. In assisting this mandate, in this reflective paper I have presented a number of critical aspects that relate to the socio-managerial aspects of sustainable SFD program development. Building on evidence-based research, the areas of research-assisted program design, inclusive management, and strategic leverage have been highlighted in detail. Overall, these three areas will be central in our managerial efforts to create, implement and sustain SFD programs for the long-term benefits of society.

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