

(SP) THE UTILITY OF PARTNERSHIP WORKING IN ENGLISH FOOTBALL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Since New Labour’s election in 1997, the British government sport policy has emphasised and rewarded partnerships and the pooling of resources across public, private and voluntary sectors. A partnership is defined as a coalition of organisations and individuals who agree to work together for a set of compatible aims (Civic trust 1999). Partnerships have become a primary organisational tool for achieving overlapping policy agendas for sport such as health, social inclusion and countering issues such as crime and youth disorder amongst many others. The emergence of such partnerships mirrors a shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’ (Rhodes 1997) whereby partnerships are a mechanism of governance in the formation of policy networks (Marsh and Smith 2001) specific to different political sectors and sub sectors such as sport development has become evident both conceptually and empirically. The British government’s strategy for sport has encouraged National Governing Bodies (NGBs) to modernise, and to contribute to the delivery of a broad government agenda for sport, from recreational to elite levels. This has involved a greater NGB responsibility for sport development programmes that had previously been the remit of national government initiatives or local authority provision. Such NGB involvement has largely been through the development, facilitation and support of partnerships with a range of educational, local government, private and voluntary providers in both delivering sports specific development initiatives, and upon implementation contributing to wider political agenda aims and rewarded through potential funding from various streams.

This paper focuses upon research into the implementation of one such NGB sport development initiative, the Football Association’s Charter Standard Scheme. A policy network for football development is analysed in two case studies, one from a relatively affluent urban conurbation (Case Study A), and another from an area of England characterised by a high percentage of the population being of ethnic minorities and economic deprivation (Case Study B). Analysis of how and to what purpose partnerships are formed and utilised within the football development policy network is taken from two angles and compared across the two cases. The first is the formation of partnerships required to fulfil criteria to implement the scheme in gaining FA Charter Standard accreditation, the most predominant being school – club links. Gaining accreditation provides the basis upon which clubs and schools have greater access and appeal to other organisations such as charities, urban regeneration and development groups in order to attract funding for mutual benefits such as the building of facilities or the running of social inclusion initiatives, and is the second angle of focus.

Methods

The type and scope of partnerships in implementing the Charter Standard are investigated by semi structured interviews with County Football Development Officers,

teachers and volunteers such as club secretaries and coaches from all levels of the football development policy network. The data gathered aims to identify the dynamics of the network in each County focusing on the experiences, issues and problems encountered by those responsible for the policy implementation, and as such adopts an inductive 'bottom up' research strategy (cf Weed 2003) to identifying types of partnerships that emerge on the back of Charter Standard implementation, and by generating the means to achieve accreditation.

Results

In both case studies, partnerships based around "grant coalitions", which had been formed to satisfy funding requirements, tended to be the most predominant. However, such partnerships tended to be unsustainable as no clear strategies were adopted for the future once the funding was acquired for individual purposes. Across both case studies, partnerships formed to implement and gain Charter Standard accreditation varied in type. A small number was deemed to be proactive in that clubs and schools actively developed strategies to share resources to improve the quality of football provision. However, most were deemed inactive in that association through indirect contact was deemed to be a partnership but nothing strategic was done to develop football. In these latter cases, development of football tended to be pursued individually for the benefit of the particular club or school with token partnerships formed in order to be able to meet accreditation criteria. In case study A, partnerships based on facility funding led by the local authority had dominant and weak partners. Charter Standard accredited football clubs with large membership numbers and longer history in the area plus the specialist sports colleges within a school sports partnership were the main power holders who had more influence to adopt strategies that suited their needs. Exclusionary practices were adopted to isolate other potential clubs and schools and prevent them from joining the partnership and benefiting from funding opportunities. Some clubs and schools were adopted into the partnership to access funding on the understanding that they take a non influential role over strategy for the facility. Similarly in case study B, partnerships led by the local authority around facility development again adopted exclusionary practices. A large local football club in conjunction with a premier league club, the local authority and a local charity formed a proactive partnership. However, the membership of the local football club predominantly derived from one ethnic group, with a similar sized club in close proximity from a different ethnic group being excluded. This led to tensions along ethnic lines within the football development policy network, and although an increase in participation of ethnic groups in football is highlighted, this is along exclusionary lines.

Discussion

There are limitations of partnership working as a mechanism of governance within the football development policy network. This is because, as this paper shows, whilst working to implement football development policies, agencies can often actively exclude some potential participant groups or partners. Partnerships based on fulfilling funding criteria work best when the local authority fully and openly engages with the full range of local voluntary sector football clubs. The effectiveness of partnerships is also difficult to determine due to their proliferation both within the football development policy network and in wider society. This has given rise to a lack of a definition of partnerships due to a

multiplicity of collaborative mechanisms which have varying characteristics that could come under the umbrella of 'partnership'. These conceptual and empirical issues bring into question the suitability and viability of partnerships as a way forward for football development at the mass participation level in England

References

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