

# **Sport, Culture and Opportunity: Building Community Capacity Through Surfing**

**O'Brien, Daniel James**

Bond University, Australia

daobrien@bond.edu.au

## **Aim**

This work explores an initiative in a remote community in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where the sport of surfing has deep cultural foundations. Currently, PNG surfing is enjoying a surge in popularity, but is also being strategically leveraged to encourage sport participation and to address community issues such as gender-based violence, access to education and poverty alleviation. The main challenge for the Surfing Association of Papua New Guinea (SAPNG) in growing the sport locally has been the unavailability of surfboards. Indeed, prior to the initiative that forms the focus of this research, PNG surfers relied solely on surfboards donated by visiting surf tourists – an unreliable and inadequate source. This work addresses the research question: How can aspects of a traditional indigenous culture be mixed with a modern sport subculture to build local sport participation and community capacity?

## **Theoretical Background**

Edwards (2015) contends that a prerequisite for sustainable community development is, “the capability for collective action, the internal resources to support the process, and the necessary skills and knowledge to successfully identify local problems and their solutions” (p. 7). Collectively, these capabilities, resources, skills and knowledge refer to the concept of community capacity. Community sport organisations (CSOs) provide valuable contexts for analysing community capacity building (Jones et al., 2017; Schulenkorf, 2012). Jones, et al. (2017) note that despite its “conceptual importance” (p. 1), community capacity building through sport remains largely under-researched. Where Jones et al. explored a CSO initiative in the United States, this investigation is in a developing country context (PNG). While many of the challenges of gender-based violence, equitable access to education, and poverty are endemic to both contexts, the interplay between indigenous culture and participation in community activities is potentially more influential in developing countries. Indeed, while Saufi, O'Brien and Jenkins (2014) shed light on the interplay between indigenous culture and access to benefits derived from tourism, little is known about the same in relation to sport and the implications this has for building community capacity. As well as many positive values, modern sport subcultures such as that of surfing are also known to promulgate some negative values, particularly in relation to gender relations (Ford & Brown, 2006). By shedding light on this important relationship between culture and community capacity, this study makes an important contribution to the burgeoning sport-for-development (SFD) literature (Edwards, 2015; Jones et al., 2017; O'Brien & Ponting, 2013).

## **Research Methods**

This study utilised a qualitative case study method. Tupira Surf Club in PNG was selected as the research site due to the author's relationships with key gatekeepers central to community leadership and the sport of surfing there. Data were collected through eight semi-structured interviews with community leaders and individuals central to program implementation, as well as extensive field notes and photographic evidence. All data were collected over a two-month period from February-March, 2017. The data were transcribed and analysed manually using Edwards' (2015) seven dimensions of community capacity as a theoretical lens to categorise and make sense of the data.

## Results

The main challenge for growing the sport of surfing in PNG is the lack of available surfboards. Local manufacture has been impossible due to poor access to raw materials, and no surfboard shaping experience in the country. However, in 2016, at the invitation of tribal elders, an Australian surfboard manufacturer specialising in wooden surfboard construction travelled to Tupira to share his methods of crafting modern wooden surfboards. The resultant construction process employs a mix of traditional Melanesian and modern woodworking methods and has produced a new generation of local surfboard artisans. As it is communities that own surfboards in PNG, rather than individuals, the SAPNG mandated that access to the new wooden surfboards be linked to compulsory school attendance as well as an education program about gender-based violence. In this way, the initiative has created new opportunities to participate in surfing, especially for women and girls, as well as building community capacity across Edwards' seven dimensions to address critical global issues locally. Newly learnt skills and the commercial opportunities they engender through the sale of beautiful timber surfboards to visiting surf tourists, have also gone some way to poverty alleviation.

## Conclusions and Implications

This research fills a gap in the literature on the interplay between indigenous culture, sport participation and community capacity building. The results demonstrate that the ability to reflect on shared cultural foundations when planning for sport development can lead to positive community-level change. In this study, a CSO has contributed to community capacity building, particularly in terms of an enhanced local learning culture, gender-based violence awareness, new skillsets to alleviate poverty, and the building of cultural pride and awareness among indigenous peoples.

## References

- Edwards, M. B. (2015). The role of sport in community capacity building: An examination of sport for development research and practice. *Sport Management Review*, 18, 6-19.
- Ford, N. & Brown, D. (2006) *Surfing and social theory: Experience, embodiment and narrative of the dream glide*. London: Routledge.
- Jones, G. J., Edwards, M. B., Bocarro, J. N., Bunds, K. S., & Smith, J. W. (2017). Leveraging community sport organizations to promote community capacity: Strategic outcomes, challenges, and theoretical considerations. *Sport Management Review*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.006>
- O'Brien, D., & Ponting, J. (2013). Sustainable surf tourism: A community centered approach in Papua New Guinea. *Journal of Sport Management*, 27, 158-172.
- Saufi, A., O'Brien, D., & Wilkins, H., (2014). Inhibitors to host community participation in sustainable tourism development in developing countries. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 22(5), 801-820.
- Schulenkorf, N. (2012). Sustainable community development through sport and events: A conceptual framework for sport-for-development projects. *Sport Management Review*, 15(1), 1-12.