

## **The role of highlight events in sport-for-development**

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### **Introduction**

In contrast to traditional forms of sport development that focus on improving skill and talent, worldwide, sport-for-development (SFD) programs are being designed to go beyond the delivery of sport itself to make important contributions to improvements in people's health, livelihood, and overall wellbeing (Sherry, Schulenkorf and Phillips, 2016). Designed correctly, SFD programs can also play a pivotal role in fostering social inclusion, education, and gender equity in disadvantaged communities (Levermore and Beacom, 2009, Schulenkorf and Adair, 2014). As such, the concept of SFD is receiving increased attention from both practitioners and academics around the world as an innovative, active, and engaging approach to socio-cultural, economic and health-related development. While recognizing the important role that sport *can* play in local and international development, current research suggests that the use of sport for development purposes is neither simple nor inherently successful, and the achievement of "success" depend heavily on the design and management of SFD projects (Coalter, 2010, Darnell and Black, 2011, Coalter, 2013).

### **Nexus Between Sport-for-Development and Highlight Events**

Within the context of SFD programs around the world, there is evidence of special events designed as part of the overall program portfolio, used as a means of engaging communities and contributing to wider development outcomes (Sugden, 2006, Schulenkorf and Edwards, 2012, Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries and Cohen, 2015). This is hardly surprising given the proven ability of special events to generate positive economic, socio-cultural, participation and health-related impacts.

From an economic perspective, events are attractive to communities and destinations given the contributions they can make to local, state and national economies. Events generate economic benefits by attracting new money into a destination in the form of investment and tourist spending; through stimulating business activity; and through creating income and

employment opportunities (Carlsen, 2004, Getz, 2007, Dwyer and Jago, 2012). Through increased media coverage associated with an event, in the longer term, destinations can also benefit economically through destination awareness and increased tourist visitation (Carlsen, 2004, Dwyer, Forsyth and Spurr, 2005).

In addition to their potential economic benefits, events can provide a wide range of positive social impacts on both participants and the wider host community, including opportunities for celebration and entertainment as well as social interaction with other members of the community or with visitors to the community (Delamere, Wankel and Hinch, 2001, Dimmock and Tiyce, 2001, Small, Edwards and Sheridan, 2005, Schlenker, Foley and Getz, 2010). Moreover, special events may contribute to the celebration and enhancement of cultural traditions, the opportunity to develop community spirit and pride, and the acquisition of new (management) skills (Chalip and McGuirly, 2004, Misener and Mason, 2006, Kellett, Hede and Chalip, 2008, O'Brien and Chalip, 2008). In short, special events are often a welcome attraction to members of the community, as they engender feelings of camaraderie that allow for engagement and learning to occur.

Special events are also recognised as having the potential to generate positive participation and health-related impacts. Increased participation can be in the form of more regular involvement in sport clubs or physical activity groups (Weed, Coren, Fiore, Wellard, Mansfield, Chatziefstathiou and Dowse, 2012, Craig and Bauman, 2014), or ideally, encouraging inactive members of the community to become 'more active more often' (Brown and Massey, 2001, Shipway, 2007). Aside from participation in sports or physical activity, special events have the potential to encourage greater community participation in activities associated with the event theme, for example music, culture or the arts (Getz, 1997, Dwyer, Mellor, Mistilis and Mules, 2000). Participation as active volunteers presents another important aspect for community life.

Despite the increased awareness and knowledge of the role that special events can play in community development efforts, there are very few studies that investigate the specific contribution of special events to SFD endeavors in the extant literature. This lack of research attention may be explained by the general belief that regularly conducted SFD programs offer a greater likelihood of long-term success than one-off, transitory events. In fact, much of the SFD literature argues that regular and ongoing programs are much more likely to have

sustained impacts on a community than the “helicopter approach” whereby, for example, a famous sport personality is brought in for a fleeting visit with community members, in the hope of inspiring them to become active and motivated (Coalter, 2010, 2013).

Schulenkorf and Adair (2013) however, argue that one-off special events may well have the ability to play a key role within the context of ongoing, regularized SFD programs. They suggest that as an out-of-the-ordinary peak moment within the SFD calendar, a “highlight event” may, for example, renew interest among local participants, but also arouse interest among those who have yet to engage in sport, physical activity, or community programs. Participatory special events may thus have the potential to lead to what Weed, Coren, and Fiore (2008) have described as the “festival effect.” While the authors use this term in the context of mega-events, it is applicable at other scales, describing the effect of the positive emotions surrounding a special event, which may result in people from the wider community becoming incidentally active and “drawn from their sofas” to either take part in or witness the show. Furthermore, if managed and marketed accordingly, a special event can showcase and promote the wider SFD program to local, regional, and even national politicians, as well as sport associations, potential sponsors, and the media. This, in turn, may facilitate additional business activities that may benefit sport participants, organizers and the wider community.

Two noteworthy studies that investigate the specific contribution of special events to SFD endeavors were conducted by Schulenkorf and Edwards (2012) and Welty Peachey, Borland, Lobpries and Cohen (2015). First, Schulenkorf and Edwards (2012) investigated SFD event projects in the ethnically divided Sri Lanka and highlighted that social and cultural benefits can best be achieved if event organizers and host communities focus strategically on children as catalysts for change; provide event-related sociocultural opportunities; engage in social, cultural, political, and educational event leverage activities; and combine large-scale events with regular SFD programs. Importantly, Schulenkorf and Edwards (2012) suggest that while regular SFD programs create opportunities for a “deepening and intensification of contacts and friendships” (p. 385), highlight events are often capable of extending these relationships to others in the wider community.

More recently, Welty Peachey and colleagues (2015) conducted research on the social impacts and growth potential of SFD events, confirming that SFD events are able to cultivate liminality and a sense of community for those involved. In line with earlier research, they

suggested that SFD event organizers design both formal and informal opportunities for social interactions through a variety of sport and ancillary events to build *communitas* and to create additional opportunities for social leverage. Their findings highlight the contributions to broader community development endeavors made by a special event, through cultivating a sense of community, creating opportunities for relationship building and the development of social capital.

The theoretical concept that encapsulates the previously discussed opportunities is referred to as *event leveraging*. Chalip (2004) introduced the term into the sport and event management spheres, arguing that in order to achieve event leverage, event organizers must move beyond the planning of direct event impacts and, instead, focus on creating strategic opportunities which will achieve lasting outcomes for host communities. The concept thus provides the theoretical underpinning for this study as it engages with the opportunity of one-off events to contribute to wider and more lasting development outcomes in communities (Chalip, 2004, Chalip, 2006, O'Brien and Chalip, 2008).

### **Event Contributions**

Having established the theoretical backdrop and a clear argument for increased research into 'highlight events' as a part of SFD programs, the remainder of this chapter focuses on discussing the opportunities and challenges of using highlight events to deliver benefits to participants and wider community stakeholders. In particular, we draw from previous conceptual and empirical research into SFD programs conducted in Australia and the Pacific Islands, which have incorporated cultural festivals, inter-school competitions or carnivals as highlight events. Importantly, these highlight events were part of a holistic SFD portfolio and therefore had a strategic place as 'nested' elements in wider community development work. This is in contrast to standalone events that have been widely criticized for their limited impact and lack of sustainability, given the absence of follow-up activities that maintain or grow newly generated impacts (see e.g. Schulenkorf, 2012).

In short, the discussion that follows overviews the important contributions made by highlight sport events within the context of ongoing, regularised SFD programs. These contributions are in the areas of: Creating New Excitement; Re-Engaging Stakeholders; Building Local Management Capacity; and Leveraging Partnerships.

### *Creating New Excitement*

Previous research conducted on SFD projects (Misener and Schulenkorf, 2016, Schulenkorf, 2016) identifies an important contribution made by 'highlight events' in creating new excitement and additional interest among students, parents, and the wider community. In fact, many people look forward to a day of sport and culture where they can watch performances, showcase newly learned skills, and engage in non-sporting activities. Moreover, many young sportspeople are motivated to play and perform in front of a larger audience, while members of the wider community can be drawn into the event in various roles, participating as supporters, as volunteers, or by cheering on their children during sport and cultural performances. In line with the theoretical idea of leveraging events for social purposes (Chalip, 2006, O'Brien, 2007, O'Brien and Chalip, 2008), it is suggested that in the context of ongoing SFD programs, special events have the ability to create additional liminoid spaces for participants and the local community.

One-off special events can also create excitement for other events stakeholders including commercial partners and sponsors who are excited about the extra visibility of sport activities – and related sponsorship campaigns – around highlight events. While the financial engagement by local partners and sponsors in a developing country context often remains marginal, the connections and networks established with the business community may provide opportunities and benefits for future programming and in-kind support. Arguably, increased business support and new sponsorship deals are more likely if SFD events were to grow into larger event projects that opened their doors for international teams and tourists (O'Brien, 2007, O'Brien and Chalip, 2008, Misener and Schulenkorf, 2016). This area presents an interesting opportunity for future research and empirical studies into the nexus of sport, events and tourism development.

### *Re-Engaging Stakeholders*

When viewed as a strategic tool forming part of a SFD program, a special event can bring to life what might be a largely concealed, ongoing SFD program. A one-off or highlight event, by its very nature, brings a burst of attention to the ongoing SFD program, which can contribute to engaging or re-engaging various event stakeholders. Firstly, a one-off event can engage new participants who have not previously been aware of or involved with the SFD

program . The special event provides the initial opportunity to engage newcomers, who may in turn, be encouraged to engage with other elements of the ongoing SFD program . Secondly, special events can also present an opportunity to renew the interest of those participants who were previously part of a SFD program , but whose interest and active participation was not able to be sustained by the regular program of activities. The highlight event may be the stimulus they need to re-engage with the program . Thirdly, previous research suggests that SFD organizers may leverage highlight events to secure additional funding and/or community support for the goals of the SFD program (O'Brien and Chalip, 2008, Schulenkorf and Edwards, 2012, Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2015). And finally, stakeholder re-engagement may go beyond participants themselves as highlight events can be leveraged for the purpose of business stakeholder (re)activation, including sponsors and government departments (see e.g. Taks, Misener, Chalip and Green, 2013, Craig and Bauman, 2014).

#### ***Building Local Management Capacity***

Highlight sport events can be viewed as an opportunity to contribute to building the skills and management capabilities of participants and the wider community. While the majority of international SFD programs are coordinated and often also managed by international development staff (Schulenkorf, Sherry and Rowe, 2016), the inclusion of a 'highlight event' such as a sports tournament or festival into a SFD program can provide an opportunity for local community engagement in the design and delivery of projects. Previous research supports that when local staff and community members are given the freedom to experiment around specific elements of the event design and day to day management, this increase in responsibility can develop their professional skills and leadership capability (see e.g. Schulenkorf, Sugden and Burdsey, 2014, Sherry and Schulenkorf, 2016). However, SFD organizers should not expect "too much, too quickly" from the local contributors. It is suggested that if too much organizational control is handed over in a short period of time then local communities and their sporting clubs could feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of managerial and sport-specific tasks assigned to them. As previously argued by Schulenkorf (2010), a full transfer of management power— which includes independent organizing of programs and activities— can and should only be achieved progressively over time, and with the background support of experienced SFD managers or change agents.

#### ***Leveraging Partnerships***

To achieve the wider aim of awareness building around pressing community issues, organizers often use SFD events as a social vehicle through which they engage partners into joint communication of messages. In other words, partnerships with key stakeholders are leveraged to increase the SFD initiative's reach and impact. From a theoretical perspective, the activation of key stakeholders links with the leverage strategy of cooperating with the media to showcase social issues (see O'Brien & Chalip, 2008). Moreover, it extends the focus beyond the media to include additional partners in an attempt to publicize social and health-related development issues. Especially in small communities or island states, relevant partnerships with potent organizations such as Red Cross, Ministry of Health, the Police force, or army personnel provide an effective opportunity to grow social messages to a wider audience.

Beyond local partnerships on the micro- and meso-levels, special events may also be an attractive vehicle to engage in strategic cooperation on the macro-level. In other words, if a SFD program becomes more visible — one of the benefits that special events such as festivals can provide — large development organizations may come on board as strategic partners in an attempt to further grow and leverage core messages. Schulenkorf and Adair (2013) have previously argued for strategic engagements between sport and non-sport organizations to allow for a deepening and widening of relationships through SFD. As testimony to this proposal, a recent cooperation agreement between the SFD program of the Oceania Football Confederation (Just Play) and the United Nations Children's Fund (2014) highlights the potential for sport organizations to connect with large development agencies — a strategic move that may lead to a multiplier effect in terms of generating additional awareness, interest, financial resources, and commitment.

### *Caveats*

This research has shown that highlight sport events are capable of making important contributions to broader community development efforts within the context of ongoing, regularised SFD programs. However, it should be acknowledged that there are challenges and limitations to one-off events. In particular, a 'highlight event' that is not integrated into wider, more concerted efforts at community development, runs the risk of being isolated and unsustainable. This reinforces the importance of integrating special events within an overarching SFD program if they are to achieve success as a means of community

engagement (Sugden, 2006, Schulenkorf and Edwards, 2012, Welty Peachey *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, it is possible that even a well-integrated special event can create negative impacts and unintended consequences for (at least part of) the community and/or participants (Balduck, Maes and Buelens, 2011, Jeanes and Magee, 2014). For example, communities are often faced with extra financial and social burdens, while participants must deal with additional sporting commitments and psychological pressure to perform in front of a large audience (Holt, Kingsley, Tink and Scherer, 2011). Negative consequences can influence media portrayal of the event, which can in turn contribute to an unfavorable public perception of the event. Moreover, any damage to the event's reputation can also damage the reputation of the wider SFD program, its organizers and host community. This can have serious implications for the continued social and financial commitment of event participants, wider communities and business stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

As a vehicle for the creation of social, cultural, political, economic, and health-related benefits, sport events have become an increasingly popular instrument at the local, regional, national, and international level. In line with this trend, SFD programs have started to integrate special events as strategic elements in their development portfolios. This chapter reported on the specific contributions that sport events may add to regular, ongoing, and participatory SFD program activities. In short, it is suggested that highlight events can create new interest and excitement for SFD activities, re-engage stakeholders to the wider SFD program, provide opportunities to build and shape local management capacity, and leverage social and business partnerships.

Overall, special events provide a multitude of opportunities for SFD programs; hence, SFD organizers and local communities should take the contributions of special events into account when designing new development portfolios. While the focus of regular and ongoing SFD activities will always remain on the *deepening* of existing relationships and networks, special events allow for the *widening* of participation and the *proliferation* of program scope. In fact— as discussed in this study— the inclusion of highlight events allows for a vital showcasing of SFD projects and their goals to a wider cross-section of a host community, including potentially new participants, family members, sponsors, government bodies, and



sport associations. This stimulus seems particularly important where project organisers are looking to maximise social and business-related benefits through a process of sustained engagement and empowerment of locals in the management of community development projects.

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