Catalysing Parasport Development through Events: Challenges and Lessons from the Local initiatives

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With proliferation of research on the immediate impacts of hosting large-scale events for host cities and regions, researchers and international governing bodies have begun to focus on ways to create sustainable positive impacts of these events (Misener, McGillivray, McPherson, & Legg, 2015). Further, critical event scholars have also argued that the traditional avenues of expecting events to create civic and economic development outcomes hold little value for local communities seeking to gain from the hosting events in the region (Moscardo, 2007). Thus, there is a growing interest in examining how events can be used to positively impact outcomes that enhance community infrastructures including physical and social well being (Carey, Mason, & Misener, 2011). In line with this perspective, the emphasis of legacy programmes of events has shifted to creating sustainable social legacies of events that emphasize broader community benefits. As a result, the moniker event leverage has entered the large-scale sporting event body of knowledge calling for more multifaceted and nuanced systems to event planning where strategies and tactics are implemented prior and during an event to foster desired impacts (Chalip, 2014). This means that governments, community organizations, and sport organizations become implicated in the process of strategically developing tactics that can positively impact broader social outcomes.

Smith (2014) advanced the understanding of strategic leveraging by proposing that the notions of event-themed leverage are designed to enhance community capacity through supporting existing community programmes and infrastructure to position potential social outcomes. Whereas event-led leverage approaches are often determined by others may not have a long-term stake in the host city and may result in strategies that are incoherent with a community’s capabilities and desires. Smith (2014) further argued that event-led approaches tend to be top-down, driven initially by sanctioning bodies and event organizers and, as a result, their ability to optimize event outcomes are already compromised by being framed by agencies external to the host city. Despite a local communities’ interest in the potential opportunity to strategically use the hosting of a large-scale event as a means to enhance existing programmes and opportunities, there are numerous constraints that require negotiation in order for leveraging to occur. In this paper, we draw upon data collected as part of a large-scale longitudinal research project examining how various types of events are being leveraged broadly, and focus on the strategic leveraging tactics of five host municipalities of the Toronto 2015 Pan/Parapan American Games. Our interest for this project centres primarily on disability sport events, however the learnings from the strategic leveraging have broader implications for host communities.

We employ a multiple-case study narrative approach of five municipalities that have engaged with the Ontario Parasport Legacy Group (OPLG) to develop strategies affecting social outcomes pertinent to their own communities as a direct result of the hosting of the 2015 Games. To conduct the research, we employed strategic interviews with key stakeholders in each of the municipalities, as well as the governing legacy team. The research team has also been involved as participant observers in all meetings of the OPLG from its inception, and been privy to all documentary data (e.g. meeting minutes, presentations, press releases) associated with the legacy strategies. All data were coded by multiple members of the team with the facilitation of Nvivo 10 software enabling cross collaboration and discussion of themes that emerged.

A description of each case and the leveraging strategies is presented in relation to the event-themed and event-led framework based primarily around increasing sport participation and development in some capacity. In the cases
studied here, three are using event-led strategies, and two are using event-themed strategies. Strategies were developed in conjunction with OPLG prior to the hosting of the event. As expected, many of the municipalities put a hold on their leveraging programmes as the Games came closer and the realisation of hosting set in. In each of the cases, numerous constraints have arisen regarding human, economic, and physical capital to implement strategies effectively targeting community needs, however each municipality has negotiated these constraints in varying ways such as increasing partnerships, applying for grant funding, and engaging experts from event planning. The ongoing support of the OPLG has been an enabling factor for the continued leveraging efforts of each municipality, and a unique outcome has been the cross sectorial and multi-level engagement. In terms of event-led versus event-themed approaches, there are clear differences in capacity to deliver programmes and acquire necessary resources associated with sustainability and impacts.

The findings of the cases demonstrate significant variability in development, implementation, and sustainability of event leveraging strategies. Contrary to what Smith (2014) argued, in these cases event-led initiatives were developed bottom up in an entrepreneurial fashion in order to capitalize on the opportunity of the event. However, given the context of a disability sport event, there was a lack of existing programmes to use event-themed strategies and therefore innovative thinking was required. Certainly, a major constraint to be negotiated was the lack of resources in various forms to draw upon for strategies, however the municipalities demonstrated great ingenuity in finding ways to leverage existing resources and foster increased opportunities. The findings of this study will be insightful for other communities seeking to leverage events for greater community based social impact.