The Surprising Impact of COVID-19 on Grassroots Sport Resource Creativity

Marlene Dixon, Texas A&M University  
Ashlyn Hardie, Texas A&M University  
Stacy Warner, East Carolina University  
Arden Anderson, High Point University  
Emmaculate Owiro, Highway of Hope  
Dennis Orek, Highway of Hope

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, sport organizations across the globe have been faced with unprecedented challenges as well as unanticipated opportunities. Warner and Martin (2020) stated: “... The COVID-19 crisis can and should be viewed as an opportunity for sport fans, athletes, and sport managers to validate the role and power of sport to positively impact society.” Without question COVID-19 created significant challenges for sport organizations at every level, yet most of the focus has been placed on the challenges in elite level sport. In this study, however, we explore the opportunities that also arose during this time for a grassroots sport organization to enhance local staff capacity and improve self-sufficiency for long-term program success.

The context for this study is Highway of Hope, which is a grassroots sport for development program in Nairobi, Kenya. Prior to Spring 2020, the program consisted of 5 teams across 3 schools, with 59 young women taking part in the sport and mentoring activities. The program (co-created and supported by Kenyan and U.S. partners) was delivered by local coaches and mentors. It consisted of basketball training five days/week and weekly mentoring sessions. The teams participated in their school-based basketball leagues, typically playing several games per week, until these were abruptly suspended in early March 2020.

A qualitative descriptive case study approach was utilized for this study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Sandelowski, 2000). Case studies rely on a variety of data collection methods in order to understand the case in as much depth as possible. For this portion of the study, which is part of a larger on-going study, data was primarily collected via field notes and observations with project team members, participants, mentors, and program leaders. We analyzed the data according to the primary research question: What organizational opportunities arose during the pandemic? The data was then organized with the purpose of creating a “comprehensive summary of the events in the everyday terms of those events” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336).

The results revealed the COVID-19 pandemic represented a turning point for the organization (Giele & Elder, 1998). According to life course theory a turning point is a significant event within an organization reshapes the way an organization operates. Further, the results revealed that the scarcity of resources in some ways positively impacted Highway of Hope and forced the organization to become more independent and creative in both obtaining and operationalizing resources. We know that SFD initiatives are often difficult to sustain because of scarce resources, as well as multiple stakeholders, agendas, and organizational forms (Dixon & Svensson, 2019; Giulianotti et al., 2016; Svensson, 2017). Often in hybrid organizations, Global North partners can impose logics, resource dependence, and organizational forms that ultimately hinder sustainability. However, in the wake of COVID-19, this organization’s steps at the local level to tackle initiatives such as developing their own curriculum, securing funding for food supplies, and leveraging partnerships for a meeting location demonstrate their progress toward resource independence and sustainability.