Sport Councils: Where Sustainability Meets Community Service

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Sport councils have emerged in 23 communities across Ontario over the last decade. Funded largely by grants from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), sport councils were created as part of a broader strategy to foster linkages among local sport clubs and build capacity among these organizations. Sport councils range in their mandates from facilitating coordination and integration among community sport organizations (CSOs), to supporting volunteers and fostering engagement, to advocating on behalf of sport leagues and clubs (Sharpe, Barnes, MacLean & Cousens, working paper). As a relatively new population of organizations, the fledgling councils struggle for resources, legitimacy, and support from CSOs. Critically, the sustainability of the CSOs came under question when, at the conclusion of the two years OTF funding period, several sport councils ceased to exist or continued as virtual organizations with little structure and little if any program delivery. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the mechanisms for sustainability that were focused on service delivery to the local community.

Sport councils constitute a mechanism for collaboration and integration of sport clubs at the level of the community. Importantly, sport councils move beyond the silos of same-sport linkages that are typical in the Canadian sport system (Barnes, Cousens & MacLean 2007) to include clubs and leagues from a range of different sports such as hockey, baseball, soccer, rugby and tennis. The importance of enhanced interaction among sport organizations was highlighted in the most recent Canadian Sport Policy (Sport Canada, 2002) with the stated goal to “increase collaboration, communication and cooperation amongst the partners in the sport community, government and the private sector, which, in turn, will lead to a more effective sport system.”

The benefits of collaboration among sport organizations have been highlighted by scholars in the field of sport management (MacLean, Cousens & Barnes, forthcoming; Doherty & Meisner, 2008; Sharpe, 2006; Stockdale & Williams, 2007). The barriers to interaction have also been discussed (Frisby, Thibault & Kikulis, 2004; Shaw & Allen, 2006; Simmonds, 2000; Nichols et al., 2005). Yet, little is known about the role of sport councils in fostering linkages among CSOs and, in turn, whether these efforts to develop local-level linkages are in any way linked to the sustainability of sport councils.

This research used a case study design to follow the development of one sport council during its inaugural year. A qualitative approach was used to capture the progress of this organization from its inception though its first 12 months of existence. In-depth interviews were used to gather data about the perspectives of various stakeholders in the community who also volunteered for the sport council during the period of this investigation. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked by the interviewee for content accuracy. The analysis of the qualitative data consisted of having each member of the research team read the data to identify codes, patterns and relationships among words of the respondents.

A document analysis of over 400 pages of material including progress reports, minutes from committee meetings, documents from a strategic planning session, reports developed for funding and government agencies, as well as research reports, were analyzed to gain information about the goals of the organization, its strategies, its means to link with sport clubs and foster collaboration among CSOs, and its tactics to ensure the sustainability of the organization. The printed materials were content analyzed in accordance with the objectives of this research.

The results of this research revealed that ensuring the sustainability of the sport council was a primary objective of the stakeholders of this organization. Innovative ideas and tactics to foster the sustainability of this organization were diffused from within and beyond the boundaries of the sport council. The importance of developing services that were valued by the sport clubs while simultaneously generating revenue for the sport council were developed as a means to ensure the council’s longevity. Surprising, linkages with non-traditional stakeholders, such as hotels, attractions and restaurants, facilitated the creation of revenue-generating programs for the sport clubs as well as the Niagara Sport Commission.

The implications of this research suggest that emergent strategies (Miller, 1992) for sustainability provided innovative sources of revenue for the Niagara Sport Commission which, in turn, foster linkages with CSOs. The inclusion of stakeholders from economic development, tourism, education, health, politics, and marketing appeared to foster innovation within this sport council given the varying insights, knowledge, expertise and network of contacts they provided. The goal of the sport council to foster collaboration and integration among CSOs was highly compatible with the sustainability of the sport council given that...
programs leveraging networks of sport clubs to generate revenue benefited the clubs as well as the sport council. Thus, providing services valued by the sport clubs were central to achieving both of these goals.