Sport Participation, Intergovernmental Relations, and Enhanced Interaction

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Since 2002, the Canadian Sport Policy has focused on the achievement of four goals: enhanced excellence, enhanced participation, enhanced capacity, and enhanced interaction. Our research focuses on two of these goals: enhanced participation and enhanced interaction. As part of this 2002 policy, a series of formal intergovernmental relations were arranged between the federal government and 13 provincial/territorial governments to enhance sport participation among all Canadians. Through intergovernmental relations with these 13 provincial and territorial governments, the federal government (i.e., Sport Canada) has facilitated the implementation of sport participation initiatives throughout the country. These formal intergovernmental relations are called bilateral agreements and ensure ‘new’ and matching funding from both federal and provincial/territorial governments to invest in increasing sport participation among Canadians. In doing so, these two levels of government have been able to prioritize and customize sport participation initiatives unique to their context.

The purpose of our study was to examine the impact of intergovernmental relations between the Canadian federal and provincial/territorial governments on the development of enhanced interaction or collaborative practices between provincial/territorial governments and provincial/territorial sport organizations and local governments and sport clubs. Given the importance of community sport in achieving sport participation (cf. Barnes, Cousens, & MacLean, 2007; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Misener & Doherty, 2009), collaboration among all levels of sport (national, provincial/territorial, local) and their organizations is imperative (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Frisby, Thibault, & Kikulis, 2004; Shaw & Allen, 2006). In the organizational theory literature, the effectiveness of interorganizational relationships has rarely been the object of investigation (cf. Brinkerhoff, 2002; Peng & Kellogg, 2003; Provan & Milward, 2001). As such, scholars have called for increased focused on the effectiveness of partnerships. For example, Agronoff and McGuire (2003) and others (cf. Brinkerhoff, 2002; Provan & Milward, 2001) emphasized the importance of measuring the effectiveness of interorganizational partnerships and systematically evaluating the outcomes of these partnerships. Our study focused on the collaborative endeavours developed as a result of the bilateral agreements in four provinces (British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan). The complexity of Canada’s sport system and its multiple stakeholders, the unique federal-provincial/territorial bilateral agreements, and the contextual differences between provinces, were ideal for a comparative case study design. Data collection involved interviews with key policy makers representing federal governments (Sport Canada) and policy makers at each of the four provincial governments (and, in some cases, sport-related nonprofit agencies involved with provincial governments) responsible for sport participation initiatives. An analysis of sport participation policy documents (e.g., Canadian Sport Policy, Federal-Provincial/Territorial Priorities for Collaborative Action, 2002-2005 and 2007-2012) and federal and provincial reports on sport participation initiatives, programs, and evaluations were also undertaken.

The results demonstrated that the bilateral agreements had led to a number of partnerships in each of the four provinces targeted for the study. In addition to the maintenance and support of a number of ongoing traditional partnerships, new collaborations with provincial governments’ units related to health promotion and/or protection, with provincial sport organizations, with schools and school boards, local governments, and local clubs were all fostered through funding originating from the bilateral agreements. Some of these traditional partners were recipients of increased funding to enhance sport participation in their jurisdiction because of the bilateral agreements. As well, novel partnerships were developed with organizations that targeted special populations that have traditionally been under-served in sport (i.e., low income people, Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and seniors). The enhanced collaboration that occurred between various organizations at different levels (local, provincial, and national) and the resulting network of organizations and individuals working toward increased sport participation were seen as favourable outcomes however, some level of duplication in initiatives of different organizations was questioned and the competition for participants in a number of sport programs led to some conflict. As well, the focus on some target groups (children, youth, Aboriginals) meant that other groups were overlooked for bilateral funding and this was a source of concern for some sport leaders. The findings illustrated that unanticipated negative outcomes occur in complex interorganizational relationships and that mechanisms need to be in place to deal with the conflicts and concerns that arise to maximize partnership effectiveness. Yet as the provincial and territorial government sport leaders want the bilateral funding to continue, there was hesitation on their part to report some of the difficulties they encountered. The implications for the federal government are discussed along with recommendations for future research.