The Role of Special Events in Sport-For-Development

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When strategically managed, sport can be a neutral yet exciting and proactive space for development (Coalter 2010, 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 behavior (Brown 2003). Given the ubiquity of health-related social issues in the Pacific Islands, the need for activity-based community development initiatives is critical. The challenges are profound. From a social perspective, the Pacific population experiences one of the highest rates of domestic violence and suicide in the world. From a health perspective, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) present a significant risk area for individuals and families (WPRO 2009). NCDs include diabetes, cardiovascular disease, different types of cancer and depression.

Previous research on sport and physical activity in a Pacific Island context suggests that targeted health promotion campaigns with a focus on habitual physical activity can be an effective strategy towards increasing sport participation and reducing NCD risk in the region (Siefken 2013). Active involvement in sport-for-development may thus serve as a physical, social and behavioral hook for people to be committed and engaged, and through this process establish new friendships or networks for social and health related benefits (Coalter 2007, Schulenkorf & Edwards 2012). Consequently, government agencies, aid organizations and NGOs have been implementing sport-for-development projects in the Pacific Islands for several years. Most of these initiatives also include special events such as cultural festivals, sport tournaments and educational conferences as part of the overall program portfolio. However, at present there is little empirical evidence of the role and effectiveness of these initiatives in contributing to community development outcomes.

The belief that events have a role to play in developing sports, communities its people stems from arguments around event leverage opportunities and ripple effects. First, event leverage refers to strategic planning for the maximization of social, business, environmental or other types of event benefits (see Chalip 2004, 2006; Schulenkorf & Edwards 2012). In other words, to achieve leverage, sport-for-development organizers need to move beyond the planning of immediate impacts and towards focusing on strategic paths which achieve lasting outcomes for host communities. Applied to the Pacific Island context, events may become a leverage opportunity to achieve wider community engagement and physical activity. Second, Sugden (2010) explains the maximizing and spreading of sport event impacts through his Ripple Effect Model. The model suggests that just like a stone dropped into a still pool of water, a community intervention has its strongest impact on those directly involved in a project or event. However, community activities such as sport events are seen to also be influencing other related stakeholders (e.g. families, communities, policymakers etc.) through the ripple effect, the waves from which eventually wash over the shoes of those who walk in the corridors of power. We must bear in mind, however, that strength dissipates as the waves move further from the center where the impact is more obviously felt and more easily measured.

As a structured sport-for-development program, the soccer-based Just Play initiative promotes physical activity, healthy living and community involvement across ten Pacific Islands; the program started in 2009 and is currently in its second funding phase (2013-2016). It is delivered through the respective national football federations and supported by AusAID, UEFA and the Australian Sports Commission. Following an interpretive paradigm, the present study investigated the role and value of special events within the Just Play initiative. By doing so, it responds to the lack of systematic data collection and empirical analysis encumbered in the management and evaluation fields of sport-for-development. The study builds on 38 interviews and three focus group discussions with Just Play project officers, change agents, community groups and program participants from Vanuatu, Samoa and the Cook Islands. The focus of the investigation is on opportunities and challenges of the program overall, and Just Play’s approach of using football festivals as special events to reach larger numbers of participants and engage the wider community.
Our study found that one-off ‘highlight events’ have the ability to play an important role within the context of ongoing, regularized sport-for-development programs; they can provide much needed excitement, animation, enthusiasm and vibrancy. The combination of regular programs and ‘highlight events’ can also be linked to the different dimensions of social capital (see Putnam 1993, 2000, Woolcock 2001); they can renew interest among local participants (bonding), but also arouse interest among those who have yet to engage (bridging and linking). In other words, regular programs are able to deepen existing relationships and networks, while highlight events allow for the widening of participation and program scope. The strategic inclusion of episodic highlight events may thus create a ripple effect (see Sugden 2010) that showcases sport-for-development projects and their related initiatives to a wider cross-section of a host community, including potentially new participants, family members, sponsors, government bodies and sport associations. This stimulus also seems important where external project organizers are looking to leverage the event and engage locals in the management of development projects, thereby empowering their role as existing members of the (sport) community.

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