Pursuing Parasport Alignment: Forming a Strategic Cross-Sector Partnership to Leverage the Toronto 2015 Parapan American Games

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Mega events present a unique opportunity for organizations that might not otherwise work together to develop collaborations. Given the uniqueness of disability sport events, it has been argued that these events could be a catalyst to create social change opportunities (Misener et al., 2013). Yet, little is known about the ways in which events can be strategically used to create partnership opportunities that may impact event outcomes. Misener and Darcy (2014) have argued that disability sport events could present an opportunity to overcome some of the constraints to parasport participation such as lack of equipment, accessible facilities, and appropriate transportation. If events are to be utilized for strategic social outcomes, Harrison-Hill and Chalip (2005) determined that alliances need to be formed between stakeholders in order to plan and implement the necessary strategies. Hosting the Toronto 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games presented a golden opportunity to improve parasport delivery in the province of Ontario for future generations, and indeed four Parapan-specific legacy initiatives were identified in the original bid document submitted by the TO2015 organizing committee (Accessible facilities, training and development, grassroots parasport development, and volunteer recruitment)(TO2015 Bid Committee, 2009, p. 211).

In order to realize the legacy goals surrounding sport development, TO2015 identified collaboration with the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) as critical to engaging with local communities, domestic National Sport Organizations and international sport organizations. The legacy left by the Toronto 2015 Games aimed to build on the recent growth of the Paralympic movement and presents scholars a unique case by which to examine a collaborative partnership working to enhance opportunities for a targeted population. The focus of this paper is on the development of the cross-sectorial partnership group which was an initiative associated with the leveraging of the 2015 Parapan American Games.

The Ontario Parasport Legacy Group (OPLG) serves as the case study herein to examine the development of a collaborative partnership created during the course of the CPCs EnAbling Change Project for the 2015 Games. The idea of creating a working group to collaborate on legacy initiatives occurred as a result of the Ontario Parasport Summit event held in December 2012 that was used to discuss the future direction of parasport in the province (CPC, 2013). The event was a critical start point for many of the CPCs legacy plans, but the most important outcome of the Summit was the unanimous realization that a leadership group was needed to create stronger linkages between stakeholders in the provincial parasport system for the event and beyond. This group would conduct a thorough review of provincial sport strategic plans and identify areas of potential overlap or collaborations, and then bring together stakeholders to create a plan for the areas held in common. Thus, the OPLG was created.

The data collection for this study is an ongoing effort, using a number of methods to form a case study in accordance with Yin’s (2009) embedded single case study approach. Evidence from documentation and physical artifacts including website data, brochures, planning documents, print media, and event reports are being analyzed to track the OPLG’s development since its inception towards the fulfilment of the legacy objectives it was intended to achieve at the Parapan Games and beyond. The document analysis procedure has helped to identify the most appropriate persons to interview and helped dictate interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews are occurring on an ongoing basis with key personnel involved in the planning, organizing and development of the OPLG and its associated initiatives. Also included in the evidence will be participant observations occurring at OPLG group meetings and workshops as well as events associated with legacy initiatives.

Using Oppen, Sack, and Wegener’s (2005) interpretation of partnerships, the OPLG is comprised of members that span three “institutional arrangements” (p. 270) of ‘government’, ‘market’, and ‘society’. Each of the members in those arrangements can be further split by their involvement in either elite or recreational level sport, sport category or disability type, and their influence on municipal, provincial, or national policy and best practices. As a result of
their diverse institutional backgrounds, each organization is governed by different sets of rules, priorities, constraints, and basic convictions. These differences are the root cause of the challenges in structure (confusion over governance, roles and responsibilities, complexity of structure) and strategy (competition versus collaboration, changing missions and objectives) that typify cross-sector partnerships outlined by Babiak and Thibault (2009). Understanding of structural issues in sport development partnerships are addressed through themes of membership, degree of formality, and how power and resources are distributed within partnerships (Lindsey, 2011). Strategically, the capacity levels of individual members and the lead organization, the processes of partner interaction, and the distribution of benefits shape scholars understanding of how effective a partnership can be (Babiak & Thibault, 2008). To this point, little is known about legacy-based partnerships that arise from the event hosting policy agenda, less so for disability sport events. The OPLG provides a fascinating case study that can further inform scholars and practitioners understanding of partnership work in a complex environment that involves several actors and influences in a Canadian context.

This study aims to provide depth to current research on sport development partnerships and governance surrounding the formation, development, implementation and evaluation of legacy objectives for a major sport event (Bell & Gallimore, 2015; Christie & Gibb, 2015). This project also contributes to the relative lack of research being done on partnerships that begin from the inception process and track its development and growth. Finally, this study is an opportunity to help further parasport delivery in the province of Ontario and contribute towards the CPCs goal of ensuring equitable access to resources and support for all parasport athletes, coaches, officials and volunteers (CPC, 2015). The benefits to engaging in sport and physical activity are numerous, which means that our understanding of the environment surrounding parasport is paramount to overcoming the barriers that continue to plague parasport in all jurisdictions (Misener & Darcy, 2014). The findings will be shared with the OPLG and may be used in the continued development of parasport partnerships across Canada, contributing to the CPC’s vision of creating the world’s leading Paralympic nation (CPC, 2015).