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*An investigation of innovation in community sport organizations*

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### **Project Summary**

This research builds on a previous project exploring the incidence and nature of innovation in community sport organizations (CSOs). We uncovered that CSOs are turning to innovation, that is any organizational effort perceived as new by the organization, to meet member and societal demands, and to survive in a changing and challenging environment. With an increasing reliance on CSOs to deliver programs and services that help to increase the participation of Canadians, it is important to understand the pressures, challenges, and successes CSOs are experiencing with regard to innovating, given its direct connection with organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

Building on our previous investigation, the objectives of this research were: (1) to investigate the nature of radical vs. incremental innovations in CSOs (Study 1); (2) to examine board culture and club culture as determinants of innovation adoption (Study 2); (3) to study the innovation adoption process in CSOs from a longitudinal perspective.

We experienced difficulties recruiting participants for Study 2, thus conclusions are only presented for Study 1 and Study 3. Nonetheless, insight to the role of board and club culture in CSO innovation was generated in the other studies and thus objective 2 was at least partially met.

From Study 1, we determined that CSOs engage in radical innovation, and this is distinct from incremental innovation in terms of being (1) something that is brand new to the sport or to the club's community, (2) something that represents a substantial change to the club in terms of a departure from existing practice, and/or (3) something that has a wide and deep impact on the club. Radical innovation is also distinct from more incremental innovation in that it tends to focus on club growth and development, is led by an idea champion, and relies on a supportive board culture and financial resources to implement. Successful radical innovation may prompt a variety of further club opportunities.

From Study 3, we determined that CSOs may experience innovation in quite different ways, highlighting the potential complexity of the process. Different innovations, and different approaches to their adoption and implementation, can be successful in terms of achieving their intended objectives. However, unique aspects of the innovations also contribute to whether they are sustained or not.

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### **Research Methods**

Study 1: To understand the nature of radical vs. incremental innovations, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Presidents of 16 CSOs representing 12 different sports in 10 Ontario communities. These CSOs engaged in both radical and incremental innovation.

Study 2: To further examine board and club culture as determinants of the adoption of radical and incremental innovations, we planned to conduct focus groups with CSO board members. We were

unsuccessful in coordinating a sufficient number of such groups, despite numerous attempts over a one-year recruitment period.

Study 3: Case studies of two CSOs (hockey, synchro) in Ontario were conducted, representing an 18-month period of innovation in those clubs. Data were collected through interviews with key stakeholders, document and social media analysis, and field observation at various stages in the innovation process. Each case represents a rich story of innovation.

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### **Research Results**

CSO presidents discussed 20 radical and 16 incremental innovations. Radical innovation was identified in this context as new to the sport or community, and/or having a substantial impact on how the club operates and what it offers. Examples included a new youth program, and partnering with another club or sport. Incremental innovations were identified as new but more of an 'add-on' or adaptation to existing practices, or as a common practice elsewhere that was adopted by the club. The main distinguishing features of radical and incremental innovations were the magnitude of change and potential risk involved. Radical innovations tended to be focused on club growth, while incremental changes focused on participant development. Radical innovations were driven by an idea champion who came from anywhere in the club, while incremental changes were largely prompted by the board. Volunteers were critical to the successful adoption of both types of innovation, but financial resources were also critical to more substantial radical innovations. Both types of innovation, but particularly radical innovation, led to some unexpected outcomes for the CSOs, including further club development or development opportunities.

The longitudinal case study investigation of innovation in CSOs revealed the different experiences of sustained and discontinued innovations. In both cases, what were considered radical innovations were implemented quite quickly (within weeks) although pressures for change had been experienced up to a year in advance. Idea champions led the innovations in both cases, although they were at different levels of their respective organizations. There was full support from all key stakeholders in the organizations, likely because of the extended pressure for change. This was a critical factor in successful innovation adoption. Factors that prompted and facilitated the innovations were both internal (participant demand, volunteer expertise and commitment to implement) and external (changing market of participants in the sport, reduced competitiveness) to the CSOs. There were different barriers to innovation in each CSO, with greater challenges experienced by the club that was not able to sustain its innovation. In one CSO, there was wide acceptance and successful implementation of the innovation from the outset. In the other CSO, the innovation was not continued primarily due to its reliance on a partnership between two clubs. Differing circumstances within the clubs led to the cancellation of the new program.

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### **Policy Implications**

The findings of the current research provide awareness into innovation in CSOs as an important mechanism for increasing their capacity to achieve their sport development goals. In response to various pressures, CSOs are moving beyond traditional ways of delivering sport, and adopting programs and practices that are new; whether they are incremental or more radical changes. The findings can inform sport policy and strategy at the local, provincial/territorial, and federal levels by providing insight into the strengths and challenges CSOs experience in the innovation process. Sport policy and strategy that are intended to guide various changes at the community sport level (e.g., gender equity, disability sport, LTAD, coaching development), should be informed by an understanding of the process of innovation at that level, as reported here.

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## Next Steps

1. The apparent distinction between radical and incremental innovation prompts further consideration of these types of innovation. Related research should investigate whether CSOs that engage in radical innovation vary by club size, mandate, history, type of sport, size of community, and so on. This will enhance our understanding of CSOs that commit to making more radical changes for sport development.
2. Insight into radical vs. incremental innovation highlights the importance of distinguishing these types of innovation – and how they are managed differently – when developing policy, strategy, and practice aimed at developing CSOs or aspects of community sport. What may seem straightforward or incremental to one party may be perceived to be radical by a CSO(s) with implications for its effective adoption.
3. The rich insight into the innovation process in CSOs provided by the two longitudinal, real-time case studies should be continued and expanded to a consideration of the role of external partners in this process (e.g., sponsors, provincial/territorial sport organizations). Community sport delivery is (ideally) a collaborative process among a variety of partners, and their respective roles in the innovation process warrants examination.
4. It can be challenging to conduct research with CSOs, which are predominantly, if not exclusively, run by volunteers. Engaging in research may be an additional burden to these already over-taxed individuals, even if they are very interested in being involved. It is important to be attuned to ensure the process is mutually beneficial. Collaborative research approaches should be considered.

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## Key Stakeholders and Benefits

CSOs can benefit from an increased understanding of the nature and process of (especially radical) innovation. They should be aware of the factors involved in engaging in radical innovation (e.g., idea champion, supportive board, human and financial resources), that ideas may come from anywhere in (or beyond) the club, and that radical innovation may have a positive impact beyond its intended objectives.

2. Provincial/territorial sport organizations can benefit from insight into the innovation process in CSOs, and acknowledge the challenges that clubs face when directed by P/TSOs to adopt an initiative that is new (and even radical) to the CSO.
3. Provincial parks and recreation organizations, and other provincial/territorial organizations that have community sport within their mandate, would similarly benefit from the insight to innovation in CSOs.
4. National sport and multi-sport organizations that have community sport within their purview, either directly (e.g., Canadian Sport for Life, Coaching Association of Canada), indirectly (sport governing bodies), or as policy leaders (e.g., Sport Canada), would also benefit from the insight into CSO innovation.