Rethinking the Social Value of Sport and Events through an Asset-Based-Community-Development (ABCD) Perspective

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Sport has been held in high regard for its potential to positively influence social change or rectify social issues in our communities. For example, at a policy level, governments justify significant financial contributions to sport and event projects with expected positive impacts on image, community identity and social cohesion on a local, regional, national, and global scale. Further claims include sport’s ability to unite disparate populations and connect seemingly disparate groups of people; promote active citizenship; generate healthy activity levels among citizens; alleviate problems of social exclusion and ‘anti-social behaviour’; and develop community capacity and local empowerment. Despite this often-widespread belief that sport has the potential to solve all the ills of world, we need to be aware of the problems and challenges associated with sporting projects. In other words, we need to recognize their limitations and inability to live up to the exaggerated expectations projected by the (sporting) community.

Kellett, Hede, and Chalip (2008) have argued “that there is clearly a need for greater attention to the social value of events and the relationship between events and their host community” (p. 117). Events of all sizes and scales require some level of investment in human, financial, and physical capital from communities that stage sporting events. Thus, events should be more accountable to the communities that host them. In response, scholars have recently begun to focus on identifying and capitalizing on leveragable assets of events as a means to foster positive lasting social and economic benefits (Chalip 2006; O’Brien & Chalip 2008; Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012). Rather than simply evaluating event outcomes such as social and economic impact, the centrepiece of legacy efforts becomes about the development of targeted strategies aimed at achieving desired social change. Despite this ideological shift, there exists a lack of theoretical direction for developing these strategies toward achieving positive social community based outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is to explore one particular model of community development, Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), as a means of developing a more action oriented, community based approach to the development of leveragable social assets surrounding sporting events. ABCD draws attention to social assets of a community such as talent of individuals, social capital inherent in the relationships, and informal networks, alongside formalized assets such as infrastructure, resources, and human capital. The underlying premise is that by identifying and mobilizing existing assets in conjunction with the influx of new event related assets, activities can respond to and create local economic opportunity. In this way, it shifts the focus of legacy efforts away from attempts to ‘solve’ social problems (i.e. deficit perspective) to enhancing the existing assets of a community (i.e. strengths perspectives).

In previous research, scholars have argued that sporting events can foster social capital within existing relationships and therefore strengthen the social fabric of groups or communities, particularly when community members are involved and have the opportunity to actively participate event related outcomes (Misener, 2013; Schulenkorf, 2010, Skinner, Ziakus & Cowell 2008). However, much of the literature on events has demonstrated that community members are rarely involved in the planning and implementation processes of events, and if they are, they tend to be on the periphery of the event activities. Furthermore, if events are situated as a means of addressing social disparities or community concerns, it tends to be about ‘fixing’ the so-called problems of community rather than integrating the event(s) as part of a strategic development activity to enhance community assets. In other words, the role that sport and events can play in developing community and building social capital has predominantly been investigated from this deficits perspective, which highlights the problems, inequities, and detriments of communities that need to be ‘fixed’ (see also Coalter 2007, 2013). However, we argue that events should be managed strategically and in line with community values and needs to achieve relevant, meaningful and sustainable outcomes. For this to occur, local communities need to be at the centrepiece of development activities throughout all stages of the event lifecycle.
A focus on Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is suggested to create sustainable social development opportunities that are embedded in – and underpinned by – community centred experiences vital to regeneration efforts. Importantly, an ABCD perspective focuses on the strengths of a particular community and offers realistic and meaningful opportunities to enhance social change by focusing attention on the positive leverageable assets of a community. The ABCD approach genuinely empowers citizens and strengthens the effectiveness of government and other agencies by drawing on the resources, abilities and insights of local residents. Thus, genuine community development activities through leveraging strategies must be citizen-led with external resources acting in a supportive role. Leveraging activities, investments and resources brought in to the community through the events process can then support asset-based, locally defined development activities.

In exploring ABCD in an applied social context, we draw upon two differing perspectives from our own research: 1) Sport Events for Peace and Reconciliation efforts; and 2) Sport Events for Increasing Community Accessibility. We present empirical findings that highlight the challenges and opportunities in realizing an ABCD approach for disadvantaged communities. In regards to Peace and Reconciliation, these relate to the differing expectations and political power games played out within and between disparate communities, funders, government agencies, project staff and volunteers. In the Community Accessibility space, the extant social distance between the expectations of governments and policy makers, sport and recreation providers, event management specialists, and the needs of community members is demonstrative of both the constraints and opportunities of such an approach. Our paper discusses the ABCD approach from an applied perspective. We aim to provide academics and practitioners with empirical findings that highlight the prospect in changing the focus away from a deficit model and instead focus on an empowerment approach to development through community sport and events.