

Exploring the impact of sport events on sustainable sport participation outcomes in local communities

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Aim of abstract/paper - research question and theoretical background or literature review*

Economic and tourism impact have dominated studies on impact of events, while the impact on sport participation has not received the same level of scholarly attention. There is little empirical evidence to support the common notion that "sport events stimulate sport participation", and if there is, empirical studies are mainly focussed on 'mega' or 'hallmark' sport events (e.g., Frawley & Cush, 2011). Non-hallmark events have been under researched when it comes to sustainable legacies in general, and the impact on sport participation in particular (e.g., Foley et al. 2012). However, small-to-medium sized sport events are more ubiquitous, and at the aggregate level, their impact may provide more sustainable benefits, as opposed to hallmark sport events (e.g., Girginov & Hills, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to explore if, and how past non-hallmark sport events have impacted sport participation and development in local communities through the perceptions of key stakeholders. The Pan-American Junior Athletic Championships (PANAMS), a medium sized international sport event, and the Canadian National Figure Skating Championships (SKATE), both hosted in 2005 in two different medium cities in a Canadian province, are taken as cases.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Participants for the study were purposefully selected to include a variety of key stakeholders of both events. For the PANAMS, 21 participants were targeted and agreed to participate (8 members of the organizing committee; 2 members of the local track and field club; 2 coaches; 3 facility managers; 7 athletes). The SKATE sample consisted of 15 respondents (9 members of the organizing committee; 3 facility managers; 1 coach; 2 athletes). Face-to-face interviews for the PANAMS were conducted between October 2010 and May 2011; for SKATE between October 2011 and January 2012. A semi-structured interview guideline was developed, consisting of five general themes, related to sport participation and development: (a) awareness of sport participation initiatives at the time of the event; (b) expectations; (c) perceptions; (d) relationships; and, (e) reflections on lessons learned and potential tactics and strategies for future events. While these themes were similar for all stakeholder groups, probes were stakeholder specific. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The researchers identified a variety of

themes. Axial and open coding was used; NVivo software assisted in the process.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions**

The interviewees perceived different outcomes for the two events. There were indications of sport development opportunities for the PANAMS, while this was not apparent for SKATE. The PANAMS interviewees indicated that the organization of the event enhanced the overall local human and physical infrastructure. They clearly had the impression that organizing the event, the availability of a new facility and new equipment created opportunities for personal growth for athletes, coaches and officials alike. The event benefitted not only the development of track and field at the university and in the community, but also other sports post event. Although this was somewhat expected, expectations were exceeded. The key stakeholders for SKATE, on the other hand, perceived no, or at best, little impact with regard to sport participation and development. Almost all stakeholders emphasized that the event was a 'high level competition' which develops participating athletes by increasing their experience and furthering their sports careers. In addition, they referred to SKATE as 'pure entertainment', staged to increase economic impact and to draw spectators into the seats. Initiatives around SKATE, such as school programs, were initiated with the intent to bringing children into the facility to watch practices of the athletes; first of all to benefit the athletes by creating a 'real audience' during practices, and secondly to draw them to the event with friends and family. For both events, those who are already active in the respective sports seemed to be overwhelmingly the primary beneficiaries.

Stakeholders of both events somehow expected an 'automatic' effect on sport participation based on the creation of 'awareness', however, no strategies or tactics were intentionally undertaken. All interviewees recognized the potential value of sport events to stimulate sport participation in the local community post hoc, and acknowledged 'missed opportunities'. A sustainable impact, although unleveraged, seems to be apparent for the event for which a new stadium was built (PANAMS). The question as to how to make events more effective to serve specific goals for sport participation and development in local communities requires further investigation. The focus should be on linking a cause/need/purpose/message to event portfolios and then to have a marketing plan that capitalizes on that, and that goes beyond the event. Events should be seen as one set of tools in an overall (social) marketing strategy.

References – limited to 5

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