Global Assessment of Sport for Development Programs for Girls and Women

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A number of researchers (Binder, 2001; Hums, 2009; Lyras, 2007, 2009; Thibault, 2009,) along with international sport and humanitarian institutions (IOC 2009a, 2009b; UN, 2003, 2005) have advocated the need to leverage the positive impact sport can have on individuals, societies and the world. Since 1994, many organizations sought to empower girls and women by providing recommendations and policies emphasizing the use of sport to resolve challenges girls and women face (Beijing Platform for Action, 1995; Brighton Declaration, 1994; UN, 2003, 2005; Windhoek Call for Action, 1998). The primary focus of national and international agencies is providing equal access to sport, which is viewed an instrument crucial to the development of girls and women. Access to sport may take the form of mixed-groups (boys/girls, men/women) or single-sex environments; however, the Beijing Platform for Action and the United Nations have advocated for special programs targeting girls and women. Furthermore, “the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are critical to the eradication of poverty, hunger and disease and the achievement of development that is truly sustainable” (UNPF, 2008, p. 29). Despite the plethora of humanitarian efforts, the effectiveness and application of policies and Sport for Development (SFD) programs are still questioned, and gender issues still exist around the globe.

In an analysis of gender differences in developing countries, Meier (2005) found a “weaker position of women and girls in social, political, economic, legal, educational, and physical matters” (p. 5). As support for equity and women’s development increases and the use of sport as an instrument for education gains global momentum, it is vitally important to identify SFD programs for girls and women and analyze the context and outcomes of those programs. In order to address the absence of scientific evidence on how Sport for Development programs and policies can more leverage their effectiveness, Lyras (2009) introduced an interdisciplinary Sport for Peace and Development Theory, which is specifically designed to address the gap between sport for development theory and practice.

Sport for Peace and Development Theory (SPDT; Lyras, 2007, 2009) refers to attributes and procedures that can increase efficiency in the initiation, management, assessment and effectiveness of non-traditional sport interventions. According to the SPDT, if we claim that sport can serve as “a good medicine” for a number of social issues (e.g., cross-cultural intolerance, racism and conflict) – then social scientists have to utilize scientific procedures to assess three components, (a) The Content (the ingredients of the medicine–e.g., themes, topics and activities), (b) The Process (the prescription of the medicine depending on the problem to be resolved – e.g., pedagogy, frequency and organizational context), and (c) The Outcomes (the indicators showing if “symptoms were healed” – impacts and assessment). These three components refer to the context and management practices of sport interventions aimed at pursuing the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (e.g., sport & gender equality, sport & peace, sport & health).

The absence of substantial scientific evidence regarding the content and outcomes of SFD programs, specifically those related to girls and women, may inhibit policy makers and practitioners from maximizing positive impacts (e.g., increased self-esteem, health education, life-skills) intended in their respective programs. Therefore, the purposes of this study are to a) identify and compare SFD programs targeted at girls and women around the globe, and b) analyze the content, process, and outcomes of the SFD programs targeting girls and women.

For this two-phase study, data was collected from Sport for Development platforms on the Internet. The platforms provide data about global SFD programs (n=1035) and include information about organizational structure, impacts and management practices. Specifically, each database contains information on a program’s mission and objectives, founding year, location, sport(s), educational purpose (e.g., social integration, health, life skills), monitoring and evaluation efforts, funding sources, and target group (e.g., girls/women, persons with disabilities, refugees). The first phase of this project focuses specifically on program content (i.e., target group, sport, educational purpose), process (i.e., mission/objectives, curriculum), and outcomes (i.e., monitoring and evaluation). A preliminary assessment of data collected revealed 439 Sport for Development programs specifically targeting girls and women.

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(n=139) and Africa (n=111) were home to the majority of programs for girls and women. Soccer (n=139), general fitness (n=83), dance (n=29), and basketball (n=28) were the most popular sport activities. Common program content included health education (e.g., maternal, HIV/AIDS, alcohol/drug abuse, nutrition), social inclusion (e.g., equality, breaking down stereotypes, accessibility, citizenship), and personal development (e.g., increased self-esteem, life-skills, leadership). Nearly 62% (n=271) of programs were created after 2004.

Preliminary data analysis indicates that SFD programs for girls and women combine traditional (e.g., soccer, basketball) sport and non-traditional (e.g., dance, double-dutch) sport as well as cultural activities (e.g., story-telling, music, art) to encourage personal growth and development. Additionally, very few SFD programs for girls and women employ scientific monitoring and evaluation processes to determine the actual impact of programs over time. This finding underscores the absence of substantial scientific evidence in Sport for Development programming for girls and women. Furthermore, it strengthens the argument for evaluation. Policy makers and practitioners can utilize this evaluation data to maximize the intended positive impacts of Sport for Development programs.

In the second phase of this study, we will compare and contrast the findings using the Sport for Peace and Development Theory (i.e., content and outcomes; Lyras, 2009) to identify organizational and context components that lead to effective SFD programs related to girls and women. These findings will be used to (a) strengthen theoretical foundations of sport for peace and development, (b) gain a better understanding of SFD programs and practices for girls and women, (c) provide practical design and implementation suggestions for SFD program coordinators, and (d) provide possible implications for future SFD policy for girls and women. Future research recommendations will also be discussed.

This project is a part of a larger initiative known as the Sport for Development Global Initiative (Lyras & Wolff, 2009) that aims to advance the SFD body of knowledge (theory and applications).