League Bilong Laif: Sport for Development in Papua New Guinea

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League Bilong Laif (LBL) is a sport-for-development (SFD) program that was established in 2013 as a three-way partnership between the Australian Government, the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government (Department of Education), and the Australian Rugby League Commission (National Rugby League [NRL]). The program was designed around two key aims, to contribute to students’ educational engagement and to communicate positive social messages, with a particular emphasis on gender equity and respect. Additionally, there was a focus on improving the capacity of teachers to conduct rugby league-based activities and to improve the organisational capacity of the PNG rugby league federation (PNGRFL) to deliver school-based rugby league in PNG.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) provides a unique and challenging context for the implementation and analysis of SFD projects; PNG suffers from low rates of school attendance and has significant problems with anti-social behaviour and gender inequity. For example, the mean years of schooling in PNG amount to just 3.91 years, adult literacy is 62.4% and only 10.5% of the current adult population (aged 25 years and older) have attended secondary school (UNDP, 2015). PNG ranks at 124/136 on the UNDP’s gender development index, placing it in the bottom 10% of countries worldwide. Against this background, our empirical research aimed to evaluate the pilot phase of the LBL project and explore the nuances and complexities of SFD program delivery. More specifically, in this paper we provide a snapshot of the current state of play in relation to the educational components of the program, and we suggest implications for SFD program design and delivery.

One of the key defining factors of this work is the focus on education outcomes which differentiates our study from previous SFD work conducted to achieving social change (Sherry 2010), improving health-related behaviour (Casey, Payne & Eime 2009), reducing anti-social behaviour (Ekholm 2013), or contributing to reconciliation and peace outcomes (Schulenkorf 2010). Therefore, the study offers a unique insight into the SFD-education nexus. Emphasis is on the perspectives of those individuals involved ‘on the ground’ to generate a more holistic understanding of the complex socio-cultural context and to tailor programs more effectively to engage local communities and deliver the social/educational aims of the program. In particular, the data that has been gathered from the LBL program provides a platform for ‘local’ experiences in and around SFD, with regards to both participants and stakeholders. Regrettably, these are often marginalised from research practice (c.f. Jeanes, 2013) despite the fact that the inclusion of such perspectives offer a more holistic snapshot of local program interactions and processes of program management, delivery and engagement.

Data for this study were collected through a combination of interviews and focus groups with a over 50 individual representatives from program delivery staff, stakeholder organisations and government departments in the areas of sport, education and community development. Following an interpretive mode of enquiry, data analysis was guided by a systematic coding process recommended by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014), which involved a broad read through the raw data, a search for recurring concepts and patterns, and then a grouping together of these concepts into broader themes.

The preliminary findings presented here have been loosely categorised according to Coalter’s (2008) logic model for SFD programs in respect of ‘outputs’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘impacts’. Findings indicate that the LBL program has achieved significant progress in regards to a variety of outputs, outcomes and impacts. In particular, key outputs include the development of LBL staff and increasing the capacity of teachers to deliver education-based aims in conjunction with sport programs. Next, there have been increased opportunities for local children to participate in sport and to access educational materials. In addition, there has been greater inclusion of girls in sporting contexts with the program tailored towards securing their participation. The LBL program has delivered social and behavioural messaging, alongside emphasising the importance of school attendance and engagement. While it is not
possible to specifically assess the social/educational impact on children during these initial stages, recurring themes emerging from the data are increased levels of self-esteem, greater respect (to self and others) shown, improved discipline and school attendance.

Notwithstanding these progress areas, there have been issues with securing teacher engagement and consolidating existing stakeholder relationships. Findings suggest that it is imperative to develop and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders to secure sustainability of SFD programs and to embed these initiatives in local institutions and communities. Furthermore, our findings have highlighted the importance of ensuring a sense of local ownership over SFD projects and incorporating the perspectives of key individuals, communities and institutions – something that LBL will aim for in the next phase of implementation. Overall, understanding contextual factors and teachers’ perceptions is imperative for developing education-orientated SFD programs that attempt to work with schools to facilitate long-term program sustainment and ‘practitioner empowerment’ (Jeanes 2013). To conclude, this paper highlights the fundamental outcomes emerging from the qualitative review of the education-orientated LBL program in PNG. It provides a unique insight into outcomes emerging from the initial stages of LBL delivery and the challenges to sustained program growth and development.

References


