Under New Governance? Examining the Role of Canadian Sport for Life in Sport Policy and Governance

Mathew Dowling, University of Alberta
Marvin Washington (Advisor), University of Alberta

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Over the past decade sport has enjoyed unprecedented saliency and interest within Canada, evident by the doubling of Canadian federal government investment into Olympic summer sports programs from C$52,297,871 during the Beijing quadrennial to C$117,512,216 in the lead up to the London 2012 Olympic Games (OTP, n.d.). Symptomatic of what academics have referred to as the ‘global sporting arms race’ (De Bosscher et al., 2006; Green, 2005), many countries are now pursuing high performance success as a key policy objective. In support of this race there has been a paralleled increasing emphasis on the importance of governance, with countries creating a number of quasi/non governmental organizations, programs and initiatives to help accomplish their objectives. In recognition of these broader developments, the purpose of this research is to begin to unpack and assess one of these newly emerging quasi-governance structures within Canadian sport; namely the emergence and development of CS4L.

Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) has been considered as the cornerstone contributor to the relative success of the Canada’s national sport policy over the past 10 years (Sutcliffe, 2010), and has been recognized as vital component of achieving governments’ sporting vision over the subsequent decade (SIRC, 2012). Led by a quasi-academic-practitioner group called the Canadian Sport for Life Leadership Team (CS4LLT), CS4L has been self-described as “a movement to improve the quality of sport and physical activity in Canada” (CS4L, n.d.). Most notably, CS4L and its leadership team have been responsible for the creation, promotion and implementation of the Long Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD) both domestically and internationally. Currently, government invests C$3,500,000 per annum to support the integration and alignment of LTAD principles and practice into Canadian sport organizations (Canadian Heritage, 2013). Nationally, over 90% of Canadian National Sporting Organizations (NSOs) have now integrated CS4L/LTAD principles into their strategic planning processes (Sutcliffe, 2010). In short, there is growing evidence to suggest that CS4L and its leadership team have become a significant part of, and active organizational-like entity within, the Canadian sport system. Consequently this research seeks to answer two questions: To what extent has CS4L influenced Canadian sport policy? To what extent has CS4L influenced the ability of Sport Canada to govern?

Theoretically informing the investigation are the notions of governance theory or the so-called ‘governance narrative’ (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Grix, 2011; Rhodes, 1997). Governance is “the act or manner of governing…the manner in which something is governed or regulated; method of management, system of regulations” (OED, 2012). The adoption of governance theory within the context of sport has been notable in recent years; in particular the application of corporate/organizational governance to examine governance ‘of’ or ‘over’ sport organizations (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; Hums & Maclean, 2009; Shilbury & Ferkins, 2011; Shilbury, Ferkins, & Smythe, 2013). Whilst these studies have been valuable in understanding the role that governing boards can play in improving organizational performance, little research has explicitly examined systematic governance, or governance ‘between’ sport organizations (Henry & Lee, 2008). Some questions this perspective could answer are: what role should government play in the delivery of sport? Who should direct and control system delivery? Who should hold the power and authority to distribute funding within a sport system? From a systemic governance perspective, the emergence and development of CS4L can be conceived as a change in the governance structure of Canadian sport in that CS4L has increasingly become a governing entity empowered by government (viz-a-viz Sport Canada) to provide guidance, information and expertise to a vast array of sport organizations spanning both vertically and horizontally across multiple levels of jurisdiction.

To answer the two stated research questions an embedded, explanatory case study design was adopted (Yin, 1994). Data were collected from January to September, 2013 using semi-structured interviews with the entire CS4LLT (n=18), senior Sport Canada officials (n=5), and senior NSO personnel (n=6). Interview data were then supplemented by a range of data sources as a form of verification and data triangulation (Patton, 2002).
Supplementary sources include organizational and policy documentation (i.e., CS4LLT, Federal Sport Policy, Sport Canada, NSO produced documentation equating to 50-70 documents), CS4L annual conference attendance data (2006-present), and observation of a series of workshops, conferences, mini-summits and meetings over a three year period. Consistent with Yin (1994), these multiple data sources were then converged to draw conclusions regarding the extent to which CS4L has influenced sport policy and Sport Canada.

Results indicate that a number of developments (e.g., the creation of the CSP1 and the successful bid to host the Olympic Games in Vancouver) created a permissive climate leading to CS4L’s adoption by Sport Canada. CS4L and its leadership team have been successfully able to infiltrate and have been proactively involved with, the highest levels of Canadian sport policymaking; most evidently during the consultation and drafting processes that lead to the publication of Canadian Sport Policy 2.0 (Canadian Heritage, 2012). CS4L has enabled government to promote and implement change beyond its traditional organizational remit (i.e., further down the delivery system and increasingly co-opt other sectors) to achieve its objectives. Evidence suggests that the outsourcing of activities to CS4L has created what has been perceived to be considerable organizational change across the Canadian sport system at a relatively low cost. However, such an approach has produced a number of challenges for government including the inherent difficulty in being able to identify, quantify and measure outputs, and the loss of direct control over CS4L’s strategic direction.

This research has a number of contributions, both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, this investigation traces emergence and development of CS4L as a newly emerging phenomenon within Canadian sport. In doing so, the study also provides a greater understanding of the socio-political context by which the LTAD has become the de facto athlete development model adopted by sport organizations across Canada. Theoretically, the case of CS4L questions the often taken-for-granted assumption within sport management that traditional government funding agencies and large-scale institutions (such as Sport Canada) are all-powerful and monolithic governing entities. Rather, as demonstrated by CS4L, that there are alternative and innovative ways in which sport organizations and sport systems can be developed.