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Community Sports Projects and effective Community Empowerment; A case study in Rochdale

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How can community empowerment be most effectively achieved through the use of sport? In a case study of a bespoke voluntary sector project, an action research approach revealed insights into effective community empowerment. Although focused on a comparatively small project within a provincial UK town, the issues addressed and lessons learned can be generalised and transferred much more universally to community based sports delivery. Detached from mainstream providers, and more agile and responsive to local needs, the project succeeded in achieving a very local degree of ownership and control. The study revealed the limitations of much mainstream provision and some of the sustainability vulnerabilities of small scale projects, with funding dependencies in delivering broader structural change. The project challenged many of the values and approaches of its larger statutory neighbours and signified exemplary good practice. It demonstrated how to achieve sustainable community development despite its own funding being in jeopardy. And it further challenged its statutory neighbours to consider adopting its practices, investing in the project's long term future or presiding over its eventual demise.

Keywords: Sport, Community Development, Empowerment, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on community empowerment within a community sport project managed by the Rochdale Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations (hereafter referred to as RoFTRA). Community empowerment necessitates the integration of community development principles, a movement away from the 'development of sport in communities' to the 'development of communities through sport', and a focus on the relationship

between the community and the provider (Coalter, 2002; Houlihan and White, 2002; Hylton and Totten, 2007b; Bolton et al., 2008). Yet, despite increasing investment in this type of work, there has been a lack of research on it, and on the impact of community sport on community empowerment (Coalter et al., 2000; Long and Sanderson, 2001; Long et al., 2002; Strategy Unit, 2002). This criticism formed the basis of the rationale behind this research. The action research nature of the study, based on community development principles, promoted a critical consciousness whereby research findings were recycled back into practice alongside theoretical reflection. Analysis of power relations determined that empowerment is an ongoing process of continuous struggle.

Rochdale Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations

Historically, RoFTRA followed a remit focused around supporting its members (individual tenants and residents associations on social housing estates), by lobbying and campaigning on their behalf to mainstream agencies, predominantly around housing issues (RoFTRA, 2004). Social housing estates across Rochdale are typified by high levels of anti-social behaviour and crime, health inequalities, low educational attainment and above average levels of unemployment. This is illustrated by Rochdale's ranking as the 10th worst Borough in England and Wales (out of 354) in terms of 'hot spots' ('rank of local concentration') in the 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation (DCLG, 2008).

Rochdale Community Sports

Established in 2001, the RoFTRA Community Sports Project (hereafter referred to as Rochdale Community Sports and abbreviated as RCS) represented an organisational shift away from dealing with just housing issues, towards a broader remit of social regeneration. In many respects this mirrored similar UK policy trends that place emphasis on people and the development of social capital in communities (Coalter et al., 2000, Long and Bramham, 2006). RCS was distinctive, and perhaps unique, in terms of its positioning within a tenants' federation, independent from the state (local authority); and its role as a central aspect of ROFTRA's aims for community engagement and empowerment (RoFTRA, 2004). It combined direct delivery with longer term capacity building.

RCS received its funding independently from a series of grants, originally from Sport England and later the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (although there was some doubt as to how this would continue in the period after this research was conducted). RCS worked in partnership with tenants and residents associations to engage children and young people in and through sport, and to plan and deliver sport and recreation services in the heart of their own council housing estates. It had very few externally driven targets and objectives resulting in a level of freedom to respond to community needs that is highly unusual in today's performance management culture. This gave RCS the autonomy, and RoFTRA's members and their communities a "voice", to challenge the balance of power held by the local authority and Rochdale Cultural Trust (which houses the sport and leisure functions for the Borough), and influence the planning and delivery of service provision.

RCS aimed to balance delivery of sports activities with the development of skills and capacity (RoFTRA, 2001). RCS also represented the interests of social housing communities on Borough wide partnerships and attempted to ensure that the needs of these communities were considered when making decisions at this strategic level. The project provides an example of the 'development of communities through sport' rationale, and was underpinned conceptually from its inception by five key principles (RoFTRA, 2001):

- Participation Catalyst
- Engagement
- Capacity Building
- Empowerment
- Sustainability

Purpose of Research

Evaluation often ignores outcomes such as the development of social capital and the strengthening of community groups, both of which are crucial elements in the empowerment of communities. Our research provided an opportunity to examine what contribution Community Sports Development makes to community involvement and subsequently community empowerment (Sugden and Bairner, 1992; Blackshaw and Long, 2005; Coalter, 2007). In order to do this, the study needed to look beyond what is presented externally at both a policy and delivery level, and concentrate attention on the power relations that underpin provision and result in

structures in society that exclude and marginalise some groups, whilst protecting and enabling others (Rowe, 2004; Ledwith, 2005). This research, embedded in its “real world” context, analysed power relations within community sport at a micro level, using a case study approach. The RCS Organisational Framework is outlined in Figure 1 and shows the different relationships the project had internally and externally. It examined how the approach to delivery enabled (or disabled) the empowerment of tenants and residents associations and their communities. Its analysis considered challenges to structural constraints and power relations both within and beyond a sporting context.

{Insert “Figure 1; RCS Organisational Framework”}

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND COMMUNITY SPORT

Community Empowerment

Community empowerment cannot just be thought of as “giving of confidence, skills and power to communities to shape and influence what public bodies do for them” (DCLG, 2007:12), but also the autonomous capacity for communities to do things for themselves. Shaw (2000) suggests community empowerment remains limited in its scope when focusing solely on partnerships between communities and public bodies. A more radical stance would advocate real transfers of power to communities, enabling them to identify the causes (rather than symptoms) of social problems such as anti-social behaviour, and develop solutions to tackle them (Ledwith, 2005). Power

is central to the analysis of Community Sports Development (CSD) as it is omnipresent as the central dynamic of all social life (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2002), and therefore a pervasive influence on all CSD. Power is an ability to influence decision making despite the potential opposition of others (Horne, Tomlinson and Whannel, 1999).

Empowering communities involves some shift in power from dominant groups to communities, enabling them to influence decisions and services that affect them, and also to take action independently of dominant groups (Schuftan, 1996; Ledwith, 2005). This cannot be viewed as merely the transfer of power from one group to another: it is a much more complex process operating to different degrees and with varying success (Checkoway, 1997). Practices that appear empowering can actually be manipulated by dominant groups for their own purposes and some empowerment strategies have been criticised for being tokenistic; avoiding any real shift in power, despite creating the illusion of greater influence for communities (Burr, 1995; Berner and Phillips, 2005; CDX, 2008). Ledwith (2005) argues that empowering individuals can help to empower groups and then communities, potentially resulting in the development of social movements. These outcomes are “vital to plans for sustainable integrated economic and social development” (Lawson, 2005:147). As Ledwith (2005) maintains, there is a difference between good work, (which may improve the quality of life in communities) and transformative work (that aims to tackle the unequal power relations that result in social inequality).

Community Sports Development

Hylton and Totten (2007b:80) characterise community sport as “a form of intervention in sport and recreation which in some way addresses inequalities inherent in more, established, mainstream, sports provision.” Top-down, ‘one solution fits all’ bureaucratic community sports schemes have failed to reach and engage communities beyond an initial contact, and have subsequently had little impact on social regeneration or long-term empowerment (Butcher, 1994). Success depends on securing the involvement of communities in their own projects, and Bolton et al. (2008) argue for a co-dependant “non hierarchical” partnership between citizens, communities and providers in the governance of effective CSD. A Community Development approach that decentralises decision-making, and actively involves communities in the development and delivery of projects is needed, in order for there to be any realistic opportunity for the achievement of social policy goals.

Community Development

Some of the limitations of community development are “thoughtless action” and “action-less thought” (Ledwith, 2005). These refer to practice which takes place without critical thought and critical thought which is not put into practice. Successful community development requires “thoughtful action” to challenge power structures and to embed local control through “community consultation, empowerment and involvement in sustainable transformative change” (Hylton and Totten, 2007b:81). A “community led” approach puts emphasis on grass roots community involvement, citizen participation, collectivisation, empowerment and sustainability.

Chanan et al. (1999) argue that community members are in the best position to express local needs and wishes and these should be incorporated in regeneration programmes. However, community involvement as a policy has sometimes been criticised as a token gesture aimed at quelling the frustrations of subordinate groups by offering them a place within existing structures that remain dominated by powerful agencies unresponsive to community need (Arnstein, 1969; Shaw, 2006). Capacity building is necessary whereby communities take the lead in developing and delivering activity in their own communities. But as Skinner (1997) warns, if capacity work is not supported by a commitment to hand over power, empowerment as a by-product is unlikely to occur. A lack of structural change can masquerade under the pretence of devolved power, whilst ignoring the material conditions that exist within communities that create a power imbalance in the first place (Ledwith, 2005).

The creation of social capital can act as a 'check' on state power, and can be found in a variety of cultural activities such as sport; providing a focus around which people can come together, develop relationships and in some cases develop social networks (Blackshaw and Long, 2005; Matarasso, 2007). Coalter (2007:50) identifies social capital as the "formation of social networks based on social and group norms which enable people to trust and cooperate with each other". Activities that are developed spontaneously because the community want them are more likely to be successful than those facilitated more remotely by other agencies. This has the potential to form the basis of

collective action which can challenge dominant power relations in society (Ledwith, 2005). Combining the interest and social capital generated via the RCS with the organisation's pre-existing networks, offered the potential for sports activities to contribute towards wider transformative action (RoFTRA, 2007). Action research can play an important role in this process as it is crucial that communities are supported to develop critical consciousness to enable them to make informed choices and decisions, and generate a philosophy of 'praxis' (Ledwith, 2005).

“Thoughtful Action” and Praxis

“Liberation is a praxis; the action and reflection of women and men upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, quoted in Freire and Macedo, 1998:73). 'Praxis' is generated through “thoughtful action”. Practice is focused by a critical awareness of the social context in which it takes place. Praxis is the symbiosis of outlook and action, the application of critical perspective to a social context with the intention of transforming it for the better. It can be enhanced when strategic alliances are formed within the political practices of subordinate groups. Community empowerment can be seen as a direct consequence of this 'critical consciousness' as groups take action for social justice (Ledwith, 2005). Long and Bramham, (2006:136) question the rationale behind discourses relating to social inclusion and empowerment, arguing that policies frequently concentrate on tackling the symptoms of exclusion, not the causes, and “a simple inversion will not promote inclusion if it fails to tackle the process of exclusion.” So crucially, CSD needs to tackle underlying issues that cause inequalities in society (Chanan et al., 1999; Ledwith, 2005).

Matarasso (2007:452) argues strongly that working in partnership with community groups, and building social capital through cultural activities, provides people with more control over services affecting their community and “the importance of this for community development should not be underestimated”.

Coalter (2003) argues that social inclusion and the subsequent focus on developing social capital is now the main influence for community sports development policy. This emphasises the need to empower communities to allow them to play an active role in the planning and decision making of community sports schemes. Empowerment exists to differing degrees and the approach utilised for delivery of community sports projects can impact upon the extent to which empowerment is achieved. Sport has the potential to act as an ingredient in enabling subordinate groups to challenge dominant structures of power that systematically exclude and marginalise at both a micro and macro level (Budd, 2001; Ledwith, 2005). The identification of a critical praxis which challenges embedded inequalities and injustices with a view to creating social transformation through “thoughtful action” is aspirational for best practice in CSD and therefore guided the action research approach to this research.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The bulk of the research was undertaken in 2008. This research aimed to get ‘under the skin’ of RCS and to analyse power relations that impact upon RCS

and influence its potential to empower communities. A qualitative approach was adopted utilising a case study framework heavily influenced by critical ethnography and action research. This provided the dual advantage of allowing the study to collect rich, insightful data, and to empower tenants from social housing estates to have their opinions, thoughts and experiences regarding RCS acted upon (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Action researchers aim not just to know the world, understand it and explain it, but to also change it (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). With this in mind, it became even more important that the research promoted citizen participation and was informed by data provided by those groups it sought to benefit.

Critical Ethnography

Critical ethnography allowed the researcher to immerse herself in the social world being studied using data gathered from community sports sessions, tenants' and residents' meetings, strategic planning meetings and in more informal areas of RCS activity, reflecting the variety of different settings that the project works within. Thomas (1993:2-3) argues that a critical ethnographer describes, analyses and opens "to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centres and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain" thereby offering a researcher the potential to use their findings to effect social change. Throughout this study, the researcher took the guise of a 'complete participant' – playing a dual role as an employee and researcher (Robson, 2002). Unlike systemic observation where the observer does not interact with those being studied, this form of observation provided opportunities for the

researcher to interact with participants in order to delve deeper into points of interest (Thomas, 1993).

Action Research

The epistemological foundations of this study were heavily influenced by employment of one of the authors within RCS. The researcher's insider status was central to the methodological approach taken, and was of huge importance in providing access to the research setting, helping to overcome potential issues with gatekeepers, and allowing the collection of rich, insightful data (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005). Action research principles exploited the researcher's 'insider status' to follow a cyclical process whereby the findings of the study were subsequently used to improve community sport practice.

The existence of subjectivity within the research process is acknowledged as it is impossible for individuals to be completely objective. This "situated-ness" of the research is embraced as part of the researcher's praxis, to test "thoughtful ideas" and put them into practice. This allowed the researcher to delve even deeper into the hegemonic power relationships affecting the project, especially those that were a result of her own actions as RCS project manager.

From an ethical perspective, as a researcher (as opposed to RCS Project Manager) there was additional consideration given to ensuring research participants felt comfortable discussing elements of the project critically, and it was felt that the pre-existing relationships between researcher and

participants actually helped this process rather than hampered it. And a sense of critical self-consciousness guarded against cruder applications of bias. Following a cyclical action research approach, as demonstrated in Figure 2, helped to ensure that the findings of the study were acted upon, and integrated into future working practices to build capacity for community empowerment.

{Insert Figure 2; The Action Research Process (Denscombe 1998:60)}

Multiple Methods

The validity of this study was aided by the use of multiple methods (in this case, group discussions, participant observation and in-depth interviews) which allowed the triangulation of data, and the crosschecking of the existence of common theory and phenomena across all the research methods (Bell, 1993). It also meant “multiple realities” to be studied holistically in their own context. The findings of this study and its methodological approach are applicable beyond its local boundaries as despite lived experience being unique, people and groups in society can share similar circumstances (Blackshaw, 1999). This provides an opportunity for conclusions developed via this study to inform practice in other community sports projects in different geographic areas. A theoretical analysis of power and process to develop ‘praxis’ can help challenge established approaches, theory and practices relating to community sport and the evaluation of it, more universally (Long, 2007).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

RCS acted as a medium for community empowerment; to develop community involvement in activities; build capacity within tenants and residents associations; and develop social capital in communities. This is a service that tenants and residents associations wanted, felt was beneficial to their communities, and were able to choose their level of involvement in. In the terms of Butcher (1994), RCS was seen as a resource that is 'on tap' rather than 'on top'. And it also developed a critical consciousness amongst the key project staff at RCS about their own working practices.

Engaging Communities

Checkoway (1995) describes citizen participation as involving communities in policy planning and programme implementation resulting in benefits for both agencies and citizens. RCS promoted a strong sense of community ownership over RCS activities; essentially it had strong local credibility. Although RoFTRA had a relationship to statutory agencies, findings revealed that it was more independent and representative of local organisation and democracy. As a tenants association, RoFTRA had established routes of consultation into extensive local networks penetrating the social and cultural lives of the estates it represents. Those who might otherwise consider themselves disenfranchised or excluded from other statutory bodies have a far greater sense of ownership over RoFTRA, more community influence, empowerment and representation.

A central premise of RCS is that it works with and through tenants and residents associations to reach and engage communities in the project (RoFTRA, 2006; 2007). The research found that tenants overwhelmingly endorsed this approach and confirmed that they felt consulted by project staff, involved in the decision making and able to access support at a level they are comfortable with, as and when needed. This demonstrates similarities with the community practice approach championed by Butcher (1994), where agencies and communities work in partnership for service delivery. Mainstream sports provision in Rochdale, such as by the local authority and the Cultural Trust, was found to be prescriptive and inflexible, often not meeting the needs of the young people from social housing estates. Mainstream organisations were viewed with suspicion as there was a wariness of being manipulated in a 'public relations exercise' as a staff member illustrates,

I have links in these communities...and a lot of organisations are contacting me to try and get a toe in the door. It winds me up! Cos basically I'm doing their work and they're jumping on the bandwagon! And they'll be ticking their boxes when at the end of the day it's me and the valuable volunteers who have done the work.

Addressing Anti-Social Behaviour

There was strong feedback from the research process that indicated support for the sports sessions acting as a mechanism for the reduction of anti-social

behaviour. These activities were seen by tenants as a “discrete form of education”. For many tenants and residents associations the desire to tackle anti-social behaviour had been the reason for their establishment, and for them the RCS had been a natural link to make. One tenant emphasised that the young people turn up voluntarily and concluded that “I don’t think we’d have been able to carry on as a tenants and residents association if it hadn’t of been for the initial participation of the sports”. Sport lent weight to the association’s role in the community and enabled them to engage with young people and develop positive relationships. In addition to obvious links to the development of social capital, these arguments also demonstrate support for sport providing the initial engagement, acting as an ‘antidote to boredom’, and then creating spin-off social regeneration benefits around education (Coalter, 2007). Sport in this case is viewed as the “ideal school of democracy” (Blackshaw and Long, 2005:248) to engage young people and then act as a mechanism to integrate young people not just into more acceptable forms of behaviour, but into community life more generally.

Anne and Suzanne’s Project

Anne and her daughter Suzanne lived on a small, yet very deprived council estate (within the top 10% deprived wards in England and Wales). There were few activities or facilities for children or young people. They felt increasingly frustrated by this, and having come into contact with a Community Youth Worker who was managed by RCS, expressed an interest in setting up a small youth club on the estate. They secured access to a small room in the rear of the local housing office, accessed basic youth work

training, and opened one night a week. After consulting with children who attended the club, they contacted RCS about setting up football coaching sessions. This developed into a second weekly session, and following successful funding applications, outdoor pursuits sessions and sports-based training courses for volunteers were provided, and the small youth club room was expanded into a purposefully designed youth club. They also become involved in a local multi-agency meeting with staff from statutory agencies to look at improving the estate, having being encouraged to attend by RCS, and played an integral role in the planning and development of a kick pitch and play area on the estate for local kids. They now run three evenings of activity for local young people, and are recognised as community leaders, being the first port of call for many statutory agencies working on their estate.

Building Capacity

The promotion of community capacity building and self help can be an ideological myth that with a minimal amount of support, communities are able to generate their own alternative provision. As a result, empowerment policies may effectively damage opportunities to challenge for the redistribution of resources, resulting in little structural change with deprived communities remaining on the periphery of mainstream sports provision (Berner and Phillips, 2005). As one tenant argued

We do things in isolation... because people have left us to it...
avoided the social housing estates saying 'well (RCS) are doing
that why should we?'

This is contrary to the two-way partnership approach advocated by Checkoway (1995) as mainstream sports agencies such as the local authority and the Cultural Trust may use RCS as an excuse to redeploy resources elsewhere. Despite the great advantages of independence, the lack of formal links to mainstream provision has affected the ability of the RCS to advocate on behalf of social housing communities and limits the potential to bring about structural changes in mainstream sports delivery in Rochdale.

Funding Vulnerabilities

RCS was faced with a crucial dilemma in March 2009 with the projected cessation of its current funding. Its main option was to approach the Rochdale Cultural Trust and ask for the Trust to consider mainstreaming project costs either as a service level agreement with RoFTRA (thereby retaining a level of independence) or by taking RCS 'in house' within the Trust itself. Although they might secure sustainable funding for the RCS, either of these options could also potentially undermine the key elements of the project that make it successful, namely its autonomy and community ownership. So the potential mainstreaming of RCS within the Cultural Trust may enable a development of this advocacy, but conversely it could effectively neutralise it further still. It would be crucial that staff and tenants and residents associations continue to utilise their critical consciousness to manage this relationship.

Social Capital

Skinner (1997) states that for capacity building to be successful it needs to be properly resourced, and should not be seen as an alternative to mainstream provision. Both tenants and staff members provided examples of the creation of social capital through recreational activities. These included the establishment of a new tenants and residents association that formed as a result of the delivery of a dance session at a local community centre. It brought together parents and the volunteers responsible for running the centre who decided to form an association to represent the local community. This small social network has therefore become part of a much larger social movement through membership of RCS which represents the views of individual estates at a borough wide level, offering the potential to generate power in the community (Ledwith, 2005). As one tenant commented,

it gets more people interested in being volunteers or providing other services themselves by forming their own groups and finding their own funding. So it's had a positive knock-on benefit.

Some of the tenants argued that the sports activities have increased awareness of tenants and residents associations and their work, whilst one tenant referred to improved relationships between residents "I think the parents know we're trying to do something for the children as well, so besides the children being positive to us, the parents are". A staff member used sports sessions as the basis for developing relationships between refugees and asylum seekers and their host communities as, "through the sports you don't really need English as a first language...and it'll build up the trust and

friendship with other young people”. Sports activities were also highlighted as a method to tackle territorial issues between estates by bringing young people and volunteers from tenants associations together, who had previously spent their time working against each other, as this quote demonstrates,

Normally, never twain shall meet, but...we've had a couple of successful tournaments with the young people and also its helped build up the staff [volunteers] relationship on both sides whereas even the adults are very territorial – they just wouldn't mix. So now they're actually linking in with each other.

In these examples, sports activities offer wider potential to make a real difference not just to those individuals involved in them directly but also to the wider communities; the benefits of social capital generated by individuals being transferable to whole communities (Lawson, 2005).

Influencing Mainstream Provision

As Harper (2001) concedes, social capital is not a 'panacea' and may have a potential downside. Blackshaw and Long (2005) recognise it can also lead to the integration of social networks into existing structures which perpetuate inequality. And Community Sport has been criticised as being a form of compensation, providing a shield for a lack of willingness amongst mainstream agencies to divert funding and resources to tackle the causes of social unrest (Sugden and Bairner, 1992). Yet there is a clear difference

between such short term-ism and initiatives structured around providing holistic programmes of activity and support for young people.

The overall evidence from this research emphasises the benefits of developing social capital through sport, and as Ledwith (2005:2) summarises, “Collective action grows in strength as individuals form groups, identify issues and develop projects, and projects form alliances that have the potential to become movements,” and these movements can empower communities to challenge dominant arrangements. Even though RCS had previously felt isolated and lacking any effective mechanism to influence mainstream sports provision, it has subsequently been able to pressurise the Cultural Trust to focus more on community Development through sport and negotiate a consideration of potential mainstream funding towards running costs. As Morgan (1994:72) argues,

Since the dominant class cannot treat any threats to its dominance lightly, it can do little else but negotiate with and make concessions to, agents of subordinate groups.

Louise’s Project

Louise and her family live on a neglected council estate within a more affluent ward. As a result, the estate was often overlooked by statutory agencies and deemed comparatively not to be a priority, irrespective of its semi-rural isolated position and rising anti-social behaviour levels. And whilst RCS cannot claim to have initiated activity on the estate (as Louise had already run

a summer sports programme with support from the local authority), it can cite the work done with Louise as a prime example of how the project worked alongside tenants and residents associations to empower them. RCS supported Louise and other volunteers to lead, develop and manage their own sports and activities programmes that ultimately became quite self-reliant. RCS provided support including guidance on programme design, creating pathways and support for volunteers to access training, help with multiple funding applications, support with book-keeping, and attending meetings between Louise and statutory agencies to 'champion' the association's work. Subsequently, the association gained representation on a number of local and borough-wide partnerships. This has resulted in Louise securing mainstream funding to cover the costs of running a community base for five nights a week, and for school holiday sports programmes which are still running now.

Enabling Self-Help

Feedback from tenants indicated that RCS was of immense value to them as associations, and to their communities. As tenant A summarises,

It's an important project because it actually delivers within the community for a start off...it's a project that the community feel they can have an actual involvement in and to a degree influence how it's delivered.

Tenants associations have embraced RCS wholeheartedly, having regular contact with project staff, planning their own sports programmes, and in many

cases delivering them themselves (RoFTRA, 2006). RCS provides support to deliver sports activities, and for many this is vital and enables them to establish and run their own sports projects (RoFTRA, 2006). The active involvement of community groups in the delivery and planning of these activities is more empowering than having a pre-packaged service delivered on an estate (Butcher, 1994). Tenants A and B argue that community groups are often better placed to deliver services as they possess a better understanding of community need and have better links into these neighbourhoods. Both have worked with RCS to develop capacity to deliver and organise their own sports provision, to compensate for a lack of support from mainstream agencies. As tenant B argues,

What you've got to do is become a self-sufficient community...you're empowering your own community so you don't need other agencies, if they let you down...you just pull in your own resources.

The approaches to delivery used by the RCS provided tenants and residents associations on social housing estates with the ability to influence decision-making on the delivery of sports activities within their neighbourhoods, and far more. Community participation extended further through routes established by RoFTRA into other multi-agency campaigning. Community concerns about social justice were developed through critical consciousness into a form of politicisation that connected local issues to regional ones and the broader structural arrangements that create them. In this way RCS acted as a

conveyer for “participatory democracy” (Ledwith, 2005), as a vehicle for raising social and political concerns, as a means through which communities could organise to gain representation, to campaign and to engage in resistance against the injustices they faced.

Addressing Restrictions on Impact

Despite some limitations, overall analysis revealed that RCS acted successfully as a medium for community empowerment, but the impact varied amongst individual estates. A dominant hegemony can emerge within communities and tenants associations themselves (Burr, 1995). Some staff members described tenants and residents associations as “little power bases” that can exclude other members of the community, arguing that tenants and residents associations are historically structured and not impartial, and that for RCS to become more representative of whole communities they need to engage other disenfranchised groups. This would further the opportunity for RCS to transcend ‘narrow’ empowerment and strive towards the comprehensive empowerment of communities.

Although the study found that decision-making power is shared, staff ultimately had more power to make decisions than most community members. Some staff members and tenants recognised that a dominant ideology within RCS may subconsciously influence decision-making as without appropriate information, community representatives can be limited in their ability to make informed choices. This can result in the stagnation of services, where ‘a way of delivering becomes the way of delivering’ and becomes institutionalised,

effectively perpetuating the exclusion of certain sections of the community and only effecting a form of 'narrow empowerment' (Lawson, 2005).

However the action research nature of the study meant that these findings could be redressed promptly through adaptations of working practices. The recognition of potential "little power bases" or gatekeepers led to further emphasis on organising consultation sessions for children and young people to ensure that their thoughts were used within the decision-making process. In addition, proposals were drawn up for sub-groups of the RoFTRA Board, incorporating new members, to focus on different elements of work such as a 'sports' sub-group. The intention of these groups was to oversee the work undertaken by staff more closely and to contribute to the strategic direction of RCS.

Critical Consciousness

A further impact of the study was on the researcher's own critical consciousness. As Blackshaw (1999) stressed, individuals have their own perspectives on the world and this was no different in the case of the researcher having preconceptions of RCS and its work. As a result of research conducted with tenants in particular, methods employed by the researcher when working with tenants and residents associations (such as providing associations with an options list of sports activities RCS could support) were highlighted as reinforcing the dominant hegemony of the researcher and also being counter-productive from an empowerment perspective. As a result of the study, more emphasis was placed on using

consultation to identify what was 'wanted and needed' in communities and also on identifying the causes of sporting and social exclusion, and designing programmes to tackle these issues.

Extending Community Influence; Praxis

RCS offered support for tenants and residents in establishing their own sports-based projects and through this support enabled associations to challenge dominant power relations and accepted ways of service delivery. As Morgan (1994) argues, sport qualifies as a form of 'material praxis' as it helps us define who we are and what kind of life we wish to have. This links the potential for cultural activities to contribute to the empowerment of communities, and to act as a form of resistance to dominant power relations in society. Whilst sport has historically been an arena for non-transformative resistance, it still offers the potential to act as part of a wider social movement and become resistance via sport (Budd, 2001). Although most community representatives expressed their frustration at being unable to access local sports facilities, the support of RCS can enable them to move from passive resistance to taking action to transform structures that previously constrained them and their communities (Duncombe, 2007). In reference to a swimming project, one tenant stated,

They [the local authority] failed the local people miserably by being very restrictive about who they let in the building and how they used it...and it became a real issue so we took it over...and also did it for a lot less money.

Transformative Change

A strength of RCS' work was its ability to engage with tenants and residents associations and their communities to develop a range of sporting activities. This has allowed it to create a critical mass of support which has enabled it to influence the mainstream "Cultural Trust". One example was the Trust diverting mainstream resources to support RCS two months beyond a funding lifespan deadline. However this illustrates the nature of hegemonic compromise as it also resulted in some loss of autonomy and pressure for RCS to take on additional pieces of 'mainstream' sports development work. But without this additional funding RCS may have ceased to exist at all. One tenant argued, "we can only do something in our own little bubble," but RCS had the potential to transfer social capital and foster resistance developed via sports activities. It offered the potential to empower communities to challenge established power relations that excluded and marginalised subordinate groups both in a sporting context and wider society. As this example from a tenant illustrates;

They [the young people] used to play on the school field but then they fenced it off a good few years ago, and so we've pushed to get a kick pitch...[due to the management committee] we've been able to say when we wanted it open. If it had just been the school we wouldn't have been able to do that and it wouldn't have been opened...we run it really.

The sports activities were viewed as strengthening and empowering existing community groups, and providing a link into a wider social movement (in the form of RoFTRA) that could challenge power relations externally. For those tenants and residents associations who have been actively involved in RCS, it has provided them with support to build their capacity as groups to run their own sports projects, often utilising the sports activities within a broader 'plus sport' context (Coalter, 2007). This has led to the achievement of certain social regeneration outcomes such as improved education and employment. As one Staff Member states, "they've gone from playing football to the gym to employment." Crucially in this case, RCS provided support for these young people throughout this process from running initial football sessions, to negotiating free access to a gym, and ultimately supporting the young people through job interviews.

CONCLUSIONS

Action Research

Monitoring and evaluation of community sports schemes remains mainly output driven (Strategy Unit, 2002; Coalter, 2007) and focused on a presumed contribution to social inclusion. As a consequence, the real benefits of community involvement, and the differences made by community sports projects to neighbourhoods and communities are seldom identified (Long et al., 2002; Loughborough Partnership, 2004). In this study the collection of data was specifically aided by the researcher's insider status. Utilising a covert ethnographic approach to participant observation allowed the collection

of data that provided 'real life' substance and practical examples of power 'in action' within community sport.

By utilising an action research approach, 'critical consciousness' and critical reflection were used to improve working practices within RCS. Action was taken to investigate and promote the establishment of a tenant-led steering group for the project. And more emphasis was placed on the importance of consulting and communicating with tenants and residents associations, especially those who were not actively involved with the RCS. In addition, there was increased emphasis on extending consultation with communities beyond familiar gatekeepers. And, the findings of this research were integrated into the RoFTRA Community Empowerment Strategy (RoFTRA, 2008) impacting on the whole organisation (and its members), not just RCS.

Strengthening Community Empowerment

This study revealed that power is a multi-layered concept and can involve different agencies, groups, communities and individuals in a constant process of negotiation in order to either challenge dominant structures or consolidate them (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994). These power relations and negotiations interlink with forms of hegemony at both macro and micro levels (Morgan, 1994; Rowe, 2004). Power relations within RCS were deemed to not just influence the relationship between the project and mainstream agencies such as the local authority and Cultural Trust (see figure one), but also the relationships between RCS and tenants and residents associations, and internally within RCS as an organisation. All of these power-based

relationships influenced the empowerment potential of the project and its work with tenants and residents associations (Checkoway, 1995).

Whilst noting that many models of community empowerment represent the process as a continuum, this research found that it is better to represent it as a series of inter-linked and overlapping concepts. It is difficult to argue that the factors involved are as black and white as being either empowering or disempowering. For example, a coaching programme delivered in a community with a tenants and residents association empowered to direct and manage programme delivery is very different when compared to a less empowered association on another estate relying on RCS staff to plan and manage the programme. To those external to the activity, they may have looked like identical activities, but were fundamentally different experiences for each tenants and residents association. As Schuftan (1996:260) states;

Empowerment is not an outcome of a single event; it is a continuous process that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their own lives. It provides people with choices and the ability to choose, as well as to gain more control over resources they need to improve their condition.

Community Awareness

The research also highlighted the need for individuals and groups to develop 'critical consciousness' and recognise the structural constraints that result in

social exclusion (Ledwith, 2005). Analysis from the research suggested that without this form of consciousness, tenants and staff effectively perpetuated dominant and exclusionary ways of delivering community sport such as creating 'menus' of activities for tenants and residents associations to choose from, rather than providing a 'free' choice. RCS has supported tenants and residents associations to enable them to make informed choices about how and what to deliver in relation to sport on their estates whether by funding activities on their behalf, campaigning with them on issues to mainstream agencies (such as for improved access to existing facilities), helping them to run consultation sessions within their communities, or paying for volunteers to undertake training courses; all of which has contributed to the empowerment of the association and subsequently the wider community. As such, community sports activities can often be the starting point for the development of social capital that can result in the formation of new groups and networks (Blackshaw and Long, 2005; Coalter, 2007). These activities can also generate resistance to existing structures of power and the location of RCS within a community development organisation with a remit to do this, offered potential for wider collective action (RoFTRA, 2007).

Sustainability

The five RoFTRA Principles (RoFTRA, 2001) were well evidenced in practice and capture much of what is desirable in best practice. CSD operated as a 'Participation Catalyst' to promote the initial engagement of individuals into the project. 'Engagement' was maintained beyond the initial catalyst. 'Capacity Building' provided individuals and communities with new skills and knowledge.

'Empowerment' resulted in individuals and communities developing their own sports-based activities and services, and championed the sporting needs of social housing estates at a Borough wide level. And 'Sustainability' was ensured through the promotion of self-reliance in the development of individual projects and the long-term provision of new sports-based activities on Rochdale Borough council estates. In summary, RCS was extremely successful in creating effective community empowerment. But what of the sustainability of RCS itself?

Earlier, reference was made to the temporary nature of RCS funding and negotiations with the Cultural Trust to mainstream funding and protect the long term viability of RCS. This carried its own dangers as "mainstreaming" might have resulted in RCS being incorporated and diluted, subsequently losing its unique values and method of delivery as it gets entrenched within the dominant hegemony of the mainstream. If funding was secured via this route, it would be desirable for RCS to negotiate an agreement with the Trust regarding continued support for, and involvement of, its communities in the management of its work.

At this point the reader may be wishing a happy ending in which the successes of RCS are recognised and supported by the Trust? This did not happen, and RCS no longer exists! Given its own financial instability, RoFTRA opted strategically to attempt to gain support from the Trust for RCS, but RCS was denied funding, much to the intense frustration and disappointment of all those involved in RCS. One can only speculate how RCS and its' history of

resistance was perceived by the dominant regional hegemonic player, but “budget revisions” resulted in RCS being closed down in September 2009. Despite this, and because of earlier good practice by RCS, several tenants and residents associations are still actively delivering sport and physical activity within their communities. So Anne and Suzanne’s Project still exists, and Louise’s Project still exists, and some other projects initiated by RCS have been integrated into the Cultural Trust’s Neighbourhoods and Communities programme. So aspects of community empowerment enabled through RCS continue to thrive.

Community Ownership

RCS did effectively strengthen community empowerment. The local identity of the project lent it credibility and acceptance which in turn lead to a stronger community engagement and penetrative impact. A sense of local democracy helped to build capacity for self-help which strengthened community empowerment. RCS worked because of its very locally embedded credibility. It worked because it was not the Government, not the Council, not the Cultural Trust and not Sport England. It was trusted and not an “outsider”. It was independent and unfettered by macro-politics. It was agile and responsive. RCS worked because it operated directly with tenants and residents associations and members of social housing communities, giving them ownership over a service which was provided on their estates; whereas mainstream provision prescribes a service that most commonly does not even reach their estates. As a Staff Member contends,

They [mainstream sports agencies] need to learn from this project don't they? Not just what can be done, but what makes it distinctive and effective and apply it across their own resources as otherwise the impact that this organisation has...is always going to be limited. Teach the world!

Community Sports Development: best practice

There are lessons learned in Rochdale that can definitely be exported elsewhere. Statutory agencies should strongly consider developing arms-length partnerships with, or out-sourcing operations to, appropriately placed voluntary and community sector agencies. These most often have better and more established links into deprived communities and hard to reach groups. Community groups need to be involved in the delivery of services as real partners, not as a token gesture, as the latter generates mistrust and does not improve service delivery. This research has demonstrated the impact of community sport is more substantial when delivered with the active support and involvement of community groups. The real benefits of community sports schemes are often missed by conventional monitoring and evaluation techniques. There is a need to examine the potential of using longitudinal studies and Action Research focused on specific cases. The views and opinions of project beneficiaries who have 'lived' the project also need to be utilised. And CSD practitioners need to be critically conscious, reflexive, and constantly evaluating their work; whilst engaged in praxis.

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