

Community Development through Sport – The Street Socceroos.

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Keywords: sport development, community, soccer, social impact

Abstract

Aim

The aim of this research is to investigate the use of sport as a tool for community development by community and welfare organisations through a case study of the Australian street soccer program – the Street Socceroos.

Theoretical Background

The conceptualisation of sport development over time has evolved into two distinct streams: elite sport development (development of sport) and community sport development (development through sport) (Houlihan & White, 2002). The interest in community development, and resulting community development initiatives through sport, are responses to marginalisation in the community (Green, 2007). Green (2006) asserts that access to sport is representative of access to other community infrastructure, and argues that social exclusion of marginalized people in society at large is also played out in lack of access to sport. Consequently, lower rates of sport participation are a feature of groups that possess characteristics of lower socio-demographic positioning (Collins, Henry, Houlihan & Buller, 1999).

Sport under the banner of community development is often viewed as the responsibility of community welfare organisations rather than sport organisations (Houlihan, 1997). The shift towards sport being used for community development is largely the domain of charitable or community organisations with a community development agenda (Bloomfield, 2003). Subsequently, in Australia there has been a trend towards provision of these programs for disadvantaged people occurring within community organisations, rather than sporting organisations. Vail (2007) acknowledges that the provision of sports in terms of community development may rely upon the involvement of non-traditional partners and community leaders who might not be part of the recognized sport system but who do understand community needs.

Research Design

A case study approach has been utilised with the Australian community street soccer program with data collected via in-depth interviews with street soccer program coordinators and participants, and a comprehensive review of relevant policy documents from Government and funding bodies.

Results

The Australian community street soccer program began in Melbourne and has now extended to include metropolitan and regional areas Australia-wide. The participants are people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, and the program provides an opportunity for ongoing social connection in addition to the health benefits of sport participation. Community organisations use sport as the 'hook' to draw community members from their target populations into programs which in addition to providing sport and recreation activities, can also link participants to support networks and services (such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation, housing, legal assistance and employment opportunities).

Although mainstream sport organisations have begun to develop programs and policies for more inclusive practices, and appear to be better providing for groups such as disability, indigenous and women, a number of socially marginalised groups continue to fall through the gaps. This research suggests that these gaps in community sport provision are being filled by community welfare organisations.

Conclusions

The fragmentation of sport development (i.e., development of sport versus development through sport) has resulted in sport organisations becoming rivals for scarce resources against community organisations, rather than partners in a common enterprise. Sport organisations need to develop partnerships with the community sport development programs to both meet the needs of Government and funding bodies for inclusive programs, and retaining resources (i.e., funding) within the sport structure.

References

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