

## The Role of Change Agent and Event Context in Sport-for-Development Projects

*Chrysostomos Giannoulakis, Ball State University*

*Nico Schulenkorf, University of Technology Sydney*

*Lindsey Blom, Ball State University*

**Sport for Development - Other (Other)**  
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### Introduction

Throughout the past decade, there has been considerable academic research around sport-for-development (S4D) projects and related events (e.g., Coalter, 2007; Lyras, 2007; 2011; Lyras & Welty-Peachy, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2010; 2012, Sugden, 2006). While studies on the socio-economic impacts of sport events have been flourishing, there is a surprising lack of empirical evidence on the actual contribution of events in a S4D context. To facilitate empirical studies in the area, researchers have proposed strategic frameworks and models that may assist event managers with the planning, management, and leveraging of development projects for wider social, cultural, and health-related benefits (Schulenkorf, 2012). In this context, the concept of event leverage as an integral component of S4D projects has come to the forefront of academic literature (e.g., Welty-Peachey et al., 2015; Schulenkorf, 2010; 2012). Event leverage is regarded as the strategic planning for the advancement of long-term benefits stemming from an event (Chalip 2004; 2006). Thus far, the majority of research on event leverage has focused on tourism impacts (e.g., Chalip & McGuirly, 2004; O'Brien, 2006) and outcomes of large-scale events, such as the Olympic Games (e.g., Chalip, 2004; 2006, O'Brien, 2006). However, there is limited empirical evidence on how small-scale community events with an enhanced social leveraging component can benefit S4D projects (Schulenkorf, 2010). Moreover, the role of sport event organizers in this process deserves further attention. In the context of S4D, an external entity (i.e., change agent; see Schulenkorf, 2010) often serves as the mediator for promoting expertise and knowledge regarding an event project, while providing guidance and support to the host community. To maximize the potential of S4D events, we know that the cooperation between change agents and local communities needs to be fruitful and in line with social and contextual values; however, more research is needed to establish success factors for engagement.

### Purpose

This study aims to contribute to the debate around the role of change agents and event contexts by providing a case study of the Spetses Mini Marathon event conducted in Spetses, an island located 54 nautical miles south of Athens, Greece. The idea of the event was conceived in 2010 by a private public relations and communication entity in Greece with the vision to stage an annual, mass participation sport event in collaboration with the local Municipality. Against the background of an economic crisis and an increasingly unstable political situation in the country that resulted in tensions in and between communities, the purpose of this study was to: (a) identify perceptions of various stakeholders towards the role of external private for-profit entities (i.e., change agents) in S4D event projects, (b) examine organizational matters that result in social impacts/outcomes for the host community through S4D projects, and (c) discuss the (potentially important role of the) event context and origin as the foundation for initiation and sustainability of S4D projects.

### Method

This study utilized a qualitative mode of inquiry. Data sources included: (a) semi-structured interviews with a total of 19 participants from seven stakeholder categories (i.e., organizing committee, non-resident athlete, resident athlete, municipality, resident business owner, sponsor, and resident volunteer); (b) participant observation; and (c) document analysis (e.g., press releases, Internet sources). Triangulation of findings assisted in contextually understanding the data; it also increased the trustworthiness of the process and outcomes (Creswell, 2012). From a process perspective, all qualitative data were analyzed with the help of the computer-aided data analysis software NVivo 10 (QSR International, Doncaster, Australia). The software also supported authors in coding the various data excerpts that were eventually classified into emerging categories and themes (i.e., free and tree nodes). Three main categories were developed: event context, event organization/management, and community involvement.

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### Findings

Event context: While the majority of respondents were not familiar with the origin of the event, there was consensus among participants that the change agent capitalized on a number of contextual features, including: (a) an environment of economic recession in the island and overall in Greece, (b) the rise of amateur sports in the country, (c) the need within the island for better engagement and social cohesion, and (d) the regeneration of the local economy through extension of the tourism season. Overall, the change agent accounted for the local context and managed to empower local actors and engage partners for a common cause.

Event organization/management: The nature, status, and mentality of the change agent towards management of the event affected perceived outcomes and relationships with the host community. Interviewees appreciated the amount of local knowledge, professional skills, competence, and technical expertise demonstrated by the organizers. Beyond that, participants valued that the change agent had developed a strategic management plan prior to performing an intervention on the island which included identification of local culture and policies, along with social and financial issues. Thus, the change agent considered and respected societal, political, financial, and institutional factors when developing the event. The company removed barriers of initial resistance from locals, while building trust and appreciation with the local community.

Community involvement: The change agent invested in a close and genuine partnership with the community. Municipal administrators and residents were gradually involved in the developmental, problem-solving, and decision-making processes related to the event. It was reported that this method instilled an attitude of confidence and developed a collaborative atmosphere, where various stakeholders on the island were brought together under a common cause. In particular, community involvement resulted in much needed tourism, social, and financial advancements. Although the majority of participants acknowledged contributions of the change agent in leveraging event benefits, some highlighted the need for a more strategic and open involvement of the wider community and business sector (i.e., beyond the Municipality) in the initial decision-making process and overarching strategy of the event. This would have allowed for a potential growth of the market, resulting in maximization of event benefits.

### Discussion

This study from Spetses, Greece, serves as a response to the call for empirical evidence related to small-scale S4D community events. Specifically, it highlights the roles and responsibilities of change agents in the event development and management processes, as well as the evaluation of the context where the event is taking place. Results illustrated the key role of the change agent in sharing knowledge and technical expertise with locals, importance of community empowerment through gradual and organic involvement considering the local mentality and culture of the region, and alignment of the S4D project with targeted social and financial issues. To this extent, the social leveraging aspects of S4D events become pivotal by blending sport with cultural and political dimensions, and fostering a creative sense of community. How durable these benefits are – and how S4D event organizers may sustain achievements in the long-term – deserves to be investigated further. Also, the specific characteristics of the change agent as a private for profit agency and their impact on community perceptions should be analyzed in future work. In any case, this study brings to the forefront the need for context-specific research with S4D-related projects in order to help understand structure, processes, conditions, components, and stakeholders of S4D interventions.