The "Trickle Down Effect" of Medium Sized Sport Events: In Search for Empirical Evidence

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The claimed impact of sport events on sport participation relies on an asserted ‘trickle-down effect’, which alleges that the performances of elite athletes at events inspire others to become active and partake in sport (Hindson, Gidlow & Peabees, 1994). Evidence supporting this ‘trickle-down effect’ is largely anecdotal (Coalter, 2004) and the lack of empirical evidence to sustain these ideas raises concerns over the validity of claims that events can trigger increased physical activity and sport participation. Previous research on the ‘trickle-down effect’ has focused primarily on major (i.e., hallmark) sporting events (e.g., Bauman, Ford, & Armstrong, 2001; Hindson et al., 1994; SportScotland, 2004). Little is known about the relationship between non-hallmark events and sport development. Sport development refers to the policies, processes, and practice of facilitating opportunities for involvement in sport, from mass participation to elite performance (Hyton & Bramham, 2001; Green, B.C., 2005). Given the fact that small and medium sized sport events are more ubiquitous (than for instance mega–events), they may potentially be more relevant to communities as possible sources of leverage to increase sport participation. The purpose of this paper is to present the first stage of a larger research project in which we analyse the leverage of small and medium sized sport events for sport development and participation. In this first stage we want to evaluate to what degree local (sport) organizations seek to leverage a sport event for sport development purposes in their community; what tactics are being used and to what effect; and what the intended and unintended effects of these events are on sport participation.

Two small/medium sized sport events are being evaluated in this phase, using a qualitative approach. First we seek to find out whether these events included a specific agenda promoting sport development, and whether long-term and short-term strategies have been employed. This analysis helps determine what is and is not working when sport development efforts are built into events. If promoting sport development was not an acclaimed purpose for staging an event, intended and unintended effects on sport development are being evaluated to help reveal the sport development potential of events, including a comparison of planned and unplanned outcomes. The selection of the events was based on the following criteria: (a) small-to-medium in size; (b) single-sport; (c) attract media attention; (d) attract spectators; (e) not a high profile sport (e.g., hockey); (f) hosted previously (2005-2009) allowing for measurement of potential long term effects (if any); and; (g) from the same geographic region (South Western Ontario) in order to keep geographic and economic background variables similar. The 2005 Pan American Junior Athletic Championships was selected because this event has been the subject of previous research and data have already been collected on the event. The 2005 Canadian Figure Skating Championships, hosted in January 2005 in London, Ontario was selected because it also meets all the above criteria and provides a comparative event.

The effect of each event on participation and the degree to which any effects were a consequence of intentional efforts to leverage are evaluated using a combination of document analysis and interviews. The document analysis enables the research team to gain expertise about the event, to identify the most appropriate persons to interview, and hone the interview protocols. Websites, brochures, planning documents, print media, post-event reports, as well as membership numbers of local sport organizations (LSOs) are analyzed to identify evidence of intentional and unintentional attempts to leverage the event for sport development as well as any planned or unplanned outcomes.

Interviews are used to probe the actions, expectations, and perceptions of stakeholders who were closely involved with the event, its leverage, or other sport development outcomes (intended or not). Eleven to 15 interviews were conducted for each event. The sample consists of 4-5 key managers or board members from local sport organizations (LSOs), 3-4 managers from local sport facilities, 2-3 executives from local organizing committees (LOCs) for the event, and 2-3 local coaches. LSOs are the organizations that benefit most from sport development generated by an event. Local facilities provide the necessary capacity to cater to added demand generated from an event, and will experience any effects, even if transitory; managers of those facilities provide insight into observed post-event demand, as well as supply constraints or adjustments necessary to enable sport development through an event. The LOC was responsible for event marketing and any associated leverage; executives from the LOC provide insight into sport development expectations, potentials, and activities. Coaches play a pivotal role in the delivery of sport services; they provide insight into effects from the event as well as the challenges of capitalizing on an event. Interviews are used to solicit interviewee’s perspectives on the event, including their views on attempts to leverage sport development opportunities, effects of the event on sport development, lessons, and the potential of events to stimulate sport participation. Probes are used: (a) to explore tactics or reasons for not implementing any leveraging activities; (b) if tactics were applied, how and why they had chosen these particular strategies, and why those tactics did or did not seem to be effective; (c) to explore their perceptions of the intended and unintended effects of the event on sport development (e.g., LSO memberships, sport facility...
usage); (d) to identify special advantages or problems associated with leverage of an event for sport development; and (e) to explore potential tactics they envision for leveraging sport events for sport development. The interviews are conducted during the months of October and November 2010. The interviews will be fully transcribed. NVivo software (QSR, 2008) will be employed to help sort, code and analyze the data. Data from the document analyses and interviews are coded for presence or absence of leveraging strategies, the rationale for leverage (or for not leveraging), apparent sport development outcomes from the event, and potentials for event leverage. Strauss’s (1987) open coding technique is used to generate the themes and subthemes from strategies, rationales, perceived outcomes, and expected potentials for event leverage. Themes, subthemes, and representative quotes will be used to report the findings. The presentation of results will focus on the degree local (sport) organizations sought to leverage the events for sport development purposes in each community; what tactics were used and to what effect; and what the perceived intended and unintended effects of these events were on sport participation. This stage of the research is a foundational step in the search for revealing strategies and tactics that can be used to leverage small and medium sized sport events for sport development and participation.