Community-Driven Development, Collective Action, and The Olympic Management Structure: The Case of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games

NaRi Shin, Texas Tech University
DooJae Park, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of an Olympic host community’s local residents, focusing on their collective actions toward the process of Olympic-related community development. Beard and Dasgupta (2006) argued that there has been a shift in community development projects initiated by international agencies that favors local over central planning. This shift is in response to inadequacies of top-down approaches that have dominated international development. However, community development projects driven by sport mega-events such as the Olympic Games still represent top-down management and centralized control (Gautheir, 2017). Nevertheless, very few studies have examined the management practices and structure of sport mega-events at the community level, particularly the role of community power and community-driven planning and development. Understanding the management at the community level is important because it provides an opportunity to explore the counter narratives of residents, which has not received enough academic attention (Cunningham, 2014).

Our study is guided by the three key concepts of community-driven development (Dasgupta & Beard, 2007): (a) collective action, (b) decentralization, and (c) democratization. We investigated the role of residents’ collective actions and the level of decentralization and democratization of the Olympic management structure using the case of Daegwallyeong-myeon, host community of the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics.

This study has three research questions: (a) Why and how did residents organize collective actions for the Olympic-driven community development?; (b) What are residents’ perceptions on the level of decentralization and democratization of the Olympic management practices at the community level? and (c) What are the implications for community-driven development strategies in the context of sport mega-events? Critical ethnography was utilized to understand the narratives and experiences of the residents (Madison, 2012). Two fieldworks were conducted to collect diversified data. Thirty-three observations and 24 in-depth interviews were conducted, and 52 archival and media data were collected. All data were collected in Korean, and important data were translated to English by the first author who is fluent in both. Data were analyzed through low-level and high-level coding, a priori coding, and selective coding (Carspecken, 1999; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings identified Daegwallyeong-myeon’s residents organized collective actions to initiate community-driven development for the successful preparation of the Olympic Games. They participated in the actions based on their felt needs for the community and individual interest, and endeavored to practice a collective self-help rather than to follow what was suggested by the Organizing Committee and the International Olympic Committee. However, residents perceived that the Olympic management practices were very centralized and less democratized. The initiative for the development of the host community was solely in the purview of the Organizing Committee and the International Olympic Committee, similar to what was highlighted by Bouquet et al. (2016) as the ‘headquarters know the best syndrome.’ We argue based on these findings that the Olympic management structure needs to be decentralized and democratized in a direction that favors the interests and needs of host communities. Theoretical and practical implications will be suggested, followed by directions for future research.