Partnership Evaluation Practices in Public-Nonprofit Community Sport Relationships

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Interorganizational relationships (IORs) can offer community sport organizations (CSOs) a comprehensive and coordinated approach to address the complex issues in their environment (Misener & Doherty, 2014). IORs offer each partner access to specialized knowledge, information, and material resources (e.g., human, financial, infrastructure) that otherwise may be unattainable on their own (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). One type of partnership that may offer significant benefit to CSOs is public-sector partners such as municipal recreation departments who work closely with CSOs to coordinate facility use and offer support for sport delivery in their communities (Thibault, Frisby, Kikulis, 1999). However, the resource exchange and evaluation of IORs between CSOs and municipal partners has not been well understood (Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith 2018).

The study draws on resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) as a lens for understanding how organizations can navigate power and resource flow in order to reduce environmental uncertainty and dependence (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009). For CSOs, access to specific resources, and particularly infrastructure/facilities, is crucial to achieving their mandate. However, cross-sector partnerships may not achieve their potential because of imbalanced resources, misalignment of values, and different accountability structures and missions (Misener & Misener, 2017). In light of possible resource dependencies that shape the nature of public-CSO relations, it is essential to understand how to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of these partnerships (cf. Provan & Milward, 1998; Babiak, 2009).

Partnership evaluation is often overlooked due to the absence of objective metrics, lack of evaluation skills, and inadequate time devoted to assessment (Babiak & Willem, 2016). Key components of evaluation include scoping, planning, managing, resourcing, and sustaining/terminating partnerships. The purpose of this interpretive qualitative study is to understand the key facets of partnership evaluation in public-CSO partnerships. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: 1) What evaluation activities/steps are used in CSO-public partnerships? 2) What are the central criteria for determining an effective CSO-public partnership?, 3) What resources are exchanged between CSOs and their public sector partners? 4) How do CSOs and their public sector partners evaluate interdependencies based on resource exchange?

Semi-structured interviews are currently being conducted with the Director of Community Sport Relations (or similar position) within the Department of Recreation Services in five mid-size municipalities in Ontario. These individuals are responsible for managing facility distribution, providing support, collaborating on events, and managing communication with CSOs. Interviews are also underway with 20 CSO Presidents from these communities who represent different sports and sizes of CSOs. Gaining the perspective of different sector partners enables a more holistic understanding of partnership practices and evaluation strategies (Babiak, 2009). Interviews will be transcribed verbatim and analyzed using inductive and deductive methods (Patton, 2015).

The study offers new insight addressing Babiak et al.’s (2018) call for research-based evaluation frameworks and may be used for the development of tools to determine successful collaborations. This knowledge may help to reduce the potential negative consequences that can occur from overly dependent partnerships that do not achieve their intended purpose.