“College Kids With Big Titles”: A Critical Assessment of a Sport-for-Development Program’s Organizational Capacity

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Sport-for-development (SFD) programs are an increasingly important component of international development. USAID, the UN, as well as influential sport organizations like the International Olympic Committee have recognized sport as a tool for social engagement and development (IOC, 2009; UN, 2010; USAID, 2013). As sport-for-development continues to gain credibility as an avenue for social change, the organizations that provide these programs face challenges to build and maintain the capacity to meet their objectives.

Previous research regarding development through sport has mainly focused on participant outcomes (Coalter, 2010; Sherry, 2010; Skinner et al., 2008), policy development (Coaffee, 2008; Crabbe, 2007; Levermore, 2010) and most recently, volunteer motivations and retention (Welty-Peachey et al., 2013). Although there is a general belief that SFD programs achieve important objectives, there is inconsistent evidence of their efficacy (Coalter, 2007; Levermore, 2011). Because SFD organizations often emerge organically, either in response to a social problem or in response to a sporting opportunity, they frequently lack the organizational capacity to achieve their objectives. Capacity can be defined by the specific potential capabilities of an organization to achieve its goals and objectives (Misener & Doherty, 2009).

Organizational capacity is a common issue in the non-profit sector (Bryson, 2011), yet it is only beginning to be explored in sport and development (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2013). Hall et al.’s (2003) organizational capacity framework forms the core of the research in sport. According to Hall’s model, there are three dimensions of organizational capacity: Human resources capacity, financial capacity, and structural capacity. Structural capacity is further differentiated as relationship and network capacity, infrastructure and process capacity, and planning and development capacity. By dividing an organization’s capacity into these five dimensions, it is possible to determine the influence of each dimension on the organization’s ability to achieve its desired outcomes (Hall et al., 2003). The main purpose of this study is to provide a critical assessment a sport-for-development organization’s capacity by analyzing the limitations, strengths and potential within each of the capacity dimensions. Specifically, Hall’s organizational capacity framework was used in this study to better identify the organizational capacity of Street Soccer Seattle.

This study uses instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 2003), which is consistent with other sport management research examining organizational capacity in the sport context (cf. Misener & Doherty, 2009). Data collection methods included focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and direct observation of the organizational setting and processes. Street Soccer Seattle was selected as the case study site as it is representative of recently developed SFD programs. Further, the researchers were provided unlimited access to the research setting.

Street Soccer Seattle is a non-profit organization founded in 2009 dedicated to use soccer to “empower homeless individuals to find greater success and peace in their lives” (SSS, 2012). Street Soccer Seattle is one of 20 teams that are affiliated with Street Soccer USA (SSUSA). Each team attempts to further the SSUSA mission of using “the power of soccer to help homeless men and women dramatically transform their lives” by (a) creating a sense of community and trust through sport, and (b) providing a training curriculum that instills job preparation and life skills that connect participants directly to jobs, education, and housing (SSUSA, 2013). Street Soccer Seattle relies on a board of directors, coaches, and individuals who assist in marketing and event management activities, to perform the administrative and operational duties for the organization. All of these groups serve in a volunteer capacity and are primarily comprised of students from local universities.

Upon completion, the founder and the nine additional members of the Board of Directors, who also often function in staff member roles, will be interviewed. To date, all but six interviews have been conducted. Two focus groups
have been conducted with nine key volunteers responsible for marketing, fundraising, and event management. Interviews and focus groups were semi-structured with queries designed to examine each of the five dimensions of organizational capacity (Hall et al., 2003).

All data were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed in a multistep process.

NVivo9 was used to store the data and assist with analysis. The data analysis process consisted of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using the concepts in the theoretical framework as a guide, data were coded line-by-line, then aggregated into higher order themes. To enhance the dependability and reliability of the data analysis, researchers coded independently. Discrepancies in the coding were resolved via discussion between the researchers (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Initial findings revealed perceived strengths and weaknesses within each dimension in Hall et al.’s (2003) model (human resources, financial, relationship and network, infrastructure and process, and planning and development). Consistent with previous work on SFD programs (i.e., Welty-Peachey et al., 2012) board members’ motivation to volunteer for SSS stemmed from a combination of philanthropic interest and love for soccer. However, the data also suggests that love of sport and good intentions did not always equate to effective management. In fact, the SSS leadership seemed ill equipped to handle necessary marketing, recruiting, fundraising, and networking tasks.

While previous research has examined SFD programs (Chamberlain, 2013; Coalter, 2013; Welty-Peachey et al., 2013), this paper makes a unique contribution to the extant literature as it provides a critical assessment of the organizational capacity of the program. From a theoretical standpoint this study extends the SFD research by offering a multidimensional examination of organizational capacity among volunteer-run programs. From a practical standpoint, results suggest the value of basic managerial skills training to facilitate effective programing and long-term sustainability. Specific recommendations for building capacity in each dimension will be discussed.