Exploring the Role of Shared Leadership in Multi-Organizational Sport for Development and Peace Collaboratives

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A considerable number of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) organizations try to overcome capacity challenges through different types of collaborations with external stakeholders (Svensson et al., 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2018). Existing research on inter-organizational relationships in SDP remains limited to collaborations between two organizations (i.e., inter-organizational partnerships). Yet funders and larger SDP network agencies are increasingly investing considerable resources in multi-organizational collaboratives to promote collective impact, build capacity, and co-create new solutions. Unfortunately, prior research suggests such collaborations face many challenges. Thus, it is imperative to advance our understanding of these types of partnerships to identify how they can be improved and sustained over time.

How leadership is manifested in multi-organizational collaborations remains largely unknown despite a consensus among scholars of the importance of leadership as a key component for partnership success. In particular, recent sport management studies have emphasized the potential role of alternative leadership approaches including shared leadership (Jones et al., 2018; Kang & Svensson, 2019). However, few studies have explored how leadership is shared among members within the context of multi-organizational partnerships. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the role of shared leadership in multi-organizational SDP collaborative.

This study was guided by three research questions to address the research purpose: (a) How and when is leadership shared between members in multi-organizational SDP collaboratives?, (b) What potential benefits do SDP practitioners perceive shared leadership may have for the multi-organizational SDP collaboratives?, and (c) What challenges may limit the development of shared leadership? A basic qualitative research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) guided this study to explore shared leadership through the lived experiences of SDP practitioners. Multi-organizational SDP collaboratives in the United States were purposefully sampled (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from 30 member organizations across two collaboratives created by Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Sport for Good Chicago and Sport for Good Atlanta. Publicly available organizational documents were also collected. Data were analyzed through a two-step coding process (Saldaña, 2013).

Several themes emerged across the three research questions. First, SDP practitioners perceived leadership is shared when the collaborations have (a) strategic approach, (b) support from vertical leaders, and (c) openness to collaborations (RQ1). Second, perceived benefits of shared leadership included (a) collective impact, (b) capacity building, (c) learning, (d) cohesiveness, and (e) shared responsibilities (RQ2). Lastly, challenges to the development of shared leadership included (a) leadership dynamics, (b) level of information sharing, (c) lack of understanding of shared leadership, and (d) level of engagement (RQ3).

The findings from this study have important implications for SDP research and practice. The current study contributes to the existing knowledge gap on leadership in SDP as the first inquiry focused on the role of shared leadership in multi-organizational collaboratives. The insight gained from this qualitative inquiry highlights a broad range of potential benefits from shared leadership in SDP. Furthermore, this study also indicates ways that SDP stakeholders can better sustain and leverage the potential of multi-organizational partnerships by developing shared leadership.