Collaborative Synergy and Collective Impact: The Development of an Inter-Organizational Sport for Development Collaborative

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Background

Interorganizational relationships (IORs) have become increasingly valued in the nonprofit sector, particularly in the field of sport for development (SFD). Over the past several decades, funding for nonprofits has become closely tied to their perceived efficiency, professionalism, and coordination in solving pressing social problems (Hwang and Powell 2009). Many of the social issues nonprofits aim to address, however, transcend beyond the capabilities of any individual organization. As a result, inter-organizational collaboratives have recently emerged as potential platforms for facilitating “collective impact.”

Despite the growing prominence of IOR research within sport management (Babiak et al., 2018), previous studies suggest many nonprofit sport organizations struggle to effectively form and manage relationships (Misener et al., 2013). This is particularly true for SFD organizations that face growing competition for space, resources, and participants and operate in rather fragmented environments (Jones et al., 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2018). Prior nonprofit studies also suggest inter-organizational collaboratives can be challenging to build and sustain (Nowell, 2009). In response, SFD scholars have highlighted the potential of collaboratives as platforms to promote communication, enhance knowledge dissemination, and facilitate IORs among SFD organizations for collective impact (Jones et al., 2018; Svensson & Loat, 2019). However, there is currently limited knowledge about how these projects are developed, managed, and sustained. The purpose of this project was to understand this process by examining how participation in a citywide SFD collaborative influenced member organizations.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-one executive directors from SFD organizations currently involved with a citywide collaborative in the Northeastern part of the United States. Questions focused on perceptions of the collaborative, its role in facilitating IORs and other organizational capacity-building efforts, and perceived impacts on member organizations. Data collection was completed and interviews have recently been transcribed verbatim for analysis (approximately 300 pages). This primary data will be supplemented by longitudinal administrative and financial records for each organization to provide appropriate context. A two-stage inductive coding process will be utilized to analyze the data (Saldana, 2013).

Expected Findings and Implications

Previous research suggests inter-organizational collaboratives do not always produce desired outcomes, and can actually be costly when backbone organizations absorb resources that might otherwise be allocated to members (Thomson & Perry, 2006). Considering the project under study is still in the initial stages of formal development, we expect different perceptions regarding the perceived impact of the project on member organizations. In addition, previous research indicates SFD organizations can vary drastically in terms of their mission, values, and intended outcomes (Holt, 2016), so we expect to uncover contrasting perspectives on the perceived need for IORs across different member organizations. Finally, organizations with stronger resource profiles are, in theory, less dependent on collective impact projects to acquire physical, financial, and social/political capital, so we expect these organizations to have different collaborative intentions than smaller, less-resourced organizations. The findings can help leaders of SFD agencies develop a better understanding of how and when (if at all) collaboratives may benefit their organizations.