Bridging the Gap: Planning to Leverage Events for Participation via a Panel of Experts

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Sustainability through the triple bottom line (TBL) of economic, social and environmental benefits for host communities has become an essential component in the portfolio of event practitioners (O’Brien & Chalip, 2007). A key social benefit of event hosting is increasing opportunities for active sport participation. The current study is part of a larger research project in which we investigate the potential of sport development strategies as new and innovative ways to leverage sporting events to create durable sport participation benefits for the host community. Chalip’s (2004) leveraging framework for sport events is used as a framework for the overall study. He identifies four necessary components for successful leverage: (a) presence of a leverageable resource in the host community; (b) the opportunity for leverage; (c) the inclusion of strategic leveraging objective(s); and, (d) the means to achieve the objective(s). In the first phase of this study, we evaluated intended and unintended sport participation outcomes through document analyses and interviews with key stakeholders of two medium sized spectator events hosted in 2005. Findings indicated that, at least for one of the events, human and physical capitals were enhanced; new facilities were built; new equipment was acquired; and opportunities for personal growth were created. These outcomes benefited athletes, coaches and officials alike. Although stakeholders expected these outcomes, their expectations were exceeded. For both events, there was an underlying assumption that new participation would be generated, supporting the ‘trickle down’ effect (e.g., Bauman, Ford, & Armstrong, 2001; Hindson et al., 1994; SportScotland, 2004). However, neither event initiated any active leveraging. Instead, ‘hosting a quality event’ was the primary mandate, rather than looking for ways to increase sport participation. The interviewees identified a variety of missed opportunities to leverage the event to build sport participation. Thus, while there was a recognition of potential value before (i.e., in the bid documents) and after (i.e., missed opportunities post hoc) the events, it was also clear that specific strategic objectives were missing and that no intentional leveraging was pursued. Although event stakeholders clearly valued the objective of increasing sport participation, they did nothing to leverage the events for that purpose. Consequently, the next stage of this research project seeks to examine the potential means to achieve the objective of increasing participation via event leverage. The current study will elaborate on the planning phase, specifically undertaken with a panel of experts to identify and generate new and innovative strategies and tactics, to assist local (sport) organizations to leverage sport events for sport development purposes.

In order to identify further opportunities and challenges to leverage events for sport development, this stage consists of a creative planning phase by which the means to cultivate effective leveraging of sport events by local sport organizations will be identified. A planning workshop protocol is used, combining brainstorming and dialectical decision making (DDM; Chalip, 2001; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979), as has been done in other studies (e.g., Chalip & Leyns, 2002). This method is useful for the formulation, evaluation, and implementation of complex problems that involve numerous individuals. It helps to provide creative insights into the problem which, together with the outcomes from the previous evaluation phase, can be applied to the final phase of this project, the action research phase. Following the protocol for dialectical decision making (DDM; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979), a nine to twelve member task force is created to consider the challenges and prospects for leveraging sport events for sport development. The members are academic experts (e.g., marketing, social/community work, sport psychology, sport development, education, youth service) and practitioners (e.g., members from organizing committees, members from non-event based sport development initiatives like YMCA or Sport Canada). Event experts are members from organizing committees of different types of events (e.g., locally, provincially and nationally organized events). Including people with expertise in non-event based sport development initiatives as well as academics is relevant for two reasons. Since the evaluation research in the previous phase did not reveal many sport development initiatives and/or effects, expertise from non-event settings may shed light on sport development strategies that might be useful for events’ settings. Non-event experts may identify sport development initiatives which may be particularly enhanced via events. Facilitators will guide the process, allowing the task force to think freely without imposing ideas. Recorders keep note, but will not participate in the discussions.
The workshop starts with an overview of the findings from phase one. As per the DDM protocol, the task force will discuss ways that Local Organizing Committees (LOCs) and Local Sport Organizations (LSOs) might leverage events for sport development purposes. They are then prompted to consider the best means to help LOCs and LSOs do so. Three groups are created, each consisting of a mix of academic experts and practitioners with different academic or practicing backgrounds. The groups work independently to formulate their initial ideas, which are then presented to and discussed by the task force as a whole. Ideas are collated and missing pieces identified. The outcomes are analyzed by the research team together with the recorders. The task force’s recommendations are then summarized, and will be taken into the action research phase (phase 3 of the research project), where the findings will be implemented while working closely with an event. The workshop is scheduled to take place in April 2012. The results will be available at the end of the workshop.

The findings will assist event organizers and local (sport) organizations to consciously apply leveraging tactics for sport development purposes, and therefore contribute to event sustainability. If successful strategies and tactics are revealed, host communities will also benefit from the outcomes of this study. In addition, the findings may assist sport policy makers and sport event organizations to substantiate their claim that sport events foster sport development. From a methodological perspective, this study will illustrate how the DDM process, used in this panel of expert workshop, is employed to explore underlying assumptions and assists in optimizing the range of alternatives generated. In the context of leveraging sport events, this phase is often forgotten, although it provides a solid and – in fact – an essential foundation for the implementation phase. This presentation will focus on the implementation of the DDM protocol as related to this study. In particular, we will address the value, challenges, and insights gained from employing a DDM framework to develop strategies for affecting event leverage. Further, we will draw upon the findings of the workshop to demonstrate how engaging in a focused dialectic about strategic leveraging tactics offers an evocative means of developing tactics to increase opportunities for sport participation.