

(SP) SUSTAINABILITY OF SPORTS PROGRAMMES: THEORY, POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

The provision of funding for grassroots sports programmes in the UK is commonly time-limited. For example, funding provided by the government for School Sport Partnerships in England is presently committed only until 2008. Revenue funding from the lottery is often more insecure with many programmes explicitly excluding bids for the continuation of existing projects. Sustainability is therefore an important issue and concern for a wide variety of stakeholders.

Despite the importance of the issue, research on sport and sustainability is limited and lacks a clear theoretical framework. Kirk (2004) recognises that there is a lack of research that examines the sustainability of young people's participation in sport. Similarly, there is little research that focuses specifically on organisational aspects of sustainability. Where sustainability is mentioned in research and evaluation reports, there are definitional problems in the variety of ways in which the term is used (e.g. Loughborough Partnership, 2006). Furthermore, there is commonly a focus on factors supporting or impeding sustainability rather than the achievement of any measure of sustainability.

This paper begins to address these problems. Theoretical contributions from the health literature relating to sustainability are synthesised and their potential applicability to the sport context is assessed. This assessment of applicability is advanced by a study of sustainability in the New Opportunities for PE and Sport (NOPES) Activities programme in Scotland.

Methods

A comprehensive search of the health literature was conducted for articles and publications relating to sustainability in order to identify key theoretical contributions. These key contributions were synthesised to develop a framework for examining sustainability in sports programmes.

Data on sustainability was collected as part of the evaluation of the NOPES Activities programme in Scotland. Interviews were conducted with an individual in the Big Lottery Fund with a key role in developing the NOPES Activity programme, officers from six local authorities with responsibility for a variety of NOPES Activities projects and staff from six individual NOPES Activity projects. Interview data was coded and analysed utilising the framework developed from the health literature.

Results

By synthesising the 'contradictory and fragmented' (Pluye et al., 2004, p121) literature on sustainability of health programmes, both Crisp & Swerissen (2002) and Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone (1998) identify key theoretical concepts. In fact, both these contributions identify a hierarchy of perspectives on sustainability ranging from changes in individuals to impacts on the wider social political and societal context. A synthesis of these and other contributions for this paper led to a proposed typology of forms sustainability that could be applied in the sport field (Table 1).

Table 1 : Typology of Forms of Sustainability

Individual	Long-term changes in individuals' behaviour
Community	Changes in the community in which sporting participation occurs
Organisation	Continuation of the programmes that were delivered
Institutional Context	Wider policy and practice changes in the context of the programme

Beyond the definitional issue, the health literature also provides different ways in which factors affecting sustainability can be categorised. Pluye et al. (2004) and Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone (1998) respectively provide different temporal and organisational frameworks. Although these frameworks appear to be useful for sport research, a full assessment of their utility requires further empirical work.

Using the frameworks identified, issues of sustainability in the NOPES Activity programme are analysed. Firstly, forms of sustainability desired and supported by different stakeholders in the NOPES Activity programme are considered. This is followed by an examination of the factors that facilitate and impede the desired form of sustainability.

Discussion

The resulting discussion examines the suitability of the proposed analytical framework for future research in sport. It is suggested that an approach to sustainability that emphasises continuation of programmes is dominant in research, policy and practice. A wider and more comprehensive understanding of sustainability may lead to improvements in the development and implementation of sports policy.

References

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