Defining Sports Development

Written by Barrie Houlihan
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Definition of a policy area or of a set of government activities is nearly always problematic: what starts as an apparently straightforward process of positivist-oriented empirical description soon becomes mired in ambiguity as attempts to define 'sport development' confirm. Rejecting the positivist approach to policy analysis Fischer (2003: 51) argues that 'To accurately explain social phenomena, the investigator must first of all attempt to understand the meaning of the social phenomenon from the actor's perspective ... the actor's own motives and values'. Furthermore, the meaning of policy is not static as will be made clear below in relation to sport development. While the investigation of policy will generate empirical data of great value to the policy analyst the data are unlikely to produce social categories sufficiently robust to satisfy the positivist researcher. One of the reasons for the need to treat empirical observations with care is that they are often related to a specific time and place. Thus concepts such as 'regular participation', 'sport', 'physical education', 'physical activity' and 'moderate exercise' have all been redefined once or more over the last forty years. A second reason why positivist methods are insufficient to define a policy area is that, despite regular expressions of commitment to evidence-based policy, policy-makers are just as likely to be influenced by the mythology that develops around policy and which takes on the status of 'truths' even though the evidence base is weak. According to Coalter (2007: 9) 'such myths contain elements of truth, but elements which become reified and distorted and 'represent' rather than reflect reality, standing for supposed, but largely unexamined, impacts and processes'. Coalter's argument has much in common with Hajer's (1995) concept of policy 'storylines' which, according to Fischer (2003: 88), 'function to condense large amounts of factual information inter-mixed with the normative assumptions and value orientations that assign meaning to them ... [Storylines] stress some aspects of an event and conceal or downplay others'. Sport development is replete with such myths and storylines which generate and preserve (generally positive) perceptions of sport development on the basis of weak evidence. While it is important to acknowledge that sports development is far from unique in having a weak evidence base (criminal justice, defence, education and even medicine all have their share of storylines and myths) Coalter's injunction to 'think more clearly, analytically and less emotionally about "sport" and its potential' (2007: 7) is important to bear in mind. In other words any attempt to define sport development and assess its impact needs to be accompanied by a healthy dose of scepticism.

With our scepticism primed there are a number of possible starting points for definition. One might take the statements of policy-makers as a logical starting point for specifying the objectives and activities that constitute the core aspects of sports development given that in many countries 'sport development', however we might eventually define it, is usually publicly funded. Yet experience would indicate that policy-makers are prone to play rather fast and loose with meaning, perhaps not to an Orwellian extent, but with sufficient elasticity to give us pause in accepting their definition as a natural point of departure for analysis. Politicians have a tendency to routinely vaguely over-aspire. However, even when policy-makers establish a clear set of goals for a policy they are often diluted, adapted and subverted as they move through the process of implementation. The lack of resources at the local level might require a dilution of goals, the peculiarities of the local context may necessitate policy adaption and political
opposition may result in a policy being subverted from its original goals (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Hill and Hupe 2009).

An alternative starting point is to examine the activities of those who self-define their work as 'sport development'. Many of these practitioners are employed by public sector organisations or by national sports organisations although a significant number are employed by non-sport organisations that use sport to attract young people so that personal or community development objectives can be addressed. Taking practitioners as the starting point soon highlights the difficulties of this approach as a series of boundary problems rapidly emerge. There are many examples of practitioners who seek to achieve non-sports objectives through attracting people, young people in particular, into sport. The youth worker who uses sport to engage young people so that she can undertake personal development activity; the member of a religious body who uses sport as the basis for missionary work; and the political activist who uses sport as a way of attracting and retaining members. It is certainly a moot point whether these practitioners should be considered to be engaged in sport development when it is clear that they would not define sport development as their primary concern. However, it is undeniable that much 'high quality' (another contested concept) sport development takes place outside the expected organisational contexts of schools, municipalities and sports clubs.

In some policy areas, medicine being the classic example, the boundary maintenance function is undertaken by a professional body. In the UK for example, the British Medical Association is highly influential not only in deciding how doctors are trained and when they are fit to practise, but also in determining what is considered legitimate medical treatment. This scope and depth of influence is clearly lacking in the area of sport development. In almost all countries entry to the occupations associated with sport development, such as sports development officer and coach, is very open. Where licensing does exist it tends to be organised and enforced by the state rather than by a professional body. However, while there are relatively few examples of the state controlling access to the practice of sport development and coaching the state, in most countries, plays a crucial role in defining what sports can be developed (at least at public expense). Most states that provide a public subsidy to sport define the scope of the subsidy and may prioritise funding and thus development activity in relation to Olympic sports, the more martial sports or traditional sports, depending upon political priorities such as the pattern of diplomatic relations or the imperatives of nation-building.

An analysis of the role of the state serves to draw attention to the importance of the concept of power and the fact that any definition of sport development will reflect the associated set of power relations. Definitions of substantive policy areas such as sport development are the outcome of a set of prior decisions not only about who is to be targeted, for what purpose, in what way and by whom, but also about how the need for action is identified, who has the power to define need and who determines that sufficient change/development has taken place. The
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longstanding debate within the global economic development literature about the nature of the development process and to whose advantage it operates, albeit with much more significant consequences for people's lives than sport development, is a valuable point of comparison. The power of international organisations of rich countries to define 'good development' and the conditions to be met by the countries being developed certainly has parallels in many countries with regard to sport development. The balance of emphasis (and resources) between elite and mass sport, between competitive sport and non-competitive physical activities and between age groups and genders are almost always the outcome of the operation of policy networks of varying degrees of exclusivity.

The exercise of power is a thread that runs through much recent analysis of sport development activity and provides ample evidence of the role of privileged social groups and organised interests in defining the structures within which the contemporary experience of sport takes place and also with imbuing the activity of sport with its supposed moral aura and its mystique of character-building. Other common features of the contemporary sport development policy process include: the central, and often dominant, role of the state; the degree to which states and other key policy actors such as the media have accepted uncritically the late nineteenth century mythologizing of the positive benefits of sport; the extent to which sport development is used as an instrument to achieve non-sport social and economic purposes; and the way interest coalitions have emerged around sub-fields of sport development, with elite sport development being supported, in many countries, by a particularly effective coalition of interests. A final feature of the current pattern of sport development is the extent to which the voice of one group is conspicuous by its absence - that of those being developed. It is undeniable that there are many examples of sport development activities which create welcome opportunities to participate in sport and where the developers take steps to identify the preferences of those targeted for development. However, there are still many examples, perhaps the majority, where sport development is something that is done to the particular target group (whether they are women, young people, the impoverished, or even elite athletes), sometimes something that is done for them, but it is rarely something done by or with them. Power over resources rarely moves from the funder or provider to the consumer or object of development.

In summary, attempts at defining the scope, objectives and impact of sport development need to take account not only of the underlying power relations between policy actors, but also the limited evidence base and the influence of storylines on policy. With these strictures in mind it is appropriate to review existing attempts to define sport development. One, perhaps wishfully simple, view of sport development is that it is about 'getting more people to play more sport'. However, this definition over-emphasises the role of sport in 'sport development' and underplays the instrumental attitude of most governments to sport (i.e. the non-sport objectives that sport is thought to be able to achieve). Collins (1995: 21) expands on this definition and
suggests that sport development is 'a process whereby effective opportunities, processes, systems and structures are set up to enable and encourage people in all or particular groups and areas to take part in sport and recreation or to improve their performance to whatever level they desire'. Collins' definition, given in 1995, reflects an aspirational definition and was the product of a time, in the UK at least, when sport development was associated more closely with increasing participation, and when participation was organised around a traditional range of sports delivered through a framework of public provision and voluntary clubs. Collins' definition is also interesting because it emphasises the creation of opportunities (which people are free to take advantage of or not) rather than emphasising behavioural change where indifference to sport is perceived as the core problem. Another definition from the 1990s reflects this alternative and more interventionist approach. In addition to referring to the creation of opportunities for participation and improvement the definition also notes that 'Sports development is a process by which interest and desire to take part may be created in those currently indifferent to the message of sport' (Sports Council North West, 1991: 3, emphasis added). While Collins' definition stresses the role of sport development activity in the creation of outputs i.e. opportunities for sport development to take place, the latter definition stresses outcomes (increased participation or improved performance).

Since the 1990s a new dimension to the definition of sport development has emerged and is normative and moralistic - it is less 'sport for sports sake' and more 'sport for good'. Hylton and Bramham (2008: 2) argue that 'sport development is more accurately a term used to describe policies, processes and practices that form an integral feature of the work involved in providing sporting opportunities and positive sporting experiences' (emphasis added). This is a view of sport development reinforced in 2006 by the then Minister for Sport, Richard Caborn who argued that 'if we are to prove that the [sport] sector can address government's agendas across the UK, and ... what it can do for others, be it tackling the obesity crisis in health, greater social inclusion in our communities and of course producing world class talent for our 2012 athletes and beyond - then it needs to be fit for purpose’ (ISPAL 2006, quoted in Hylton and Bramham 2008: 3). This utilitarian and instrumental notion of sport development is a long way from the creation of opportunities envisaged by Collins in the mid 1990s.

It should already be clear that sports development is highly contested in terms of objectives (which range from talent identification and development, through enhanced health to moral improvement), practices (ranging from the development of sport specific technical skills to recreational 'fun days') and practitioners (ranging from career sports development officers and coaches to youth worker and religious missionaries). Moreover, there is, in many countries, an actual or emerging tension between three orientations to sport development. The first identifies the promotion of participation in sport as the central concern much along the lines of the sport for all policy of the Council of Europe launched in the mid 1970s; the second prioritises talent identification and development; and the third treats sport as an instrument to achieve a variety of non-sport objectives related to health, community development and education for example.
The ambiguity, uncertainty and tensions surrounding sport development policy and practice are, in part, a consequence of the adaptability of sport and its capacity to attract young people, but also a consequence of its attraction to government as a relatively low cost, high visibility and malleable response to a wide range of social policy issues. There is little indication that these characteristics of sport development will alter in the near future. Sport development is characterised not only by its scope and diversity, but also by its highly politicised character and its dynamism.

References


[1] This paper is a slightly revised version of the Introduction to the *Handbook of Sport Development* edited by Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green and published by Routledge in 2011. It is reproduced with permission from Routledge.