Building Capacity for Local Sport for Social Change: An Action Research Project

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Sport for development (SFD) and sport for social change (SFSC) are popular contexts for research in sport management (Cohen & Wetsy Peachey, 2015; Sherry et. al., 2015). In a global context, SFD research often presents initiatives aimed at nations and communities in the ‘global south’ where sport is used to improve conditions identified in the United Nations millennium development goals (Kidd, 2008). However, SFSC programs are also implemented in developed nations “directed toward communities identified as marginalized or at risk…including economically disadvantaged groups and at-risk youth” (Sherry et. al., 2015, p. 1).

In a Canadian context, SFSC has gained momentum in line with the adoption of the Canadian Sport Policy 2.0 (2012), which supports the use of sport as a tool for socio-economic development at home and abroad. As well, professional sport organizations (e.g. Toronto Maple Leafs; Toronto Raptors; and Toronto Football Club via Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment [MLSE] Foundation) have taken a leadership role by offering financial assistance through competitive grants to local organizations that implement SFSC initiatives. In Canada, those groups include traditional social service agencies, sport-for-development organizations, community sport organizations, and grassroots/school-based programs. Their mandates include increasing mental health awareness and suicide prevention; providing pathways to education and supporting post-secondary enrolment; developing pro-social life skills for at-risk youth; mentoring for violence prevention; providing opportunities for positive police-to-youth interaction; and inclusive programs for new Canadians.

To date, research focused on the management of local SFD and SFSC programs and organizations has examined their capacity to achieve social change objectives (Authors, 2015; Smith & Melton, 2014; Svensson, 2015). Organizational capacity may be defined as “the extent to which (an organization) has certain attributes that have been identified as critical to goal achievement” (Horton et. al, 2003 from Misener & Doherty, 2009, p. 458). Specifically, researchers have identified critical aspects of capacity that are deemed to be unique to local SFSC organizations, notably, fundraising ability and sustainable funding; human resource skills; access to facilities; engaged partnerships; and the ability (time and resources) to plan for the future (Authors, 2015; Smith & Melton, 2014; Svensson, 2015).

As Doherty, Misener, and Cuskelly (2014) note, capacity building is a natural extension of understanding critical capacity dimensions and needs. Capacity building is a strategic process to enhance an organization’s ability to draw on and deploy its resources (Millar & Doherty, 2014). Successful capacity building depends on a systematic assessment of capacity needs, organizational readiness to build, strategy congruence with existing processes, and existing capacity to build and sustain organizational change (Millar & Doherty, 2014). Research indicates that failure to account for one or more of these factors hinders and even blocks effective capacity building in the sport organization context (Millar, 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to examine the capacity building process in local SFSC organizations, extending understanding of capacity in that context. This is accomplished using an action research methodology where collaboration and meaningful participant-driven outcomes are goals for the project. The study analyzes two SFSC organizations actively engaged in capacity building to improve their ability to deliver social change initiatives.

Action research is a collaborative process where researchers and participants work together as co-researchers to identify areas for change and development that are important to them. At its core, action research “creates the expectation that those involved will be researching a particular situation with the intention of taking action that will make a difference” (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2010, p. 239). Specifically, this study follows Ferkins, Shilbury, and McDonald’s (2009) framework for action research that includes four distinct phases of research, including issue identification, context analysis, intervention and action, and evaluation. By utilizing an action research methodology,
this study addresses researchers’ calls for more democratic methods that answer questions relevant to those being researched (Chalip, 1997; Frisby, 2005).

This study involves two Canadian SFSC organizations that were selected based on their participation in the authors’ previous study that uncovered critical elements of organizational capacity in the local SFSC context (Authors, 2015). During that study, several organizations identified dimensions of capacity in need of a capacity building intervention, and indicated an interest in future research that would benefit their organizations. Two organizations agreed to participate in further (action) research, and the study is currently underway. Acting as co-researchers, the authors and the SFSC organizations have completed the first two phases of issue identification and context analysis, including the design of an intervention to build needed capacity, and are in the process of implementing those strategies. Personal interviews with key personnel, document analysis, field observation notes, journaling, and reflections from co-researchers at each organization are ongoing as the capacity building unfolds. Insight to the capacity building process in the SFSC organizations, and the action research process, will be presented and discussed.

Findings from this study are expected to contribute to the growing understanding of capacity and capacity building in the local SFSC organization context, with implications for guiding policy and practice that advances the important programs they offer. The current study moves beyond the identification of elements of capacity that are important for goal achievement in this context to an in-depth analysis of the processes these organizations undergo while building capacity to improve their SFSC initiatives. The study also contributes to the broader field of sport management by providing an example of action research as a more democratic research method that highlights local voices in SFSC (cf. Chalip, 1997; Nicholls, 2011) while also highlighting challenges researchers encounter perceiving, interpreting, and communicating about others (Frisby, 2005). In doing so, the current study provides insight to action research as a useful tool sport management researchers may incorporate in their own research programs.

References


