

THE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF NON-MEGA SPORTING EVENTS: A SENSEMAKING APPROACH OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES' PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES

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Research question

While the economic impacts of sporting events have long been discussed in the academic literature, their non-economic outcomes are of growing interest. One of the analytical grids to study such impacts may be social responsibility (SR) which constitutes a dynamic area of research in the sport context. Sporting events are particularly concerned, since their temporal and out of the ordinary nature make their social and environmental impacts all the more visible.

Since social responsibility refers to activities “demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and interactions with stakeholders” (Van Marrewijk, 2003, p.236) recent work called for a shift from organizations’ to stakeholders’ perception of SR. Among sporting events’ stakeholders, local authorities are in a peculiar position. On the one hand, given the essential resources they provide sporting event organizers with (financial support, sport facilities), they constitute major stakeholders. On the other hand, since they represent the interests of numerous other stakeholders grouped under the term “host community”, they can be held accountable for sporting events’ impacts.

Hence, the purpose of this study based on sensemaking theory is to better understand how local authorities make sense of sporting events’ social responsibility and how social and environmental impacts influence their hosting strategies. While most academic work has yet addressed SR in mega events, we chose to focus on non-mega events which may constitute quite different environments for SR in the sense that their less structured SR practices let room for sensemaking attempts from stakeholders.

Theoretical background

As most of the literature on SR is focused on its content, there is a need for a more process based approach, focusing on « the mental frames and sensemaking processes within which SR is embedded » (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). The sensemaking approach of SR describes organizations and their stakeholders as searching for the meaning of SR, linking SR actions to cognitive and discursive dimensions.

Several authors showed that sport organizations have unique internal resources and face strong external pressures regarding social responsibility (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009). For sporting events organizers, these factors are complementary insofar as they add together to prompt them to engage in SR. However, from local authorities’ own viewpoint, the perceptions or “cues” that each of them generates are potentially contradictory: in the case of internal resources, the sensemaking process may rely upon sporting events’ unique assets to produce positive impacts, notably social leverage (see Chalip, 2006); in the case of external pressures, the sensemaking process may be linked to the risk they take in hosting sporting events due to their potential negative impacts. Therefore, there may exist both positive and negative *sensemaking drivers* which can affect local authorities’ hosting strategies.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 directors of sport from various French big and medium-sized cities. As cities host multiple sporting events, we focused our interviews to medium-sized events, including both spectator events like ATP tennis tournaments and participatory events like the Marathon of Paris.

Interviews ranged between .5 and 1.5 h. They were conducted in-person or via telephone. The interview guide followed three dimensions of Thomas et al. (1993) sensemaking model: scanning, interpreting and acting. For the scanning dimension, interviewees were asked about their whole sport policy and their broad strategic objectives in hosting such events. For the interpreting dimension, they were asked to reflect over the social and environmental impacts such events may have for the host community. For the acting dimension, they presented their strategies related to social and environmental impacts.

Results and discussion

First results tend to show that sporting events’ social and environmental impacts are increasingly integrated in public authorities’ hosting strategies. They are influenced by positive and negative sensemaking drivers, as specific combinations of drivers lead to specific strategies. What’s more, other factors also emerged inductively, namely broader hosting objectives (which we positioned on a continuum between external targets – tourism, brand destination – and internal targets – animation for local resident, sport participation), city’s sustainability policy as well as type of organizer (private-for-profit, federal, associative). These impacts are managed through three ways: the relationship with organizers (integrated in the partnership or contract), direct involvement (waste management, free or low-price ticketing, ancillary events focused on education or social integration) or cooperation with various private sector partners and associations.

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