Accelerating Social Innovation? A Case Study of the Sport for Development Innovation Fund

Per G. Svensson, Louisiana State University

Abstract 2021-247

Mode: Asynchronous

Session: Live Q&A for Sport for Development (Asynchronous)

Saturday June 5, 2021, 1:40 PM - 2:40 PM

Many sport for development and peace (SDP) organizations continue to operate with significant capacity constraints. Funding agencies, however, are in a position to directly impact the ability of nonprofit organizations to serve their missions (Shier & Handy, 2015). Discussions of funders within the SDP literature have historically focused on the power imbalances often found in the relationships between funders and grantees. However, funding agencies are also changing in response to the evolving needs of the SDP field. For example, industry funders co-created a unified Sport for Good Response Fund during the COVID-19 pandemic to help more than 60 organizations sustain their operations. Another area where SDP funders are recognizing the need for change is in regard to innovation in this field (Svensson & Loat, 2020; Whitley et al., 2020). The ability to be innovative is increasingly emphasized as a critical organizational attribute in SDP (Svensson & Cohen, 2020).

Researchers have started to investigate how and when innovative new solutions are developed (Svensson et al., 2020; Svensson & Mahoney, 2020; Webb et al., 2019). Funders can arguably play a key role in enabling social innovation since financial resources have been reported as a common obstacle to social innovation (Svensson & Hambrick, 2020; Whitley, 2019). A few funders have begun to be more open to risk-taking and allocate funds specifically for the purpose of supporting innovative ideas. The purpose of this study is to explore the role of such innovation-focused grant programs in SDP.

A case study methodology was employed to address the purpose of this study. Specifically, an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 1995) is being used to explore the Sport for Development Innovation Fund created by the SOL Foundation and the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation. Data were collected through multiple semi-structured interviews with representatives from the six inaugural grantees over time as well as representatives from the funding agencies. Additional data were collected through quantitative surveys, organizational documents, and organizational websites of both funding agencies and award fund recipients. Data collection remains in progress with the addition of a new cohort of organizations as part of a larger longitudinal assessment of the Sport for Development Innovation Fund. Initial data were analyzed through a two-phase coding approach (Saldaña, 2013).

Preliminary analysis has revealed a number of emerging themes including (a) the value of innovation-focused seed funding, (b) a ‘start-up’ culture among grantees, (c) the importance of organizational learning, (d) a need for better non-financial support, (e) inadequate innovation pathways among grantees, (f) the influential role of paid staff in innovation, (g) a need for stronger bridge-building across organizational boundaries, and (h) the liability of newness associated with smaller and younger organizations. Innovation-focused funds are becoming increasingly common to stimulate new solutions for existing social issues (e.g., UNICEF’s Innovation Fund), but how and when such funding mechanisms work (if at all) remains largely unknown. The findings from this study can help funders, network organizations, and larger SDP agencies in designing and strengthening innovation-focused support programs to better catalyze social innovation.