Corporate Social Responsibility and Sport: The case of the British Olympic Association’s FTSE-BOA Initiative

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In early 2007 the UK’s National Olympic Committee the British Olympic Association (the BOA) created a partnership scheme entitled the ‘FTSE-BOA Initiative’. The scheme partnered Olympic National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs) and FTSE 100 companies in an attempt to improve the effectiveness of organizational delivery and subsequent performance of Olympic NGBs (BOA 2010) in the build up to London 2012 Olympic Games. Two years after its conception the BOA conducted a large scale internal evaluation of these partnership arrangements. The aim of this evaluation was to provide formal documentation of the initiatives to date along with key learning outcomes in order to better future arrangements. The emergent findings of this evaluation also provided a useful and unique insight into usage of Corporate Social Responsibility (henceforth CSR) practices within mainstream corporations and the motivations for using sport to achieve their CSR agendas. The scope of this paper was to explore three case studies contained within this evaluation using a CSR lens to provide a unique and contemporary insight into CSR and cross-sectoral partnership working in sport.

Despite its common usage CSR is definitionally a problematic (Carrol, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2006) and ‘tortured concept’ (Godfrey et al., 2008 p. 1). Generally it can understood as “...the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large” (WBCSD 2000 p6). Thus CSR represents a paradigm shift in understanding that organisations are inextricably integrated with society and therefore have a responsibility towards a ‘triple bottom line’ (Henriques & Richardson, 2004; Sheth & Babiak, 2010).

In line with the broader increase in importance and interest in CSR generally there has been a parallel shift within the field of sport management to incorporate CSR into the sporting remit. This shift is so profound that “…CSR should be regarded as one of the most important components of contemporary sport management theory and practice” (Bradish & Cronin, 2009, p. 696). The majority of studies looking at CSR and sport look at how CSR is being used by sports organizations with emphasis being placed on mainstream CSR practices transitioning into the field of sports management (cf Babiak & Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Walker & Parent, 2010). This transition has been so profound in fact that it has warranted its own succinct definition as a unique area of study addressing ‘Sport Social Responsibility’ (Skinner, 2010, p. 69). Yet few authors have written in terms of CSR through the medium of sport, with exceptions including sport as a ‘vehicle’ for CSR (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007) and as a developmental tool (Levermore, 2010). Little is therefore known about the motivations and reasons for involvement of mainstream corporations in terms of how and why they choose to use sports as a means of achieving their CSR agendas. It is hoped that by understanding these motivations and rationale behind decisions the potential to use a CSR platform should become more transparent so that corporate and sport NGBs organizations will be better situated to potentially work together in the future.

This study adds to the existing literature of the later by providing an insight into the multifaceted usage CSR practice through the means of sporting NGBs. More specifically it provides a case study analysis of CSR practices implemented through three partnership arrangements as part of the ‘FTSE-BOA’ Initiative Program. The data presented within this paper constitutes part of a broader internal evaluation conducted on behalf of the BOA which produced emergent findings that directly applied to the study of sport and CSR. Consequently it provides a rare insight into a series of partnership arrangements that otherwise would be hard to access and evaluate at such depth.

The methods used were ten semi-structured interviews carried out with senior management personnel within both NSOs and Corporate Organizations. Key actors were selected using a ‘key informant technique based upon “…the specific knowledge that they possess” of the partnership arrangement (Gratton & Jones, 2004 p. 104). Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed. The primarily method was then supplemented by a Content Analysis of documentation including: annual reports, articles of association, meeting minute’s reviews and press releases which provided a useful tool in separating the rhetoric from reality (Googins & Rochlin, 2002) within these partnership arrangements.

From the empirical data collected within internal evaluation of the FTSE-BOA Initiatives two clear conclusions were drawn. Firstly CSR and sport partnerships are often misconceived as, but do not always have to constitute, sponsorship arrangements. Nor do they have to involve huge outlays of capital in order to be ‘successful’ according to the aims and objectives of both
organizations involved. Therefore this paper inherently argues that given a degree of understanding between organizations, along with a level of sensibility of expectations and a little innovation and creativity, CSR corporate objectives can be achieved, whilst providing huge benefits to the sporting landscape.

The second conclusion made is that sport can be used within CSR practices regardless of the aims and objectives of the organizations involved. The FTSE-BOA partnerships provides quintessential model of how an array of CSR objectives can be achieved through the medium of sports partnerships, whilst still providing hugely significant benefits that are tailored to the sporting organization in question. One of many illustrations of this was the partnership arrangement between the BOA and AstraZeneca plc (AZ) which produced ‘win-win’ outcomes for both organizations. The BOA received a secondee from AZ in order to project manage the FTSE-BOA Initiatives to successfully create and sustain twenty one partnerships at the time of writing. On the other hand AZ was able to develop an understanding of how best to deploy its resources within the Olympic ‘policy space’ in line with its CSR aims and objectives. This was achieved via the provided secondee whom was able to relay information back to AZ as a subtle means of market research.

All too often it is argued that the sectors of sport and business are deemed to be worlds apart and thus are not compatible. This paper brings to light, through a practical and contemporary context, how sports organizations and corporate organizations might work together to the betterment of society. The implications of these findings should provide ‘food for thought’ for managers and practitioners alike that not only are CSR practices moving into sport more broadly, but sport continues to provide a fruitful and ubiquitous setting for corporate CSR strategies which does not have to come at huge cost to corporate organizations.