Original Research

Challenges, opportunities, and managerial implications in sport for development: insights and reflections from the 'SFD field'.

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ABSTRACT

Recent research in the field of sport for development (SFD) has examined how organisational dynamics, such as the structure and management of SFD organisations, might better facilitate the impact of sport-based interventions. Such research has highlighted the increasingly precarious policy and funding landscape within SFD, noting how organisational survival is a constant pressure, and the need to be resilient, adaptable, and sustainable, has assumed a higher strategic priority. In addition, various scholars in the field have appealed for research that draws upon the ideas, experiences, and reflections of practitioners to directly explore how stakeholders across the SFD landscape are responding to current challenges. This paper is a direct response to these appeals, drawing upon a qualitative research project that engaged 27 SFD organisations from across the globe. The paper presents the reflections of representatives of these organisations, highlighting the challenges currently evident in the SFD sector, how they might be countered, and how they may also present opportunities for the sector. Specifically, the paper provides empirical evidence in relation to three themes: (i) the implications of current (short-term) funding models, (ii) the subsequent impact on building organisational capacity, and (iii) the challenges of engaging at a government/policy level.

INTRODUCTION

In the ever evolving sector of sport for development (SFD), research and debate has shifted from merely evaluating and evidencing the extent to which sport and physical activity can act as an intervention or instrument for wider social change (Whitley et al., 2019; Giulianotti et al., 2019; Spaaij & Schaillee, 2020) towards a deeper understanding of how organisational dynamics, such as the structure and management of organisations operating within the sport for development sector, might better facilitate the impact of sport-based interventions (Welty Peachey, 2019; Svensson et al., 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). This shift would appear salient, especially given the assertion of Gardam et al. (2017, p. 548), that it is "sport organisations, rather than simply sport, [that] are the true agents of social change". However, others have argued that this shift is a direct response to the sector awakening to the realities of broader global political and economic forces (see Mori et al., 2023), and a recognition that SFD can (or is required to) demonstrate how it contributes to wider development agendas, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Giulianotti et al., 2019; McSweeney et al., 2022). More specifically, it could be argued that an altogether more detailed and nuanced appreciation of organisational dynamics in SFD is necessary amid an increasingly precarious policy and funding landscape (Svensson et al., 2023), where organisational survival is a constant pressure (Morgan et al., 2021), and the need to be resilient, adaptable, and sustainable, has assumed higher priority (Svensson & Hardie, 2024).

Clearly, SFD organisations are challenged by a variety of factors and forces, both from within and external to the sector. Of these, the recent global COVID-19 pandemic accentuated and magnified many of the challenges present in the sector, but also presented an opportunity for the sector to pivot, re-evaluate, and innovate to (potentially) transform practice and approaches to SFD (Morgan et al., 2021; McSweeney et al., 2022; Straume, 2022; Svensson et al., 2023). Various scholars in the field have appealed for research to examine the organisational impacts and responses to the turbulence of recent global events (see Whitley et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024), drawing upon the ideas, experiences, and reflections of practitioners to directly explore how stakeholders across the SFD landscape have managed these challenges and adapted their practices, relationships, and approaches to both counter emerging issues and sustain

Keywords: sport for development; policy; funding; sport management; organisational capacity

delivery. This paper seeks to present a direct response to such appeals. It does so by drawing upon data from a qualitative research project, commissioned by a large UK-based funding organisation, which supports sport for development projects across the globe. The project sought to engage a selection of SFD representatives from organisations from across the UK, sub-Saharan Africa, India, and South America about the way in which these organisations viewed and experienced the processes and practices of the funding model deployed by the commissioning organisation.

The paper showcases the testimonies of these representatives, presenting their reflections on the challenges currently evident in the SFD sector. Our central research question was: what are the experiences of representatives of SFD organisations in relation to current challenges pertaining to funding, capacity building, and policy engagement? Insights are also presented regarding the implications of these challenges, how they might be countered, or, indeed, may present opportunities for the sector to engage with. Specifically, the paper provides empirical evidence in relation to three themes: (i) the implications of current (short-term) funding models, (ii) the subsequent impact on building organisational capacity and the SFD workforce, and (iii) the challenges of engaging at a government/policy level. The paper concludes by putting forward a number of recommendations regarding the way in which funding agencies might best support organisations within the SFD sector.

Key themes in the SFD landscape

As the field of SFD has matured, so analyses of the major challenges facing the sector have also evolved (see for example, Kidd, 2008; Black, 2010; Darnell, 2012; Collison et al., 2019; Giulianotti et al., 2019). While these analyses have largely responded to, or accounted for, the prevailing geo-political and economic conditions of the time, in the current decade, the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the SFD sector has been the major focus. Recent analyses of the SFD landscape have either attempted to explore how SFD organisations have transformed (or need to transform) their operational practices to secure their immediate financial future or have (re)examined the altered relationships between delivery organisations and funding agencies brought about by the pandemic (see for example, Svensson et al., 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). More specifically, the analyses undertaken by Svensson et al. (2023) and Svensson & Hardie (2024) have focussed their attention broadly on three themes. First, the longstanding concern around funding for SFD projects and organisations; second, considerations around capacity building and, in particular, issues related to the composition, diversity, and development of the SFD workforce; and third, a focus on how the SFD sector may embrace innovation and adopt a more entrepreneurial approach to operations to transform practice.

In considering the first of these themes, as Svensson et al. (2023) note, the suitability and applicability of funding models within SFD continue to be among the most common challenges facing organisations in the sector. Literature is replete with examples of the inadequacies of the short-term, highly restrictive, and inflexible approaches to funding that are familiar to the SFD sector (Schulenkorf, 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson et al., 2023; McSweeney & Jones, 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024), and which limit the extent to which SFD organisations are able to work strategically and sustainably (Morgan et al., 2021; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). In addition, the extent to which meaningful, sustainable change can be delivered through a piecemeal approach to funding SFD is also limited (Schulenkorf, 2017; McSweeney, 2020; Svensson et al., 2023), which is further compounded by a narrow focus on delivering immediate results to demonstrate impact from investment (Svensson & Hardie, 2024; Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019).

Appeals from academics to transform funding models and approaches are nothing new (see Kidd, 2008; Collins & Kay, 2014; Levermore, 2011; Schulenkorf, 2017), but recent scholarship has suggested that responses to this challenge appear increasingly necessary if SFD is to be a contributor to sustainable solutions to complex global social issues (Darnell et al., 2019). For Svensson & Hardie (2024), multi-year funding cycles which afford organisations greater flexibility and enable a diversity of initiatives to be funded is required (see also Straume, 2022). In addition, autonomy over how funding may be apportioned and utilised by SFD organisations in receipt of grants has also been noted as being critical to a transformed, more impactful sector (Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). Moreover, the propensity for funding in SFD to be allocated to only support direct delivery costs, rather than core operational costs and overheads, has meant that often there is limited opportunity for SFD organisations to develop longer-term strategic approaches and build the related capacity and infrastructure to support more enduring and broader impacts (Straume, 2022; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). Indeed, longer-term, unrestricted funding has been proposed as the catalyst for SFD organisations to demonstrate their potential to present solutions to social issues at scale, by allowing projects to appropriately embed and enable the necessary experimentation, learning, and 'risk taking' that is required for transformative social change (Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson et al., 2023).

This argument builds into the second theme that has emerged within the literature in the post-COVID SFD landscape, specifically concerns over capacity building and associated challenges in supporting, managing, and developing the SFD workforce. Several studies point to human resource capability as an area of greatest need in the sector (Wegner et al., 2023; Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Schulenkorf, 2017; Morgan et al., 2021), with challenges around effective recruitment of paid and voluntary staff, retention and attrition, and developing leadership capability and progression among the most commonly cited concerns. Other literature highlights the unique profile of skills required in SFD, where a requirement for a combination of business acumen and knowledge that straddles both sport-based delivery and development factors is often absent (Wegner et al., 2023). Moreover, the sector is still transitioning from a largely volunteer (or part-time paid) workforce to one of full-time, paid employees (Ekholm & Holmlid, 2020), which in and of itself requires structures and organisational capacity that can weather the fluctuations of an uncertain and volatile funding landscape (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Whitley et al., 2019; Wegner et al., 2023). Indeed, it is often the challenges caused by the instability of short-term funding cycles that lead to the precarious employment situation which many in the sector find themselves, and which subsequently leads to high rates of attrition across the SFD workforce (Schulenkorf, 2017; Morgan et al., 2021; Morgan & Parker, 2023). This has further implications for individuals who may have acquired some of the unique and specialist knowledge required to deliver effective SFD interventions to take that expertise with them, thus extending the skills gap in the sector. Relatedly, access to training, succession planning, and opportunities for progression to leadership positions have been noted as significant workforce and capacity issues (Whitley et al., 2019; Wegner et al., 2023; Morgan & Parker, 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024), underlining the urgent need to re-think SDP programming beyond the confines of project planning and delivery.

Finally, given the unremitting financial and capacity/workforce challenges present in the SFD sector, which may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, literature has begun to consider how SFD organisations might counter these challenges by adopting a more innovative or entrepreneurial approach to their operations (Schulenkorf, 2017; Svensson & Cohen, 2020; McSweeney, 2020; McSweeney et al., 2022; McSweeney & Jones, 2023). Svensson & Hardie (2024) argue that the term 'innovation' is poorly understood within the SFD sector, with funders often (intentionally or otherwise) requesting it as a condition of grant applications to make organisations 'stand out' from their competitors, rather than as an authentic attempt to provide more sustainable programmes which have deeper and broader impacts for participants (Schulenkorf, 2017; McSweeney & Jones, 2023). Thus, to encourage authentic innovation, a fundamental shift is required in relation to the evaluation of SFD work, moving away from a limited concern with outputs and the attainment of particular metrics, towards a focus on wider learning (Whitley et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2023; McSweeney & Jones, 2023). For Svensson et al. (2023), such a shift may help to support SFD organisations to be more experimental in their approach and to take risks, safe in the knowledge that mistakes will not be 'punished' through discontinued financial support, but that the learning accrued might be seen as having a higher value in terms of identifying potentially transformative ways of operating (see also McSweeney et al., 2022). Along similar lines, encouraging greater collaboration between SFD organisations has been posited within efforts to embrace greater innovation (Svensson et al., 2023), whereby new partnerships are forged to not only ensure organisational survival through increased access to resources, but also to share expertise and leverage support from funders prepared to provide longer-term, unrestricted funding (Morgan & Baker, 2021) or generate greater engagement from governments and policy-makers (Lindsey & Darby, 2019; Morgan et al., 2021).

While existing literature has been able to indicate where issues of challenge and contention for SFD organisations exist, as Svensson & Hardie (2024) observe, there is an urgent need for scholarship that provides empirical insight into how practitioners themselves perceive their own relationships with funders and commissioners, how these relationships may need to alter, and how SFD organisations manage the implications of current funding models, all of which we address in greater detail below.

METHODS

The empirical data presented here draws on the findings of a wider research project, commissioned by a large UK-based funding organisation, which engaged 27 SFD organisations from across the UK, sub-Saharan Africa, India, and South America about the way in which they viewed and experienced the processes and practices of the funding model deployed by the commissioning organisation. Utilizing a multi-method, qualitative research design, the project comprised two sequential phases: (i) document analysis of strategic and impact reports provided by the commissioning charity, and (ii) a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with representatives from organisations which received funding from the commissioning charity between 2016 and 2023. The

document analysis in the first phase of the research identified key themes and factual information that were used to inform the structure and content of the semi-structured interviews in phase two. For the purposes of the present discussion, we draw exclusively on the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

The research received ethical approval from the Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the host institution of the authors (Ethics application reference number: 0160-318). In terms of data collection, a total of 30 current or former grant-holder organisations were identified in conjunction with the charity to act as potential respondents. These organisations, which operated in either the United Kingdom, sub-Saharan Africa, India, or South America, were purposefully sampled to ensure that an appropriate spread of geographical and social/demographic contexts were examined, with organisations also selected in relation to their size/maturity, and experience in the SfD sector. Of the original 30 organisations that were approached for interview, 27 agreed to take part (12 from the UK and 15 from other international locations) (see Table 1). Interviews were carried out virtually via Zoom or Teams, all of which were preceded by introductory e-mail communication; first from the commissioning charity and subsequently from the research team. The latter were primarily used to request and confirm participation, but also facilitated the written informed consent of respondents. In addition, prior to the commencement of each interview, participants were reminded of key ethical concerns (e.g. anonymity and right to withdraw) and had the opportunity to ask questions about the research project, before reaffirming their consent to participate verbally. Interview discussions lasted between 34 and 62 minutes (mean duration 51 minutes) and followed an interview schedule or guide comprising a number of open-ended questions which explored stakeholder perceptions and experiences of the funding relationship with the charity (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Notwithstanding the issues of methodological rigour that have been raised in relation to processes of respondent validation or ‘member checking’ (see Smith & McGannon, 2018; Tracy, 2010), in accordance with conventional practice, project participants were offered the opportunity to reflect upon interview discussions via e-mail correspondence.

Table 1
Participant List

Pseudonym	Role	Country
Rochelle	Head of Philanthropy	United Kingdom
Philippa	Chief Development Officer	South Africa
Jack	Chief Executive Officer	United Kingdom
Paul	Senior Global Partnerships Manager	Brazil
Bart	Managing Director	Zambia
Eloise	Director of Operations	Zambia
Michael	Project Officer	Malawi
Anthony	Director of International Operations	Malawi
Victoria	Senior Programme Coordinator	Kenya
Albert	Head of Operations	Rwanda
Mark	Director of Growth	United Kingdom
Cate	Director of International Programming and Strategy	Rwanda
Henry	Executive Director	Malawi
Katherine	Young Person's Case Worker	United Kingdom
Natalie	Youth Operations and Workforce Manager	United Kingdom
Diedre	Country Director	Uganda
Saeed	Senior Fundraiser	Malawi
Alistair	Senior Grants Manager	United Kingdom
Samira	Senior Project Manager	United Kingdom
Rahul	Chief Executive Officer	India
Tamsin	Director of Research and Evaluation	South Africa
Rupa	Founder/Director	India
Stuart	Head of Communications	United Kingdom
Tracey	Operations Manager	United Kingdom
Tim	Head of Fundraising	United Kingdom
Meera	Director of Impact	United Kingdom
Jackson	Operations Manager	United Kingdom

Note: This table provides background information about the participants involved in the research. This information includes details of each participant's role in their organisation and the country where their organisation is located. In line with the ethical approval for this research, it also provides a pseudonym for each participant (to conceal identity).

As with many research projects in the SFD field that are commissioned by grant making or funding organisations and which involve funded partners as respondents, issues surrounding the power differential between the research team and research participants had the potential to emerge. The breadth, scale, and intensity of issues related to the politics of power within SFD research have been well-documented (see, for example, Lindsey, 2017; Giulianotti et al., 2016; Spaaij et al., 2018; Schulenkorf et al., 2020), and it is widely acknowledged that typically such sociopolitical and socioeconomic power imbalances are caused by the complexities of donors and researchers from the Global North interacting with recipient delivery organisations from the Global South (a factor that was evident with the research participants that we engaged from outside of the UK). As Schulenkorf et al. (2020) remind us, these imbalances often have the potential to influence respondent contributions, perhaps feeling obliged to state what they think the interviewer wishes to hear or responding in ways that align with funder expectations rather than reporting the realities of their circumstances. While this may be at odds with what they may actually believe to be the 'truth', often it is done in fear that their responses will be judged by more powerful actors, which may negatively impact their relationship with the funder in question and their ability to source future funding (see also Lindsey, 2017).

As experienced researchers in the field of SFD, we were critically aware of the need to be highly attuned to the principles of participation, power sharing, and reflexivity within our interview conversations with respondents (Spaaij et al., 2018; Schulenkorf et al., 2020). For this reason, and where possible, we set out to relinquish control and ownership of these conversations in order to reassure participants of our awareness of the power dynamics in play, reposition our role as researcher from evaluator to facilitator and collaborator, and recognise our own biases, beliefs, and assumptions in the process of sense-making (see Spaaij et al., 2018 for a fuller explanation). While issues around power differentials were raised and reflected upon within our initial ethics application, at a practical level, we took a number of steps to further mitigate these issues during the interview. First, before commencing each interview, we explicitly restated to our respondents the ethical protocols around confidentiality and anonymity which were outlined on the participant information sheet, and how their data would be reported both to the commissioning organisation and within academic publications. This, in turn, enabled us to reinforce that the responses of participants would not have any negative or detrimental impact on their relationship with the commissioning organisation (and funder), either currently or in the future. This demonstrated our commitment to recognising that interviewees may have been concerned about how their data would be managed or reported and created a 'safe space' for conversation to develop (Spaaij & Schulenkorf, 2014). The pre-interview conversation closed by inviting each interviewee to raise any questions they had about the research process, or the wider objectives of the project. As a further effort to mitigate issues of power, we made it clear to participants that as researchers we had no knowledge or awareness of which organisations/respondents were currently in receipt of funding from the commissioning organisation. While some respondents voluntarily divulged this information, this was not used to influence the data analysis or reporting process.

Data were analysed in line with the conventions of qualitative research whereby respondent interpretations of their experiences were explored in detail as were the meanings which they attached to these experiences (see Bryman, 2016; Robson & McCartan, 2021). The questioning style during the interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify responses. To this end, data were analysed systematically through a process of open, axial and selective coding, and the formation of a conceptual narrative that explained the experiences of participants from their perspective (Charmaz, 2014). In turn, data were coded, managed, and organised manually and were subsequently analysed in four stages. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded and indexed allowing the different aspects of respondent experience to be captured. Third, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalized into a number of overarching topics. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into generic themes which we present below. This iterative aspect of the data analysis process involved first, identifying broader patterns of shared meaning across the data sets, and then reviewing these patterns by checking that they were representative of the overall data and cohered with the stated aims of the study (see also Clarke & Braun, 2014; Xu & Zammett, 2020).

FINDINGS

Financial challenges

As one might expect, access to funding was identified as the major organisational challenge by all participants. Without exception, respondents reported that they had experienced reductions in the size of grant allocations, and, indicated that they were having to apply for funding more frequently, which increased competition for investment and negatively impacted the sustainability of their work (Svensson et al.,

2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). Capturing several of the financial challenges facing the SFD sector (and the charity sector more widely), Alastair, from a UK-based organisation summarised the current funding landscape:

… having spoken to a few colleagues, read a few things … there just isn't much money going round and there's more charities than ever, with costs going up. So that's a really big impact. Just in trusts and foundations I'm seeing smaller grant allocations, and I'm seeing more rounds to get the same amount of money as before. So, I think, yeah … it's [funding] really sort of difficult to get.

The primary issue for organisations, which several respondents noted, was the duration of funding periods, with a perception that many funders in the sector preferred to provide short-term, project-focused grants (Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). While this approach enabled impacts to be reported quickly and conveniently (Levermore, 2011; Webb & Richelieu, 2016), respondents observed that it limited the extent to which interventions could be embedded and sustained. For the majority of those interviewed, typical funding agreements lasted for one to three years, with the former being the norm. Perhaps not surprisingly, short-term funding brought with it deeper impacts, which often militated against organisations achieving their potential both strategically and operationally, but also in relation to optimising participant impacts. Several organisations spoke of their concerns surrounding delivering interventions which had short-term benefits that could not be sustained, often leading to the withdrawal of interventions (and organisations) from project locations. Alluding to this dynamic, Anthony, Director of International Operations of an organisation operating in Malawi, highlighted that the 'expand and contract' nature of short-term investment (Lindsey, 2017; Schulenkorf et al., 2016) could often do more harm than good:

I could tell you lots of things that are wrong with the development world … but one of the major factors is that many funders really like short term pieces of work. They like pieces of work they can fund for a year or two, tie it up in a bow, do an evaluation and it's done, and it's neat and it's tidy. Because of this expectation, that shapes the type of work you can do, which is [often] not meaningful … and generally only scratches the surface of something, and what you find is that you see the fossilised remains of these projects all over the world …

As a consequence of short-term funding, the necessity to continually submit grant applications and develop new and innovative projects was highlighted as a challenge if organisations were to remain successful in an increasingly competitive context (Svensson et al., 2023). Cate, Director of International Programming and Strategy for an organisation based in Rwanda, remarked:

…there is so much work to be done and it feels overwhelming that we have started something but that fear when the funding is up, we have got to fill that. You know all these non-profits are scraping for funds and battling each other and all doing good projects but there is so much help that is needed and so I think that's a huge barrier …

For this reason, the longer-term mindset of the charity that commissioned the research was unanimously well received. For less established organisations, longer-term investment provided an opportunity to clarify mission and purpose (Schluenkorf et al., 2016; Welty Peachey et al., 2020). Philippa, the Chief Development Officer of an organisation in South Africa that utilised sport as a tool to address mental health issues revealed:

[Longer-term funding] has given us a bit more focus in terms of our own priorities [and] helped give us a bit more focus on what our role is within the sector. Because we are a sport and physical activity charity there's only a certain role that we can play within the mental health space [but] I think it's made it clear what role we can play.

For emerging and/or more established organisations, the ability to focus less on organisational survival and grant capture, and consider how they might innovate and 'take risks' to generate wider social impacts (Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Svensson et al., 2023) was a benefit that longer-term funding offered. Two responses from UK-based organisations exemplified this view:

It's 'gold standard'. … It's luxurious to have guaranteed three-year funding and income coming through the door where you know that you can build, develop. But it also gives you the capacity and the ability to make mistakes and still move forward, whereas when you have got limited funding you really haven't got the option of being able to do that. You are so conscious of having to get it right because you can't afford to lose [money] by trying to do something that doesn't work (Tracy, Operations Manager, UK).

My goodness, what a difference [longer-term funding] makes to an organisation, to a generation. Knowing that you're working to this five-year evaluation, it's wonderful. … It's kind of five-year grants with a beautiful piece of blue-sky thinking attached to it; tell people what you really want the world to look like through this work … around systemic change and social change ambitions (Meera, Director of Impact, UK).

A related funding issue was the propensity for many grant-making agencies to invest in direct delivery costs only (Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson & Hardie, 2024), thereby restricting the flexibility that organisations were afforded to allocate financial resources as they saw fit. Given the complexities of delivering SFD interventions in the locations where respondents operated, stipulations and restrictions on how grants could be used created significant challenges. As Paul, Senior Global Partnerships Manager for an organisation based in Brazil, explained:

… it's harder and harder to fund our core activities, it's harder and harder to fund it especially in [one country] where we've grown a lot, and we've got government contracts. We've got a big project in [one city] that requires really professional management and governance, like legal issues. But a lot of that funding won't pay for the back-office costs. So, the costs of running a professional and diligent organisation requires a type of funding that a lot of funders aren't willing to give.

Other respondents were able to outline how flexibility around funding arrangements not only allowed them to support core costs, but also equated to deeper impacts for programme participants. Capturing the views of the majority, Tim, Head of Fundraising at a UK organisation noted:

… having an opportunity to apply for a grant that will cover your core costs, that will … increase the capacity of the work that you're delivering, is really important … We've been able to have somebody directly working on the project and that has been really beneficial because then they can really put a lot of time and investment into being able to work with those [smaller] [sports] clubs and those communities and really deliver what we set out to deliver … It really gives us a lot of flexibility in terms of who we want to work with and how we want to work with those clubs.

Many respondents reflected on the wider implications of the challenges of the present financial climate. Significant in these reflections was the impact which these challenges had on organisational resources, which, in turn, negatively impacted project delivery. Most notably, it appeared that for many organisations, financial uncertainty often had a negative impact on staff, especially in relation to motivation and wellbeing; a theme that we now explore in more detail.

Capacity and workforce challenges

Respondents noted a host of workforce challenges, often related to pay (particularly relative to recent increases in the cost of living), job security, lack of training and promotion opportunities, and, subsequently, staff retention and turnover. Indeed, many respondents spoke of the difficulties of retaining experienced and highly effective staff within their organisations or across the SFD sector more broadly. Given the critical importance of employing high-quality, frontline staff to deliver SFD interventions (Morgan et al., 2023; Morgan et al., 2021), and the centrality of mentoring relationships between staff and participants as a key mechanism of effective programming (Morgan & Parker, 2017; Morgan & Parker, 2024), respondents explained how staff instability had begun to affect the depth and quality of their offer. As Rochelle, Head of Philanthropy at a UK organisation explained:

… when there's instability you really see the impact in terms of frontline staff and how long they stay really, but also the potential reduction in social impact on the ground with young people.

Commenting further on retention issues, several respondents spoke of their frustration of investing time and resource to train and upskill staff (Hoekman et al., 2019; Wegner et al., 2023), only for the closure of a project and the removal of continuation funding to cause these individuals to leave the organisation. Others referred to the competition for high-quality staff within the SFD sector (and development sector more broadly), and the additional challenges this presented in relation to staff retention. Capturing the experiences of several respondents, two organisations reflected on this issue:

…the biggest challenge when we're running the organisation, it is people. You just have to find the right people … often [there are] pots of funding available [to cover staffing], but they are not very consistent … We want to be accessing those pots of funds, because we can't only hire staff for six months and then fire them, and then hire staff for six months and then fire them. That would mean that the entire model that we have, that consistency of routine for kids, would fall apart (Philippa, Chief Development Officer, South Africa).

… for small organisations like ours, we are used as training products. Like when a person gets experience then they'll jump off to the next big organisation, well-paying organisation and then you're going to have to recruit, re-train, re-mentor before you begin to get the dividends of having a fully trained member of staff. So, yes, it helps for people to stay in their jobs for some time, but I think when an opportunity comes for those that are really good at what they do, it's very easy for them to be bought off from small organisations and, yes, those that have more money (Bart, Managing Director, Zambia).

Such testimony opened a wider discussion with many organisations about the challenges they faced in recruiting staff. Critically, many organisations had to prioritise the recruitment of frontline delivery staff in order to fill gaps in provision. Often this involved recruiting individuals who had experience as coaches or educators, or those whose expertise within the SFD sector was based on personal or lived experience (Morgan and Parker, 2022). As one organisation noted, while this addressed a short-term recruitment need, the longer-term development of these staff and transitioning them into management and leadership roles was a central concern in relation to capacity building (Svensson & Hambrick, 2016; Hoekman et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2023):

… because we put so much emphasis on the relationship between our coach, therapist and young person, it does mean we've been recruiting a certain kind of coach who's got lived experience of various issues … we recruit kind of more about their attitude rather than kind of qualifications. So actually, our coaches aren't necessarily going to be right for management roles, so they need support. I'm not saying they can't do it, but they probably need more support than we can offer them… (Mark, Director of Growth, UK).

Clearly, this insight presents an important consideration for the SFD sector, not only in relation to staff retention, but also in relation to the adequacy of training and professional development opportunities available to the current workforce to upskill and support career progression towards leadership and management roles. However, the data also highlighted examples of where longer-term, flexible funding had enabled investment in the professional development of staff. For example, Meera revealed how funding had "transformed" the complexion of 'frontline' delivery, not only in terms of supporting staff retention, but also in deepening the impact of their provision:

The biggest impact for me organisationally, is the transition of the team; how we went from being ['sport'] coaches to 'social change' coaches. It transformed what it is to be a [sport] coach to being a social change practitioner …

Along similar lines, Michael, Project Officer for an organisation operating in Malawi, succinctly illustrated how the intersection between longer-term funding and the ability to invest in staff progression aided both the capacity of the organisation and the overall quality of their programmes:

… the quality of your product essentially gets better because you know that you can invest in the staff team, you can train them, you can work with them, which then means that staff team deliver better projects; they train the peer educators better, they work with the partners better. So, by getting that sustained investment, it allows us to be confident to put the resource and the effort in to working with our staff team to build them up. Which then means we end up building and delivering better projects.

Finally, while many organisations reflected on the challenges facing their paid staff, others commented on workforce challenges in relation to volunteers. Unlike many sectors and industries, the sport sector is highly reliant on its volunteer workforce to maintain and sustain provision (Farooq et al, 2013; Hoekman et al., 2019). Indeed, the social and economic issues contributing to challenges amongst paid workers were equally evident for volunteers. Summarising some of the current challenges of engaging volunteers for sport-based interventions, Natalie, Youth Operations and Workforce Manager for a UK organisation, commented:

… a lot of the organisations we fund are [reliant on] volunteers and obviously since COVID there's been a massive impact on the number of people within clubs who are volunteering … We offer a lot of additional training, support, knowledge, awareness within the workforce, but again there's challenges around them [volunteers] being able to actually attend that training because they've all got a full time job and this is just what they're doing in the evenings … no matter what we do and what training we can put on it still doesn't work for the group of people that we're working with.

Influence at a policy level

A final challenge reported by respondents was the longstanding problem of trying to connect, engage and influence at the policy-level (Lindsey & Darby, 2019). Many of the comments on this theme related to the potential of SFD to offer a 'cross-cutting' policy tool (Giulianotti et al., 2019), but that accurate and impactful messaging at government level (in particular) was still lacking. Respondents indicated that on the whole, a recent "deterioration of socioeconomic conditions" and the "overhang of COVID" had increased demand for their services, especially from young people, meaning that more precise definitions and articulations of how the SFD sector acted as a 'solution' were essential (Lindsey & Darby, 2019; Whitley et al., 2019). Furthermore, this required the development of a coherent mechanism to connect and engage with policy-makers as a necessity. As Alistair, Senior Grants Manager at a UK organisation, noted:

With sport for development, we sit in this weird space

where we do a lot of football, where we use football in a very specific way. And obviously football is our theme, and it's what helps reinforce our messages. But we're in the education sector, predominantly I'd say. And I think then just having the capacity to engage those people [education policy-makers], you know the people in the policy space will always be a challenge ... We need to find the right people to lead us on this path, with the right expertise to deliver that [connection to policy-makers].

Continuing the theme of policy coherence, several respondents provided insight into the difficulties they faced in aligning their work to connect with multiple policy agendas. More specifically, many of the organisations interviewed revealed that they received financial support from several different grant awarding organisations, which on the one hand enabled more extensive interventions to be developed, but on the other, highlighted the practical challenges of attempting to deliver on multiple outcomes from multiple funders (Adams & Harris, 2013; Giulianoti et al., 2019). As Paul, Senior Global Partnerships Manager for a Brazilian-based organisation, reported:

If you're doing good work and you're getting more funders interested, then you're getting more and more funders pulling you in different directions and wanting different outputs and different ways of reporting. So you're writing 10 different reports on something very similar, when you could do a slimmed down way of doing things that would allow you to focus on the work that you're doing.

However, there were examples which illustrated an emergence of key strategic-level partnerships having been created. Critically, respondents noted again how longer-term funding had presented the space to create openings and connections with (national) government departments or to explore opportunities to create or convene partner networks, both locally and internationally (Morgan & Baker, 2021). One such organisation explained how their partnership operations had enabled them to become a central pillar in efforts to mobilise policy change, address policy issues,

and/or act as an enabler for other organisations in the SFD sector to connect with the policy landscape. They explained:

Essentially, so many organisations wanted to learn from what we were doing, but we wanted to try and house a space where we could create a way of addressing this huge treatment gap in [our] country, because there's such a huge mental health problem. We work with the Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport, the Department of Health, and others; we've created this network where we try and equip sport and physical activity services to adopt our methodology (Tamsin, Director of Research and Evaluation, South Africa).

A further challenge noted in relation to the policy landscape was the issues raised by changes in government or fluctuations in political priorities by those in power (Giulianotti et al., 2019). Naturally, while the timescales for parliamentary elections and the potential for changes in government varied across the international locations that were surveyed, there were several examples provided of political change having a clear detrimental impact on the delivery work of respondents. For some organisations, much of their work consisted of government contracted delivery, which meant that the challenges caused by political change were felt more acutely, as the following testimony from an international organisation illustrates:

... our biggest partner in all our work is the government. So then the transitions from governments, from one party to the other comes with change in policies, change in systems or governance, priorities and all that sort of thing. So you'll have to go and do almost everything against that which you have created ... you have to re-establish yourself in those relationships, you have to restart some of the conversations ... (Bart, Managing Director, Zambia).

Clearly, if the SFD sector is to further develop and demonstrate its value as a credible policy mechanism to address societal inequalities and support broader social change then strengthening relationships with government and building networks across political parties is essential (Lindsey & Darby, 2019; Whitley et al., 2019). As our findings indicate, where SFD organisations are given latitude to create these relationships and afforded the autonomy to allocate resources to partnership development with government and policy-makers, then such connections are possible.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to respond to appeals from scholars within SFD to examine the organisational impacts and responses to the turbulence of recent global events and to explore how stakeholders across the SFD landscape have managed these challenges and adapted their practices, relationships, and approaches in order to counter emerging issues and sustain delivery (Svensson & Hardie, 2024; Svensson et al., 2023). Drawing on empirical data from 27 SFD organisations from across the UK, sub-Saharan Africa, India, and South America, the paper has provided testimonial evidence from organisational representatives

surrounding their reflections on the challenges currently evident in the SFD sector and how they might be countered or re-envisioned as opportunities.

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While the findings presented in this paper are limited by being representative of respondents' experiences of working with one (common) funder, they reinforce many of the implications of short-term, project-focused funding models which still prevail in the SFD sector (Welty Peachey et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2021; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). Specifically, and reflecting previous research, data reveal how such an approach had the potential to limit organisations to focussing on meeting the outcomes of such projects (Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019), thereby restricting their broader transformational impact on participants. While this enabled organisations to demonstrate an ability to deliver projects successfully, such funding models hindered the extent to which interventions could be embedded, sustained, and optimised (Webb & Richelieu, 2016). Significantly, this had broader implications for building organisational capacity and supporting the development, welfare, and career progression of SFD personnel (Whitley et al., 2019). Respondents also noted how the necessity to focus on short-term outcomes and priorities restricted opportunities to engage at the government/policy level, not least in being able to precisely articulate the importance of their work and develop coherent mechanisms to connect and engage with policy-makers and policy agendas (Lindsey & Darby, 2019).

While these findings do not present too much in the way of novel insights, by presenting testimonies from SFD practitioners about current challenges facing the sector, the paper responds to appeals for scholarship that highlights ideas, experiences, and reflections directly from practitioners themselves (Whitley et al., 2019; Svensson et al., 2023; Svensson & Hardie, 2024), which, in turn, provides a new or alternative perspective into the benefits that alternative funding models may offer. This was specifically the case where such models advocated for increased funding timescales and less restriction on where and how this funding was allocated. While the unpredictability of broader political landscapes and priorities may limit the extent to which a longer-term, unrestricted funding approach is feasible, our findings present clear evidence that where such conditions prevail, the potential to address many (if not all) of the challenges associated with shorter-term, restricted funding is enhanced. Most of this evidence underlined how an alternative funding approach has enabled many of the organisations in this study to build capacity, safeguard the employment of their staff, and construct key strategic-level partnerships with both (national) government departments and other SFD organisations both nationally and internationally (Whitley et al., 2019; Svensson & Hardie, 2024). Critically, and from a practical perspective, this relatively minor alteration to the approach adopted by funders enabled organisations to operate more strategically and to stave off the constant need to think about organisational survival rather than concentrate fully on the forms of transformational change that are central to the mission of SFD organisations (Webb & Richelieu, 2016).

In conclusion, we offer a series of proposals, which not only have practical implications for funding agencies, policy-makers and practitioners across the SFD sector, but also offer direction for future academic examination. First, funding agencies should be encouraged to provide funded organisations with greater autonomy for funding allocations, decision-making, and adaptations to operational delivery. Granting autonomy and flexibility over the allocation of funding and allowing funded organisations to have ownership of project aims and intentions, enables innovation and empowers them to utilise their local knowledge and community experience to deliver maximum impact in the short-term, but also allows a focus on strategic priorities in the longer-term (Svensson et al., 2023). Second, and relatedly, providing longer-term funding, which can be allocated to support wider organisational operations rather than specific projects creates stronger opportunities for organisations to develop and sustain in terms of both infrastructure and delivery (Whitley et al., 2019). Finally, grant-making bodies, non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), and policy-makers should be encouraged to keep abreast of the changing and emerging issues pertinent to the sport for development sector. The sector is dynamic, complex, and highly nuanced, which means that funders (and associated organisations) must remain vigilant in understanding the most pressing issues facing both the sector and wider society.

Above all, there is an urgent need for all stakeholders within the SFD sector to recognise that generating transformative, sustainable impact through sport-based interventions often takes time and can be difficult to capture tangibly, therefore demonstrating that a flexible approach to the method and frequency of impact measurement is essential (Svensson et al., 2019). In addition, a commitment to learning about the process mechanisms that 'work' within sport for development projects (Whitley et al., 2019; Morgan & Parker, 2023) should supersede a focus on simply capturing short-term (quantitative) impact.

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