

# Seeing Is Believing: Activating Sport For Development Partners

Webb, Andrew Joseph<sup>1</sup>; Richelieu, André<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Université Laval, Canada; <sup>2</sup>Université du Québec à Montréal, École des sciences de la gestion, Canada

E-mail: andrew.webb.1@ulaval.ca

Sport for development (SFD) research has increasingly been concerned with investigating evaluation. This paper contributes to this trend by analyzing how one SFD agency transforms stakeholders into Partners. This transformation is operationalized by offering opportunities, in the form of strategically organized Games, for stakeholders to evaluate, for themselves, how sport enriches the lives of athletes living with intellectual disabilities (IDs). Special Olympics Canada provides the context for better understanding how regional, national and world Games activate Partners, which is the label this agency applies to actors who actively support their cause such as sponsors, donors, and volunteers.

## Theoretical background and research design

In a context of repeated calls for more, and better, evaluation, SFD agencies arguably must “evaluate or perish” (Richards et al., 2013, p. 1). Yet, having so far focused primarily on the evaluation of theoretical impacts of SFD, academics have somewhat neglected questions related to evaluation management. For instance, faced with the scarcity of available SFD funding (Naik, 2013; Wilson, 2012), the capacity to raise money has become a primary concern for many actors in this field. So much so, that “the drive and desire to gain funding can even influence organizations [ ... ] to make inflated promises in order to obtain funding” (Harris & Adams, 2016, p. 5). This state of affairs makes it more important than ever to a) provide insight about how stakeholders evaluate aforesaid concerns, and b) how stakeholders are activated, or transformed, into Partners.

However, the “biggest problems with the SFD movement is the lack of an evidentiary base, and the often substantial gap between theory and practice” (Cornelissen, 2011, p. 507) which, if left unaddressed, conceivably puts vital funding at risk. One solution to this state of affairs is provided by Hayhurst, Wilson and Frisby (2011) who argue that network theory is a propitious, yet underutilized, focus for examining SDP.

Accordingly, this study was based on Latour’s (2005) actor-network theory (ANT). This method of inquiry requires deconstructing a given actor-network and analyzing how actors are seduced, nudged, coerced or otherwise activated into getting involved with the network. However, as ANT focuses on describing over explaining the why of a phenomenon, two additional methods were implemented to mitigate ANT’s perceived shortcomings. First, a content analysis of (n = 20)

Special Olympics (SO) annual reports were conducted followed by (n = 41) in-depth interviews with SOC actors involved with their evaluation networks.

## Findings and discussion

Overall, the analysis of collated data suggests that Games afford four conceptual features that transforms the stakeholder into a Partner:

Offering proximity to athletes: Games strategically provide opportunities to create web-like relationships through a multitude of small interactions and connections between individuals. As described by one chapter director, convinced individual employees become internal ambassadors who are able to “influence the CEO that can make those \$300K sponsorship decisions.”

Providing an emotional experience: From a Partner activation perspective, Special Olympics Games provide a particularly powerful demonstration of determination and grit (Shriver, 2014).

Presenting a new normalcy proposition: Beyond establishing relationships, our analysis also suggests that Games concurrently provide an arena for deconstructing stereotypes and presenting a new normalcy proposition for people with IDs. Through athletic performance, a person with an intellectual disability is (re) presented simply as an athlete, as opposed to someone who is different from everyone else.

Affording opportunities to evaluate agency claims: Games provide a pretext for Partners to evaluate, for themselves, how sport enriches the lives of athletes with IDs, and is clearly a critical element of SOC’s Partner activation strategy. For instance, one Vice-President explained that “leading up to Games, I would match up athletes with sponsors and get them to send letters and post cards to sponsors letting them know how they are doing.” This has the overall effect of building loyalty, and as one interview participant explained, “Loyalty is driven through relationships and personal relationships are best... And that is when they go: I’ve got to be part of this!”

### **Implication/conclusion**

In this case, “the spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indispensable and inaccessible” (Debord, 1992, p. 9) through which society’s generalized passive acceptance of appearances is being exploited for the greater good. Thus, it is beneficial for society if spectacles are used in a way that shatters a previous situation that marginalized and ostracized others, and now allows people with IDs to thrive and lead normal lives, whatever normal is supposed to mean.

### **References**

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