Extending the SDP Conversation: Hearing the Voices of Grassroots Sport Facilitators

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The sport for development and peace (SDP) domain is ever changing to become more intentional in mobilizing grassroots projects and empowering local leadership, but there remains strong dependency on external stakeholders that is manifested by socio-economic structures, power dynamics, and barriers to authentic dialog (Giulianotti et al., 2016). Scholars have recognized a need to alleviate dependency, and equip organizations with tools to grow and truly sustain programs capable of individual and community level change (Schulenkorf, 2017; Svensson, 2017).

Using a critical sociological lens, a place to start alleviating this dependency is to understand the perspectives of local leaders (Darnell et al., 2019; Sugden, 2015). Panda (2007) argues, “Local communities have valuable experience and a special understanding of their own environment. When the responsibility for preserving and maintaining the projects bestowed on them, it invites [their] dedication and commitment.” With recent scholarly efforts to understand organizational needs from the bottom-up, we now need to know more about grassroots organizations’ perspectives on their own needs, values, and ways of fulfilling their organizational goals and mission (Darnell et al., 2019; Svensson, 2017). The purpose of this study is to give a voice to the insightful knowledge and experience of grassroots leaders in the bigger academic conversation, while increasing our understanding of what is perceived to be successful, authentic, and/or problematic in external stakeholder relationships. Specifically, we will examine characteristics and collaboration processes, organizational design, intergroup dynamics and barriers to authentic dialogue.

In the Global North dominated realm of academic literature, research that empowers and acknowledges the validity of the valuable experience of grassroots leaders, is a necessary extension to the ongoing conversation attempting to combat difficulties of facilitated dependency. A naturalistic inquiry approach is the most suitable for understanding participant experiences from their perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This in-progress study has a purposive sample of 25 grassroots leaders from varying SDP organizations, in countries across six continents (Trochim & Donnelley, 2008). To balance the principles of naturalistic inquiry with practical limitations, the participants currently are being interviewed via video call with the assistance of a translator when needed. Semi-structured interview questions will elicit grassroots leaders’ thoughts on the nature of external relationships in past and present, aspects of those relationships that are helpful and problematic, what organizational learning has occurred relative to stakeholder interactions, and what they are seeking in future relationships to help them grow and sustain authentic programming. Data will be analyzed with an open-coding, inductive analysis approach that allows themes to emerge from the voices of the practitioners themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Current findings of this exploratory study include themes regarding (1) preferences for external stakeholders who invest time and understanding in local culture and community, (2) begrudged collaboration with heavy top-down approaches, and (3) amenable and enthusiastic engagement with a variety of resources. This study will contribute to SDP theory in understanding the impact of top-down and bottom-up SDP approaches, as well as guide future empirical research and conceptual theories on sustainability and maintaining authenticity in SDP grassroots organizations.