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The Canadian Sport Policy: Toward a More Comprehensive Vision

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A Discussion Paper

By

The Public Policy Forum

Public Engagement Working Group

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1. Introduction

The Canadian Sport Policy is the first-ever intergovernmental policy for sport. It was based on major consultations with the sport community, and other sectors, from 2000 to 2002. The policy was endorsed by federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for sport in Iqaluit, Nunavut, in April 2002.

With the ten-year term of the *Canadian Sport Policy* nearing its end in 2012, F-P/T governments have agreed to review the policy's impact, determine the need and desire for a successor policy and, if appropriate, to write a successor policy.

The F-P/T Sport Committee is responsible for carrying out the review process. It now seems likely this will result in a new policy. If so, governments agree that this time stakeholders should be more fully engaged in the discussions. The Public Policy Forum is assisting the Committee by leading a small Public Engagement Working Group (PEWG) to provide advice on the design and implementation of the process.¹

This discussion paper was produced by the PEWG as part of its effort to ensure stakeholder engagement in the process will be inclusive and effective, lead to better policy and outcomes, and deepen the collaborative culture within the sport-policy community.

2. The Existing Policy Vision

The vision behind the Canadian Sport Policy clearly suggests that the Policy's mission is to enable all Canadians to participate in sport and to reach higher levels of competitive excellence:

The Vision of the *Canadian Sport Policy* is to have, by 2012, a dynamic and leading-edge sport environment that enables all Canadians to experience and enjoy involvement in sport to the extent of their abilities and interests and, for increasing numbers, to perform consistently and successfully at the highest competitive levels.

This vision is a fine one—as far as it goes. But does it go far enough? A major concern is that it says nothing about the contribution sport makes to broader societal goals. However, if the vision fails to convey this, the sport policy document briefly addresses the matter under the heading *Contributions of Sport*:

Today, sport is widely accepted as a powerful contributor to social and personal development. Nevertheless, the magnitude of sport's influence surprises many Canadians. To develop a comprehensive sport policy and to design actions to make that policy effective, it must be clearly understood that sport's impact and contribution encompasses social and personal development, health and well-being, culture, education, economic development and prosperity, tourism and entertainment.

¹ For a list of the Working Group members, see Appendix 1.

Notwithstanding these remarks, however, the policy is clearly focused on the priorities in the Vision, namely, building and consolidating the community, and promoting personal development and competitive excellence.

In hindsight, this makes sense. Ten years ago, the sport community lacked a clear sense of its identity and its mission. The immediate task was to strengthen and focus these, and to attract new members—a task not unlike what corporate planners call building the “core business.” The policy aimed to achieve this through a commitment to four key goals.²

While progress on these goals has been made over the last decade, much remains to be done. The next iteration of the policy will likely continue this work by reviewing and possibly refining the goals and adjusting the policy’s priorities.

However, the review process also needs to consider sport’s connection with the broader societal goals in the *Contribution of Sport* section. Should a new sport policy do more to include them? If so, how, where, and why would this be done?

A strong case can be made for a vision that goes beyond sport’s core business, by giving the policy a clearer “societal” focus. Such a vision would challenge the community to explore and develop some of its links to other policy fields. The remainder of this paper considers the prospects for this.

3. The New Policy Environment

The first task is to stand back and consider how the policy environment is changing. It is different today from a decade ago when the Sport Policy was formed.

It is now commonplace to view policy from a *holistic* perspective. A striking example is found in work around the determinants of health. When policy experts talked about health 25 years ago, they focused mainly on the role the health system played in curing illness and healing injury. The discussions of the day centred on issues like the availability and quality of doctors, hospitals and pharmaceuticals.

At some point, policy makers began to recognize that the goal of curing illness was largely reactive. Instead of waiting until people were ill before acting, they reasoned, it would be better to put more emphasis on preventing illness and promoting wellness. Prevention, as the old saying goes, is worth a pound of cure.

This new perspective raised all sorts of questions about what it means to be healthy and its causes: What is the difference between wellness and health? Is wellness more than a physical condition? How is it related to other factors, such as stress in the workplace, cultural

² These four goals are listed in Appendix 2 at the end of this paper.

background or income levels? Who is responsible for promoting wellness? How should governments marshal their resources to promote it?

Over the last two decades, questions like these have linked the discussion of wellness to discussions of issues in many other policy fields. Analysts have identified how a wide range of social, cultural, environmental and economic factors interact to influence public health.³ Work on these interconnections has fundamentally changed how analysts think about policy issues around health and wellness. For example, there is now a huge body of information and data on the connections between health and income. It shows, for instance, that people with low incomes have higher rates of diabetes.

Two decades later, policy fields that used to be regarded as essentially distinct from public health are routinely seen as closely connected to it in all kinds of ways. Policy analysts refer to this interconnectedness as “complexity.” In essence, to say an issue is complex is to say that its causes and solutions involve a variety of links to other policy fields, which are often hidden from view and surprising in their origins.

Of course, the holistic turn in policy thinking is not confined to health policy. Most policy fields now look at issues holistically, including education, transportation, national security, training and skills development, economic development and the environment. Moreover, the impact of this shift in thinking is now felt beyond policy; it is pushing governments to draw some far-reaching conclusions about the nature of the policy process itself. At least three principles of holistic policy development now seem clear:

- **Good Policy is Comprehensive:** Good planning and policy development in major policy fields should be comprehensive, in the sense that it should take important links to other policy fields into account.
- **Real Progress Requires Public Participation:** Complex problems are bigger than government in the sense that their resolution requires effort and action on the part of stakeholders and citizens. Consider safe streets. This takes more than good laws and police. It takes an informed and engaged citizenry who work together to report crime, discourage drinking and driving, and monitor their children’s whereabouts. The public has a significant role to play in solving a range of issues, from literacy to climate change. In order to meet this condition, holistic policy-making aims to engage the public more fully in all stages of the policy process.

³ These factors include income and social status, social support networks, education, employment and working conditions, social environments, physical environments, biology and genetic endowment, personal health practices and coping skills, healthy child development, health services, gender, and culture.

- **Every Community is Different:** Issues that look similar on the surface are often very different below the surface. For example, research shows that the profile of homeless people in Winnipeg, Vancouver and Toronto is different. As a result, so are the causes and solutions of the problem. While this does not mean there is nothing useful to say about homelessness at a provincial or national level, it does mean that good policy making must allow for real flexibility in solutions and implementation at a variety of levels.

Recognition and acceptance of these three principles is growing. As it does, the interest in new ways of developing and delivering policy is also growing. In general, the trend is to make the policy process more open, inclusive, and “bottom-up” or collaborative.

4. The Community Approach

The emerging model for developing and delivering policy holistically is **the community approach**, where governments work with stakeholders and citizens to solve issues (or achieve goals) in their community.⁴

The guiding idea is that complex issues will not be solved by government or any single sector acting alone. Real progress requires a diverse cross-section of people and organizations working together. Consider the goal of wellness. A community-wide initiative to build a healthy community might be led by organizations in the Health sector, but success requires more than good healthcare services or trained professionals. It takes an informed and engaged citizenry working together with civil society, the business community, and governments, to encourage exercise, promote proper nutrition, address poverty, provide community leadership, and so on. Everyone has a role to play.

An effective plan must engage individuals and organizations from across the community. Many of these may have had no real working relationship before, but find they are now joined in the pursuit of this goal. Each individual and organization is expected to take some action that will contribute to the overarching goal. Where an organization is concerned, these actions should be consistent with its mission and objectives—its core business.

For example, the sport community might contribute to building a healthy community through a campaign to promote participation in team sports. In this way, the sport community continues to pursue its core business—sport—but does so in a way that aligns its activity with the wellness initiative. It may even find creative ways to work with other organizations to contribute more effectively to the goal. For example, it might partner with local media to help carry out the campaign.

⁴ A community is a group of people and/or organizations who are linked together by any of a number of bonds, such as geography, language, culture or a common goal. By the same token, there are different kinds of communities, such as regional ones, ethnic ones or communities of interest.

Through such initiatives, people and organizations from across the community begin to form a *wellness network*. This network provides new organizational infrastructure for collaborative action. Building and strengthening the network is thus critical to achieving the goal.

The community approach is not unique to wellness. It is endorsed by stakeholders in a range of policy areas, such as sustainable development, life-long learning, innovation, and crime prevention. In other words, within a single community, various networks can and will evolve around these different goals. As they do, they will overlap and intersect at many points.

From the viewpoint of the community as a whole, the vision that emerges is of a new level of community integration, based on a shared commitment to a range of societal goals, such as wellness, life-long learning, crime prevention, youth development, and sustainable development. In this view, the community is evolving into a kind of network of networks.

5. Defining Characteristics of the Sport Community

Sport plays a major role in the lives of Canadians and their communities. As noted, however, while most people recognize its entertainment value, or the contribution it makes to healthier life-styles and personal development, there is far less discussion of how it can contribute to broader societal goals, such as education or economic development.

A more comprehensive sport policy would aim to change this by making the Sport Community a major contributor to societal goals. This new role would be based on a clear recognition of three basic characteristics of sport and the sport community.

Sport Exemplifies Complexity and Interconnectedness

We've seen that sport makes a major contribution to a wide range of policy issues and goals. Evidence for this can be found in the many stories people tell about the ways sport has affected their lives. Thus, in one person's experience, it is a multi-billion dollar industry, while, for another, it is a powerful support for families or community integration, and so on. The sport community contains a vast web of social, economic and cultural connections, linking people from virtually every part of society.

The Sport Community has Huge Organizational Capacity

The sport community is not only highly organized, but remarkably self-organizing. In 2003, Canada had some 33,600 Sports and Recreation organizations, accounting for 21% of the nation's 161,000 non-profit and voluntary organizations. These range from large, national, umbrella organizations to small neighbourhood hockey teams. The sport community is the second largest group in the voluntary sector, surpassed only by faith-based organizations. It is a huge reservoir of organizational infrastructure and, indeed, of social capital.

Sport Engages Everyone

Almost everyone joins the sport community at one time or another, from soccer moms to executives on the golf course. By comparison, other policy communities, such as those

dedicated to wellness or sustainable development, must work much harder to recruit new members. When it comes to choosing between, say, sharing time with friends or family members at a hockey game and attending a community meeting on greenhouse gases, sport wins, hands down. Members of the sport community are among the most loyal, motivated and engaged participants in the voluntary sector.

6. Two Options for a New Sport Policy

What do these reflections so far suggest about a new sport policy, one with a more societal focus? At least two conclusions can be drawn. One concerns the new policy's possible goals; the other is about the vision behind those goals.

Community-Building: A Fifth Goal?

Clearly, the sport community is well-positioned to contribute to societal goals. A more comprehensive policy would encourage this. But, if so, on which goals should it focus: social cohesion, economic development, engaging Aboriginal communities, education, or some others?

Given the size and diversity of the country, it would probably be unwise to focus on two or three specific policy areas. What would be right for Nova Scotia might be wrong for Nunavut; what would interest Vancouverites might be irrelevant in Prince George. In proposing a policy with a stronger societal perspective, we should keep in mind the principle that Every Community is Different. A pan-Canadian policy that is too narrowly focused or too prescriptive is likely to fail. Nevertheless, as already noted, this does not mean nothing useful can be said at the pan-Canadian level. The challenge is to think more broadly about the role a new policy could play in mobilizing the sport community around societal goals.

An alternative approach would be to propose a new fifth goal for the policy, one that simply declares the community's intention to contribute to societal goals, without committing governments or stakeholders to any particular one. They could then decide for themselves which ones to pursue, according to their circumstances. Such an objective might be formulated as follows:

The Sport Policy seeks to ensure that sport will be an effective contributor to the achievement of a broad range of societal goals, such as wellness, youth development, social cohesion, sustainable development, the support of indigenous peoples, life-long learning and crime prevention.

We could call this fifth goal **community-building** because it challenges the sport community to take steps to align its core activities more closely and consciously with these goals. But what would this mean in practice?

Extending the Vision

The answer lies in the community approach. There is a natural fit between it and the sport community. Indeed, because so much of the activity in sport is spontaneous, collaborative and

self-organizing—“bottom-up”—much of the sport community is a model of the community approach. Community sports leagues are an obvious example. A new policy could give the sport community as a whole a useful nudge in the direction of working to spread the community approach.

For example, by partnering with an immigrant settlement organization, a community soccer league could make a significant contribution to social cohesion. Families in the league would be introduced to new Canadians in their community, as well as to information and ideas about immigrants. The partnership would also expose them to organizations and people from the social cohesion network, who would, in turn, encourage soccer families to see integration as a personal responsibility.

At first, this might involve simply encouraging soccer families to look at community soccer as BOTH a family activity AND a chance to get to know immigrants in the neighbourhood better. But, hopefully, in time those families would start taking steps to welcome immigrants into their community. For example, they might seek to recruit new Canadians to join the league. In this way, a soccer league would be leveraging its organizational capacity to help strengthen the social cohesion network in the community.

In sum, sport is potentially a powerful agent of social change and innovation. The sport community is not only well-positioned to contribute to societal goals; it is well positioned to assume a leadership role in fostering the growth of community networks around these goals. This new role could be reflected in the Vision by adding a second paragraph to the existing one, which might read as follows:

The sport community is a leader in community integration. It works to mobilize its members and leverage its considerable infrastructure in ways that support the growth and development of strong community networks around societal goals, such as wellness, youth development, social cohesion, sustainable development, the support of indigenous peoples, life-long learning, and crime prevention.

Adding such a paragraph to the Vision would focus the attention of governments and the sport community on the task of using sport’s resources more systematically, and more effectively, in the service of community-building, while continuing to strengthen and consolidate the core business.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate thought and discussion among government officials and stakeholders in the sport community. In the coming months, the Public Engagement Working Group will continue to explore ways to ensure that the policy review process provides the best possible opportunities for officials and stakeholders to assess ideas and options that might contribute to the development of a new and more effective Canadian sport policy.

Appendix 1:

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Appendix 2:

The Four Goals of the Canadian Sport Policy

Goal I: Enhanced Participation

It is a Goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012...

A significantly higher proportion of Canadians from all segments of society are involved in quality sport activities at all levels and in all forms of participation.

Goal II: Enhanced Excellence

It is a Goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012...

The pool of talented athletes has expanded and Canadian athletes and teams are systematically achieving world-class results at the highest levels of international competition through fair and ethical means.

Goal III: Enhanced Capacity

It is a Goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012...

The essential components of an ethically based, athlete/participant-centred development system are in place and are continually modernized and strengthened as required.

Goal IV: Enhanced Interaction

It is a Goal of the Canadian Sport Policy that by 2012...

The components of the sport system are more connected and coordinated as a result of the committed collaboration and communication amongst the stakeholders.