Defining the Key Determinants of Cross Sector Partnerships to Promote Sports Participation

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Introduction / Purpose
Sports participation has been found to be related with higher levels of physical activity (Haskell et al., 2007), better mental health (Asztalos et al., 2009), and higher social capital (Perks, 2007). In light of these findings, health, social and other organizations have shown a growing interest in using sports or collaborating with the sports sector to increase physical activity, enhance mental health or engage in civic participation (Casey, Payne, Eime, & Brown, 2009). Nonetheless, partnership interactions between non-profit sports organizations and public health and social partners have proven to be difficult (Gazley & Brudney, 2007). Many practitioners and researchers state that more knowledge is needed about formation and success of these cross sector partnerships (Brownson & Jones, 2009). To address this issue, Parent and Harvey (2009) have established a useful framework incorporating the most relevant determinants of effective partnerships. However, they stress the need to test this model in different contexts and settings to be able to identify the key determinants – and other related functions - of partnerships. Moreover other issues hamper progress in defining key determinants of success of collaboration. First, empirical evidence of the outcome at community level is often lacking (Baker, Wilkerson, & Brennan, 2012), hindering sound conclusions of the impact of the partnership. Second, opinions of multiple stakeholders on different levels of the program are frequently not taken into account (Babiak, 2009), inferring incomplete and biased results. Finally, the stage of development of the program is generally not considered (Sydow, 2004), resulting in an undifferentiated outcome. To fill this gap and account for aforementioned limitations the present study aims at identifying the key determinants of formation and success of cross sector partnerships to promote sports participation. The setting of the study is a successful community sports program (CSP) in which organizations from different sectors collaborate closely to promote sports participation.

Case Description
The CSP aims at increasing sports participation in disadvantaged communities which experience high barriers to engage in sports (e.g., mobility / access, financial, commitment / interest) in Antwerp, Belgium. The activities of the CSP are complementary to the available sports offered in the community through other service providers and are set up in coordination with the target group and the different local sports, health, social and youth partners.

Method
This study used a multiple case study design in four neighbourhood communities with different developmental phases of operation (e.g., in two communities, the CSP had been functioning for 15 years and in two others for 5 years). This study used a qualitative approach to identify the determinants of formation and success of cross sector partnerships to promote sports participation. Semi-structured interviews were held with 44 leaders from the CSP, health, social, sports, culture and youth organizations. Interview questions were built from a literature review (Lucidarme, Marlier, Cardon, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Willem, 2013) and were based on the framework of Parent and Harvey (2009). Data were analysed and mostly deductively coded with Nvivo 10 based on the variables of the framework and literature review. However when new elements recurred in several interviews, new variables were inductively added. Key determinants for formation and success of cross sector partnerships to promote sports participation were developed by looking for themes and patterns among the variables in the framework. These categories were then scrutinized for relationships between them and further application and confirmation to the initial framework was made.
Results & Discussion

Our findings distinguish three important clusters of determinants: (1) determinants to engage in the partnership, (2) determinants that improve functioning of the partnership and (3) determinants that catalyze the partnership. Theme 1: interviews demonstrated that partners sought complementarity and fit between skills, resources and capacities as one of the main reasons to partner with the CSP. Our findings showed that the CSP managed to bridge information and knowledge between the sports and public organizations involved in the partnership. Both sports and public partners indicated that gaining access to these resources and capacities was the main reason for them to engage into the CSP. Type of partnerships is closely linked with the different activities which the CSP organizes in the community i.e. events, courses, sports camps. These activities created a different reason for the partners to collaborate with the CSP and expanded the network. Previous research already illustrated the necessity of different types of activities and partnerships to link more partners and to attain better results (Keast, Brown, & Mandell, 2007). Theme 2: our results further identified five variables key to enhance partnership functioning. The data suggested that enhanced partnership interactions (e.g., higher willingness to share resources and knowledge) were a function of (a) high interdependency (mutuality), (b) evaluation of mutual activities (process evaluation), (c) identification of metrics for success, (d) connections on a personal level (personal contact), (e) clarity about role in the partnership (coordination) and external orientation (external focus). Most items reaffirmed the importance of certain variables discussed in the partnership literature and our theoretical frameworks (Parent & Harvey, 2009). However, external focus is not a part of this framework and is less documented overall; it covers the extent to which organization are flexible to identify and engage in opportunities in their community and create links with other partners. Theme 3: The final theme highlights the importance of the phase of partnership and program development as a driver of partnership interaction. Interviews uncovered that it takes time to foster trust and build up credibility to create legitimacy of the CSP.

Our study contributes to the partnership literature by giving insights into the key determinants of formation and success of cross sector partnerships to promote sports participation in the context of a community sports program in disadvantaged communities. The presentation will conclude with recommendations for both further empirical investigation in this context, as well as highlight the practical implications of cross sector partnership exchanges.