

Sport-for-Development in a Pacific Islands Context: Towards Sustainable Social and Health Outcomes for People in Disadvantaged Communities

Nico Schulenkorf, University of Technology Sydney

Katja Siefken, Auckland University of Technology

Socio-cultural

Thursday, May 30, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 410)**

Abstract 2013-025

11:00 AM

Over the past decade, the number of aid organizations, Government agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) pursuing the Millennium Development Goals and thus seeking to improve the everyday circumstances of disadvantaged communities has been growing. Particularly in deprived community settings, these organizations bring individuals and groups together so they can actively engage and assist in the development of the community. Within this context, sport as an active and engaging leisure pursuit has been used to achieve different development goals. For example, sport projects have been implemented to redress discrimination and encourage respect for 'others' (Brown, Brown, Jackson, Sellers, & Manuel, 2003); bridge social, cultural and ethnic divides (Schulenkorf, 2010a, 2010b; Sugden, 2006); combat HIV/AIDS (Banda, Lindsey, Jeanes, & Kay, 2008; Webb, 2004); contribute to gender equality (Meier & Saavedra, 2009); and heal psychological wounds among traumatized victims of disasters, civil unrest or war (Kunz, 2009).

When strategically managed, sport can be a neutral yet exciting and proactive space (Sugden, 2010). Sport-for-development projects are seen as a promising way to encourage communication and communal celebration, as they are capable of activating people and influencing their attitudes and behaviour (Brown et al., 2003). When looking at the social and health related issues in the Pacific Islands, the need for community development initiatives is critical. From a social perspective, the Pacific population suffers from one of the highest rates of domestic violence and suicide in the world. From a health perspective, the region has experienced a major shift in disease burden: life-threatening non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have overtaken communicable diseases as a key risk area, and they are considered a significant health and development issue (WPRO, 2009). NCDs include diabetes, cardiovascular disease, different types of cancer and depression.

Previous research in a Pacific Island context suggests that targeted health promotion campaigns with a focus on habitual physical activity are an effective strategy towards increasing sport participation and reducing NCD risk in the region (Siefken, MacNiven, Schofield, Bauman, & Waqanivalu, in press). Active involvement in sport-for-development may thus serve as a physical, social and behavioural hook for people to be committed and engaged, and through this process establish new friendships or networks for social and health related benefits (see also Coalter, 2007; Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011). Consequently, government agencies, aid organizations and NGOs have been implementing sport-for-development projects in the Pacific Islands for several years. However, while their engagement is laudable, at present there is little evidence of the effectiveness of these initiatives in achieving long-term community development outcomes.

In response to the issues presented above, this paper investigates the development foci, capacity building approaches, and cultural relevance of the Just Play Initiative in Samoa, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands. As a structured development program, Just Play promotes physical activity, healthy living and community involvement across ten Pacific Islands; it is delivered through the respective national football federations and supported by AusAID and the Australian Sports Commission. Following an interpretive paradigm, the present study builds on 35 interviews and 4 focus group discussions with change agents, local project officers, sport coaches, community groups and participants and discusses the contextual challenges as well as strengths and weaknesses of the cooperative program. The differing (political) agendas of contributing stakeholders are analyzed and opportunities and restraints for program developments are outlined. Overall, the paper argues that if programs such as Just Play are to be effective – and if local communities are to take ownership of their own social and health wellbeing – then culturally meaningful sport management strategies need to be implemented that include capacity building, knowledge transfer and social leverage at their core.

The study is part of a larger research project which tries to establish the nexus between the previously separated

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

areas of social development and health within the sport-for-development sphere. It desires to unveil support factors for creating, managing and evaluating holistic community-focused development initiatives in the Pacific Islands.