

Senior Leaders Forum Discussion Synopsis

The views expressed are those of the participants and do not necessarily reflect the official positions of Sport Canada.

Introduction

The Senior Leaders Forum, held on October 12, 2007 at the Sport Leadership Conference, was a session organized by Sport Canada in order to share information and to initiate discussion on specific topics important to on-going work. The session was intended to be a ‘different kind of exchange’ – where there is a discussion of important issues related to more than one program area – and information was distributed in advance to the 53 individuals who responded to the invitation.

The session was well attended, by over 60 participants, not all of whom had responded to the invitation or received background material. Dan Smith, Director of Policy and Planning, presented an overview, invited a discussion about trends, and all participants then discussed “Becoming a Leading Sport Nation” in small groups. After a break, participants discussed issues related to either “Accountability” or “Diversity”. Sport Canada staff assisted in facilitating the conversations and taking notes.

A group of youth attending the ACTIVATE Connections program held in conjunction with the conference also attended the presentation. This group discussed the topics separately and provided input in writing. These perspectives have been integrated into the information below.

The discussions, which are summarized below, provided rich and valuable information regarding sport community perspectives on a number of topics. The content of this document reflects the views of the participants, not necessarily those of Sport Canada. The information gathered will inform on-going work, including the development of the next Sport Canada Strategic Plan, the SFAF IV, and the Women in Sport Policy Review.

Session Organization

Overall, Sport Canada has received strongly favourable reviews from participants about the session. The format was viewed as further evidence of Sport Canada's "new role" in the sport system, and indicative of increasing interest in collaboration, interaction and leadership. Participants appeared to appreciate learning more about Sport Canada's direction and priorities, as well as being engaged in thoughtful discussions on issues affecting the sport system.

Although the session was advertised as "by invitation only", there was no restriction placed on attendance. High attendance indicated significant interest in the session, however it did also present some challenges regarding facilitation (namely that the number of groups was unknown, limiting preparation of facilitators), and the preparation of participants to fully engage in the discussion. The latter was perhaps most evident in the discussion on diversity issues, which was the final topic addressed in the distributed background.

Considerations for the future

- Organize similar sessions at future sport community gatherings, such as the Sport Leadership Conference and other events.
- Provide separate opportunities for both information sharing and thoughtful discussion.
- Identify discussion topics earlier and provide background material further in advance.
- Provide information at future sessions on Sport Canada's roles, including F-P/T government relations and organization liaison.
- Earlier identification and preparation of facilitators for group discussions.
- Opportunity for systematic feedback from sport community on discussion session and future topics.

Trends

The discussion on trends did not unfold in the large group setting as originally envisioned. However, a number of trends were raised and noted throughout the morning, both confirming feedback from recent consultations and bringing into focus certain aspects of sport system evolution. It should be noted that some of the trends are inter-related and may 'support' each other.

- *Information Technology* has changed how we communicate and interact; changed norms around response times and speed of access, our ability to analyse information (such as through tools like Dartfish), how we promote sport, track information, and organize events, from entry systems to results management. The advent and widespread use of information technology has both created significant opportunities and introduced costs and stressors.
- *Volunteer engagement* is changing. While the sport sector is the largest beneficiary of volunteers (after religious organizations) in Canada, many have noted that the volunteer resource base is aging and that we will need new ways of recruiting, retaining and recognizing the next generation(s) of volunteers in sport.
- There is a *widening gap between national developments and delivery capacity*. Many exciting innovations are being led nationally – notably *Canadian Sport for Life* – but it is becoming increasingly difficult for national sport organizations and, in particular, provincial/territorial sport organizations to keep pace, deliver services and effectively implement change. While financial resources are an issue, human resources is highlighted as the most serious challenge.
- *High-performance sport is increasingly becoming centralized, professionalized and institutionalized*. As high-performance sport becomes progressively more sophisticated and competitive, the requirements to keep pace are exerting more pressure on countries such as Canada with volunteer-based sport systems to transform high-performance programs into more structured entities. Not only does this require significant investments in systems and human resources, it also points to the need for a dual strategy for community-based and high-performance sport development and new types of linkages between the two.
- *Privatization of sport delivery promotes socio-economic inequity*. The pay-per use model increasingly used in sport decreases access to training and competition. It also encourages organizations dependent on membership fees to focus on “where the money is” rather than what is necessarily best for sport development. This may be exacerbated depending on the demographics of the sport.
- *Increasing program or targeted funding* relative to core organizational funding means that organizations are tasked with delivering more programming with existing human resources, significantly taxing capacity. *Increasing reporting and accountability requirements* for funding are intensifying this trend, even while these requirements are recognized to be appropriate and largely positive.
- *Sport is increasingly being positioned as a means*, including within governments. Sport for sport's sake is no longer the only acceptable rationale for funding;

organizations must adapt to the agendas of funding agencies and understand the associated opportunities and constraints.

- The *speed of change* within Canadian sport is a trend in and of itself. The keys are to ensure that Canadian sport is receiving the resources it needs vs. the “flavour of the day”, avoiding the duplication of services or fragmentation of primary mandate.

Becoming a Leading Sport Nation

The Sport Canada Strategic Plan speaks to the goal of becoming a leading sport nation. Discussion session participants were invited to reflect on the meaning and characteristics of becoming a leading sport nation, how Canada might “measure up” and implications of embracing this goal for the future of Canadian sport. While discussions were varied, strong common themes emerged.

The general consensus is that Canada has some dimensions of a leading sport nation at present, but improvement would be required across the board in order to become one. It was noted that we might have been considered a leading sport nation some years ago by virtue of early leadership in areas such as coach education, performance in certain sports, women in sport and athletes with a disability, “before the rest of the world caught up” and began to also focus in these areas.

The idea of a leading sport nation implies comparison in an international context: one must be ahead of a significant number of other countries. Measurement would therefore need to include not only how Canada rates, but also the rating of other countries. While there were common ideas about what attributes should be included, there were a range of views regarding what countries possess these attributes, with some countries being used as examples for both leading and not.

A leading sport nation would demonstrate commitment and strength in four areas: performance excellence, broad-based participation, valuing sport, and accessible quality. Success is predicated on balance between the four areas; particular strength in one would not compensate for weakness in another. A leading sport nation would also demonstrate leadership qualities in realizing this success.

Recognizing that the boundaries of each of these components would benefit from further exploration, they can be summarized as:

- *Performance excellence*: results at senior World Championships, Olympic and Paralympic Games.

There were some suggestions that other measures or events be included, or that only medals or gold medals be counted. Still others suggested that certain sports should be weighted more heavily based on their ‘cultural’ significance to Canada, or that we should intentionally introduce a strategy to specialize in certain sports or categories of sports.

- *Broad-based participation*: sport participation rates of Canadians and/or physical literacy of Canadians and/or engagement of Canadians in all forms of sport as athletes, coaches, officials, volunteers, leaders, etc.

There seemed to be agreement that measures of participation need to be better defined, as well as harmonized across jurisdictions. For some people, participation is about doing the sport activity, while for others it can encompass sport support roles. Certainly the latter concept needs to be included in how we define a leading sport nation.

- *Valuing sport*: Canadians value sport, including success through ethics and fair play; demonstrate support as spectators and participants; and recognize its importance in Canadian culture, society, and as a tool for individual and community development.

There was recognition that this level of value assigned to the Canadian sport system represents a cultural shift, as the dominant forms of sport currently promoted are largely professional. There was also discussion as to whether and to what degree professional sport should be included in the concept of becoming a leading sport nation.

- *Accessible quality*: where quality people, programs, environments and systems are available and accessible to Canadians.

Accessibility refers to both access by diverse groups in Canadian society, as well as being ‘seen’ or ‘experienced’ by Canadians through viewing opportunities, open houses, community interaction, etc. Environment includes facilities.

- *Demonstrating leadership*: a sport system characterized by shared purpose, collaboration and partnership, consistency and sustainability, and proactive innovation.

Most viewed becoming a leading sport nation as something that Canada would be continually striving towards, but never necessarily achieved as sport is dynamic worldwide.

A common suggestion was to use *Canadian Sport for Life* as a framework. Achieving excellence (as a value) at every stage and for all supports of long term athlete development – from awareness to fundamentals, from training to win to sport for life – would ensure progress towards the five above components of becoming a leading sport nation.

In order to achieve this objective, many discussion session participants pointed out that a critical factor would be to reclaim the language in and around sport. There was widespread concern that the terms “sport” and “athlete” are being increasingly perceived as solely high-performance oriented and exclusionary; that many Canadians – while engaged in sport-related activities – would not identify themselves as an athlete or as being involved in sport. Some suggested that “sporting” might be a more inclusive term, as well as providing a direct reference to the ethos of sport.

A second required shift raised during discussions was the need to embrace sport as a matter of national interest. Often sport is perceived as an individualistic pursuit; a person or organization is perceived to be autonomous and entitled to make decisions both good and bad. There is often a reticence to intervene, based on the idea of independence. A number of participants expressed a concern that ‘too many organizations are allowed to fail’ and that there should be more supports – including proactive intervention – in place, given the public interest in sport, in national organizations, and in Canadian achievement.

It was widely acknowledged that there are significant constraints to Canada fulfilling the vision of becoming a leading sport nation, many of which are related to the trends outlined earlier. Perhaps the most important is fragmented jurisdiction. Municipalities are largely responsible for recreation, provinces for physical education and access to schools, health departments for physical activity and health promotion, others (from heritage to tourism) for high performance development. In this context it is small wonder that there is confusion over language and roles, and difficulty ‘navigating’ existing opportunities. Other challenges include widening capacity gaps (including pressure on volunteers to deliver professional services), barriers to financial sustainability, a popular culture of sport for entertainment, and an inappropriate focus on early specialization and/or early competition.

Canada also has certain opportunities that can assist in becoming a leading sport nation. In general, the international sport community is predisposed to think positively of Canada; with the *Canadian Sport Policy* and the *Priorities for Collaborative Action*, there is an unprecedented environment of collaboration; the next Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held in Vancouver and Whistler; and the most recent Speech from the Throne focused on the need to re-establish Canada as a leader in the world.

Considerations:

- Identify and implement a common vision for Canada as a leading sport nation.
- Define and clarify the common measures and current priorities for Canada to become a leading sport nation.
- Develop and consistently use a common language and ‘story-line’ for sport.
- Position sport as good public policy within government and political circles.
- Explore and clarify complementary and supportive roles and responsibilities.
- Develop more systematic interaction between F-P/T governments to identify and resolve issues, and harmonize programs.
- Pursue strategies supporting sport which engage all three levels of government (including municipalities)
- Reintegrate sport within (federal) government departments.
- Improve governance of sport organizations.
- Develop capacity of organizations to collaborate effectively, including between paid staff and volunteers, and between national and provincial/territorial organizations.
- Be prepared to question or examine all status quo roles.
- Sport Canada to lead work on policy, bilaterals and capacity.
- Sport Canada to influence alignment, cooperation and increased/complementary funding in other areas, e.g., health, infrastructure, etc.

Accountability

Most discussion session participants chose to participate in the breakout groups on accountability issues. Several common themes clearly emerged, on issues ranging from the purpose of accountability to how accountability is managed. The challenges associated with the topic were acknowledged by many.

First of all, it was recognized that accountability is an important factor in today's funding environment. Funding agencies are looking for return on investment, and sport for sport's sake, it was felt, is no longer acceptable as a funding rationale. Furthermore, sport is and needs to be increasingly linked to other objectives. Finally, there is a growing society-wide demand for measurement and the ability to demonstrate results.

However concerns were expressed about the current uncertainty regarding accountability approaches and national standards. These include:

- That Sport Canada accountability requirements are found among various instruments (National Standards, Contribution Agreements, Program Guidelines) and are not easy to consolidate,
- That equal does not mean fair; there needs to be some flexibility and the parameters need to be understood by organizations,
- Funding agencies often have similar but different requirements, adding to reporting requirements of funded organizations,
- Use, feedback on, and accessibility of collected data,
- That multiple accountabilities need to be recognized, including that organizations are accountable to both funding agencies and membership (with priorities that may sometimes conflict), and that there are also obligations on the part of the funding agency/Sport Canada,
- That current practice tends to favour 'have organizations' – organizations with limited capacity often cannot experience or demonstrate success in the same way as those with a stronger resource base.

It was recognized that the National Standards for NSOs have evolved, and that the addition of benchmarks has been useful for organizations in understanding accountability requirements.

One common suggestion was that organizations be much more engaged in discussing and setting accountability benchmarks within a common framework based on management by objectives. This would enable organizations to focus on meaningful measures important to them, and to clearly situate these activities with respect to the capacity of the organization. Participants expressed that fairness is an important aspect of any accountability framework, and that requirements should be based (in large part) on the level of contribution being received, as well as the capacity of the organization.

Overall, there was consensus that accountability should be more closely linked to funding. This would include not only setting expectations based on funding received, but also that there would be funding decreases and increases commensurate with failure or success of accountability measures. It was also noted that accountability expectations should only be in place while an organization is receiving funding. Contribution agreements – and accountability requirements – are for an entire fiscal year, yet often organizations only receive funding during a portion of that time (e.g. 4 to 9 months of the year), which tends to limit many organizations' capacity to deliver key objectives.

In addition, it was posited that it is unreasonable for Sport Canada to set out accountability expectations that it is not prepared to fund directly. This speaks directly to issues of capacity, and what would constitute reasonable expectations for ‘core’ funding. With increasing accountability requirements, more human resource time – both staff and volunteer – are needed to monitor and report; given assumptions that these efforts are part of “ongoing business” allocation choices are forced, potentially jeopardizing the ability of some organizations to attend to their sport plans and objectives.

Another theme was the idea of more frequent feedback on accountability progress. Organizations noted that feedback should be provided not on a quadrennial basis, but at least annually, including on negotiated commitments. The idea of sharing comparative data, such as a report card or an indication of progress relative to similar organizations, was also raised. Funding incentives could also be included within a quadrennial, in order to promote ongoing progress. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that interim measures need to be established as some accountability objectives are long-term (i.e. 5-10 years) in nature.

Monitoring progress was widely acknowledged to be an issue. Participants noted that outcomes in participation and social development are particularly difficult to track, and that different measures are used by different groups at different times. Sport Canada could provide tangible assistance in developing and providing tools to measure progress, and working with others to develop common measures.

Once data is collected, there is confusion and concern about how information is used. Perhaps due to challenges in collecting consistent data (for instance, on participation), global progress is often difficult to track, resulting in data gaps for future analysis, policy and program development. Agreement on what should be tracked (and why and how) could also rectify the problem of several organizations (e.g. Sport Canada, Podium Canada, Canadian Olympic Committee) all looking for slightly different accountability information. Information commonly sought could be shared amongst parties, or use the same format for ease of reporting. It was acknowledged that “accountability data” could also have other uses – informing policy or program development – but is only effective if there is common awareness of what data sets are available.

Considerations

- Analyze and articulate assumptions of what is expected of which funding recipients and why. This may be linked to the idea of national interest in sport, as explored in the previous section. Should include all areas of funding, including bilateral agreements.
- Consolidate all accountability expectations into an ‘easy-to-use’ guide for funding recipients.
- Provide increased focus on key accountability measures, with improved consistent measurement practices in place.
- Examine how funding mechanisms could be adjusted to provide rewards and incentives for constant progress.
- Harmonize accountability approaches between organizations, including reporting mechanisms, measurements and roles and responsibilities.
- Use where appropriate elements of LTAD and the *Canadian Sport Policy* evaluation assessment in developing accountability requirements and measures.

Diversity

The diversity discussion appeared to be the one that participants struggled with the most. Some become ‘stuck’ on terminology, expressing the view that specific words connoted different groups: such as equity = women, diversity = multiculturalism, or inclusion = persons with a disability. This response may be indicative of the group-by-group approach towards diversity that Sport Canada has employed to date.

Participants expressed both appreciation and wariness of a discussion on diversity. On the one hand, there were concerns that diversity considerations would supplant a focus on specific groups at a time when access and equity are by no means assured. On the other hand, participants valued the overt recognition that there could be more harmonization of approaches between different groups, and that there is significant overlap between identified groups which needs to be addressed.

It was widely acknowledged that Canada has been a front-runner on issues related to diversity. Canada has played a leading role in promoting women in sport, as well as sport for athletes with a disability. There was also a feeling that we were fortunate to have pursued this rights-based agenda – even in an environment of scarcity – as this early activity has resulted in growing support and acknowledgement of the needs of these groups.

Canadians, it was recognized, generally like to think of diversity as being a particularly Canadian value. While this may not always be borne out by ‘public opinion’, there was a strong sense that the Government of Canada plays a vital role in promoting diversity. Furthermore, sport could be used as an important tool in creating a stronger, more diverse Canada, including in cooperation with other sectors or departments.

Importantly, participants suggested that diversity in sport be positioned in terms of “how” rather than “if”, to demonstrate a common commitment to all Canadians and Canadian society. All players and parts of the sport system should be working to improve inclusiveness for all groups, with particular attention to certain identified groups. Some organizations have more potential in specific areas compared to others, given the nature or culture of the sport and/or the community in question. Not all organizations would therefore end up with the same “diversity profile” but as a whole the diversity profile of Canadian sport would improve significantly.

In realizing this vision, it should be acknowledged that organizations will have different potentials for achieving diversity, and that this potential may change over time. Organizations with high potential – based on sport attributes – may not have the requisite capacity to be able to capitalize on the opportunity. As one Executive Director put it: our sport has a scarcity of rich white kids, so raising the membership fee a dollar in order to deliver more programs is a big deal.

Reaching out was another important theme in discussions. Canadian society is changing, becoming more diverse, and the sport community needs to recognize this and adapt. The aim of increasing opportunities is no longer sufficient; considerations of equity, inclusiveness and access must become reflexive. Instead of ‘counting who is here’, we also need to consider ‘who is not here and why’ in order to be a diverse sport system. This may also include diversity within a given group or sector. Visible minorities (sometimes expressed as new Canadians or multiculturalism) were consistently identified as a group which require specific and focused attention.

Working together also emerged as an important element. Many organizations are looking for assistance in reaching, recruiting and retaining new populations, developing and delivering programs. ‘Obvious’ partnerships cited were those with designated Multisport Service Organizations such as CAAWS or the Aboriginal Sport Circle – one participant queried how work could be advanced in the area of visible minorities as there is no ‘responsible’ organization with which to partner. Less obvious were the partnerships around disability groups, given the various organizations and – in some cases – capacity challenges to providing support (for example, the Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association is funded under the SFAF as the NSO for Boccia; it is also working with the Canadian Soccer Association to develop 7-a-side football, a Paralympic sport played by athletes with cerebral palsy). It was noted that the United Kingdom has an equity panel where diversity groups can discuss common issues.

Furthermore, more attention needs to be paid to how to extend diversity in sport into provinces and territories. It was noted that provincial/territorial sport organizations often have significant capacity issues, more intentional linkages need to be made (including from a F-P/T perspective), and there need to be ways for communities to become engaged. Unfortunately, many ongoing initiatives are not connected to each other in a coordinated fashion.

Participants also discussed the conundrum of numbers – a useful tool; and also a trap. Determining targets can help inspire progress, however counting participants can lead to an over-emphasis on composition rather than skills or content, and may enter into the politics of identity – where participants may or may not choose to self-identify in different circumstances.

Considerations

- Position diversity as a matter of public interest to Canadians
- Develop a consistent, principled approach towards diversity while continuing to provide focus on certain identified groups
- Include visible minorities as part of Sport Canada’s diversity lens
- Develop a sport-system wide approach to diversity with all organizations contributing based on potential strengths
- Build sport system capacity to address diversity issues, including that of organizations providing (or those able to provide) services
- Clarify roles and responsibilities and/or develop guidelines to assist in promoting collaboration and partnership on diversity issues
- Explore and clarify the role of ‘advocacy’ organizations, including whether it is desirable to have one organization for every identified diversity population, or whether it is appropriate to have organizations (such as the Canadian Paralympic Committee) play dual programming and support roles, and how assistance services should be supported and/or reinforced

Common Themes

It is worth noting that there were a few key themes which were consistent across discussions. These include:

- *Positioning Sport:* There was a clear sense that there is an important opportunity to (re)position sport in Canadian society. The potential, values, and role of sport need to be better articulated and promoted, and the sport community has a critical role to play in communications. There is also a need to reclaim and take ownership of the language around sport.
- *Vertical Integration:* Linkages between national and provincial/territorial strategy, policy and programming should continue to be strengthened. Improved ongoing communication and collaboration, coupled with efforts to build capacity of provincial/territorial sport organization, would assist in advancing sport community priorities and in resolving issues (e.g. representative governance). Ways to involve municipal organizations and initiatives would also be valuable, while likely a longer-term initiative.
- *Core and Targeted Funding:* The balance between types of funding and expectations for reporting need to be examined. The trend towards increasing targeting of funds, coupled with increasing accountability requirements, are placing a growing strain on organizational capacity. Ways to streamline these processes should be examined, and expectations should be both realistic and practical.
- *Cross-Sector Collaboration:* There is a value in sport extending its reach through working with other sectors, notably education, justice, and health. Not only would this assist in promoting and positioning sport, but it would also help to bridge the present divides between sport and recreation/physical activity/active living/health promotion/physical education, etc. Long term athlete development is likely a useful frame for these discussions.