Original Research

# Community sport, Australian sport policy and advocacy: Lobbying at a localized level

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explored rural Australia's community sport policy process, focusing on policy development and implementation issues alongside advocacy for community organizations involved with 'grassroots' sport. The analysis focussed on the significance of the relationships between community sport clubs (CSCs), national sporting organizations (NSOs), government, and other actors in the community sport policy process. Through an intervention, a group of CSCs ($n$=9) formed a coalition to lobby for their collective issues and needs. The research drew attention to the hierarchical nature of the community sport policy process, the implications for collaboration, and the role of CSCs in policy creation. Incorporating the evaluation of partnership theory in conjunction with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, a meso-level policy framework the overall objective herein was to assess the potential for advocacy structures in community sport through an ethnographic action-research approach based on observing a group of CSCs coalescing. It is posited that a localized coalition can offer CSCs a voice in the policy process and lead to a more accurate and equitable understanding of the policy landscape.

**Community sport, Australian sport policy and advocacy: Lobbying at a localized level**

This article comprises observations based on an intervention in a town (hereinafter 'the town', for deidentification) in a rural setting in NSW, Australia, involving creating a localized advocacy group for community sport. Some critical relationships between community sport clubs (CSCs) in the town, along with national sporting organizations (NSOs), government, and other local stakeholders, were highlighted to assess the potential of an advocacy group that might contribute toward more effective localized policy implementation and simultaneously promote the interests of CSCs and the local community. The research focussed predominantly on CSCs – the implementers of sport policy (Skille, 2008) – and their observations and concerns, and the potential for advocacy for organizations involved with 'grassroots sport': an oft-used term denoting the elementary level of community sport (Cuskelly, 2004; Green, 2007; Hartmann, 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Phillpots et al., 2011). In Australia, rudimentary issues impacting community sport include scant resources, decreasing participation levels, sustainability issues, organizational capacity, problematic policy matters (Eime et al., 2016; Jeanes et al., 2022; Nichols et al., 2015; Rossi et al., 2023; Shilbury, 2000; Shilbury et al., 2020), and plummeting volunteering rates (Bradbrook, 2022; Curtis, 2022; Davies et al., 2021; Mountifield & Sharpe, 2022). Within such a complicated backdrop, this paper aims to explore the potential for how CSCs might contribute to policy development, and go beyond the *sausage sizzle* (Crundall, 2012; Fechner et al., 2021) as a means to address, for example, funding issues. Accordingly, the specific research question addressed herein is: *In the Australian regional context, how can forming a community sport coalition help address the strategic challenges of CSCs and influence the policy process?* In addressing the question, this article contributes to a greater understanding of sport policy processes and issues from the perspective of CSCs in a *real-world* context.

For community sport, to make it more accessible and stimulate participation levels, sporting organizations can benefit from collaboration based on networks involving various stakeholders and individuals at a local level, particu-

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lar the members of CSCs (Bolton et al., 2008; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Ibsen & Levinsen, 2019; Meir & Fletcher, 2019). Historically, the concept of collaboration and partnership in policy processes, in general, has proved unclear, inconsistent, and imprecise (Hall, 1999; MacDonald et al., 2022), a situation echoed in sport (McDonald, 2005; Misener & Misener, 2016). Further, the policy process is ordinarily subject to political control (Colebatch, 2020) and overt top-down strategies and influence that impact the interests of marginalized stakeholders (Berkhout et al., 2018). In addition, policy issues cannot be adequately addressed by a single organization; it is necessary to consider the views of multiple stakeholders, invoking the concept of collaboration and partnership (MacDonald et al., 2022). Addressing the interests of disenfranchised stakeholders and establishing their involvement in a more collaborative policy process requires consideration of advocacy, especially in the community sector (Hancock, 2020). The potential for collaborative decision-making determines the capacity for forming a partnership (MacDonald et al., 2022) and a meso-level approach to policy processes that includes the appropriate mechanisms to advocate on behalf of all stakeholders involved in a partnership (Rufín & Rivera-Santos, 2013). In policy processes, there are meso-level frameworks that consider the relevance of partnerships (Willis et al., 2016) with a significant emphasis on community-level stakeholders and the consideration of their micro-level issues (Hampton et al., 2024).

In applying meso-level analytical frameworks to the policy process, there is the potential to understand better the importance of collaboration (Weible, 2023). Stakeholders – or actors – in a policy subsystem can be affected by relatively stable parameters, which, in turn, shape the structure of the subsystem (Schlager, 2019). Policy actors in the community sport subsystem – namely CSCs – are influenced or manipulated by external exogenous institutions such as the government (Goodwin & Grix, 2011; Parnell et al., 2019). Policy subsystems emerge as areas in which actors coalesce to enact strategic plans, coordinate the use of resources, and form part of an advocacy structure to provide potential solutions to policy problems (Sabbe et al., 2021; Stenling & Sam, 2019). In so doing, this investigation points to the potential for fashioning an advocacy structure – an *artefact* (Hevner et al., 2004) – to serve the relationships and lobby for interests in localized community sport.

Relationships and connections are crucial to effective policy implementation (Bryson et al., 2015; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Where sport is concerned, organizational member involvement in partnerships and the relationship to coalition success is an area of research in its relative infancy (Bornstein et al., 2015; Hylton & Totten, 2006). A theoretical model such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) that acts as an interface between the various stakeholders in community sport may cater to the interests of CSCs. The ACF is a theory of policy-making (Skille, 2008) that has been widely applied in the sport policy domain (Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021). Research in sport policy has demonstrated the potential for theoretical pluralism and the consideration of the ACF alongside partnership theory (Harris, 2014) and the ACF is linked with the notion that practical policy analysis needs to include all stakeholders (Chikowore, 2018; Fahlén et al., 2018). Thus, in sport policy, CSC involvement in a collaborative policy environment facilitated by a meso-level framework such as the ACF offers the potential for a more nuanced (Osei-Kojo et al., 2022) understanding of policy issues and connections between stakeholders (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Houlihan, 2012). Indeed, evaluating the relationships with stakeholders and the potential for CSCs to coalesce and influence typically top-down community sport policy processes may provide a boon for community sport.

Within a more equitable policy creation process, input from a bottom-up perspective – a fundamental tenet of the ACF (Mountifield, 2024b) – has merit. Understanding what constitutes best practice for an advocacy coalition and how a partnership can provide opportunities for strategic alignment and organizational coordination and allow CSCs to have input, from a bottom-up perspective, into the policy process presents a potentially positive outcome (Bornstein et al., 2015). That is not to say that the ACF is the only analytical framework that might be relevant to community sport policy (Houlihan, 2005). For this paper, however, the ACF provides an opportunity to take the 'first steps' toward a community sport coalition in the town and to gain a more complete picture of the sport policy process (Bergsgard, 2018). Indeed, the ACF offers the potential for modifying top-down policy directives on a more localized level (Doherty et al., 2022) and provides a "valuable starting point for the development of analytical frameworks capable of illuminating the sport policy area" (Houlihan, 2005, p. 174). Thus, from the policy development perspective, community sport can be considered as the "point of departure" (Skille, 2008, p. 181) and a position from which to work in an *upward* direction (Hill & Hupe, 2009). Indeed, those directly involved in the process of implementation– in this case, CSCs – should be the commencement point in terms of any process to understand the reality of policy implementation (Elmore, 1982; Elmore, 1979, 1985; Sætren & Hupe, 2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature addressed in this investigation is considered essential for the raw elements of a coalition's formation process. After some initial background on advocacy in sport, the key foci are partnership theory and the meso-level ACF.

### Background

Advocacy in sport is multifaceted and takes many forms. By way of examples over the last two decades, Green & Houlihan (2004) examine the process of elite sport policy change in swimming and track and field athletics in Canada and the United Kingdom, Bergsgard et al. (2007) explore activities of advocacy coalitions and consider meso-level frameworks for research in sport, and Comeau & Church (2010) compare women's sport advocacy groups in North America. There are examples of the role of health advocates in addressing inequity by way of an advocacy framework (Hubinette et al., 2014), advocacy for athlete rights and the responsibility of sport organizations (Heil, 2016), research seeking a better understanding of advocacy and political influences impacting sport (Stenling & Sam, 2020c), and advocacy relating to concussion issues in paralympic sport (Purcell et al., 2024). With direct reference to grassroots sport and physical activity, there are numerous examples of research relating to advocacy and the need for more effective government policy (Anderson-Butcher & Bates, 2021; Lindsey, 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Stenling & Sam, 2020b).

Given that increasing physical activity levels in conjunction with sport policy is a notable consideration for governments (Green, 2007; Österlind, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2019; Varela et al., 2017) – evident in Australia based on the Australian Sports Commission's (ASC) focus on factors influencing participation in sport (Australian Sports Commission, 2024) – it follows that attention is given to instruments to achieve this (Sam & Jackson, 2004; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). To facilitate an approach to understanding the potential of analytical frameworks in the sport policy space, it is critical to enhancing awareness of important community sport stakeholders, the role they play, the level of influence they have and whose interests they serve (Brockett, 2017; Henry et al., 2014; Marsh & Stoker, 2002). With that in mind, there is value in considering advocacy at a localized, community level (Bradbury et al., 2020; Kohl et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Stenling & Sam, 2020a). Such an approach would comprise a coalition of CSCs – a "cluster of competitive, but not high-performance sports" (Green & Houlihan, 2004, p. 400) – to lobby for involvement in determining sport policy from the bottom up.

From a macro-government perspective, Houlihan's (2016) reference to policy residue translates as delegating community sport policy to other areas with limited knowledge and understanding of sport sector policy (Hoye et al., 2010). Indeed, the sport policy creation process represents an unplanned cluster of activities, initiatives and programs created by default, inadvertence, and spill-over from other sub-sectors (Houlihan, 2016). The consequences and resultant problems revolve around inconsistent policy development based on constant shifts in political, economic and cultural circumstances and influence linked to policy creation (Bellew et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2004), producing a complex policy situation for community sport. Further, the national sport policy in Australia ultimately relies upon CSCs for policy implementation (Brockett, 2017; Skille, 2008; Stewart et al., 2004), yet the policy process evolves due to significant political influence (Hoye et al., 2010; Sam, 2009; Weible & Sabatier, 2007). Indeed, CSCs lack input into a process in which they play a fundamental role primarily because national policy concerns take precedence over local matters (Adair, 2017; Shilbury et al., 2020; Skille & Stenling, 2018; Skille, 2008). Such a scenario gives rise to the potential for CSCs to form partnerships to lobby for their interests.

### Partnership theory

Partnership theory was initially considered a transient outlier concerning public policy (Giguère & Considine, 2008). It was mainly associated with tackling severe local problems and as a potential solution to ongoing social problems (McDonald, 2005). Further, it was suggested that "local governance involves multi-agency working, partnerships and policy networks" (Wilson, 2003, p. 336) and that "partnership bodies are being created to manage the complexities of policy networks" (Skelcher, 2000, p. 9). From a government perspective, the significance of partnerships rested upon the assertion that they "represent a more effective, democratic, and participatory form of service delivery" (McDonald, 2005, p. 580). Partnerships are now considered inherently attractive to policymakers because collaboration can help deal with complex problems (Mattessich & Johnson, 2018). From a normative perspective, partnerships were considered progressive (McDonald, 2005) and related to a concept that "makes things sound exciting, progressive and positive" (Finlayson, 2003, p. 63). Collaborative relationships are a product of networks in public policy. They are generally accepted to have five main benefits: trust, shared knowledge and resources, innovation, agreed goals, and a return more significant than the sum of the parts (Jones, 2004;

McDonald, 2005). Further, as further justification, the concept of partnership allows for the pooling of resources and creates an environment of efficiency and cooperation amongst key stakeholders focused on delivery to consumers (McQuaid, 2000).

In sport policy, partnerships emerged to become the critical mechanism of service delivery (Babiak & Thibault, 2008, 2009) which reflects the influence that government exerts over the strategic development of sport policy. Broadening governmental power, however, sits at odds with devolving power to local communities, but ideologically and in terms of implementing policy, partnerships were advanced across many areas of public policy as a tool for connecting policy areas and as a response to organizational fragmentation. At the community sport level, aspects of the justification for cooperative relationships include consolidation of capital, the more effective engagement of non-financial resources (e.g. facilities and volunteers), and the benefits of working collaboratively with other organizations (Harris, 2014; Mackintosh, 2011). Partnerships offer a platform for a "resource-efficient, outcome-effective, and an inclusive-progressive form of policy delivery" (McDonald, 2005, p. 579), themes relevant to the community sport policy process (Harris & Houlihan, 2016).

With the contemplation of such a platform and a more inclusive approach to sport policy, there is merit in linking partnership theory with a meso-level policy analysis framework (Harris, 2014). The utilization of policy frameworks is fundamental to research in sport (Edwards et al., 2002; Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021; Levermore, 2009; Sotiriadou et al., 2008)), mainly because there are examples of the potential to develop more inclusive policy processes and better manage the impact on various stakeholders (Hampton et al., 2024; Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Thus, to enable policy input from CSCs, the emphasis needs to be on a policy framework that facilitates a partnership for localized lobbying as a starting point, hence consideration of the ACF to better understand policy processes in community sport and including bottom-up perspectives as part of the process (Fahlén et al., 2018; Houlihan, 2005; Skille, 2008).

**ACF & Top-Down/Bottom-Up Synthesis**

In terms of considering the significance of meso-level theories and sport policy, the ACF is an analytical framework that emerged in the 1980s that has been applied to studies of public policy in a wide range of developed countries – both Western and Eastern nations (Jang et al., 2016; Pierce et al., 2017; Sabatier, 2007; Weible & Jenkins-Smith, 2016) – and increasingly so in developing nations (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Li & Weible, 2019; Osei-Kojo et al., 2022). The ACF is a contemporary framework in the policy analysis discipline with the potential to evaluate numerous and varied interconnected processes (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Funke et al., 2020; Green & Houlihan, 2004; Houlihan, 2005; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2007; Weible & Sabatier, 2018). The framework provides a method to analyse the behavior – including attitudes and beliefs – of myriad actors by clustering them into *advocacy coalitions*, defined as people from various positions who (i) have similar beliefs and attitudes and (ii) demonstrate levels of coordination over time (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999).

The ACF is based on two fundamental aspects: (i) a macro-level notion that the policy process occurs within sub-systems involving actors influenced by political and socio-economic factors (Sabatier, 1988; Wellstead, 2017) and (ii) a micro-level consideration of issues impacting actors such as resources issues, a common problem for community sport (Grix et al., 2021; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). For the analysis of sport policy, the ACF offers a more extensive approach than many meso-level frameworks and is more proportionate in actor representation than solely catering to top-down policy architects (Houlihan, 2005). Further, the ACF provides for the bottom-up influence of the policy process, viewed as essential to facilitate a synthesis with the more established top-down process (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1994; Pierce et al., 2020; Wellstead, 2017). For example, some studies examine dominant top-down decision-making, negotiation between coalitions, and bottom-up inception (Li et al., 2024), with the bottom-up aspect being a key consideration for ACF studies in complex policy systems (Angst, 2020; Pierce & Osei-Kojo, 2022). Further, there are instances where the ACF has been applied to help build knowledge about policy processes impacting coalitions, mainly about political influence at the subsystem level of analysis (Jang et al., 2016), alongside recommendations for longitudinal studies to empirically explore challenges to collaborative action over time (Nohrstedt & Olofsson, 2016).

In sport, there are examples of the application of top-down and bottom-up management techniques in the policy process (Hylton & Totten, 2013), procedures that illuminate issues leading to implementation failure, most noticeably the contrast between macro-political objectives and the reality of implementation (McDonald, 2005), and the policy creation process and the conflict with the actual capacity of the policy implementers (Hudson et al., 2019; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). For example, a top-down process relies upon implementer – CSC – compliance with successful policy implementation (Durazzi, 2020; Halpin, 2002;

Heidbreder, 2017). In contrast, the bottom-up process generally supports the dominance of the policy implementation settings and actors (Hjern, 1982; Hjern & Hull, 1982; Hull & Hjern, 1987; Lipsky, 2010). This approach allows for the examination of the perspectives of grassroots implementers, as these actors have a decisive influence on policy implementation and its success or failure.

Within this subsystem, however, there is a sharp contrast between macro-level objectives and micro-level concerns. Further, there is a dearth of consistent application of theoretical frameworks in sport policy analysis (Houlihan, 2005) and a lack of universal agreement among policy scholars on a robust approach to policy analysis in sport (Jayawardhana & Piggin, 2021). Similarly, there is scant research on community sport (Skille, 2008), particularly about the issues that CSCs face in their role as policy implementers (Doherty et al., 2022; Harris & Houlihan, 2016; May et al., 2013). The resultant impact is that the opinions of community sport stakeholders do not feature prominently in policy processes, and, indeed, said views are given only cursory consideration concerning policymaking. Within that setting, introducing a meso-level framework to examine actors' behaviour requires forming an advocacy coalition (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). Houlihan (2005) opines that for public policy for sport, the ACF "has a broader focus than many of its rivals and has the potential to illuminate aspects of the policy process beyond a preoccupation with agenda setting" (Houlihan, 2005, p. 174), a position supported in more recent research involving the ACF (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Funke et al., 2020; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Weible & Sabatier, 2018).

To summarize, based on advocacy, the potential for partnerships, and a meso-level framework like the ACF to emphasize a more inclusive, coalescive environment incorporating bottom-up influence, policy processes in sport have the potential to be improved. Such an approach would rely upon a case study– based on a *real-world* intervention – to test the potential of a collaborative approach amongst CSCs focused on common objectives. Accordingly, there is utility in a bottom-up approach to the policy process – the starting point (Elmore, 1982; Elmore, 1979, 1985; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Sætren & Hupe, 2018; Skille, 2008) – through a localized advocacy structure, based initially on a partnership (Harris, 2014), to illuminate the reality of implementation.

## METHOD

The intervention was based on an ethnographic action-research method incorporating the observation of the formation and growth of a community sport advocacy group and comprised the following four sections: *Design*, *Participants, Data Collection, and Data Analysis.*

### Design

Adopting an ethnographic action-research approach, the process for the analysis relied upon observing a sequence of meetings between the participants over three months, including the output from the meetings in terms of stages of development of the group dynamic, their observations, and the potential to achieve their objectives. Observing and evaluating community sport programs is primarily output-driven (Coalter, 2007), and the impact on the ability of the group of CSCs to influence policy and address their concerns was paramount to the study. The observations focused on (a) the numerous connections between CSCs and other participants and (b) the potential for forming robust relationships based on a broader network between the coalition and third parties. In this regard, the researcher guided the creation of the coalition and undertook the role of researcher (Robson, 2002), a position that included observing and improving the organizational direction of the CSCs through a bounded case study (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Yin, 2012). Further, establishing authenticity of the process in connection with a constructivist approach (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Schwandt, 2001) was facilitated by the researcher's intricate role as an overt insider to the group (Homan & Dandelion, 1997; Strudwick, 2019).

The researcher's insider role was crucial to the process and helped create the structure for the coalition. The design commenced with the researcher's initial contribution of coordinating the early stages of the alliance formation. Guidance was offered on how the CSC members could form a partnership and was based on (a) the researcher's relative expertise in management and administration, and (b) an existing connection between the researcher and the CSCs linked to previous research (Mountifield, 2024a). The second essential contribution from the researcher was setting a timetable for meetings of the CSC coalition and to guiding meetings by way of (a) producing meeting agendas and (b) guiding discussions. Throughout the process, the researcher documented and recorded events as part of the data collection objectives.

Given the short time frame involved in this research, there was a need to swiftly build trust between CSCs and establish common ground and objectives. Based upon the developing relationships amongst CSC members, the researcher considered it important to ensure the engagement between CSCs was uncomplicated. The researcher gathered opinions from CSCs in a narrative form, partly due to the

aforementioned time frame and also for the ease of analysis. Narrative research is a method of theorizing social phenomena that offer helpful insight into real-world experiences (Carless & Douglas, 2017), and has been applied in the context of sport and physical activity (Carless & Douglas, 2011; Douglas & Carless, 2014).

**Participants**

Participants for the advocacy group were selected from a cluster of CSCs in the town. With a population of circa 7,000, the town is non-metropolitan, with proximity to the coastline and a quiet, largely rural character surrounded by bushland and national parks. The town has a range of CSCs involved in cricket, mountain biking, netball, rugby league, skateboarding, soccer, swimming, surf lifesaving, and tennis. It has a distinct feature in that most of the town's CSCs practice and compete on or adjacent to a centralized facility comprising a pool, skate park, cycle track, rugby and soccer fields, netball courts, and cricket ovals. In addition, many of the current sponsors of many of the CSCs are based only a short distance from the sport fields. The town falls within the local government area (LGA) of a local metropolitan council, which plays an essential role in establishing and maintaining sporting infrastructure (Wicker et al., 2009; Wicker et al., 2013).

The recruitment of participants commenced with the unsolicited expression of interest from a CSC president (the 'initial president') in forming a local coalition. Said interest resulted from previous research, which included the initial president (Mountifield, 2024a). A purposive sample was subsequently drawn from the population of CSC presidents of individual and team sport in the town. The president of each CSC – the leader in charge of administrative and control tasks during meetings (Cuskelly et al., 2006) – was either known to the researcher through previous studies (Mountifield, 2024a) or introduced to the researcher by the initial president.

For the first meeting, presidents from six different CSCs (mountain biking, netball, senior rugby league, senior and junior soccer, and surf lifesaving) participated. Two further stages of participant recruitment followed as critical stages in the formation and growth of the coalition: (i) to establish impartial leadership for the coalition, the process required the recruitment of an independent party and (ii) as this group increased in number over time, based primarily on 'word-of-mouth' spreading to CSC presidents who were initially unable (or unwilling) to participate. Therefore, the CSC coalition's representation increased in size and diversity, adding three CSCs – touch football, tennis, and junior rugby league – to the total ($n$=9). By way of a very general overview, some details for each CSC are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Details of the town coalition CSCs*

| | |
|---|---|
| Mountain biking | Over 200 members with a range of events from five-year-olds to adults, and a list of local sponsors |
| Netball | Very active social media profile, numerous connections with sponsors, predominantly female membership but seeking male competitors. |
| Junior rugby league* | Teams range from U6 to U16 with an active social media profile |
| Senior rugby league* | Competition from U18 to senior, including women's league, and with an extensive and relatively sophisticated network of sponsors |
| Junior soccer* | Teams from U5 to U16 with emphasis on pathways to senior competition |
| Senior soccer* | Over 500 members with a vast array of sponsors |
| Surf lifesaving | Member of Surf Lifesaving Australia with membership from Nippers through to adults, along with a significant number of sponsors |
| Tennis | An essentially social membership with local competition for all age groups |
| Touch football | Over 400 members with a range of competitions for men, women, and mixed groups. |

*Note* * Whilst not necessarily the case in other regions, there are very distinct management structures, organizational activities, and representative duties for the division of these sports

In addition to the CSCs making up the central membership of the coalition, it is crucial to note the connections with three other parties. Firstly, representatives of the local council and NSW Sport, the lead NSW government agency for sport and physical activity (New South Wales Office of Sport, 2024). To get engagement with government, the researcher requested the attendance of two key personnel from the local council and NSW Sport, who had direct responsibility for community sport in the LGA. The invitations were well received and said representatives joined in at various stages during the coalition discussions. As noted later in the findings, this development was considered a significant achievement and fits with crucial tenets of the ACF policy process, for example, the multipartite membership of a coalition (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999). Secondly, the local Lions Club (an international organization that actively promotes the welfare of local communities) was included, as noted in the findings, from a coalition leadership perspective. Finally, the local Member for Parliament (MP) was kept abreast of the coalition activities by the initial president, with whom there was a close relationship. Although the MP did not become directly involved, support for the project was voiced in principle.

**Data Collection**

Data collection was based on ethnographic observation (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022) and occurred over three key stages: (i) meetings of participants who came together to establish if the coalition was desirable; (ii) the creation of independent leadership and an organizational structure; and (iii) noting the milestones of the burgeoning coalition over an initial period of three months. Data was collected through meeting minutes, audio recording, and observational field notes, all undertaken by the researcher. These methods facilitated the collection of rich, insightful data (Coghlan & Jacobs, 2005) by way of CSC members conveying their opinions, thoughts and experiences as part of the process toward collaboration (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). In this respect, ethnographic action-research can play an essential role by helping groups make informed decisions based on results (Ledwith, 2020). Participants were informed that all aspects of the research were confidential, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. The study was approved by the ethics committee at the University of Canberra.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis process was based on examination of the coalition formation, including ethnographic observations of coalition member interaction, and progressed to identifying critical issues for the CSCs in narrative form. When measuring a coalition's success (or otherwise), an inductive approach provides an overview of the formation of connections between CSCs and third parties and factors that impact the potential for effective partnerships. Qualitative research often follows inductive reasoning, which involves shifts from specific observations of the phenomenon to developing broader generalizations (Patton, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). The researcher was responsible for driving the formation of the coalition and the subsequent data collection, and thus able to highlight key stages and identify pivotal points raised by coalition members. The data analysed was based upon meeting minutes, field notes, and audio recordings. The audio recordings were not transcribed but were replayed to (a) ensure meeting minutes and field notes were correct and (b) identify any points the researcher may have missed due to, for example, the need for the researcher to facilitate aspects of discussions. Further, specific quotes from the participants were identified in the audio recordings and formed the supporting narrative in the following findings.

**FINDINGS**

In the first instance, owing to the nature of the ethnographic action-research approach adopted for this paper, the discourse for this section necessitates supporting detail to explain aspects of the narrative. The findings are based principally on the stages that the members of CSCs went through to form a coalition, inclusive of supporting commentary throughout. The three key stages were: (i) establishing the coalition; (ii) coalition leadership and structure; and (iii) observations of the coalition activities. As part of the observation process, aspects of each stage elicited thematic sub-sections outlined as part of the findings. These stages address crucial elements of the research question by highlighting how the formation of the coalition, inclusive of the focus on independent leadership, lead to activities demonstrative of collaborative ability to address some immediate challenges, and the potential for to influence policy over time, a fundamental tenet of ACF theory (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1999).

**Establishing the coalition**

When considering the steps to establish a coalition, it is essential to present the background relating to fundamental aspects of applying policy in community sport, as opined by the CSC presidents. Successfully developing a coalition requires the partners to have shared goals and the potential to mobilize resources to influence policy decisions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In many cases, the coalition partners are likely to have competing priorities, so there will be pressure to adopt sometimes divergent goals. Therefore, the coalition's success depends on accepting an overall strategy that tracks outcomes over time.

Building a community sport coalition requires careful attention to every process involved in the coalition timeline. In this case, the coalition president showed knowledge of the coalition structure and recognized warning signs of potential problems, thus increasing the chances for success. Upon forming the coalition, the president held a local press conference after every meeting to publicly confirm the commitment of the CSC to engage in the policy process. Furthermore, the alliance developed binding agreements between all CSC stakeholders. Three key emerging themes were pertinent to CSCs: (i) the nature of the policy process from creation to implementation; (ii) the degree to which CSCs believe they can play a role in a cooperative process; and (iii) CSC beliefs in their individual and collective capacity to attain constructive and long-term outcomes for their sport and the community.

***The character of the policy process***

Government-led policy development and implementation processes were not new to the coalition participants. This

situation, however, drew attention to the potential for a more comprehensive commitment from CSCs, a factor embodied in the notion that the government should assess the capacity of the community to take on a degree of responsibility for their future welfare. For the town coalition, the prevailing opinion regarding the policy process for community sport was that government and NSOs set the agenda for policy input, with limited, if any, capacity for policy implementers (CSCs) to influence the proceedings. In short, the process was considered hierarchical – *top-down* – and controlled by a narrow coalition of power: "It's clear that we [CSCs] are pawns in the policy process, which is dominated by more powerful groups".

This viewpoint echoed concerns about sport-related policies, for example, the NSW Active Kids policy (a NSW Government policy initiative which helps families meet the cost of their children accessing sport and recreation activities, which suffered from low promotion). From the town CSC perspective, there had been an absence of consultation involving state government policy strategists, regional government, and CSCs, along with an absence of resources offered to aid the implementation of the policy: "I think the Active Kids thing is a good idea, but we only found out about it through word of mouth. Nobody from our NSO told us about it, and it wasn't advertised anywhere".

The primary concern with the above comment is that the policy was viewed as whimsical and not meticulously transmitted to CSCs. Indeed, rather than a systematic, evidence-based method based on a consultative strategy, the approach was 'a good idea' but enacted unilaterally. For CSCs, encouraging evidence-based practice, innovation, and capacity building are all matters ultimately based on resources. Policies such as Active Kids were said to have the potential to incentivize and encourage strategies associated with improving participation or performance. Where resources are concerned, however, CSCs must first address the 'chicken and egg' scenarios relating to the intent of policy and the potential for achieving it: "Sometimes the government doesn't think about how us clubs might actually do things our end. Sure, get the numbers up but giving money to parents but what about giving money direct to clubs so they can improve capacity?".

Some CSCs considered the pressure to adhere to top-down expectations too great, particularly in often short timeframes. In keeping with ACF guidelines on the time required for policy learning, the findings pointed to concerns that the period necessary to support policy edicts was insufficient:

*We get instructions from the NSO or the council that say we need to do things in a certain way or that things need to change quickly. We can't always cope and end up having to improvise which is not good for anyone.*

CSCs also noted that there were several unintended consequences of the policy, including the definition of and what construed community sport policy and the erratic nature of macro-political objectives that often dictate policy creation, supported by the idea that: "Some sports have better [political] connections and more power and weaker clubs from weaker sports miss out. Doesn't ever take community into consideration and we think it should".

An additional consequence of policy was the identified as the rivalry between sports, stated as: "We are always fighting over the same group of players".

Policy consequences suggest that policy decisions at a macro-level often ignore local needs and that the competition between sports, based on policy pressure, is contrary to community objectives.

***The level that CSCs form a valuable component of a unified system***

CSCs were quick to champion ideals that would replace the top-down policy approach. CSCs ordinarily feel marginalized – *side-lined* – in the government's efforts to promote community sport and promote the associated social benefits. The consensus from CSCs was that collaboration is limited, and there was no specific community focus. The evidence indicated that the potential for practical cooperation is directly affected by the different strategies and priorities of CSCs: "I think we all agree why we're here. A coalition is a good idea and we're all about community. But some of us will struggle to see the benefits".

Differences in CSC objectives and those of the community at large create challenges concerning a unifying approach to attitudes and behavior. In some respects, these difficulties result from a power imbalance in community sport and, for some CSCs, impede a route to collaboration: "There's already a big difference between all the clubs. Some have more money than others because their sport is more popular nationally and their NSO can fund them".

The government and NSOs have the authority to determine the participants in the policy process, which amounts to exploitative power in dominating and coercing to secure

consensus (Curato et al., 2019; Lukes, 2005). This imbalance was said to be a matter that CSCs are acutely aware of and consider affects the prioritization of funding: "Because we don't have a say in policy, we don't have a say in funding. It's up to the top of the tree to decide and that's fine but it doesn't take in what's happening locally".

Furthermore, NSOs can influence CSC consensus on policy matters through top-down funding mechanisms for CSCs, along with performance reviews and details of CSC adherence to NSO policy objectives. Conversely, there is evidence to suggest a version of power relations that leans to one side is unsophisticated and that there is an omnipresent aspect of power that applies to local actors (Foucault, 1982). Indeed, CSCs can adjust, undermine, or defy NSO edicts: "Without giving the game away, we don't always do what we're told. Sometimes, it's just too hard and haven't got the manpower or just think the decision is bad".

The omnipresent power dimension emphasizes how CSCs might exercise power in the pursuit of their interests rather than feel they form part of a more altruistic, macro, NSO-led approach that benefits from a collective, unified system: "Doing our own thing is about survival. May not be in the community interest and definitely not the NSO interest".

The above complex power dimension partly results from the diverse participants contributing to community sport policy processes, a group that, at a macro-level, is continually pulling and pushing against policy initiatives. Equally, there are a variety of historically-rooted competing priorities and issues relating to the allocation of resources that impact the ability to align the objectives of all actors (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2017).

### *CSC member beliefs concerning the achievement of sport and community objectives*

Aspects of the findings included details of CSC participant attitudes and a belief in their capacity for achieving increased membership and, thus, overall participation levels in sport. Based on a combination of NSO, government, and local objectives, CSCs outlined three challenges in achieving the community sport goals: (i) an insufficient level of resources, particularly that of funding; (ii) the requirement for more innovation to increase CSC membership; and (iii) the issue of capacity and a sufficient level of skills, combined with funding, to bring about change: "I think we need better access to resources, including money. We need to work together and come up with ideas if all the clubs are to benefit. That might mean sharing skills amongst all of us and resources".

There was an acceptance that by focusing on the levels of participation and supporting the achievement of goals, the change would rely upon a level of pragmatism regarding what is possible. Equally, a realistic period, in keeping with lengthy time frames associated with the ACF (Sabatier, 2007), would be required to improve levels of support and to bring about a change in attitude and performance: "It will be actually really hard. How long is it going to take and how many of us really want this? I reckon it's possible, though".

Most CSCs believed that a relationship with the local government was most important for addressing the challenges associated with delivering community sport objectives. There was an assumption that local people wanted to be active, and that the government held the key for assisting CSCs, or a local coalition, to manage problems: "But I think the local council can really help, particularly with some of the things we've discussed".

### Coalition leadership and structure

For the organization and administration of the coalition, the critical aspect was establishing independent leadership. This situation was facilitated by involving the support of the Lions Club to take on the role of Chair. Installing the Lions Club representative as Chair helped to avoid a hierarchical structure and to ensure equity in terms of advocacy. The CSC leadership focused on creating a committee – or board – that operated at a strategic level. Each CSC president joined the coalition board and provided various skills across the board's membership. Of the nine CSC coalition members, seven worked in business/commerce and had connections that offered potential links for an advocacy group. The board's key role was to create a governance structure for the coalition and create collective strategic plans. The board also offered a platform to debate operational matters and identify solutions to crucial problems.

Some vital operational matters included interacting with local community stakeholders, NSOs and local government. As a leader, the Chairperson's role was to offer collaborative direction, help identify priority objectives, and plan monthly coalition meetings. The Chairperson also agreed to an action plan for the coalition and delegated specific action to the coalition member most suited to advocate for the alliance (usually based on the CSC president's existing network and the connections that developed through the Lions Club).

**Observations of the coalition activities**

This section provides some critical observations of coalition group processes and advocacy based on the emerging themes of *Coalition relationships* and *Sentiment*. The overall relevance of these observations rests on the potential for a process that leads to successful outcomes of the advocacy group initiatives.

***Coalition Relationships***

The findings proved that CSCs have a network of relationships that an advocacy group can exploit for the coalition's benefit. Across the group, CSCs took part in numerous unique relationships, with as few as one fundamental connection (e.g., with a sponsor) to as many as eight (based on an entrepreneurial CSC president seeking to build capacity for the applicable CSC). An essential matter for CSCs related to the acquisition of physical or pecuniary resources. As noted by a CSC representative, the most common were relationships with sponsors and involved support for equipment, facilities, and playing kit: "Most of the money from our sponsors goes toward running the sport. I know some of us pay players, but I guess we're spending most of the money on kit and getting the pitch ready".

Facilitating the deployment of these relationships as a collective responsibility was an example of connections based on the ACF. Such relationships relied on a collaborative process and gave rise to the potential for improving communication between actors (Doherty & Misener, 2008; Putnam, 2000). One statement suggested that connections between the town CSCs resulted from leveraging existing relationships and establishing new contacts, thereby expanding their collaborative network: "I can connect you with [them]. They will be able to help at least two clubs here. Just tell them I put you in touch and they will look after you".

Historically, partnerships relied upon CSC representatives approaching third-party organizations, either locally or further afield. These connections with these organizations resulted from existing CSC membership (e.g., volunteers connected to the CSCs). A member of the town advocacy group indicated that they were able to put a mechanism in place for expanding these connections through a more collaborative and professional approach: "Let's get a contact book or something together. This can be coordinated by the Chairperson, and we can all get access when we need it".

Coalition members also gave examples of new connections derived from contacts previously unknown to the CSC. One unique model, but a logical one for the advocacy group to exploit going forward, arose from a CSC representative contacting another CSC to explore a mutually beneficial arrangement relating to a competitive fixture: "The relationship with [them] happened because we had joined the council and the local paper to coordinate some advertising where they talked about our event".

The concept of a mutually beneficial arrangement was evident in many cases, with one of the CSC representatives indicating that there were opportunities for various 'win-win' scenarios where CSCs could take advantage of each other's assets: "Lots of possible angles here. I can see you need [that] and [they] can help a few of us".

***Development of longer-term connections***

The connection between CSCs results from the idea that the potential for developing associations through sport fits with the very nature of sport, with individuals and teams participating in a series of competitive structures with existing networks (Zakus et al., 2009). Such scenarios led to the formation of friendships where CSC representatives benefited from increased knowledge, deeper alliances, and an improved ability to coalesce – all signs of solid social links (Zakus et al., 2009). Observations from the initial stages of the coalition formation suggested that friendship was an unexpected but welcome benefit. For example, a CSC president referred to mutual gains arising from a specific relationship with another CSC that occurred due to communicating within the advocacy structure: "I met them after you suggested it. Good bunch and we're going to do a bit more with them. But we should all do it together to get a better price".

When considering CSCs and contributing toward community issues, the advocacy group created a platform for a collective voice to influence change at policy creation at a local level. For them to achieve this platform and improve the coalition governance, there was a need for a strategy that would enable them to bring about changes to the organizational culture that impacts the mindset and beliefs within local government: "With the council involved, we have got the potential to change things or at least have our voice heard".

Effective community leadership relies upon a strategic relationship with local government and other organizations with authority in the community governance process (Darlow et al., 2007). Evaluating the connection between local government and the advocacy group was necessary to measure this potential, particularly when considering the

efficacy of coalition objectives. This process followed a gamut of variables, including symbolic gestures to evidence of dedication to achieving outcomes (Anderson et al., 2014; Bolton et al., 2008) and needed to address issues relating to structures, culture, and processes throughout the engagement process. One statement indicated that adopting such criteria required robust evaluative potential of the long-term effectiveness of the process in the town: "I know the council were a bit wary at first but I think if we continue to work with them, they will continue to support the idea of our group".

Noting that the coalition was in the early stages of its journey, the above comment pointed to the council's initial caution which was based on (a) the connection with town CSCs *en masse* being a new development and (b) the need for the council to be impartial, certainly initially.

## DISCUSSION

This research sought to illuminate the issues facing CSCs concerning matters relating to community sport policy and the significance of an advocacy structure, as well as assess the ability of CSCs to form a coalition to advocate for their needs. Based on the research question – *In the Australian regional context, how can forming a community sport coalition help address the strategic challenges of CSCs and influence the policy process?* – this study provides valuable data identified in an ethnographic action-research process. From an initial interpretation of the findings above, given the nature of the ACF and the emphasis on understanding actor attitudes and beliefs, the view of the participants points to the potential for a practical application in the *real world*. The research outcome demonstrates that the data gained from the observations blend with that identified in the literature. Further, there is a proper alignment with the research aims due to support for a practical intervention through localized advocacy.

As an overall example of the appetite for localized advocacy, the early stages of the coalition formation demonstrated general CSC willingness and support for a more collaborative approach to community sport policy, along with the involvement of the researcher. Indeed, based on the outline provided in the methodology section herein, there was an aspect of direction required to drive the initial formation of the coalition. This guidance, however, was rationalized on the basis that (a) given the voluntarist nature of CSC members (Cuskelly, 2004; Skirstad et al., 2017), it would be challenging to leave the CSCs to form a coalition without instruction and (b) it reduced bias in terms of the CSCs that formed the coalition. Observing and improving organizational capacity of the CSCs through a bounded case-study (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Yin, 2012) and establishing authenticity of the process in connection with a constructivist approach (Misener & Doherty, 2013; Schwandt, 2001) was facilitated by the researcher's role within the coalition (Homan & Dandelion, 1997; Strudwick, 2019). This insider role was central to the methodological approach adopted and allowed for considerable benefits of context within the process as it unfolded.

Most data presented herein adds to the existing literature on community sport and provides significant avenues for application to the intervention in the town. For example, from a macro perspective, the intervention highlighted the disjointed nature of the policy systems on community sport (Charlton, 2010; Houlihan & Green, 2009; Jones et al., 2018), a disparity in power and the connections between actors (Fahlén & Skille, 2017; Grix & Phillpots, 2011), the strain related to policy implementation (May et al., 2013; Rich & Misener, 2019), and often unrealistic or unclear expectations of community sport policy (Houlihan & White, 2002; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009). The opinions from the participants' testimonies include (i) the lack of policy clarity at the local level, (ii) widespread resource deficiency and dependency, (iii) an inordinately multifaceted community sport policy system, (iv) a lack of participation in policy creation and implementation; and (v) the dominant position of NSO and government-driven strategies versus community-lead and focussed strategies.

From a micro perspective, the experience of the coalition in the town unearthed community attitudes and beliefs relating to localized, collective action. The observations highlighted challenges typical to CSCs, included the voluntary nature of participation, CSC members with time restrictions and who were initially unwilling or unable to join the coalition, and the overall resource issues so common in community sport. Further, there was evidence of tension, including general attitudes toward the hierarchical nature of sport policy, the dominance of NSOs, perceived inequities between sports, and gaining the trust of the local council and NSW Sport. It was the formation of the coalition, however, along with the achievement of initial objectives, that demonstrated the most positive attitude from CSCs that contributed to the traction in the coalition's construction process. The key achievements are threefold: (1) the majority of CSCs in the town has willingly entered into a structure to advocate for issues that impact community sport locally; (2) a strategic partnerships with the Lions Club has been realized, offering independent leadership, additional skillsets, and an understanding of community issues; and (3) a robust connection with local council and NSW Sport has been established, giving greater credibility to objectives of the town CSC and legitimising the coalition. Although further

observations are needed to outline and assess future coalition activities, the overall initial benefit to the town is that the coalition has been created and is taking steps to address immediate issues with a longer-term goal to improve policy from the bottom-up.

Although the research only provides details of the early stages of the coalition formation, the achievements nonetheless substantively outline the alliance's relevance to community sport in the town and its application on a broader scale. In balancing partners' needs across sectors and developing connections with and through community sport, CSCs can conceivably mitigate what can otherwise be a complicated process. Further, a positive relationship with local government enhances the coalition's status (Hylton & Bramham, 2007). While initial tensions were a common theme, this was expected and not something construed as harmful to the coalition formation process. There was, however, a concern that NSOs might react differently in the longer term, particularly as the coalition matured and extended its network. Relations between CSCs and NSOs were of varying strengths, and equally, NSO policy objectives would not always match with local community objectives. It was evident from the beliefs of the town coalition that there is a 'them and us' culture; comments such as 'we don't always do what we're told' and 'definitely not the NSO interest' pointed to a lack of alignment between NSO objectives and those of the community. The perception of the town coalition was that an increase in collective knowledge and connections, attaining a degree of power and gaining a form of political influence through improved relations with local government, would be a persuasive development in their relationship with NSOs, particularly in terms of securing the policy consensus of CSCs and avoiding the undermining of policy implementation objectives at a local level (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). This matter, however, was viewed as a step to address in the longer term and to try and create more resilient partnerships with NSOs based on the collective platform.

From an advocacy focus, the indications are that it is genuine for a localized cooperative initiative to challenge the fragmented community sport policy system (Berenskoetter & Williams, 2007; Misener & Doherty, 2013). Such potential results from the CSCs engaging in a collaborative process that involves connecting CSCs, the local community and local government into a cohesive network. Mobilising connections with multiple and diverse partners, potentially through an institution like an advocacy group, presents an opportunity for CSCs to achieve policy goals. As CSCs embrace these partnerships across various sectors, a coalition offers a platform to retain their values and manage pressure relating to the objectives of key stakeholders (Berrett & Slack, 1999). Developing and nurturing the relationship between CSCs and several other organizations would make it easier to establish connections and reproduce social cohesion. This finding echoes the argument brought forward by Pierce et al. (2020) and Wellstead (2017) that the bottom-up approach to policy formation can aid inter-organizational relationships between CSCs beyond the traditional mandate of facilitating grassroots sport.

There is also the potential to provide an overall understanding of how CSCs might shape policy processes to address, for example, resource issues: collaboration between opposing clubs and different sports could help fill volunteer gaps (Bradbrook, 2022). To facilitate such a strategy, it is critical to enhance awareness of important community sport stakeholders, their role, their influence level, and whose interests they serve (Brockett, 2017; Henry et al., 2014; Marsh & Stoker, 2002). In the town's case, it was clear that the local community would benefit from contributing to the policy process (Hylton & Totten, 2006). The town CSCs were immersed in the process, from considering the initial concept and early discussions, through to by establishing the advocacy group, pointing to the potential for localized advocacy (Bradbury et al., 2020; Kohl et al., 2019; Pierce et al., 2020; Skille, 2008; Stenling & Sam, 2020a). From the ACF perspective, the success of an advocacy coalition is based on common attitudes and beliefs of actors and the separate but ultimately collective characteristics (Berger & Luckmann, 2017). At the local level, such an approach would comprise a "cluster of competitive, but not high-performance sports" (Green & Houlihan, 2004, p. 400) to engage in shaping community sport policy actively.

## LIMITATIONS

Properly evaluating the potential of a local advocacy group revolves around power among coalition actors, the formation of policy from a top-down perspective, and the coercive nature of the influence of external actors in the policy process. Although acknowledging and understanding actor self-interest was essential to gain the support of CSC members, the revelation of external friction complicated the reality of creating a robust, stable advocacy structure through a coalition. In particular, some CSC members considered that the potential for collaboration and consultation with the community risked being stymied by a power imbalance perpetuated by administrative bodies such as NSOs and government. Problems associated with national actors like the ASC and NSOs can result in coercive pressure on local-level implementers like CSCs to

comply with the policy objectives (Agranoff, 2007; Durazzi, 2020; Heidbreder, 2017). Such coercion does not present a practical approach for national oversight of policy implementation. Thus, it is crucial to establish conditions that cater for positive connections between actors responsible for implementation (Scheberle, 2004). On the point of connections between actors, two notable attributes – mutual trust and involvement – emerged, and such characteristics are crucial to the efficacy of implementation partnerships (Cline, 2000; May et al., 2013; Scheberle, 2004).

Another limitation revolves around the level of involvement of policy creators at the top of the policy hierarchy, such as the ASC and NSOs. Such interest might involve funding, resource allocation, and the evaluation of policy processes (Scheberle, 2004). An elevated degree of interaction, however, might be considered unnecessary or intrusive and "could be counterproductive" (Scheberle, 2004, p. 21) in establishing highly effective working relations between implementing actors like CSCs. Further, creating harmonious professional associations is challenging, takes time, and relies upon an apparent dedication and focus from all actors involved (Scheberle, 2004; Song & Mayer, 2010). Indeed, functional collaboration does not exist in isolation and depends upon recognising that implementing actors (e.g. CSCs) have an essential role in the policy process (Scheberle, 2004). Hence, an analytical framework such as the ACF should be tested and address an aspect of implementation usually given scant attention in the policy process.

**Future direction**

The contribution of this study has the potential to illustrate how analytical frameworks such as the ACF may contribute to knowledge about Australian sport policy processes and the role of CSCs in coalitions. The study parallels and adds to the growing literature on sport policy networks and the realization of the significance of relationships in sport policy formation (Baiocco et al., 2018; Jeanes et al., 2018; John, 2013; Shearer et al., 2016). In this case, the ACF can predict the extent to which the beliefs and behavior of stakeholders are embedded within the networks guiding the policy-making process. Additionally, the participants in policymaking – such as CSCs, national governments, local governments, and NSOs – might try to convert their belief systems into policy ahead of opponents (Strittmatter et al., 2018). Based on the findings herein, any prospect of success necessitates searching for allies, sharing resources, and adopting complementary strategies. The interaction between CSCs illuminated a general willingness to work together and focus on achieving shared goals through a formal partnership. The results imply that the growth of CSC partnerships, as part of forming an advocacy coalition, can benefit the wider community. The strength of any alliance lies in its membership making collective decisions while respecting that each CSC may also have a particular position on a matter (Harris & Houlihan, 2016). Arriving at this objective will help to fuse a core 'coalition belief' (Cairney, 2013) for effectively influencing collective reforms.

Based on the potential of CSCs to coalesce with a view to impacting the polity process, this research advances a re-conceptualization of community sport. The potential for a multipartite connection between CSCs, the local community, and other stakeholders like local government is recognized. This relationship shapes a rationale for applying a methodology for understanding sport governance structures incorporating bottom-up and top-down approaches. Merely by the example of an analytical framework – but one with significant support in the sport policy space (Chatzopoulos, 2019; Dodo et al., 2020; Hodgkinson et al., 2021; Tacon, 2018) – the ACF can enable this approach and, with the guidance of a coalition, help shift policy creation and implementation towards a non-hierarchical model for community sport. The utility of the ACF allows for explaining, illustrating, and evaluating the policy process as it affects community sport. Further, the ACF has found credence in the emerging analysis of sport policy as it provides a coherent understanding of critical factors and processes within overall policy processes. For the process of building a coalition, the experience in the town points to the potential for independence and input, and suggests that "the community and provider may become co-authors of destiny, or partners in policy and practice" (Hylton & Totten, 2006, p. 83). Based on the observations of the interaction of the CSC coalition in the town, there is merit in future research further examining the potential for lobbying for community sport at a local level.

In terms of recommendations, the first step would be to continue research with the town and adopting the same methodology, undertake longer-term observations of the activities, achievements, and influence of the coalition. On a wider scale, however, the research has provided a platform that is transferrable elsewhere, commencing in non-metropolitan environments. In the first instance, to improve service delivery and build collective interests, CSCs need to develop robust, sustainable alliances where mutual benefits outweigh self-interest, ideally guided by an independent body. In a localized context, CSCs should consider creating partnerships with appropriately placed voluntary and community sector organizations such as the

Lions Club. Secondly, such partnerships can serve as a first stage in creating better connected communities and eventually evolve into a coalition to lobby for collective interests and help address the power imbalance impacting marginalized stakeholders. Finally, to test the reality of this potential based on the experience in the town, there is a need to apply longitudinal studies (e.g. as per Nohrstedt & Olofsson, 2016) – in keeping with ACF timeframes – and conduct further research elsewhere in Australia. Such a suggestion may be a consideration for the ASC to better recognize the importance of the role CSCs and local government in the community sport policy system. Despite the governmental nature of top-down policy (Colebatch, 2020) and the ASC's politically-focused strategy of funding NSOs rather than local authorities (e.g. as per Jang et al., 2016), a more nuanced approach (e.g. as per Osei-Kojo et al., 2022) may be advantageous. Such an initiative would involve improving resources for local government to better support community sport, incorporating bottom-up input from local advocacy groups to inform future policy initiation (e.g. as per Angst, 2020; Li et al., 2024; Pierce & Osei-Kojo, 2022), and facilitating an environment where policymakers and policy implementers become 'partners in policy and practice'.

## CONCLUSION

Through observations in the initial stages of an intervention, this paper has identified CSC views on various issues, including resource concerns, support with policy implementation, hierarchical policy edicts, and perennial funding problems. The investigation was embedded in a *real-world* context and evaluated the potential for CSCs to coalesce concerning issues that impact local sport and the community. Developing relationships with other stakeholders is one way for CSCs to increase knowledge, obtain resources, contribute to policy objectives, and improve community cohesion. The findings revealed concerns from CSCs but equally relationships based on trust, consistency, balance, and the potential for engagement in policy processes through collaboration. Specifically, in terms of theoretical and practical implications, the findings point to the importance of partnerships in the community setting and how an advocacy group based on unity regarding belief systems and shared goals increases the potential to influence policy. Further, when positioning the ACF as a meso-level theory for sport policy analysis, the outcome of this research helps inform the development of an 'artefact' to operationalize a more inclusive policy process. In addition, on a broader scale, the findings offer guidance for a transferrable program and the implementation of advocacy structures in other community sport settings.

Overall, the town experience provides substantive results to support further research. The critical contributions from this research can advance the theory and understanding of advocacy in sport in Australia and, from the perspective of all stakeholders in community sport, influence a more equitable approach to the policy creation process. There is the potential to produce robust output that will aid the comprehension of, from a policy perspective, the needs at community sport level. In turn, there is the ability to link the research findings to any subsequent development, specification and evaluation of a model for best practice for a localized advocacy coalition representing CSCs. As a theoretical point of departure in the policymaking and implementation process, the ACF can help illuminate, inform, and guide the situation facing CSCs. The research increases the understanding of how establishing a localized advocacy group might facilitate the first steps toward helping achieve local objectives in community sport.

### Author Contribution

The author completed all stages of the research and writing independently and without input/contribution from third parties.

### Ethics

Approved by the University of Canberra Human Research Ethics Committee (project number 20180310).

### Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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