

## Research Note

**“Listen To Us”: Sport for Development Practitioners’ Insights for Funders**Per G. Svensson<sup>1</sup>, Ashlyn Hardie<sup>2</sup>,<sup>1</sup>Louisiana State University, School of Kinesiology<sup>2</sup>Clemson University, Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

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**ABSTRACT**

As sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives have become more prominent, external stakeholders have adopted unrealistic expectations for program outcomes and funding models. Organizations are often left competing with other grassroots SDP organizations for grants with resource-affluent funders since funding streams have not kept pace with the growth of the field. Although some funders have begun adjusting their approaches, the purpose of this research note was to further explore how practitioners themselves perceive that funders can better support SDP efforts. Open-ended survey responses from grassroots leaders ( $n=122$ ) highlight a need for long-term funding opportunities, investment in capacity building and overhead expenses, consideration of local contexts, strategic approaches to innovation and entrepreneurial pursuits, and improvement regarding trust and power dynamics.

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One consequence of the unequivocal embrace of sport as a viable tool for social change by the United Nations was that many stakeholders adopted idealistic (and thus unrealistic) expectations that sport-based programs provide a simple solution to complex social issues (Darnell et al., 2019). The research is clear, however, that even well-intentioned programs have unintended outcomes (Burnett, 2015) and sport has a deeply rooted history of being used for both positive and negative outcomes (Darnell et al., 2019). For many years, sport for development and peace (SDP) scholars have therefore argued for the realization that the extent to which organizations deliver desired outcomes depend on the structure and management of SDP efforts (Schulenkorf, 2017; Welty Peachey, 2019). In other words,

“sport *organisations*, rather than simply sport, are the true agents of social change” (Gardam et al., 2017, p. 548, *italics* in original text).

Important advancements have been made in terms of research on program design, external partnerships, leadership, and innovation, as well as how SDP managers manage the growing pressures and paradoxes associated with emerging hybrid organizational forms (McSweeney et al., 2022; Raw et al., 2022; Svensson & Cohen, 2020; Welty Peachey et al., 2018b), among several other topics. Yet, few studies have directly explored how practitioners themselves view funding relationships in SDP. The purpose of this research note, therefore, is to begin to address the existing knowledge gap in practitioner perspectives on funders’ resource needs and resource mobilization in SDP. Specially, we are guided by the research question: how do SDP practitioners believe that funders could support future SDP efforts?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

For this research note, a funder is defined as an entity providing financial resources to support grassroots nonprofits operating SDP programs. The SDP field has undergone significant growth and now involves a broad range of stakeholders in the development, funding, and implementation of sport for social change programs in communities around the world (Whitley et al., 2019, 2020). The funding mechanisms of development agencies and community-based nonprofits in general continue to evolve. These changes have had a trickle-down effect on local SDP organizations, which continue to modify their funding models in hopes of securing financial stability (Svensson & Seifried, 2017), as the SDP field becomes increasingly institutionalized and professionalized (McSweeney et al.,

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2022). The funding mechanisms within SDP are increasingly dynamic and complex. For example, in some contexts, international bilateral development agencies are providing scaled funding for projects (e.g., Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Germany's Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, and France's Agence Française de Développement [AFD]; see Sherry & Schulenkorf, 2016). Relatedly, during the 2020 Finance in Common Summit, a set of public development banks co-created the Coalition of Development Banks for Sport for Sustainable Development. State actors are indeed involved in a variety of partnerships with SDP organizations (Lindsey et al., 2020), however, government funding in SDP remains limited to certain countries (LeCrom & Svensson, 2022), and does not (yet) represent a primary funding source for the majority of community-based nonprofits implementing SDP programs (Svensson et al., 2018). In other contexts, the introduction of SDP discourses within national policy frameworks is enabling more substantial domestic funding opportunities while sport government bodies are also investing in different SDP priorities within certain contexts (e.g., FIFA, IOC, Norges Idrettsforbund [NIF], Sport Canada, Sport England; See Darnell et al., 2019).

The evolution of the SDP field has included a significant increase in grassroots organizations involved in the operation of SDP initiatives. Historically, these organizations have been financed through a diverse range of sources including foreign embassies, bilateral development agencies, sport federations, foundations, individual donations, earned revenues, and intergovernmental agencies (Banda, 2017; Lindsey et al., 2020; McSweeney et al., 2023; Straume, 2019). Insight from global benchmark studies of capacity levels suggests that the majority of SDP nonprofits depend on foundation funding as their primary source of financial support (Svensson et al., 2018). The number of funders, particularly foundations, dedicated to financing SDP efforts, however, has not kept pace with the growth of the sector. As a result, many organizations compete for similar resources. Additionally, unbalanced growth among funders and implementing organizations have created asymmetrical power structures where SDP organizations are heavily dependent on select few funding agencies or even a single funder (Millington et al., 2019). The significant influence of external funders is also seen with younger emerging SDP organizations, which in some cases have gone as far as to shift their mission to what practitioners perceive is more attractive to external funders (Dixon & Svensson, 2019). SDP leaders have for many years expressed pressure of ensuring an organization is perceived to have measurable and scalable programs (Hayhurst et al., 2018).

Historically, how SDP organizations spend their financial resources has largely been focused on addressing the desired goals and outcomes of the funding agencies (Whitley et al., 2020). The issues at hand are also compounded by the history of the local communities, which in several cases were previously colonized by the same country or similar countries to the ones providing funding for SDP programs (Darnell et al., 2019). Yet, here again, it is important to avoid generalizations about SDP funders given the diverse range of actors providing financial support in this space. There are examples of SDP funders transforming their funding priorities and grant programs based on feedback from practitioners. Comic Relief, for example, learned they needed to adapt their funding strategies to better align with the needs of the local SDP agencies tasked with implementing sport for social change programs (Svensson & Loat, 2019). Likewise, Women Win recently developed ONSIDE Fund, an unrestricted funding initiative driven by a global practitioner advisory panel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also ushered in unprecedented change not only among SDP organizations and their immediate financial needs but also among funding agencies. For example, in May 2020 Beyond Sport, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, Comic Relief, LA84 Foundation, and several other SDP funding agencies joined forces to create the Sport for Good Relief Fund as a joint effort to provide immediate support to SDP organizations around the world facing significant financial hardships. Over the next 12 months, the program distributed roughly \$1.6 million USD across more than 100 organizations. Additionally, a network of more than three dozen agencies was mobilized to provide in-kind support through consultancy and training opportunities, focused on key topics such as fundraising (Chalat & Fraser, 2021).

Researchers have suggested that a critical paradigm shift is needed among funders from existing models centered around evidence of outputs to new models focused on understanding if more meaningful and sustainable investments and resource allocations are to become a reality in SDP (Whitley et al., 2020). Indeed, the historical emphasis on evidence is why many practitioners have reported a sense of obligation to quantify every aspect of their programs and push for scaling up quickly out of fear of losing out on future funding if funders' demands for quantifiable evidence are not met. These practices have remained common in the SDP field since reporting program failures or unintended outcomes can "have a detrimental effect on project funding, even when these limitations are the result of broader structural issues beyond the [nonprofit's] control" (Jeanes & Lindsey,

2014, p. 209). The aim of this study was therefore to explore the voices of practitioners to understand their perspectives on how funders work with grassroots organizations as well as their current organizational needs.

## METHODS

We draw on open-ended survey responses from leaders of SDP nonprofits from across a broad range of geographical locations, which were collected as part of a larger global survey on resource management in SDP. A sampling frame was established by identifying community-based SDP organizations through a systematic review of the directories of SDP-specific networks (e.g., Beyond Sport, sportanddev, Common Goal [streetfootballworld]). Invitation emails were sent to a total of 966 organizational leaders. Of these survey invitations, a total of 228 survey responses were recorded, which represents a cooperation ratio of 23.6%. Upon a review of responses, incomplete responses to the open-ended question were removed for a final sample of 122. The sample is representative of the diverse program and geographic foci of the SDP field (Welty Peachey et al., 2020). The most common geographical locations (some organizations operated in more than one region) were Africa (n=51), North America (n=28), Asia, (n=23), Europe (n=23), and Latin America (n=15). The median budget size and staff size for respondents' organizations were \$190,080 USD and 9 staff members. The most common thematic areas included Health, Education, and Gender, representative of prior reports of the SDP field (cf. Svensson & Woods, 2017). The majority of organizations in this study were also founded by someone from the same region as where they were currently operating programming.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The scope of the study presented in this research note focused on data recorded through open-ended responses to a global survey of SDP leaders, where practitioners were broadly asked, "what do you want to tell Sport for Development funders in terms of how they could change or improve to better support future sport for development efforts?" The qualitative data from the open-ended survey responses were coded through a two-cycle inductive coding process (Saldaña, 2021). Both researchers independently read all responses and completed an initial round of coding. Those initial interpretations were compared and discussed before a second cycle of coding was completed to refine the data analysis through more focused coding. Analytical notes were also maintained for reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Both researchers are native to and currently conduct their research in the global North. However, both researchers

have lived experiences and personal connections from consulting and practice within the global South. These experiences helped to inform the research questions and design process, although reflexivity was a top priority throughout the research process - particularly during data analysis. Specifically, we were intentional about challenging ourselves to critically reflect on whether our interpretations throughout the coding and analysis process to ensure practitioners' voices were prioritized. The first author has extensive experience in studying and consulting SDP organizations on resource mobilization around the world. The second author has extensive experience in working with grassroots SDP organizations across more than a dozen countries and conducts research in SDP.

## FINDINGS

The findings revealed several themes regarding how practitioners perceived SDP funders need to change.

### Increase Funding Scope

Funding issues have long been recognized as a critical challenge for the SDP field (Kidd, 2008), and the field is in desperate need of transforming historical funding models and funding cycles to be more effective and sustainable (Svensson & Loat, 2019; Whitley et al., 2020). The findings from our analysis underscore that the most prominent concerns for practitioners are the need for longer funding cycles as well as an increase in the size, scope, and diversity of funding opportunities.

### Extend Funding Cycles

The most salient of the concerns was the need for longer, multi-year funding cycles. For example, participants expressed their "request to funders in Sport for Development is to support the initiatives over multi-year(s) to ensure there is a sustainability and it ensures the local team to effectively achieve the planned impact as circumstances at times on-ground are not so welcoming" (Respondent 10), and "To get better results the program funded should be consistent [rather] than for just one time" (Respondent 91). One of the most common aspects emphasized related to multi-year funding was that "it is necessary to establish a long-term relationship" (Respondent 78) for meaningful change and sustainable impact to be realized in the SDP field. Developing more long-term relationships would provide one strategy for starting to overcome the significant power imbalances within existing funding relationships and the pressures that many practitioners feel of having to deliver immediate results in the SDP space. In other words, "long-term and substantial funding is required to achieve social change"

(Respondent 95).

The perspectives shared by respondents indicate that practitioners are acutely aware that the short funding cycles commonly found in SDP present significant obstacles to realizing any meaningful change. Providing longer funding cycles would allow for better sustainability for SDP organizations and doing so would also allow for the development of more in-depth evaluations and learning opportunities for what works and what does not work as planned over time. As Whitley et al. (2020, par. 22) stated creating environments grounded in learning “in which null and negative findings are viewed as an opportunity for honest, critical reflection over longer funding cycles can lead to meaningful change.”

### ***Increase Funding Opportunities***

Participants also expressed a need for more sufficient funding opportunities, and greater diversity in the types of initiatives that can be funded. Many participants spoke to the lack of available funding opportunities in comparison to the number of active SDP organizations, which extends the literature on the competition for similar resources within the field (Welty Peachey et al., 2018a). For example, Respondent 38 stated that funders need to “be generous, so many organizations are doing great work and lack of funds seems to be the biggest hindrance.” At the same time, these findings indicate that grassroots practitioners may not recognize or be aware of the increasingly diverse range of funding options available within SDP. As Whitley et al.’s (2020) reported, practitioners could benefit from improved education on funding options. In addition, there was a shared belief that there remains a need to diversify the funding provided. One participant stated, “sport for development funders should avoid selective funding to only one organization several times in one region” (Respondent 69).

While increased funding amounts and longer funding cycles are a clear desire for nonprofit organizations, it was improved consistency and utility of funding that was primarily identified as critical for the betterment of the SDP field. Interestingly, while the need for multi-year funding cycles was the most salient concern, in practice it is antithetical to the participants’ desire for greater diversity and quantity of organizations who receive funding. Participants’ lived experiences likely catalyze a predisposition to be more concerned with one more so than the other; nevertheless, if funders are limited in available resources, these findings highlight a tension between prioritizing long-term partnerships with a smaller number of nonprofits or diversifying funding recipients with shorter funding cycles. One possible option could be for local SDP

organizations to go after scaled funding through place-based solutions such as citywide collaboratives (Svensson & Loat, 2019; Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2022). Because organizations all endure different circumstances, which render divergent financial needs, it appears that offering diversity in funding amount, type, and duration is a key practical implication for funders to consider when posting calls for proposals or other funding collaboration processes.

### **Invest in Capacity Building and Overhead Expenses**

Another area emphasized was the perceived need for funders to “support organizational capacity” building (Respondent 68). Several researchers during the last ten years have examined the nature of organizational capacity in the SDP space. A common thread in prior studies has been the conclusion that capacity building is needed to help many of the nonprofits tasked with implementing SDP initiatives in local communities (Svensson et al., 2018; Wegner et al., 2023; Welty Peachey, 2019). Respondents in this study emphasized that “for the organization to implement new initiatives and focus on impact-oriented initiatives, staff are key and hence [we] request the funders to also support the capacity-building of the organization as it eventually ensures achieving the set goals” (Respondent 10).

Several respondents asked for funders to “be more open to capacity building proposals” (Respondent 110) across a range of different needs. For example, “[w]ith the increasing needs of space and infrastructure within [sport for development], funders along with financial support could also provide platforms/spaces/access to such infrastructure for the needs of the programme and its beneficiaries” (Respondent 16). These statements align with discussions during recent years of exploring the possibilities of shared spaces and administrative services (cf. Eisinger & Vinokur-Kaplan, 2019). Likewise, another way that respondents indicated funders can better support SDP organizations was to more intentionally fund professional development and “training for staff” (Respondent 35). To this point, funders were called on to “empower the organizations with proper training to work [in] more professional ways” (Respondent 59), in response to the professionalization of the SDP field (McSweeney et al., 2022). We would argue that future consideration should be given to how funders can support training on readiness for capacity-building, which is often lacking for local organizations to fully benefit from capacity-building initiatives (Wegner et al., 2023).

Several respondents also emphasized the need for better support for smaller, start-up organizations whether that is by “pay[ing] attention to the newer organizations and what can be done to help them improve or become successful”



(Respondent 54) or to “make [the] funding application processes simpler for small organizations (Respondent 53).

Here, funders could explore the use of place-based accelerator programs that combine funding and operational support for selected organizations (Whitley & Welty Peachey, 2022). For example, “make smaller pots available to small organisations to allow them to take gradual steps towards growth” (Respondent 61) and “reduce the stringent requirements to accommodate upcoming sport for development organizations” (Respondent 118). Thus, respondents in several cases pleaded for funders to improve “supporting small organisations such as ours with funding and technical assistance” (Respondent 56).

These findings warrant future research on the formative stages of nonprofits within the SDP field, which could draw inspiration from an emerging body of scholarship on nascent nonprofits (e.g., Andersson, 2016). As Respondent 64 stated, “remember it's often the small [organizations] that understand the grassroots issues and can deliver for you. Setting a minimum turnover at 100K reduces your access to grassroots.” To this point, Respondent 108 suggested that “[w]hen we apply, we are up against the large NGOs who receive support based on their name, not on the effectiveness or sustainability of their programs. Can there be blind applications where programs are judged on outcomes and not the NGO's name?”

Relatedly, others wished that funders would reduce the burden placed on staff when receiving grants, which effectively would help increase their capacity levels. For example, some suggested that funders should “reduce the reporting requirements so that staff can focus on delivery rather than reporting” (Respondent 55). Similarly, Respondent 117 pleaded for funders to “simplify the reporting process please. Rely more on qualitative reporting.” In other words, there was an emphasis that there should be “no clunky data collection” (Respondent 105) tied to existing grant programs.

These findings demonstrate that nonprofit organizations are eager to learn more, develop professional skills, and build the capacity of their personnel as it relates to knowledge and ability. While funders could consider providing financial support for capacity building and skill development, they may also consider incorporating capacity building initiatives that help organizations fulfill their reporting requirements with the help of a trained professional. This not only helps ensure that funding organizations get accurate and reliable reports, but helps

develops organizational personnel capacity for designing, evaluating, and reporting that may assist with future proposals and partnerships.

### Consideration of Local Contexts

Another theme identified from our analysis was a clear emphasis among SDP leaders on the importance for funders to better recognize, understand, and support local contexts when making funding decisions. Local agency has been positioned as a critical factor in existing theoretical advancements in SDP (Schulenkorf, 2012; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). In this study, respondents argued that funders “need to understand the operating environments of each organization [and that] the funding should be direct [to local organizations] (Respondent 16). More specifically, several respondents expressed the need for “prioritisation of local needs as opposed to the funders' needs and expectations” (Respondent 122).

There was an emphasis among respondents on the need for funders to pursue “close engagement with local sport for development organizations” (Respondent 30) rather than funders' agendas or standardized goals across all grantees. Some participants, therefore, argued that more funding is needed for local implementing organizations, “all funders should provide local implementing organisations with more core funding - local partners really need this and funders don't prioritize it. They just want programmes implemented on the ground without enough consideration of local partners staff costs and ongoing operational costs” (Respondent 56). The desire for greater consideration of local contexts was reinforced by a desire for funders to “allow organizations to report on the outcomes that most align with their programming” (Respondent 18). It is unfortunately well-documented that practitioners often feel that they have to frame their work around whatever priority areas funders have set or have to communicate different messages to funders compared to local stakeholders out of fear of losing funding that those organizations depend on (Raw et al., 2019; Svensson, 2017).

Likewise, some respondents noted the importance for funders to consider underrepresented regions and/or groups, “reach out to organisations in Asia and look at underserved groups like foreign domestic workers/migrant workers (Respondent 26). Several respondents emphasized that they were not advocating for shifting funding away from existing grantees, rather funders “should also expand their funding areas and regions of the world” (Respondent 45). That said, respondents also expressed concerns about their own experiences with funding agencies in that many funding decisions were made by managers and executives

abroad without little to no knowledge of the local context or vetting of the grant applicants. These concerns were succinctly summarized by Respondent 40 who argued that funders should:

*only fund organizations you either have visited in the field before or are visiting in the decision making process. Don't decide based on a word document and a few pictures. Now I feel many funding decisions are taken as if we would decide who to marry with based on social media profiles.*

There are both financial and geographical barriers for funders which often prevent site visits before determining a beneficiary for a funding initiative. The necessary resources to travel to investigate applicants could alternatively be used to fund a separate initiative for an additional organization - which previously discussed findings suggest that participants would support. Thus, participants' desire for funders to make more locally informed and investigative decisions, is at tension with their desire for expanding opportunities to underrepresented groups and regions of the world. As a result, two key practical implications need to be recognized. First, this speaks to the need for more inclusive and holistic funding applications that can convey and demonstrate program delivery and organizational culture (e.g., video footage). Second, these tensions highlight the benefits of regional funding initiatives, which increase the awareness of a funder within a local context/culture, as well as their familiarity and accessibility to local organizations. In light of the diverse and complex funding mechanisms within the SDP space, one possibility could be for local, regional, and sport-specific SDP networks (e.g., Goodpush Alliance; SOMOS Network in Latin America; Uganda Sport for Development Network) to collate and share existing funding options of relevance in their specific context, or even go after joint funding applications (Kang & Svensson, 2023).

### **Innovation and Entrepreneurship**

In recent years we have witnessed significant growth in the attention given to innovation and entrepreneurship within SDP (Cohen & Welty Peachey, 2015; McSweeney et al., 2022; Svensson et al., 2020; Whitley, 2019). Some funding agencies have created innovation-specific funding programs to help support ideas, which may not easily receive funding elsewhere (e.g., Laureus' Sport for Development Innovation Fund). Yet, respondents in our study had conflicting opinions on whether funders should support innovation and entrepreneurship.

Some respondents argued that there is a significant need for "more innovative financing" (Respondent 75), and that funders should "support more entrepreneurial activity

within the sector" (Respondent 3), which reinforces arguments made by practitioners who have successfully embraced innovative behavior (cf. Svensson & Mahoney, 2020). Others argued for more specific emphasis among funders in that "they should support income generating activities to enhance sustainability" (Respondent 159), which would also help address pressing capacity challenges within the SDP field. Those sharing such perspectives argued that funders should "seek to invest in innovation instead of 'like for like' products and services just to save money" (Respondent 104) while others called for agencies to fund "more innovative ideas to improve on the lives of disadvantage communities" (Respondent 30).

However, a few participants raised concerns about the growing push for innovation and programs for the sake of being innovative. For example, "please support staff costs and programs that are proven to work, not only new innovations that may be unproven" (Respondent 11). The concern raised by a group of respondents centered around innovation-specific funding unintentionally forcing organizations to develop new programs and models for the sake of securing funding rather than continuing to sustain existing, successful programs. This is consistent with respondents' concerns regarding a need for funders to invest in core costs, overhead expenses, capacity building, and the institution of SDP itself.

The evidence here suggests that funding innovation and entrepreneurship can create more inclusive funding opportunities, as well as enhance organizational sustainability (e.g., income-generating activities) for some nonprofits. However, re-emphasizing the importance of having different types of funding opportunities, these findings highlight that a constant push for innovation can prevent capacity building, sustainability, and the overall impact of nonprofit organizations. Thus, a practical consideration for funding entities is to reconceptualize the ultimate desired outcome of funding initiatives to be neither capacity building nor innovation, but sustainability and impact. For nonprofit organizations, this emphasizes the need for leaders/managers to make strategic decisions regarding which funding opportunities are worth pursuing within the complex funding landscape associated with SDP, given their organizations needs and capacities.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The findings from this study allow for the identification of ways to advance SDP funding. Respondent 22 synthesized many of the key themes identified by stating that from their perspective, funders need to:

*Prioritise (a) multi-year funding (b) which supports programs as well as core organisational costs and capacity development; and (c) supports participatory approaches to program design, monitoring and evaluation in which indicators/metrics are determined by community members themselves.*

Funding entities need to prioritize creating more sustainable collaborative processes and systems with nonprofit beneficiaries. This can be done by creating more diverse, inclusive, bottom-up, and flexible funding opportunities. Throughout this process, funders should practice reflexivity and consider the local context of the organization and their geographic and cultural affiliations to build trust and mutually respectful communication pathways. The findings from our study build on prior reports of the perceived importance among practitioners of more inclusive funding dynamics within the SDP field (Whitley et al., 2019). In closing, as Spaaij and Jeanes (2013, p. 452) argued, funders:

*need to assume some responsibility to alter the mechanisms through which they provide support. Idealistically, where such a relationship is absent or where it imposes unfair priorities or conditionalities, it may be preferable to reject funding from a donor institution. However, the challenges for local NGOs to reject funding and potentially reduce their organizations' chances of survival must be acknowledged.*

The findings presented in this research note allow for the identification of how funders, particularly SDP-focused foundations, can begin to alter such mechanisms to better support the needs of SDP organizations while creating more meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. The main limitation of our research note is that these perspectives only represent the viewpoints of leaders of community-based SDP organizations. Therefore, we call on future researchers to explore the perspectives of existing SDP funders related to the concerns and suggestions raised by practitioners. We also encourage researchers to draw on literature from other disciplines to form a theoretical basis for future analyses in order to advance the body of knowledge within SDP (Giulianotti et al., 2019; Schulenkorf & Spaaij, 2016). Additionally, how practitioners engage in fundraising and revenue generation remains a significant knowledge gap in the current SDP literature, which also warrants future research.

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