

Building Evaluation Capacity In Sport For Development: Lessons Learned From A Multi-National And Sectorial Team

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Aim of abstract

This paper's purpose is to examine the development of a research collaboration to identify implications for researchers interested in partnering with Sport-for-Development (SFD) organizations to establish long-term partnerships to build research and evaluation capacity.

Theoretical background and literature review

Recent years have seen a significant increase of NGOs using sport as a mechanism for youth and community development under a SFD framework (Edwards, 2015; Keim, 2003). Many of these NGOs' efforts have focused on United Nations Millennium Development Goals of strengthening education, improving public health and community safety, and developing social cohesion. However, little empirical evaluation has been conducted to provide evidence for the efficacy of SFD programs (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2012). Protocols for evaluating outcomes of SFD initiatives have typically relied on broad qualitative perceptions and community case studies.

Critical challenges to implementing program evaluation is that organizations and researchers in developing nations (where SFD programs operate) often lack capacity and expertise, while researchers in developed nations frequently lack the ability to spend significant time to develop cultural understanding and overall experience of programs. International collaborations among researchers and organizations has promise for building research capacity to sustain partnerships in public health (Varshney, Atkins & Diwan, 2016). Therefore, the design of this project was to engage researchers and program stakeholders (including established and emerging scholars from developed and developing nations) to assist an SFD organization to develop long-term research and evaluation capacity.

Methodology

The Football Foundation of South Africa (FFSA), a subsidiary of the Grootbos Foundation, operates in the rural Overberg region of Western Cape Province. FFSA uses sport (e.g., soccer, netball, field hockey, and track & field) across multiple programs to achieve dual goals of social integration and educating/empowering youth. Researchers representing institutions in North America and South Africa were introduced to each other and FFSA through previous projects. The evaluation collaboration commenced in July 2015 with document reviews and the start of regular videoconferences. Two site visits occurred in February (for stakeholder meetings to refine logic models, identify program goals, and assess feasibility) and June 2016 (for additional stakeholder meetings and to pilot test instruments). Additional regular videoconferences and email correspondence have been ongoing to refine measures and protocols and identify next steps in the collaboration.

The results of this paper represent the reflections of research team members and program staff to examine the research process to identify facilitators and challenges experienced in the development of the collaboration.

Results

Challenges were created by a variety of things, including physical distance (between partners as well as the South African partner and FFSA sites), lack of dedicated project funding, needs for multiple languages translations, and a culturally unique research setting. Overcoming challenges was facilitated by the previous experience of researchers working together and the different but compatible backgrounds of researchers. Additionally, it was noted that researchers had to be clear about their roles, committed to timelines, and actively participate in communication. The importance of members of the research team traveling to FFSA to both meet with stakeholders and include South African graduate students in fieldwork was also noted. Specific effort was needed to ensure partners unable to travel to South Africa felt included in communication. Researchers identified the critical role of FFSA in supporting the project and their active involvement in designing measures and protocols. FFSA's efforts to educate researchers was especially necessary, as resource limitations prevented researchers from spending extensive time in the field.

Key successes identified to date included helping FFSA clarify and define measurable program goals and facilitating opportunities for the program to engage with stakeholders. Drawing upon the collective expertise and capacities of partners allowed faculty and graduate students in South Africa to learn new techniques and develop their own research capacities. Finally, Western researchers also found the opportunity to work with local researchers and practitioners to develop culturally relevant measures both challenging and rewarding.

Discussion and implications

The use of multi-national research partnerships working with SFD NGOs may help to build local capacity for evaluation and encourage long-term collaboration to ensure the efficacy of SFD programs to achieve goals. However, these partnerships are not without challenges, and certain characteristics of these partnerships as well as management practices can help ensure success and sustainability. Approaches should be inclusive of academic and local stakeholders, diverse in team composition and experience, and longitudinal in scope.

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