Positive Results Still Call for Critical Evaluation: A Post-Event Assessment of a Sport-for-Development Initiative

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Management/leadership  Friday, June 5, 2015  20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Capitale)
Abstract 2015-082  8:30 AM

Introduction
In recent years, there has been an increased amount of research focusing on larger scale sport-for-development (SFD) events. Particularly, studies have focused on positive outcomes and impact these events can have locally, nationally, and internationally on key stakeholders such as participants and volunteers (Authors, 2014; Schlenkorf & Edwards, 2012). While most research has focused on positive outcomes, Getz (2002) notes, "as much can be learned from failures as from success stories, but failures appear to be more difficult to document" (p. 209). Literature on festivals and events has revealed failures might be common, but have rarely been studied (Getz, 2002). Thus, the purpose of this study was to critically evaluate a multinational SFD event from an organizational perspective to ascertain leadership, process, and design features of the event which may be limiting its long-term effectiveness. This event, called the World Scholar-Athlete Games (WSAG), is held every four years for talented high school youth from around the world. It uses mixed nation sports teams and fine arts activity groups to work at facilitating peace building and cultural understanding. The current study is part of a larger longitudinal research endeavor with the 2011 WSAG, in which 525 young people took part. Findings have noted positive changes in prejudice and change agent self-efficacy among participants (Authors, 2014) and gains in social capital among volunteers (Authors, 2014).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
Beyond the field of SFD, event research has often focused on economic outcomes (Getz, 2000; Williams & Bowdin, 2014), or evaluated events from a tourism rather than an organizational perspective (Mossberg, 2000; Williams & Bowdin, 2014). Getz (2005) suggests looking beyond economics of events and focusing on the cultural, environmental, and social outcomes. The current study taps organizational support theory (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986) as a lens to evaluate the WSAG from an organizational perspective. The framework of organizational support refers to perceived organizational support, or the belief in the degree to which an individual perceives how his or her contribution, values, and well-being are received by the organization (Aisbett & Hoye, 2014; Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Eisenberger et al., 1986). Additionally, Eisenberger, Cumming, Armeli, and Lynch (1997) posit if individuals perceive they are garnering positive support from an organization, they will demonstrate greater levels of commitment and satisfaction. While the organizational support framework has not been commonly utilized in a sport event setting, one study of a sport event found volunteers' commitment and retention was based on positive or negative perceptions of organizational support (Aisbett & Hoye, 2014).

The current study also uses Sport-for-Development Theory (SFDT) as an additional guiding lens (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). SFDT notes the importance of monitoring and evaluating a sport initiative beyond simply the sport itself, exploring the organizational, educational, and cultural aspects of these programs. Considering the unique nature of the WSAG, which intersected sport, music, art, and educational workshops for participants, SFDT was an appropriate additional framework to guide this study.

Within this context, three specific questions guided the research:

(a) What was the overall perception of organizational leadership and execution of the event?
(b) How did stakeholders (staff, volunteers, workshop speakers) perceive the organizational support they received?
(c) How effectively was each component of the WSAG (i.e., sport, cultural, educational) administered and executed?
Method
Data collection methods for this study included personal interviews, focus groups, and direct observations made by four of the authors who attended the WSAG. As the present study is exploratory in design, qualitative methods were utilized to provide for rich data. Specifically, semi-structured focus groups and personal interviews were conducted with 21 volunteers, eight staff members, and 13 workshop leaders (three focus groups and 22 personal interviews). Direct observations and detailed note taking took place to support the interview data, which provided a means for triangulation to enhance dependability and credibility (Creswell, 2012). Specifically, four of the authors attended the WSAG for 10 days to observe all components of the event as well as study participants’ activities (74 distinct program activities were observed). Guided by organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and SFDT (Lytras & Welty Peachey, 2011), thematic coding categories were developed, with data analysis consisting of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings and Discussion
Initial findings illuminate five themes that negatively impacted the experience of stakeholders and potential for long-term impact and sustainability of the WSAG. The most prominent theme was the lack of organization (e.g., late switch in venues, timing issues, inadequate communication from leadership). Another key theme was poor structure and format. There was a noticeable disconnect between sport and fine arts platforms, along with a lopsided balance of lectures and workshops over sport and fine arts activities. A third theme participants stressed was a noticeable regression from past events. Specifically, volunteers and staff who had taken part in previous WSAGs were disappointed the event took place at a “worse” venue, had become smaller, and incorporated less skilled participants. Finally, the last two themes illustrate a concern about stakeholders potentially not returning in the future; disheartenment (e.g., low morale and lack of support from leadership) and lack of action (e.g., leadership not being proactive, not following up on aspects of the event).

Despite the negative feelings towards the event that were spurred by the organizational leadership, nearly every study participant recognized the positive outcome of the WSAG and the impact it still had on event participants. This is important to note, since positive outcomes at events can potentially cause organizational leadership to overlook disgruntled stakeholders, which could lead to negative consequences and ineffectiveness of the event over the long term (Schulenkorf & Edwards, 2012).

Evaluation is a critical component for an event to succeed in both the short- and long-term (Getz, 2005). One of the critiques of SFD research has been the lack of definable and measurable outcomes (Coalter, 2010). Utilizing organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986) and SFDT (Lytras & Welty-Peachey, 2011), this research illuminates the importance of evaluating a SFD event with a critical lens. In particular, the implications of this study suggest a need for post event evaluation from a critical perspective, regardless of the impact of the event or perceptions of participants. Additionally, leadership and organizational structure and process can impact event outcomes and satisfaction levels of stakeholders. Future research should continue to critically assess SFD events and program components and their link to long-term outcomes.