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Canadian Sport Policy and the role of intergovernmental relations

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The concept of intergovernmental relations is not new to the Canadian context. As explained by Graefe (2008), through spending power, the federal government has developed relationships with provincial and territorial governments to ensure effective implementation of social policy. Graefe (2008, p. 54) contends that “federal government exercises its spending power, but not to impose program conditions or standards. Instead, the power is used to provide the federal government a seat at the table in setting policy agendas and priorities, as well as to extract provincial commitments to develop indicators jointly, share best practices and report to the public.” Although Graefe’s work does not specifically focus on sport policy, sport is an integral component of social policy in Canada (cf. Macintosh et al., 1987; Harvey, 2002; Zussman, 2003). Through intergovernmental relations between the federal government (i.e., Department of Canadian Heritage, Sport Canada) and provincial and territorial governments (i.e., Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Québec, and Saskatchewan and Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon), sport participation is a central element of Canadian Sport Policy implementation. These formal intergovernmental relations are called bilateral agreements and ensure ‘new’ and matching funding from both federal and provincial/territorial governments. In doing so, this enabling these two levels of government to prioritise and develop sport participation initiatives unique to their particular circumstances.

The purpose of our study was to examine how intergovernmental relations between the Canadian federal and provincial/territorial governments have contributed to sport participation policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Specifically, our research focused on four provinces (British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan) and the priorities (i.e., sport participation initiatives and populations targeted by these initiatives) set out by each of these through the bilateral agreements. The complexity of Canada’s sport system and its multiple stakeholders, the unique federal-provincial/territorial bilateral agreements, and the contextual differences between provinces, required a comparative case study design. Data collection involved interviews with key policy makers representing federal governments (Department of Canadian Heritage, Sport Canada) and policy makers at each of the four provincial governments (and, in some cases, sport-related nonprofit agencies involved with provincial governments) responsible for sport participation initiatives. An analysis of sport participation policy documents (e.g., Canadian Sport Policy, Federal-Provincial/Territorial Priorities for Collaborative Action, 2002-2005 and 2007-2012) and federal and provincial reports on sport participation initiatives, programs, and evaluations were also undertaken.

The results demonstrated that all provincial policy makers were receptive to the bilateral agreements and could easily point to a number of excellent sport participation initiatives that were developed as a result of the agreements. Furthermore, policy makers at both levels of government emphasised the value of the agreement to leverage more funds from their respective government's treasury to invest in sport participation. The positive relationships between ministers of sport and between government civil servants responsible for overseeing these bilateral agreements were also discussed. Trust, cooperation, and transparency between federal and provincial civil servants were attributed to the favourable response towards the agreements.

Although policy makers were complimentary of the agreements, some issues did emerge. Specifically, with regards to the implementation phase, provincial organisations and local clubs responsible for sport participation programs were not all at the same level in terms of capacity (e.g., training of instructors and coaches, securing access to appropriate infrastructure for the programs, negotiating with clubs and local sport organisations to undertake sport participation initiatives) to develop these programs. As a result, in some provinces, the funds from the bilateral agreements were used to enhance the capacity of clubs and local organisations, while in other provinces funding was used for sport participation initiatives. Another issue involved the measurement of outcomes of sport participation programs and the reporting of the data by provincial governments. For example, questions were raised about how factors such as gender, rural/urban participation, and new sport participants/repeat sport participants were considered in the reporting of the data to the federal government. With no accurate baseline data on sport participation, it is challenging for the federal and provincial governments to measure the impact of the Canadian Sport Policy. Other challenges of intergovernmental relations (e.g., power, leadership, and jurisdiction) and their impact on sport policy are also discussed.

References:

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